

PLAYING WITH SCALES: THE GLOBAL AND THE MICRO, THE MACRO AND THE NANO*

I

The focus of this *Past and Present* Supplement on microhistory and global history invites a contemplation of historical scale: from the micro to the global and back again. It does so in the hope of reconciling these two modes of research and connecting the space in between so as to demonstrate that they are not rivals but can be part of the same enterprise — indeed, that the common historical enterprise can be enhanced by their fruitful alliance. Why is this of importance? Perhaps it is because of the great investment historians have made from the 1980s onward in microhistory, broadly defined.

Before proceeding, I must pause briefly to address what I understand by microhistory and by a ‘broad’ microhistory. As an outsider to this historical genre, perhaps I can be forgiven for observing that its practitioners do not make this an easy question to answer. All can agree that its methodology is to reduce the focus of analysis, often to an individual or small group, a place or locality and, usually, a brief time period. This move allows for a meticulous reconstruction of events and relationships, and a juxtaposition of conflicting sources concerning the same event. Indeed, in Giovanni Levi’s view a ‘reduction of scale’ is akin to a historian’s microscope, permitting us ‘to observe aspects of large historical processes that would remain invisible under the homogenous categories of macrohistory’.¹ Microhistorians seek to contextualize the object of their interest as fully as possible, and often demonstrate a praiseworthy archive-based virtuosity in this respect. But there is more. A broad definition links microhistory to the larger ‘cultural turn’. To be sure, cultural history is a methodologically more varied category than microhistory. Nor is all microhistory focused on cultural themes. But what John-Paul Ghobrial calls microhistory’s characteristic subversion of the triumphalism of grand narratives surely lies at the heart of both.²

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¹ Giovanni Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), 93–113.

² John-Paul Ghobrial, ‘Seeing the World like a Microhistorian’, introduction to this volume. Many historians have reflected on this turning point in history. Examples include Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005); William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformations*

Most microhistorians claim that on the basis of their meticulous, craftsmanlike work certain things then emerge *from the sources themselves*. If I may cite here from the vigorously argued essays by Christian De Vito and Filippo de Vivo in this volume, the exceptional events revealed by microhistorical methods ‘reveal broader phenomena’ (de Vivo); microhistorians ‘derive the categories, spatial units and periodizations of their research from . . . the social practices revealed by the sources’ (De Vito). As a result, the specific sites of microhistorical focus serve as ‘fragments through which universal processes can be observed’ (De Vito). By examining ‘historical processes from the bottom up and as entangled constructions . . . “the rules that action gives itself in its development” [reveal themselves and should be] the primary tool to generalize historical knowledge’ (De Vito).³ Finally, to cite Giovanni Levi on the means by which understanding emerges from the sources, ‘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’.⁴

These are grand claims and they are not shared, unqualified, by all. Indeed, many microhistorians deny outright that any universal processes or generalized claims are either possible or desired. Here is where the problems emerge. I believe it useful to speak of two broad strands of microhistory.

That which remains true to the original Italian *microstoria* understands site, place or locality to be socially constructed and to serve as a historical laboratory at the crossroads of multiple connections. Such a laboratory invites the investigation of connections among sites. Thus, Giovanni Levi insists that ‘history [remains] a science of general questions and their specific answers, generated by what one finds [within the sources], not by mechanical [models]’. John-Paul Ghobrial echoes the spirit of the pioneers when he restates the essence of microhistory as reducing the focus of analysis in order to revise large-scale paradigms.⁵ This interaction between microhistorical methods and social theory informed the original Italian practitioners of

(Chicago, 2005). See also Jan de Vries, ‘Changing the Narrative: The New History that Was and Is to Come’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xlviii (2018), esp. 319–21.

³ Christian De Vito, ‘History Without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective’, in this volume, p. 362, quoting Osvaldo Raggio and Angelo Torre, ‘Prefazione’, in Edoardo Grendi, *In altri termini: Etnografia e storia di una società di antico regime* (Milano, 2004), 33.

⁴ Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, 99.

