

### **John Brewer: “Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday life”**

“The Time is approaching when History will be attempted on quite other principles; when the Court, the Senate and the Battlefield, receding more and more into the Background, the Temple, the Workshop and the Social Hearth will advance more and more into the foreground, and History will not content itself with shaping the answer to the question: How were men *taxed* and *kept quiet* then? But will seek to answer this other infinitely wider and higher question: how and what *were men* then? Not our Government only, or the ‘*house* wherein our life was led’, but the *Life* itself we led there, will be inquired into”. (Carlyle, 1899, 83)

Historical writing in the last forty years has made ‘everyday life’, the experiences, actions and habits of ordinary people, a legitimate object of historical inquiry. Anglophone new social history, history written in the context of the new social movements concerned with gender, race and sexual orientation, *alltagsgeschichte* in Germany, *microstoria* in Italy and post-Annales cultural history in France all concern themselves with the intimate, the personal, the emotional, the small-scale, quotidian and the ordinary. I trust that we are all familiar with at least some of this work – by John Demos and Laura Thatcher Ulrich on colonial and Revolutionary America, Bob Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, Le Roy Ladurie and many others on early modern France, Gene Brucker, Judith Brown, Carlo Ginsburg, and Giovanni Levi on Italy, David Sabeau, Hans Medick and Alf Ludtke on Germany and Richard Kagan on Spain.<sup>1</sup> I’m well aware that in putting together social history, microhistory and the history of everyday life, I am conflating works which are distinct and operate within different (national) historical traditions. Work by American scholars has been enormously influenced by cultural anthropology, especially the work of Clifford Geertz; French and Italian microhistory has positioned itself in opposition to the long-term serial history of the Annales school that

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<sup>1</sup> For full details of these works see the bibliography

relegated the subordinate classes to what Francois Furet called “number and anonymity” (Ginzburg, 1980, xx); while *alttagsgeschichte* set out to use Edward Thompson’s notion of ‘experience’ to illuminate the everyday life as well as political struggles of the labouring classes. Even within the field of microhistory David Bell and Brad Gregory have drawn a distinction between what they respectively call extraordinary and ordinary histories, or episodic or systematic histories (Gregory, 1999, 102; Bell, 2002, 269). They distinguish, in other words, between studies of a remarkable event that enables us to open up an otherwise obscure social world, and those that painstakingly reconstruct day to day transactions. But I think that all these different sorts of history do have a family resemblance, a common set of preoccupations, and a shared culture that merits investigation. They also belong to a common historical moment in the 1980s, though many of their most distinguished practitioners belong to the generation of 1968. So I want to explore the history, politics, methodological assumptions, strengths and weaknesses of these forms of history inquiry, placing them in the context of other social scientific writing – in critical theory, sociology and cultural studies – since World War II. Essentially I want to argue that this historiographical trend emanates from two major debates within the social sciences and politics – one that is concerned with the nature of everyday life under modern capitalism, the other with the vexed issue of the relations between free will and determinism – the question of the efficacy of human agency. What unites critical theory and historical investigation, I want to show, is a commitment to a humanist agenda which places human agency and historical meaning in the realm of day-to-day transactions and which sees social reality as grounded in the quotidian. The position is one that rejects both an abstract and quantitative (liberal) social science, and a

post-structuralist skeptical anti-humanism. In order to make my case I will draw on a range of historical and cultural theoretic scholarship, but my chief cases and primary focus will be on Italian and French scholarship, rather than that of North America and Britain.

Let us begin with a bit of ground clearing. We need to place the historians' interest in everyday life within the context of two other literatures. The first is what I will call the banal version of everyday life. When you conduct a bibliographic search for "everyday life" you turn up numerous such works, which remind me very much of the sort of social history I did in elementary school – all with titles beginning with "Everyday life in" ... Ancient Assyria, modern Albania, classical Rome, or wherever. The emphasis of such works is antiquarian and ethnographic, placing particular emphasis on material culture, social practices, and family life. It rarely concerns itself with change over time, though it is sometimes suffused with a certain nostalgia – an attachment to the recovery or description of, in the words of Peter Laslett's title, *The world we have lost* (Laslett, 1965) It, in turn, has a long pedigree dating back in Europe at least to the seventeenth century in local, antiquarian, archaeological and genealogical studies, and which flourished in the romantic ethnography of the likes of Herder. Until the 1960s such writing was largely absent from universities, though it flourished in many voluntary associations and had a healthy profile in the realm of print.

