The Representativeness of a Reputation:
A ‘Third Wave’ in Microhistory

Hans Renders and David Veltman

In popular history books, the individual perspective is often chosen as a point of departure to describe a historical development or phenomenon. But the personal is not the only determining factor in history. Attention should also be paid to the way in which a public representation can be explained or interpreted from the perspective of the personal. Autobiographical sources can be one way to explain a reputation, but the biographer has the freedom to bring other sources into play. Thus, the historical significance of an individual becomes the subject of critical investigation, enabling the biographer to contextualize history in a new manner.

Indeed, the individual enjoys a certain freedom within the boundaries of the social structure in which he is active. But this structure is also continuously evolving and contradicting itself. Therefore, Magnússon argues that microhistory should acknowledge that the agency of the individual cannot be predicted: it is in a constant flux, not making use of well-defined concepts, but of ‘minor’ or ‘local’ knowledge.¹ A close reading of the available knowledge can help the microhistorian to examine the mentality of the individual. In order to get a clear, uncontradictory view of this mentality, one should limit himself to this small research unit.²

We would like to argue that in microhistory different fields of knowledge can be related to each other, not only the knowledge that was available to the writer of autobiographical accounts. The ‘method of clues’ has often been regarded as the starting point of microhistory. The microhistorian searches for something that does not quite fit, something odd that needs to be explained. This peculiar event or phenomenon is taken as a sign of a larger, but hidden or unknown, structure. A strange detail is made to represent a wider totality.

Microhistory, as it was introduced in the 1970s and 80s by the Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, was seen as one of the methodological alternatives to the relativist historiography of the day. According to them, historical research had become a rhetorical or aesthetic activity, too dependent on the available written records of the events they describe. Instead, microhistory wanted to focus on the events themselves. The agency of the individual, they argued, could be explained from the perspective of a constant negotiation, manipulation and choices people had to make in a normative reality. Ginzburg and Poni therefore chose marginal people, outlaws even, as the subject of their investigation: these subjects could shed light on the freedom people had to choose between the contradictory normative systems that they encountered in life. By doing so, the dominance of well-known historical narratives was questioned.

The next phase in microhistory was introduced by historians like Matti Peltonen and Jacques Revel. They argued that marginal figures in history could be seen as representative of groups that have not been recognized before as a community. Elaborating upon the concept of ‘thick description’, as introduced by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Peltonen argued that the representativeness of the individual is dependent on the scale used to describe his agency. The reduction of scale offers a new perspective on the larger context. As a politician or artist, someone experiences life differently than as a resident of a small village.

But biographical research can also work the other way around: by studying the individual perspective, something new can be said about general issues as well. The biographer then problematizes the way individuals are seen as representatives of a larger whole. This what we would call the third wave in microhistory. Modern biographers should not seek confirmation of the representativeness of the person under scrutiny. Instead, they are capable to show discrepancies in the agency of the individual between a micro- and a macro-level.

When different roles are carried out in a life, people search for resemblances between their practices. This convergence leads to the formulation of new knowledge that governs the social setting in which the individual is playing

---

his role.5 This knowledge cannot be singled out as being ‘local’ or ‘minor’, as Magnússon argues. He is willing to reject all contextualization in history books, because it blurs the lines between the individual past and the story we want to tell about that past.6 This methodological rigorousness could lead to a neglect of the ability of the historian to offer a corrective to the dominant view of history with help of the individual perspective.7

The microhistorical approach is for the most part epistemological, providing instructions on how to gain new information in order to create new information or hypotheses. When the scale of observation is reduced, structures can be found that are relevant on a larger scale than the individual life. It then appears that theoretical frameworks that are imposed on historical phenomena from the top down are not always able to describe the individual agency. By looking only for normal exceptions, the process of (not) adapting to norms, roles or expectations in life can easily be flattened out in larger generalizations.8

In a biographical research that takes microhistory as its method, the sources do not speak for themselves. They have to be diligently contextualized, in order to show that these voices are coming to us in an institutionalized manner. Microhistory then becomes a hermeneutical device, allowing us to interpret historical sources in a new way. To scale down the historical event to a human dimension allows the historian to test the experience of an individual to the grand historical narrative.

In a functionalist historiography, one seeks to normalize certain social behavior within a coherent system, which is used as an explanation of the way the system functions. Instead, microhistory starts off with the contradictions that govern social behavior. The fragmentary, contradictory perspectives that normative systems impose on social behavior are thus fully appreciated. It is no longer the aim of microhistory to define the function of the formal institutions in power, as Magnússon argues.9 This functionality was indeed at the

---

Marxist roots of Italian microhistory, but fifty years later, the focus has shifted to the representativity of individual agency in describing larger contexts. Agency can yield power relations, but it is also capable of acknowledging the status quo.

Microhistory needs a specific form of communication with the reader: the narrative. This form allows the biographer to show the relationship between normative systems and the openness to allow for individual actions taking place within the margins of these systems. If you want to tell why a historical phenomenon was important at a certain moment in history, it is not sufficient to present your research in case studies. A historical investigation based upon case studies is at risk of wanting to meet a certain horizon of expectations. By using microhistory as an open, truly critical method of investigation, the historian shows that the course of life is like a narrative, that is: fundamentally undecided.