⁵ Giovanni Levi, ‘Frail Frontiers?’, in this volume; Ghobrial, ‘Seeing the World like a Microhistorian’.

microstoria. Forced to reconsider what Levi called the ‘great Marxist or functionalist systems’ in which they had lost faith, they sought to examine social behaviour at the microlevel, where one might observe individuals negotiating with normative reality. These observations might then form the basis of a new understanding of social freedom and social constraint.⁶

This remains in certain respects an appealing agenda, but it is today far from the dominant form of microhistory. In a fateful historiographical conjuncture historians beyond Italy appropriated the term as a solution to a different problem. Their microhistories came to be enlisted in a larger project that has been variously labelled the cultural or linguistic turn and the new cultural history. For some, microhistory became a vehicle to advance post-modernism in historical writing. By essentializing the uniqueness of place and person they denied altogether the possibility of narratives of exchange and connection, let alone the testing of grand theory.⁷

However, the soup is rarely eaten as hot as it is served. The historians who invoked these claims rarely acted on them. A far more common form, the dominant form, of microhistory proceeded to water down the stern strictures of the theorists by focusing on archival virtuosity and empathetic storytelling, thereby ‘populating’, as Tonio Andrade recommends, ‘our models with real people’.⁸ By this strategy one could re-embrace historical narrative while seeming to honour the postmodern theorists’ posture of ‘incredulity toward master narratives of all types’.⁹ John Brewer has called this broad strand of microhistory ‘refuge’ history, echoing the forthright and succinct account of its appeal offered by one of microhistory’s warmest supporters, Jacques Revel:

Progress, the rallying cry in a time of rapid transformation, no longer seemed assured. The present was uncertain, the future opaque; the past became a safe place in which to invest . . . What people now wanted from history was no longer lessons, precedents,

⁶ Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, 94–5; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 74.

⁷ Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, ‘“The Singularity of History”: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge’, *Journal of Social History*, xxxvi (2003), 701–35; Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, ‘Social History as “Sites of Memory”? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and Grand Narrative’, *Journal of Social History*, xxxix (2006), 891–913.

⁸ Tonio Andrade, ‘A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys and a Warlord’, *Journal of World History*, xxi (2010), 574.

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984, first publ 1979).

or ways of understanding the present but, rather a refuge against the uncertainties of the moment.¹⁰

Revel goes too far in stating that this form of microhistory had no interest in providing lessons for the present, but the focus of political interest had certainly shifted. Microhistory commonly, though not exclusively, took the form of an empathetic telling of the story of hitherto marginalized or otherwise historically obscure individuals and small groups. At its heart is the appropriation of microhistorical methods to uncover the stories of subaltern historical actors with a view to empowering contemporary subaltern groups.¹¹

Microhistory of this type is well known to all historians today for it lies at the heart of the strong bond between microhistory and cultural history. As noted above, it is not a necessary bond, but in practice, the affinity between the two has been strong for over a generation now, the more so as many social historians long ago, especially in the United States, confessed their materialist sins and social theoretical errors and took cover under the umbrella of cultural history.¹²

The cultural turn is sometimes referred to as a revival of narrative, but it was an embrace of a special form of narrative, *petite* narrative at a human scale. It was a rejection of grand- or mega-narrative history (national, political history) and, even more, of social science history.¹³ These historical approaches were at odds with each other, of course, but they both usually operated at a large scale, both spatial and temporal. They were concerned to

¹⁰ Jacques Revel, 'Introduction', in Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1995), 34.

¹¹ De Vito, 'History Without Scale'. The distinction made here between types of microhistory owes much to the insightful analysis in Francesca Trivellato, 'Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?', *California Italian Studies*, ii (2011), 10. She reminds us that the Italian microhistorians of the 1970s set out to challenge the 'totalizing theories' of Marxism and the Annales School. While their 'tests' were not highly formal, their questions guided the selection of historical material and the choice of theoretical models with which to interpret this material. They were not (only) involved in the sympathetic appreciation of a unique consciousness for the sake of recovering a 'lost voice'.

¹² Two somewhat regretful retrospectives on the 'movement out of social history into cultural history' and the 'substitution of microhistories for macrohistories', by prominent social historians who themselves made this move: Eley, *A Crooked Line*; Sewell, *Logics of History*.

¹³ Premonitions of this turn were announced in Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979).

explain change over time of large human aggregates, more often than not the nation state.

