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Introduction

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> A species of hope resides in the possibility of seeing one thing, one phenomenon or essence, so clearly and fully that the light of its understanding illuminates the rest of life.
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> —*William DeBuys,* The Walk, *2007*

The idea that intense reflection on a single event, place, or life might yield insights across scales of space and time is hardly new. From William Blake's notion that one might "see a world in a grain of sand" to Nabokov's hapless Timofey Pnin's belief that a small history could be written of "customs, curiosities, literary anecdotes" so as "to reflect, in miniature, la Grande Histoire," writers have sought to wed the richness of close detail to the comprehension of more distant significance.

In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy argued that history is made not by the deeds of great men and women but by the ensemble of collective actions of all those involved in events. Speaking of the epic Battle of Borodino, which turned the tide against the French army, Tolstoy observed that "it was not Napoleon who ordained the course of the battle, for no part of his plan was executed and during the engagement he did not know what was going on before him. Therefore the way in which these men slaughtered one another was not decided by Napoleon's will but occurred independently of him, in accord with the will of the hundreds of thousands of individuals who took part in the common action." Drawing a lesson from these events of early-nineteenth-century Russia, Tolstoy concluded, "to elicit the laws of history we must leave aside kings, ministers and generals, and select for

study the homogeneous, infinitesimal elements which influence the masses." Although the neglect of kings may appear to contradict the instruction to study all of history's actors, Tolstoy puts it as a matter of priority, given that previously historians had devoted only "one-millionth" of their attention to the actions of ordinary people. The story of Borodino, a turning point in the affairs of nations, links Napoleon, the head cold he suffered on the day of the great battle, the devastated Russian countryside, and the coming winter to the lives of the foot soldiers who fought the war. Customs, curiosities, and literary anecdotes—extraneous intimacies to most historians—found full and terrible convergence with the epic sweep of "big history" on September 7, 1812.

Tolstoy's reflections on the nature of history in the 1860s resonate with thinking now current in the historical social sciences. Growing dissatisfaction with global perspectives and meta-narratives has led to renewed interest in event, biography, and local vantage and the research genre known, somewhat ungracefully, as microhistory. Indeed, Carlo Ginzburg's exemplary book *The Cheese and the Worms* is a microhistorical study of the heresy trial of a sixteenth-century miller. It drew its impetus, Ginzburg says, "from *War and Peace*, from Tolstoy's conviction that a historical phenomenon can become comprehensible only by reconstructing the activities of all of the people who participated in it" (Ginzburg 1993:24).

The term *microhistory* appeared in European historical writing during the 1970s, although it had appeared as a self-defined term in varied contexts somewhat earlier (see Ginzburg 1993:10–13). As the term gained currency in the following decade, *microhistory* came to refer to a particular style of work rather than any codified method, a practice rather than a doctrine. Exponents of this new style shared disenchantment with grand theories of modernization, whether liberal or Marxist. Diverse practitioners of the emerging school urged a return to narrative, detailed analysis on a small scale, and the search for unforeseen meanings embedded in cases: "The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved" (Levi 2001: 101). In this sense, microhistory underscores the need for local perspective in understanding global patterns and wider narratives, as well as offering unique insights into phenomena and patterns that may lie outside of macrohistorical narratives or flatly contradict them.

Yet microhistory eludes formal definition. It is less a method than an orientation, sensibility, and aesthetic—an "exploratory stance" in the words of Richard Maddox (this volume). It finds adherents across the social sciences and humanities, including historians, sociologists, ethnographers,

and archaeologists. Exemplary works best characterize microhistory denotatively. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Carnival in Romans* (1979) describes the 1580 rebellion of a French village, whose hopes and sorrows foreshadow revolutions still two hundred years away. E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) interprets conflicts over poaching and common rights in England's royal game parks as key to understanding new practices of state-building. Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) builds from a family, a husband imposter, and a celebrated trial to questions of identity, gender, and law in early modern France; her recent *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (2006) extends its reach to a biography that illuminates the vast Mediterranean itself. Examples can be multiplied; microhistory is the strategy employed in studies ranging from Junker estates of Brandenburg (Hagen 2002) and peasant villages in Mexico (González 1974) to biography written through the interdisciplinary lens of the documentary record and archaeological past (Beaudry, this volume). The essential feature of this perspective is a search for meaning in the microcosm, the large lessons discovered in small worlds. Roger Chartier (1982:32) observes that "it is on the reduced scale, and probably only on this scale, that we can understand without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of belief, of values and of representations on one side and social affiliations on the other."