The second body of literature is the critical cultural theory version of everyday life that dates from the early twentieth century and is associated with a *marxisant* or Leftist critical tradition. It has come in scholarly circles to have a standard pedigree that runs from George Lukacs, through the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin, Bakhtin, Henri

Lefebvre, the Situationist international to Michel de Certeau. The primary concern of these scholars has been with the nature of modern everyday life in commodified, capitalist societies, their consciousness of its constraints and their concern to transform a realm of necessity into a world of freedom, of boredom into creativity, and of alienated and fragmented existence into a human wholeness. Crucially this is a story about historical change as loss, one that sets the agenda as one of humanist recuperation. One of its major premises – this can be seen most clearly in the writings of Henri Lefebvre - is that modern specialized forms of knowledge have become debased instruments of social control and discipline, and that in consequence it is only in the realm of everyday life that we can find the resources for self-fulfillment, for the realization of a whole, human self. It draws then, on what Charles Taylor has called the “expressivist” tradition of the Young Hegelians (including the early Marx). It has to be seen as part of the post-War trend to shape a new form of Marxism or socialism bereft of the rigid and stultifying economism associated with repressive Stalinism. It was also, it goes without saying, a resolute attack on liberal and then Cold War apologetics for western capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

Academic historical writing about everyday life, I want to argue, draws on both traditions. But before I elaborate on this I want to make some general remarks on the nature of historical writing, particularly social and cultural history in recent years. Le Roy Ladurie famously remarked that historians fall into two categories, parachutists and truffle hunters. I’d want to put it slightly differently and, using a distinction first employed by the landscape theorist, Jay Appleton, talk about two types of history – prospect and refuge (Appleton, 1996). Prospect history is written from a single, superior

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<sup>2</sup> For good general surveys of this literature see Gardiner, 2000, Highmore 2002, Bennett and Watson, 2002..

point of view – a bird’s eye perspective or from a lofty peak – in which an extensive, large scale landscape is surveyed and analysed. The perfect example of such a history would be Charles Tilly’s aptly titled, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (Tilly, 1984). The viewer or writer is not in the picture but outside it. Because of height, size and distance, what is observed and recorded is general not specific, an undifferentiated shape or aggregated trend whose contours and surface can be seen but which lacks distinct detail. The pleasures of this sort of history are formal and abstract, a bit like the aesthetic appeal that Adam Smith attributed to the contemplation of the workings of the market. But they are also the pleasures of power, a sense that the intractable materials of the world can be re-formed as a pattern or shape which in some way will serve the needs of their creator. Knowledge and insight come from abstract science. Subject and object are clearly differentiated and distinct.

In contrast refuge history is close-up and on the small scale. Its emphasis is on a singular place rather than space, the careful delineation of particularities and details, a degree of enclosure. Within the place of refuge there are many points of view all of which engage with one another. The emphasis is on forms of interdependence, on interiority and intimacy rather than surface and distance. The pleasures of refuge history derive not from a sense of control of history but from a sense of belonging, of connectedness – to both persons and details - in which the observer is also a participant. Knowledge and insight come from sympathy and understanding, from a process of loving recuperation; refuge history is *heimlich*. (This is Adam Smith again, but of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* rather than of *The Wealth of Nations*.)

I make the distinction between prospect and refuge history, not because I want to claim it as some universal pair of archetypes that cover all cases of historical writing (which it doesn't) but as a metaphorical contrast between two very different styles of historical writing, one that I make in topographical, aesthetic and psychological terms rather than, as is more conventional, in terms of literary narration.

It is quite often said that micro-history and a concern with the everyday and the intimate is explained or should be understood as part of the more general rejection and critique of grand narratives in social sciences and critical theory. This is true. But it is important to understand that what is at stake here is not the question of narration as such but, as Giovanni Levi has emphasized, the issue of scale and point of view (Levi,1981).