II

Microhistory broadly defined now confronts the return of large-scale historical work in a form that presents itself with a more sympathetic face. Global history cannot be so easily dismissed as old-fashioned, or deplored as a form of apologetics for capitalists, odious political regimes, or even dead white men. Lynn Hunt sees the threat clearly and recently felt moved to awaken her fellow historians and, especially, impressionable students from their complacent slumbers. ‘Is globalization a new paradigm for historical explanation that replaces those criticized by cultural theories? Or is it a Trojan horse that threatens to bring back old paradigms rather than offering a truly new one?’ Her answer is quick in coming: ‘The globalization paradigm reinstates the very suppositions that cultural theories had criticized, and thus potentially threatens to wash away the gains of the last decades of cultural history’.¹⁴

Hunt speaks of global history and globalization interchangeably, conflates globalization with modernization, and elevates globalization to the status of a paradigm. These moves are all questionable. If there is a guiding spirit to global historical research, it is to treat the concept of globalization critically and sceptically — to push back against old accounts of the diffusion of and convergence toward western norms. Indeed, the most influential narrative structure so far produced by global history is the ‘great divergence’ and if anything unites its exponents it is the rejection of the notion that a single path, originating in the British Industrial Revolution, leads to modern economic growth. That is, they reject the key assumption of modernization theory and seek to undermine the Eurocentric canon of social theory that has hitherto served to explain ‘the rise of the West’.¹⁵

Global history, far from harbouring within it the dreaded globalization paradigm, can better be regarded as an aspirational history, lacking an agreed methodology to achieve its goals, or even a master narrative with which to arrange its provisional achievements. Global history’s future form remains an unsettled question.¹⁶ But it is understandable that historians raised in the milieu of cultural studies feel some unease: the large scale of global history has

¹⁴ Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in a Global Era* (New York, 2014), 52, 59.

¹⁵ The great divergence now boasts of a vast literature: see Peter Coclanis *et al.*, ‘Assessing Ken Pomeranz’s “The Great Divergence”’: A Forum’, *Historically Speaking*, xii, 4 (2011), 10–25.

¹⁶ Many agendas for global history have been offered over the past two decades. My views on its possibilities are presented in Jan de Vries, ‘Reflections on Doing Global History’, in

a natural affinity with prospective theories and with structuralism of one sort or another; it has the potential to be technical and in need of conceptual definitions: neither accessible and congenial, nor agency-affirming and empowering. Can historians avoid this fate by developing new research strategies for global history while its form is still malleable — strategies that connect global themes to microhistorical methodologies? That question has recently engaged the attention of prominent historians, and a critical evaluation of the chief arguments in support of such an engagement now follows.¹⁷

The most compelling and deeply felt urge to join microhistory with global history derives from a belief that this is the only way to honour and recover human agency and to leave room for contingency and subjectivity in the construction of historical accounts with a global reach. The problem is usually expressed as follows: the larger the scale of historical analysis, the more human agency is obscured from view, replaced by a focus on large social groups and categories that are animated by structural forces. Microhistory is therefore essential to serve as an antidote to this malady, allowing us to observe the individual in action, even on a global stage. But, is this ‘recovery of agency’ not simply an illusion of small scale? If a global scale is faulted for lending credibility to a false structuralism, should we not also be concerned with the misleading signals given off by a microhistorical focus, no matter how congenial its illusion might be to us? The issue of agency and structure is not so easily evaded; it deserves a direct confrontation, to which I return below.

The study of ‘unusually cosmopolitan individuals’ (UCIs) who led global lives is recommended to us as an accessible and entertaining way to reveal global forces through the prism of individual experience. It is, today, certainly the most widespread form of micro-global history. These UCIs not only reveal the global at a human scale, but they usually do so in a sympathetic way, as they overcome barriers, dissolve misunderstandings, exhibit resilience and create spaces of tolerance.

Are these UCIs equivalent to the ‘exceptional normals’ that Grendi regarded as the proper object of study in the tradition of Italian *microstoria*?¹⁸

Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century* (London, 2013), 32–47.