Appeals for grounded and eventful history risk descending into trivia or nostalgia. To confront this pitfall, microhistory claims, explicitly or implicitly, to illuminate more general truths, wider patterns, or at least to draw some analogy to other cases. In the best of circumstances, microhistorical studies reveal in fine-grained detail how larger processes operate, how the case serves as a useful hypothesis for exploring other cases. The microhistorical place, event, or personage may function—to borrow Clifford Geertz's recent simile—"like a magnetic field passed through iron filings" to arrange and chart seemingly random scatters of historical debris (2006:23). We understand, for example, what the Hanoverian state in eighteenth-century England (and by extension the emergent modern state) was all about by discovering what its royal game parks were for and why village hunters and sod cutters where accused (but seldom convicted) of capital crimes for exercising their traditional common rights to the forest. The challenge lies in relating the microhistorical case to macrosocial factors, however the latter are conceived in a given inquiry (for example, as state-building, social movement, demographic change, environmental constraint, or economic hegemony)—how to relate the local and the global. As Burke (2001:116–17) underscores, "If this question is not taken seriously,

microhistory might become a kind of escapism, an acceptance of a fragmented world rather than an attempt to make sense of it."

Levi (2001:99) posits that "microhistory as a practice is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material." Yet this idea introduces an ambiguity of scale. *Small* and *large*, *micro* and *macro* are comparative terms that have meaning only in relation to one another. A village is micro if analyzed in relation to the state but macro if employed as the setting for a study of households. But the ambiguity can be turned to an advantage. Matti Peltonen (2001:348) argues that microhistory deals with levels and relations of social reality and especially the *intersection* of the micro and macro in a given case. Illustratively, the cultural knowledge that informs the small world of Ginzberg's miller intersects with the social control of the church and its Inquisition trials. Efforts to enforce (macro) church discipline reveal surprising (micro) levels of literacy and beliefs about the cosmos that flourish in peasant society. It is in these intersections that empirical discovery takes place. The link between micro and macro perspectives is not simply reduction or aggregation but rather qualitative and the source of new information (Peltonen 2001:357).

The preceding concerns frame this volume. These are twelve experiments in ways of using the detailed case to pursue fresh insights and innovative research maneuvers. The contributions are original interdisciplinary works that encourage interpretive stretch and comparative thinking about how social scientists and humanists of varied experience are engaged in writing history. The scholars represented are anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and sociologists—although many of the contributors can be comfortably placed in more than one discipline. As the chapter titles suggest, their research examines a wide variety of subjects, time periods, and geographical settings. The authors share some temporal and geographic foci broadly framed by the era of the Atlantic world, concentrating on case studies from Europe and the Americas, although ranging in focus from fifteenth-century West Africa to twenty-first-century Yucatán. They are united through perspectives that examine wider patterns, through case studies that are local and particularistic: events, lives, and locations. A recurring theme is the construction of social history from below, the small ways in which ordinary people affect the world. The authors are scrupulous about detail, the interpretive significance of small clues otherwise overlooked, and, through them, discoveries with broader implications.

From that point on, however, the contributions diverge in many ways, as our subtitle is intended to suggest. They differ in method, language,

epistemology, and disciplinary vantage. These differences are sometimes pragmatic and negotiable. At other times, they are firmly held convictions that are a source of deep epistemological division. The tensions, as well as the complementarities, that run through these contributions and emerge through their comparison are instructive. We draw out both for the reader to evaluate.

The collection is divided into two parts. Part 1 introduces varied perspectives of microhistory, including different approaches to methodology, data, and vantage, as well as the disciplinary tensions represented. These chapters are not disciplinary overviews or theoretical reflections but are case studies that serve to illustrate the seminar's diversity. They range from biography to social history, from essays on conventions of time and space to archaeological perspectives on European expansion. The case studies in part 2 further explore these issues, illustrating lenses of changing scales, progressing from event and biography to settlement and landscape. Their differing orientations are not solely about scale but also involve explorations of method, data, and epistemology.