We can see this more clearly if we turn to one particular sort of grand narrative, the story of liberal modernization as developed by Cold War apologists, and which was revitalized as the new conservative liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher at precisely the moment when the new history of everyday life began to flourish. As many commentators have pointed out – I'm thinking of Brad Gregory and David Bell, both of whom have written excellent essays on microhistory and the history of everyday life – this new history reflected both a political and intellectual disillusionment (Gregory, 1990: 100; Bell, 2002, 266-7). The political disillusionment was twofold: with the receding prospect of radical political change, and with the astonishing durability of the institutions and values of liberal capitalism. This was reinforced and paralleled by an intellectual disillusionment with quantitative social science history, whether socialist, liberal or Annalist, both as a tool for social change and as an account of social experience. Moreover the strictures of structuralism, whether coming from Foucault or Althusser,

seemed to reinforce the sense that, in Gregory's words, "the protean interplay of political institutions, corporate power, technological innovation and mass advertising" were an iron cage imprisoning the disoriented forces of radical change (Gregory, 1999: 100). Both structuralist Marxism and late capitalism seemed to consign human agents to a position somewhere between impotence and passivity. (Philippe Aries, for one, commented in the 1970s on how criticism of progress "has passed from reactionary right that had, moreover abandoned it, to a Left or, rather, a leftism with poorly drawn borders, rough, but vigorous", and connected this to a growing flight to the study of "pre-industrial societies and their mentality" (Ginzburg, 1993: 20).)

The reaction was not just to liberal capitalism and modernization theory but to the particular version of everyday life it endorsed, one built around a culture rich in commodities. It was this view of everyday life against which all others – those of Lefebvre, the Situationists, de Certeau -- sought to distinguish themselves. I think we tend to forget just how powerful modernization theory had become in the post-War era – especially by the 1960s when its proponents were heralding the end of scarcity – with its own (highly politicized) version of everyday life and its relations to western capitalism.

Modernization theory employs a standard set of criteria for modernity: sustained economic growth; high levels of political participation; secularization; high rates of geographical and social mobility; and a new sort of historical subject, modern man (Atir, Holzner & Suda, 1981: 42-6). The theory is self-contained – it never questions its notion of modernization; it only asks whether a particular case constitutes modernization – and operates using transhistorical quantitative categories. It deploys a single, linear progressive model of time against which all societies are measured. It is, as has often

been pointed out, a westernized notion of both time and space, in which all societies are mapped according to the degree to which they have reached modernity, a state explicitly associated with the west. This makes it possible to say, “what time is this place”. As Pierre Vilar has put it: modernization theory “has managed to fix a single standard of measurement – world time – produced by a “single global space of coexistence”, within which action and events are subject to a single, quantifiable chronology.” (Harootunian 2000: 49) This was prospect history with a vengeance, a view that placed all economies, societies and cultures on a time/space continuum that culminated in the triumph of the west. The effect of such a model was to see the rest of the world in relation to “Western” developments, to treat the Third World as a sort of laboratory in which modernization could be cultured. Carlo Ginzburg has stressed that Italian microhistory was very self-consciously opposed to what he describes as this sort of ‘ethnocentrism’ (Ginzburg, 1993: 20).

This sort of analysis was not of course new. It followed the stage theory of societal development first made by Turgot, Adam Smith and the conjectural historians of the Scottish Enlightenment. The literature on economic development in the 1950s and 1960s used a similar model and indeed looked back to the experience of the first industrial nation and its theorists to elaborate its models of growth. Thus W.W. Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto*, which between 1960 and 1972 sold a staggering 260,00 copies in English alone, was an explicit attempt to use British history “to the formulation of a wiser public policy”, to show that the western model rather than Russian communism was the right way forward for the 3<sup>rd</sup> World. (Cannadine, 1984: 147-8, 152-4).

This Cold War formulation of economic development was further elaborated in theories that connected growing affluence and the ownership of goods to conceptions of democracy. This sort of argument is well represented in another classic text of the early 1960s, Seymour Martin Lipset's *Political Man*. Lipset argued that only mass affluence ensured that "the population [could] intelligently participate in politics and develop the self-restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogues". (Lipset, 1963: 50)

Lipset's measures of democracy include not only education and wealth, but levels of consumption - persons per motor vehicle, numbers of telephones, radios and newspapers per capita. "In the more democratic European countries, there are 17 persons per motor vehicle compared with 143 for the less democratic. In the less dictatorial Latin-American countries there are 99 persons per motor vehicle verses 274 for the more dictatorial". (Lipset, 1963: 54).