¹⁷ I base my comments primarily on the following: Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel, ‘Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History’, in *Size Matters: Scales and Spaces in Transnational and Comparative History*, *International History Review*, xxxiii (2011), 573–84; ‘AHR Conversation: How Size Matters. The Question of Scale in History’, *American Historical Review*, cxviii (2013), 1431–72, esp. 1444–7, (participants: Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce Chaplin, Ann McGrath and Kristin Mann).

¹⁸ Edoardo Grendi, ‘Micro-analisi e storia sociale’, *Quaderni storici*, xxxv (1977), 506–20.

Perhaps some are, but a focus on cosmopolitan individuals seems on the face of it to be inconsistent with microhistory's eschewal of elite biography and preference for the lives of people of little account in their societies. Even those who are willing to set this problem aside must grapple with another, deeper problem with UCIs. If microhistory is to serve as a keyhole offering a view onto the global, then the lives of UCIs who have left sufficient records are likely to offer a distorted view, one that is misleadingly hopeful, but also just misleading, since lives lived successfully abroad will have learned all too well to dissemble and self-fashion. It will, as Ghobrial notes, tend to lead us back to the traveller's home, to local history, rather than to the global.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the UCIs who were beheaded, burned at the stake, enslaved or confined to remote island prisons during their transnational travels will not be major contributors to this literature.

The linkage of global with microhistory is also advocated as a methodological move: the historian can 'zoom in and out', change the scale of study at intervals in order to combine synthetic, global-level analysis with archive-based microstudies. This appealing and hopeful proposal makes a very doubtful, unspoken assumption: that the historian can gain multiple perspectives on *one and the same subject* by altering the scale of observation from the global, via the national, regional and local, to the smallest unit, the individual actor — and back again.

The zooming metaphor is appealing, but I believe it is a fantasy. Its central premise is that one is viewing the same thing at different levels of resolution. Things invisible on a larger scale reveal themselves on a smaller scale, when, as Giovanni Levi states, we 'read through a microscope what was not evident on the surface'.²⁰ They had always been there and they remain when one moves to a larger-scale perspective. The zooming exercise adds information for a better understanding of the whole — and it is entertaining as well. But history is not physics (and even physics has its Heisenberg Principle). Microhistories have different purposes from the more prospectival scales of historical study. The central premise fails because microhistories do not, and are not intended to, aggregate to macro-level and global histories. There is no path, no methodology, no theoretical framework in the current repertoire of the microhistorian to make this move possible. Put differently, if there *were* a theoretical framework for this purpose, microhistories would be 'case studies'.

¹⁹ John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory', *Past and Present*, no. 222 (Feb. 2014), 58–9, 92–3.

²⁰ Levi, 'Frail Frontiers?'

True case studies (for, just as with microhistory, many who invoke this term do not quite live up their billing) are controlled, detailed examinations of a particular phenomenon with care given to the context, so that it might be compared to other cases in which the context differs. Thus, a study of central bank behaviour in financial crises may be built upon several case studies of national central banks responding to the same international crisis, or a study of the global consumption of Coca-Cola could depend on case studies of its diffusion in several countries, each with differing tariffs, income levels, et cetera. Case studies need not be quantitative in character, but they do depend on a theoretical framework, and a research design intended to enhance the comparability of case studies. That is, the case study is linked by design to a larger-scale historical inquiry.²¹

But all of this violates the spirit and intent of microhistorical research. Microhistories certainly can address theoretical claims, but they do so directly, by the power of a unique example, and that power tends to derive, as John Brewer put it, from ‘the historian’s sympathy and identification with actors in the past, an association that destroys difference and the distance between the past and the present’.²² This ‘refuge’ history derives its strength from an inward view, a closeness to the subject matter that on principle refuses to apply external standards to its interpretation. The aim is to generalize, following Lynn Hunt’s recommendation, from the bottom up, on the basis of ‘thick description’ rather than from a priori categories; to read documents, as Giovanni Levi recommends, ‘beyond the edge of the page’. But, just what is it that historians who are genuinely innocent of a priori categories and cleansed of social theory — who, as De Vito urges, have managed to ‘unthink’ all macro-analytical categories — find as they read beyond the edge of the page?²³

²¹ Consider Filippo de Vivo’s contribution to this volume: ‘Microhistories of Long-Distance Information: Space, Movement and Agency in the Early Modern News’. He calls his study of the transmission of information in sixteenth-century Europe both a ‘case study’ and a ‘microhistory’. The terms appear to be interchangeable. His meticulous reconstruction of the ways information about a single event was presented, misrepresented, transmitted and distorted by various parties in various places has a strong micro-level empirical focus. But the author’s microhistorical findings are used systematically to critique and correct prominent theories of information diffusion and reception. Indeed, he calls for other case studies using other examples to do the same with a view to improving information theory. Its explicit external frame of reference leads me to see this work as a case study that relies on microlevel historical research.