Richard Maddox opens the discussion in part 1 with the uses of biography to take "microsteps toward a counterhistory" of Spain since the 1930s, tacking between macro- and microhistorical perspectives to investigate counterhistories and hegemonic processes. Much is written in Spain and elsewhere about the grand transition from dictatorship to democracy, with the implication that such changes are hegemonic in scope and reflected in individual lives. Maddox's story of one man, ordinary in some respects and extraordinary in others, not only belies this understanding of macrohistory but also compels reconsideration of distinctions between great and small events—much as Tolstoy proposed. Maddox comes at biography from below, from the vantage of a man who lived through the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship. Juan Vargas became a key informant in Maddox's ethnography of Aracena, a small town in Andalusia. Juan's career reveals shifting motives for his initial support for and later opposition to Franco, as well as to subsequent hegemonies of church and state. Maddox's examination of the tensions between macro and micro perspectives usefully frames the issues confronted in the following chapters.

Kathleen Blee examines similar tensions in a contemporary setting by studying the microhistory of collective action in its formative stages: how ordinary people and contingent acts shape—and reshape—the course of events often seen in retrospect as structurally determined social movements. Her study of an incipient social movement in Pittsburgh reveals how, in the case of a group battling neighborhood drug use, social movements emerge

and transform their aims and constituents. Methodologically, Blee draws on observational data over twenty-four months, documentary sources, and oral histories of principal participants. This approach affords a way to scrutinize the "dynamics of social life," to understand their genesis in terms of earlier actions, and to understand the constraints and margins of possibility through which they emerge. Microhistory is modified and extended as a way of understanding context, recovering lived experience, and restoring it to a central place in historical explanation.

Paul Eiss offers a different kind of microhistory, in which the writing itself is part of a historical process connecting the author and events of the past as they continue to unfold. He examines a 1913 peasant uprising in Yucatán that was ultimately suppressed, but not before rebels left their message of liberation carved on a piece of wood, its text transmitted in successive later writings up to this volume. Like Maddox, Eiss tells a piquant story of resistance to domination—a story in which, ironically, the voice of the rebels outlives what once appeared to be one of history's great victories. In his telling, Eiss questions the positionality of the researcher and the potential for opening a space of encounter between historical actors and historians, as well as between historians of radically different backgrounds. Microhistory can be a political act.

Part 1 closes with a contribution by Christopher DeCorse that examines the tensions between interpretations drawn from documentary sources, oral traditions, and the archaeological record, each frame emerging through the examination of small and fragmentary pieces of evidence to build an interpretation that relates to broader histories and processes. DeCorse's excavations in coastal Ghana and the African trade entrepôt of Elmina is his entrée into examination of African–European interactions between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. DeCorse examines how the inconsistencies between material culture and the documentary record reveal a more complete historical account of the African settlement and the emergence of Elmina as a sociopolitical entity.

Part 2 opens with works that are seemingly narrow in scale, beginning with the event and individual and moving on to place, setting, and landscape. Ultimately, however, these case studies illustrate that whether the lens is an event, individual, or landscape, it can open onto much wider vistas. While playing off differences in scale, the papers also play off each other, intersecting in varied ways in the uses of data, method, and interpretation. John Walton's study of arson in two nineteenth-century California frontier communities builds on the social history of rural revolt in England but goes on to argue that comparative microhistory reveals new

and contrasting phenomena. In one case, arson took the form of social protest against racism, but in another instance, it served the ends of popular justice, a form of social control on a lawless frontier. Walton shows how acts of arson expressed a style of popular justice in frontier communities, sometimes as a method of social control in the absence of law and sometimes as protest.

Michael Harkin's study of the lost colony at Roanoke Island urges a bold move for microhistory, previously confined by narrow conceptions of the "unities" of time and space. He argues for wide-ranging, imaginative, indeed playful comparisons across conventional boundaries—"shifting frames" that move from the Western Apache landscape to prewar Paris, from 9/11 to sixteenth-century Virginia. These varied contexts open new interpretations, a means of searching for multiple endings.

Linda Gordon's chapter on Great Depression–era photographer Dorothea Lange employs "biography as microhistory" in a demonstration of how one woman's life and art afford insight into New Deal political culture. Dorothea Lange and her husband, economist Paul Taylor, are legendary figures in the farmworkers' struggle, and their lives connect many threads in U.S. culture and society. Gordon's biography depends upon the technique and detail of Lange's images. Her study of Lange opens a window on the popular-front movement in the arts, the relationship between government (Lange's Farm Security Administration employer) and the arts, technical developments in photography, the industrialization of agriculture, and gender politics of the prewar era.