In short here we see the explicit association of certain sorts of commodity (or more precisely the density of certain sorts of commodity) with a particular political regime. In other words it is during the Cold War that American commodities – the classic case, brilliantly used by Kubrick in *Doctor Strangelove* and deconstructed by Daniel Miller (Miller, 1997) is, of course, Coca Cola – come to represent the American (liberal democratic) way of life. Consumption, conceived of somewhat unproblematically, as ownership (rather than say as use) becomes a key measure of politics; a set of economic and social practices (signed through goods) is conflated with a political vision or ideology of the good. The

appurtenances of a modern everyday life – soft drinks, fridges and phones – become part of what was then a global struggle. Think, for instance, of the famous kitchen debate at the American exhibition in Moscow in 1959, when Richard Nixon opposed the American housewife’s washing machine to Russian “machines of war”.(<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=176>.)

Thanks to the efforts of Cold War liberals the connection between the projection of a certain (American) way of life and consumer goods has become naturalised. But we should rather recognised this conjunction as a historically specific consequence of the ideological struggles of the Cold War which were sustained in the American case not only by academic scholarship but by such bodies such as the U.S. Information Agency and the State Department which deliberately sort to export a particular version of the American way of life. Here was capitalism’s politics of (the American way) of everyday life, one that placed commodity culture at its centre, and which has framed the debate about modernity, commodity culture and everyday life ever since (Cohen, 2001).

The political objections advanced against such a view are easy to imagine – that it was a triumphalist apologetic for capitalism, that it failed to take into account the inequality, conflict, false consciousness and alienation engendered by what Lefebvre called “the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (Lefebvre, 1984: ch. 2.). But there was also a strong methodological critique, albeit one that came largely from historians on the Left.

Giovanni Levi in particular has laid out the objections to what he calls “the idea of a regular progression through a uniform and predictable series of stages in which social

agents were considered to align themselves in conformity with solidarities and conflicts in some sense given, natural and inevitable” (Levi, 1991: 94). His and others objections to this sort of account are that such overarching, what I have called prospect narratives are exclusionary and univocal. Exclusionary in that they efface any sort of individuality – the accounts are abstract and faceless, dehumanized. And exclusionary in that they fail to confront or take account of human agency refusing what Levi calls “an enquiry into the extent and nature of free will within the general structure of human society”. (Levi, 1991: 95) They are univocal in their exclusion of voices that do not fit the uniform model of change, and univocal in that they do not recognize the contradictions and conflicts within the model. What Levi offers is an alternative vision, one in which “all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms” (Levi, 1991: 94).

This is not a question of denying the existence of larger historical processes – modernization, industrialization, commodification, urbanization etc. – but of how best to understand and portray them, of looking at them from the point of view of everyday life. As Alf Ludtke, one of the most vigorous proponents of this approach in Germany puts it, we need to look at “how the expansion of commodity production, the state and bureaucracy was *experienced* by the many” (Ludtke, 1995: 8). Wolfgang Kaschuba takes a similar view: “such an approach does not entail any abandonment of the ‘big questions’ regarding the formation of states and classes, religions and churches, industrialization and capitalism, nation and revolution” (Ludtke, 1995: 170). So the issue is one of point of

view. As Giovanni Levi has written, “The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved...phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than examples” (Levi, 1991: 97-8). One aim of this approach is to establish dynamic interconnections. As Roger Chartier has put it, “it is on this reduced scale, and probably only on this scale, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on the one hand, and social affiliations on the other” (Chartier, 1981: 32). Social and cultural history unite in the micro-processes of everyday life.