²² John Brewer, ‘Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life’, *Cultural and Social History*, vii (2010), 12.

²³ Levi, ‘Frail Frontiers?’, 41; De Vito, ‘History Without Scale’, 369.

III

Microhistories are not intended to aggregate to global histories, but they are methodologically allied nonetheless. They differ in geographic and social scale but they often share the same temporal scale: they both confine themselves to a short time period, often a moment suspended in time, in order to focus on synchronic relationships. Francesca Trivellato regards this as an essential feature of microhistory, which ‘takes a synchronic approach by choice and by necessity — it is more interested in (and more suited to) uncovering the interconnection between multiple phenomena than identifying causal processes of change over time’.²⁴ Global history may not be tied to the synchronic approach out of any inner necessity, but as a practical matter ‘real existing’ global history has usually taken the form of transnational history, comparative history or entangled history (*histoire croisée*, *transfergeschichte*). This move renders global history professionalizable; that is, it allows for global studies based on archival sources, which are nearly always local or national in character.²⁵

In this respect, ‘zooming’ from micro to global is not a shift of scale at all; it is the same temporal scale, with the same strengths and weaknesses regarding the kinds of historical explanation that can be addressed. Andrade sees the possible strengths of this connection. Microhistories in his words form ‘a keyhole through which to view the world in which individuals lived’. Such studies could then, he continues, ‘accumulate to form a history of our interconnected world, as so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle’.²⁶

This seems rather fanciful to me. The best that can be hoped for from the accumulation of microhistories is a gathering of experiences caught in a moment of time. At this scale of study the subjects appear to have agency because the constraints and structures to which they are subject are barely visible, and the historian’s distance from her subject is replaced by a sympathetic closeness. Yet, at the microlevel, the achievements of agency cannot ordinarily transcend the particular fate of the agent in question. Worse yet, as Nicholas Purcell reminded many of the contributors to this volume at a 2016 workshop in Venice, ‘most people, most of the time, use their agency to reproduce structures’. Indeed, human society depends on this being the case.

²⁴ Trivellato, ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory?’, 10.

²⁵ Global history’s affinity to synchronic analysis has this practical side, but it is also a means to advance a widely shared ideal of seeking to persuade humankind of its mutual interconnectedness. Other historical scales tend to complicate this agenda. De Vries, ‘Reflections on Doing Global History’, 39–42.

²⁶ Andrade, ‘A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord’, 574.

An accumulation of microhistories revealing system-reinforcement would be uninteresting, to say the least. Understandably, such microhistories are rarely written. The historian seeks out the ‘exceptional normal’ and other examples of destabilizing and decentering thought and action. But such microhistories, however much they engage the reader, have their own problem: only some of them are consequential, and many do not yield a coherent narrative, despite our best efforts at empathetic and imaginative reconstruction of what might have been.

A global history ‘populated’ with microhistorical vignettes can entertain and give the illusion of human agency, but it will not be able, by itself, to confront the actual problem historians must face of explaining change over time, which requires a capacity to identify ‘fateful events’ — structure-modifying events.²⁷ For this, synchronic study must be joined to diachronic study; both microhistory and global history need to be connected to the study of change over time.²⁸ Without this connection, global microhistory remains one-sided. David A. Bell and Jeremy Adelman have recently accused this version of global history of privileging ‘motion over place’.²⁹ It is attracted to ‘stories that move . . . over tales of those who got left behind’. But the real problem is not in the selection of stories, in deciding which ‘exceptional normal’ to grace with the historian’s touch, but in the absence of a basis for selection. This requires concepts or models, that is, some appeal to social theory. I characterized global history earlier as an ‘aspirational history’. Many of those drawn to it are convinced that human history is a globally interconnected process.³⁰ The alliance of micro and global history emphasizes interconnection, but it neglects process. In this sense it is not really equipped to act on its full agenda.