At times it seems that one of the claims that some historians want to make is that the shift in scale offers the possibility of greater completeness. For certain sorts of microhistorian may confess themselves dissatisfied with grand narratives but still aspire to a notion of total history. This is especially true of those Italian and French microhistorians who both react against but want to remain within the great Annales tradition of *histoire totale*, writing what Jacques Revel has described as “a total history, but this time built from the ground up” (Revel, 1995: 497). The sort of highly detailed network analysis practiced by Giovanni Levi, based on the micro interactionist anthropology of Frederik Barth, purports to achieve a new sort of comprehensiveness (Rosental, 1996, ). But the claim to completeness or totality, regardless of scale, is the most exclusionary version of historical narrative. It supposes one true history rather

than competing histories. This seems to me deeply problematic, for, as any theorist of narrative will tell you, there is no *formal* difference between grand narratives and micro-narratives. No story is innocent; all narratives involve plotting. They necessarily involve choice, inclusion and exclusion. This claim to completeness or plenitude is connected to another – to which I will return – that histories on a small-scale provide “a more realistic description of human behaviour”.

Without necessarily ascribing to the notion of a total history both Michel de Certeau and Carlo Ginzburg have emphasized how changes of scale and approach recover and explain phenomena lost to conventional analysis. This is true of practices or beliefs that were dismissed, like Menocchio’s cosmology or the possession of the Ursuline nuns of Loudon, as irrational, superstitious or “anomalous”, but also of the transitory, evanescent practices of modern everyday life that De Certeau describes as “unprivileged from history” (De Certeau, 1986: 189). Italian historians have enshrined this idea, in Edoardo Grendi’s notion of the “normal exception”, an event or practice that, viewed in the context of modern ‘scientific’ inquiry seems exotic, remarkable or marginal, but that, when properly investigated, i.e placed or coded in its proper context, reveals its own logic and order (Ginzburg and Poni, 1991, 7). De Certeau, both in his historical investigations and his work on contemporary everyday life, has taken this idea still further. He has urged a history that deliberately seeks out what he calls “exceptional details” and “significant deviations” from actions or events readily accommodated within the explanatory models of the prevailing social-scientific and political order (De Certeau, 1988: 35-6). At the same time, in his work on contemporary France he identifies “the tactics of the other” as the means by which the alien strategies of power are transformed

by the weak to their own ends in the practices of everyday life (De Certeau, 1988: xix). Like Lefebvre, de Certeau emphasizes individual capacities to resist or deflect hegemonic forms of dominance and control in the present (what the Situationists in the 1960s called the tactic of “detournement”), while he also joins the Italian and German microhistorians in urging a historical investigation of comparable phenomena in the past.

Ginzburg’s method, though it resembles that of de Certeau, is somewhat different. In his famous essay on clues he traces the genealogy of a conjectural method which, in the manner of Morelli and Sherlock Holmes, relies on faint traces or observable discrepancies (the dog that did not bark in the night) as signs of hidden truth (Ginzburg, 1989: 96-125). Particularly important are the gaps, slips and misunderstandings found in the historical record. (The debt to Freud is obvious and acknowledged.)

Ginzburg’s approach can be seen as part of a general concern among students of everyday life for small things and discrete particulars, a pre-occupation going back to the brilliant essays of Georg Simmel but also found in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer (whom Ginzburg speaks of as an indirect ‘influence’) (Ginzburg, 1993: 27). They focused on ephemora, fragments, anecdotes (the literary form that punctures narrative), “insignificant details”, and “superficial manifestations”, to achieve what Benjamin called “profane illumination” (Harootunian 2000: 71, 86).

While one of the key objectives in changing the scale and viewpoint of historical analysis was methodological and epistemological, it is important to remember that these concerns were framed by a consideration of who and what counted as history. As we have seen, most historical investigations of everyday life, like most cultural criticism, have a democratic, populist or socialist agenda, one that usually wants to give a voice and

the capacity to make meaning, to give agency and the power to change the world to those who act out the practices of everyday life. This applies both to figures like Lefebvre who explore the theoretical possibilities of transformation possible through everyday life, and to historians and sociologists eager to put new subjects (both topics and persons) on the disciplinary map. Obviously this preceded the initiatives of the 1980s. Thus the social historians of the sixties and seventies saw it as an obligation to follow Edward Thompson's determination "to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson, 1963:12-13). Thompson, of course, was drawing on a long-standing tradition, working chiefly outside the academy, of British labour and socialist history. But in the following decades the new social movements soon expanded the subjects of history to include children, women, gays and lesbians and people of colour. Italian microstoria has been described as opening "history to peoples who would be left out by other methods". Natalie Davis speaks of uncovering "the social creativity of the so-called inarticulate" (Davis, 1975: 122) and Roger Chartier of "the illuminations of the illiterate, the experiences of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child". (Chartier, 1997: 46) And the sociologist Dorothy Smith in her strongly feminist analysis of everyday life, criticized conventional sociology, because "its methods of analyzing experience and writing society produce an objectified version that subsumes people's actual speech and what they have to tell about themselves; its statements eliminate the presence of subjects as agents in sociological texts; it converts people from subjects to objects of investigation" (Smith, 1990: 31).

The changing personnel and content of history - women and gender, the emotions and intimacy, the poor and the routines of everyday life, the mad and the heretical – posed awkward questions about how history should be written.

One of the major effects of this quandary was on the relationship between the historian and the archive. Over the last thirty years, the historical archive has undergone a major transformation. What has been indexed, catalogued, made available, included in the archive (and therefore deemed a legitimate historical source) had changed profoundly. This has been accompanied - indeed was preceded by - a re-reading of the archive. Italian *microstoria* repeatedly and brilliantly uses institutional records – of the church, state, and local authorities – not to write a history of the exercise of power but to reconstruct the vision and experiences of those who were its subjects. Reading sources from a feminist perspective, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, rewrote the history of a small eighteenth-century American community from women’s point of view (Ulrich, 1991).

Before the 1960s the models of history that prevailed were woefully ill-equipped – both in terms of content and style – to address new subjects. Put very schematically, there seem to have been three main responses to this problem. The first, more common in Britain and Germany than in France and Italy (it was also one of the trends in the US), was to adopt Edward Thompson’s category of “experience” (which, incidentally, he used both in a subjective and objective way) as the organizing principle of inquiry. The second, predominantly American move (you could call it the Princeton shuffle) was towards cultural anthropology and the interpretive strategy most fully developed by Clifford Geertz in his heuristic of “thick description” (Ortner, 1999). The third way,

adopted chiefly in Italy but also in France and Germany, was towards microhistorical analysis. None of these tactics or moves was isolated or autonomous, and they all shared, to differing degrees, a hostility both to overarching narratives and (often even more ferociously) an antipathy to any anti-humanist position, whether structuralist – like that of Thompson’s *bete-noir* Althusser – or post-structuralist like Derrida.

What these approaches also shared – this was most true of those who wrote about the experience of everyday life and microhistory – was a humanist realism. For much of this writing – especially in Italy – was driven not by skepticism but by the determination to write the real. This is obviously the case in E.P. Thompson’s attachment to a history that was both brilliantly rhetorical and unrepentantly unapologetic about British empiricism. In Italy it had a rather different register. Giovanni Levi talks of “the search for a more realistic description of human behaviour”, stating that “the true problem for historians is to succeed in expressing the complexity of reality” (Levi, 1991: 110.) Ginzburg ends his interview with Maria Luisa Pallares Burke with a ringing call to undertake the hard task of seeing reality (Pallares-Burke, 2002: 210). This seems at first sight anomalous with his categorical assertion of an anti-positivist, constructivist view of the production of history – “based on the definite awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are *constructed* and not *given*: the identification of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analysed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader” (Ginzburg, 1993: 32.). But realism and positivism or empiricism are not for the Italian historians the same. For they take their views first and foremost from the Italian neo-

realist movement of the immediate post-World war II era, and more generally from twentieth-century notions of realism derived from literature and film.

Neo-realism is best known outside Italy through the films of Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti – *Paisa*, *Roma*, *Citta Aperta*, *Ladri di Biciclette*, and *La Terra Trema*. (Indeed I would argue strongly that *Paisa* was the first work of Italian microhistory.) But these films were part of a larger post-war cultural movement intent on ending the ideological and aesthetic obfuscation of real, everyday life. As the novelist and friend of Ginzburg, Italo Calvino put it: “for us the problem appeared to be entirely one of poetics, of how to transform that world which for us was *the* world into a work of literature” (Forgacs, Lutton, Nowell-Smith, 2000: ), or, as the critic Cesare Zavattini put it, “What we are really attempting is not to invent a story that looks like reality, but to present reality as if it were a story” (Stam, 19 :73).