IV

Historians have many ways of approaching this challenge, and I do not wish to argue here that one approach should be preferred over all others, let alone

²⁷ See Andrade, ‘A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys and a Warlord’, 574, ‘I believe we should adopt microhistorical and biographical approaches to help populate our models with real people, to write what one might call global microhistory’.

²⁸ Sewell, *Logics of History*, 219; De Vries, ‘Changing the Narrative’, 327–34.

²⁹ James Belich *et al.* (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016); Jeremy Adelman, ‘Is Global History Still Possible or has it had its Moment?’, *Aeon Essays*, 2 March 2017; David A. Bell, ‘This is What Happens when Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network’, *New Republic*, 26 October 2013.

³⁰ This is a major theme of the editors’ intro. to Belich, *et al.*, (eds.), *Prospect of Global History*.

to champion the classical theory of modernization that disturbs the dreams of so many historians. But, some discussion of the place of historical work that engages the social sciences, that applies theory to history and attempts to test hypotheses — in short, a history that takes explanation of change seriously and places its proposed explanations in jeopardy of rejection — seems called for at this point. It seems appropriate because much of the interest in microhistory, ever since the 1980s, but again with the emergence of global-historical themes, is motivated by an animus against social science history and especially economic history. Such historical work is criticized, among other things, for not being based on archival research (therefore it is not real history) and for embracing universalizing theories that blind the historian to human agency (therefore it is not sympathetic history).

The first charge is simply not true, as is shown below, while the second is a caricature. So long as one seeks 'refuge' in microhistory and synchronic, short-term historical phenomena, social science history may seem to efface the individual in totalizing theoretical frameworks. (Yet, do the most ambitious microhistories not seek to present us with a 'total history' of their chosen microcosm?). If one can concede that 'playing with scales' should involve temporal scales as well as geographic and social scales, then the task of microhistory is not only to connect with the global, but to connect with histories of longer duration. These are, of course, not all social scientific in character, but they tend to depend for their coherence on theories, conceptual frameworks and, in the hands of some, on cyclical and long-term timescales. Let us call them, provisionally, macrohistories. If global history has an affinity with microhistory in its concern with cross-cutting relationships, macrohistory is concerned with explaining change over time.

If the reader can accept for a moment this effort at categorization, we can proceed to a problem that is common to both microhistory and macrohistory. Much macrohistory is based on the assembly of events, individually fleeting and of little account, into larger aggregates. For example, most quantitative history begins with observations of small-scale historical acts that are based on archival records of market transactions, tax and tariff collections, toll payments, the registration of demographic events, charitable distributions, the purchase of burgher rights and many other contractual agreements. However brief the archival record, it documents a real historical event in which real people come together, even if only for a moment, to exchange a word, a handshake, a nod or a sum of cash. And these events leave us with a price, a payment, a gift, a contract or a name in a register. Usually the names of the actors are unknown, but even when known they can rarely be linked to anything resembling biographical knowledge.

This sort of history — we can call it ‘nanohistory’ — is based on real historical events and requires genuine archival research, yet it leads us not to microhistory but to histories that rely on patterns, trends and regularities. But, as I mentioned earlier, microhistory and nano/macrohistory share a common problem: the outlier — the exceptional case, the extreme value or the seemingly inexplicable event.

Outliers are observations that are, by some relevant measurement, distant from most others and can have several causes. They may reveal that the population from which the observations are drawn possesses a high level of variance. That is, they say something useful and important to the investigator, even that the assumed theory with which the data are approached is flawed. On the other hand they may be the product of observational error, transcription error or chance. In these cases, outliers stand as an obstacle to correct interpretation; attempting to read meaning into such outliers is a fool’s errand. They should be discarded. Historians are understandably more reluctant to make this move than are most social scientists. A historical event or observation, unless it is truly an error, can be of interest to historians even as it puzzles and confounds them, while for the investigator testing a hypothesis, it is more important to separate noise from signal. It is the signal that counts.³¹