And what sort of world did the neo-realists’ depict? They depicted a world that was fragmentary, sometimes capricious and arbitrary, full of conflict, skewed by partial knowledge and different levels of consciousness, marked by different temporalities that were circular, repetitive and subjective, discontinuous as well as linear. It was a world inhabited by every sort of person, speaking in every sort of voice. Take *Paisa*, for example. Rossellini’s film takes one grand narrative, the progressive liberation of Italy by the British and Americans in 1943-44, which frames six stories set in different regions of Italy from Sicily to the Po Valley. The stories reduce the conflict to a human scale, yet in doing so they undercut or re-write the positive story of liberation, showing how time’s arrow is often diverted. People die needlessly, fail to achieve mutual understanding. Acts of kindness lead to death. Love turns to indifference. The

characters (many not actors but ‘ordinary people’) speak in a babble of languages and dialects – American English, English English, German, Sicilian, Neopolitan, Roman, Tuscan and Venetian dialects of Italian, as well as the pure version of the language. The viewer is both made conscious of cinematic artifice – conscious of the presence of the camera – but also aware of Rosellini’s curious sense of detachment. Throughout there is a tension between veracity and verisimilitude, between the patterns of everyday life and the forces of a larger history.

Rosellini’s neo-realist aesthetic that depicts history from ordinary, everyday points of view is part and parcel of the process that Eric Auerbach in his masterpiece described as “Mimesis”, the process by which western literature (to which we must add film) developed forms of representation that vividly depicted the everyday and the ordinary (Auerbach, 1968). For, as Auerbach showed the conjunction of realism and the everyday was far more developed in the novel than in any historical writing. The best (most plausible, most real) versions of this world in the nineteenth century were literary fictions (Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy), which, in Carlo Ginzburg’s words, brought “to light the painful inadequacy with which historians had dealt with the historical event” (Ginzburg, 1993: 24). This was just as true, even if the forms of narration were different, in the modernist fiction of Woolf, Proust, or Joyce. So, when Lefebvre wants to explain everyday life in the modern world, he turns first to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to Dublin and to Bloom and his wife Molly, to a social realm that can be both quotidian and enchanted (Lefebvre, 1984☺). When Ginzburg is asked his advice for aspiring historians he tells them their historical sensibility will be sharpened by reading novels (Pallares-Burke, 2002: 203).

Imaginative fiction provides access to the real. As Ginzburg puts it, ““A writer is someone who is able to make us aware of certain dimensions of reality. This is the cognitive side of fiction, of which I became aware through Calvino” (Pallares-Burke, 2002: 192). But this does not mean that fiction and history cannot be distinguished. Rather the processes by which history is made need to be explicit in order to enhance its realism. Levi insists on “incorporating into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretive constructions” so that “the researcher’s point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account”... and “the reader is involved in a sort of dialogue and participates in the whole process of constructing the historical argument” (Levi, 1991: 106). For Ginzburg such a stratagem was essential to a realistic account of Menocchio’s beliefs in *The Cheese and the Worms*. “The obstacles interfering with the research were constituent elements of the documentation and thus had to become part of the account; the same for the hesitations and silences of the protagonist in the face of his persecutors’ questions – or mine. Thus the hypotheses, the doubts, the uncertainties became part of the narration; the search for truth became part of the exposition of the (necessarily incomplete) truth attained.” (Ginzburg, 1993: 23-4) Natalie Davis takes a very similar position in her spirited defence of her *The Return of Martin Guerre*, elaborating in detail her reading of the documents, her strategies and assumptions, and finally leaving interpretation open to conjecture (Davis, 1988: 572-603).

This position both invites and refuses the literary. Invites because it directly addresses the question of narrative strategy; refuses because, as Ginzburg points out, historical realism with its incomplete and conjectural analysis differs from fictional

realism which can, if it so wishes, offer a coherence and closure not available in an honest historical investigation. To pretend otherwise – as is often the case in historical writing – is at best misleading and at worst mendacious.

I don't intend to pass judgment on how successful this interpretive strategy is, nor even on the question of whether it is an accurate account of the practices of historians of everyday life. But I want to emphasize that it is a response to the intractable questions of closeness and distance that the metaphors of prospect and refuge history embody. Microhistory and other accounts of everyday life frequently seem to make two rather contradictory claims. One is about strangeness (and therefore distance and difference), the other about familiarity (and therefore closeness and similarity). In the preface to the English edition of *The Cheese and the Worms* Ginzburg speaks first of how “Every now and then the directness of the sources brings [Menocchio] very close to us: a man like ourselves, one of us”, but in the very next paragraph he writes “But he is also a man very different from us” (Ginzburg, 1980: xi-xii). The oxymoron of the “normal exception” is a (not very convincing) attempt to get round this seeming contradiction.

Cases where the emphasis is on strangeness, it seems to me, involve a complex and particular strategy, one that on the one hand says – what I uncover is strange in the context of conventional history – and on the other draws on the long tradition of “strange but true” to reinforce a reality effect. It is typical of such accounts that they reproduce, often in the form of direct speech which employs non-standard or old linguistic usage, extensive quotation or documentation, letting, as it were, the subjects speak for themselves. The overall effect is to make the account seem ‘true’ even while it reinforces its exoticism/strangeness (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2001: 54-6 ). This is the

substance, for instance, of Dominique La Capra's criticism of Robert Darnton's approach in the Great Cat Massacre. "The entire complex problem of the interaction of proximity and distance between and within the past and present is reduced to the rather simple idea of difference back then, which is recuperated and familiarized in the here and now" (LaCapra, 1988: 105). The position in LaCapra's scathing dismissal is "that of the folksy spectator – if not voyeur – of the exotic past" (La Capra, 1988: 106).

Two related criticisms are often applied to this sort of history which I will call transparency and identification. The former criticism, whether from a post-structuralist perspective, like Joan Scott's famous essay on 'experience' (Scott, 1991: 773-97), or from a traditional historical perspective about source interpretation, emphasizes a rather literal (and ahistorical) interpretation of historical evidence. The latter often sees this misinterpretation as the result of a sympathy and identification with actors in the past which destroys difference. This is the thrust of Robert Finlay's critique of Natalie Davis's account of the peasant woman Bertrande de Rols in *The Return of Martin Guerre* and of several critics of Gene Brucker's portrayal of Lusanna in his study of a fifteenth century dispute over a clandestine marriage (Finlay, 1988: 553-71; Kuehn, 1989: 517). In both cases it is said that a contemporary feminist sympathy with women as independent and resourceful actors has led a historian to an erroneous because anachronistic interpretation.

The issues of closeness and distance recur in the literature about contemporary everyday life. Thus the language that is used about an 'authentic' everyday life is rather like that about primitive societies – its about its recovery, about the way it is threatened, and in consequence the way in which it might be conserved. The notion that everyday

life is strange, almost irrecoverable by conventional scholarly means, that it is, from an academic point of view 'exotic' or 'other', sits together, in a more comfortable relation than we might imagine, with the sense that the everyday offers us access to the real, which is not partial, not ideological, not encumbered with disciplinarity, not illusory, but somehow "the real thing". And the scale of everyday life brings its student into a concrete, intimate relation with her material, much harder to achieve in the realm of large abstractions. The presence of the "voices" of the everyday enhance that feeling. It is almost as if the investigator can feel that through examining daily life he is experiencing a communality rather than a difference from those people and circumstances he is examining. Equally important is the possibility of recovering human agency, the sense that freedom is not entirely an illusion and that, as in Joyce's Bloom, there are heroic sagas in the stories of ordinary lives. The issue here is not whether or not these feelings are real or false (consciousness), but that they are historically conditioned needs that the process of the study of everyday life can fulfill.

But, if the project of studying everyday life provides us with satisfactions and fulfills desires that some of our predecessors would not have felt in the same way (or put in the same place), it does not excuse us from seeking to establish some perspective on the phenomenon we study. Perspective, Ginzburg has written, "we are told is good, because it emphasizes the element of subjectivity; but it is also bad, because it emphasizes intellectual distance, rather than emotional closeness (or identification)" (Ginzburg, 2001: 156). We need both distance and closeness and the best history, as I think many of us would recognize, successfully negotiates this tension. For, in the end, though we can see that the effectiveness of historical writing that takes as its subject

matter the quotidian, the ordinary, the white-noise of everyday life depends not on the humanist realist assumptions that underpin it, but on the quality of its execution. Here there can be no doubt that such an approach has produced some of the finest historical writing published in the last thirty years.

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