How far must an outlier lie from the central tendency of the larger population in order to be safely excluded from further analysis? There is no single mathematical definition of what constitutes an outlier, but statistical conventions offer guidance to populations that are thought to be normally distributed (to form, as the population becomes larger, a ‘bell curve’). There, depending on the level of confidence one is willing to tolerate, standard deviations give guidance. But these conventions can be misleading, even dangerous, when applied to distributions that are not normal. For example, lognormal distributions are characterized by many observations at low values plus steadily fewer at higher values. There are many small cities but

³¹ Many years ago, while engaged in research for my dissertation in economic history, I found a fiscal record of all land users in a large portion of the Dutch province of Friesland. There were several thousand entries, and I proposed to take a random sample of these entries in order to gain information about the distribution of farm values among the region’s farmers. To my economics adviser, this seemed a sensible, efficient strategy. His only question hinged on methodology: how large should the sample be? My history adviser pushed back on my plan. Why, he asked, did I not record every entry? Who knows what I might otherwise miss? One adviser saw value in the signal, the other in the potential value of the unique case. In the event, I took the historian’s advice; unfortunately, I did not thereby uncover curious information with which to write a brilliant microhistory of an exceptional Frisian farmer.

few large ones, and only one that stands head and shoulders above the rest. The same is true of the distribution of wealth and the publication records of academics. These populations possess what is known as a long tail, with a few extreme values. These outliers, unlike those of normally distributed characteristics, are often of particular interest, of course. They are discarded at one's peril (especially if the characteristics of interest are risk factors in financial transactions, such as the chance of default among mortgage holders). If the term 'exceptional normal' can be given a fixed meaning, it would appear to refer to cases that reside in the long tail of a distribution: the observation is unusual and rare, but it is not an error; its very existence challenges the prevailing theory thought to explain the population under examination.

So, what does this all mean for historians going about their work? If the social scientific historian engages nanohistory to find regularities and discards outliers, the microhistorian is specifically attracted to the study of the exceptional, to acts of resistance to prevailing norms and the lives of those marginal to a society. They do not discard outliers. Or do they? Microhistorians certainly do not pursue *all* aspects of exceptionality. As I have noted above, some events attract our attention and sympathy more than others, some we can understand (or think we understand), while others seem unclear or incoherent. Here, too, there is a problem of discarded outliers.

Moreover, the reclamation of the exceptional does not by itself lead to insights that go beyond the microstudy at hand unless the reclaimed material can be situated in some context. If microhistorical work is a matter of *im Kleinen das Grosse suchen*, or of determining the relationship between the fragment and the whole, then it is essential to have some basis on which to interpret the fragment.³² Is it the same as the unobserved or unstudied fragments? Is it somehow an exemplification of the whole? Or is it an outlier? In short, there is no easy escape from the need to confront humanity's encounter with the structures or iron cages that simultaneously constrain and sustain it.

The various scales of historical analysis do not by themselves vary in intrinsic virtue or promise. That depends on the question the historian has set out to answer. And this brings me to a conclusion that one might argue should have been my starting point. The microhistorian's attraction to the exceptional and the marginal and the social scientific historian's inclination to discard the outlier are twin vulnerabilities of a history that starts with the sources rather than with the problem. A microhistory that begins with a curious document may reveal the historian's virtuosity in recreating a lost place and time and it can excite the reader to wonder over the exceptionality

³² On seeking the large in the small, see Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler (eds.), *Im Kleinen das Grosse suchen: Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis* (Innsbruck, 2012).

of certain hitherto obscure historical figures. But a valuable and potentially powerful microhistory sets out to address a problem, or challenge a thesis. This necessarily brings the microlevel exceptional into contact with some model, or theory which, in turn, disciplines the interpretation of the micro-level sources. To connect fruitfully with global history microhistory needs to be more theoretically aware — not only critical of the ‘rigid and mechanical’ models and ‘mindsets’ and the ‘predefined’ and abstract theories of yesteryear — an all-too-easy target — but also critical of the limitations of its own practices.³³

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³³ Levi, ‘Frail Frontiers?’, p. 37; De Vito, ‘History Without Scale’, this volume, *passim*.