Like DeCorse and Lightfoot (see below), Mary Beaudry works at the intersection of written texts and the archaeological record as a means of examining the past. However, Beaudry's entrée into history is through anthropological biography. Her study of the homesite of two New England merchants uses artifacts and documentary sources to trace family lifestyles and changing fortunes across the late eighteenth century and the early republic; these are "archaeological biographies" derived from colonial history and material culture. Neither of these men were "famous" Americans, yet study of their lives emerges as more than particularistic narrative. Like Maddox, Beaudry views individual lives not as "small" elements of history but as the ultimate measure of history's consequences. Beaudry uses her study to examine the varied nature of historical and archaeological research and to revisit the constraints and opportunities afforded by reliance on different categories of data.

Emphasis on the view from below and individual agency animates Rebecca Jean Emigh's study of fifteenth-century Tuscan peasants and how

their tax records illuminate local economy and society. Emigh argues that fifteenth-century Italian peasants developed an acute sense of working with figures—numeracy skills, if not conventional literacy, that made possible the creation of tax and accounting systems developed by emerging states. By aggregating microhistorical analyses of different forms of taxation, Emigh reveals the coherence of peasant economies.

In his contribution, Dale Tomich illustrates how microhistory finds fresh application in the study of Cuban sugar plantations and how intellectuals greeted the dramatic nineteenth-century industrialization of Cuba's countryside. Like Gordon, Tomich gleans insight into sweeping economic and cultural changes through examination of visual and textual records, in this case lithographs of sugar plantations created by French artist and lithographer Eduardo Laplante, superbly reproduced in *Los Ingenios* (1857), with text by Justo Cantero. *Los Ingenios* was a testimonial to the technological achievements of the Cuban sugar industry and the march of progress. Tomich interrogates Laplante's depictions and Cantero's descriptions of the mills to uncover clues to cultural attitudes toward nature, landscape, and industrialization. Although Cantero's use of the term *picturesque* in describing the mills seems at variance with Laplante's industrialized landscapes, Tomich's examination reveals a view of an idealized if transformed nature, and through it clues to locally configured Cuban identity.

James F. Brooks shares Harkin's relish for provocative comparison in his study of the nineteenth-century Argentine frontier and the hybrid Indian and creole societies whose intersection shaped the modern state. A sensitive reading of the contingencies affecting intergroup conflict suggests that history could have taken a very different course and that these suppressed historical alternatives remain as lessons for the present. Brooks examines indigenous opposition and adjustment to the subsequent domination of Argentine nationalism and, like Paul Eiss, hints at alternative futures that were once possible.

Examining another colonial world, Kent Lightfoot's study of the nineteenth-century Russian Colony Ross in northern California constructs the history of place from fragments of archaeology, written documents, and oral traditions. The study of Fort Ross juxtaposes archaeological evidence from the site with colonial documents, pictorial representations of the old fort, and Native American oral histories of life in the fort's environs, with particular attention to women's lives. Recollections of Native people are privileged in a reexamination and critique of colonial accounts. Each case suggests important reformulations of standard interpretations of colonial encounters and grand theories of capitalist development.

Collectively, the volume papers demonstrate varied perspectives of and on microhistory, some of which abruptly depart from the traditions fashioned over the past three decades. All these studies urge a rethinking of what we presume to be the great and small events of history, of who really rules, of the complex webs of collective action, and of what might have been. In the end, the studies elicit questions about the objectives of microhistory and the broader aims of writing history in the social sciences and humanities. Although some authors draw on microhistorical works such as Ginzburg (Blee, DeCorse, Harkin, Tomich), Thompson (Walton), and Levi (Eiss, Emigh), they find new applications. Others find conceptual parallels between microhistory and other disciplines, such as methods of biography (Beaudry, Gordon, Maddox), archaeology (Beaudry, DeCorse, Lightfoot), and historical ethnology (Brooks), even as the conceptual utility of the term is cast into doubt and disciplinary boundaries are explored.

Some contributors revisit the concern that microhistory may drift into the study of particularities and, consequently, become irrelevant. Emigh argues that microhistory on a too-small scale may prove a liability; she recommends instead aggregate and comparative microhistories in her own study drawing on three different data sources on how Tuscan peasants accounted their tax liabilities. Walton develops comparative microhistory to show how the social meaning of a given act (here arson) varies with historical context. Blee uses microhistory to understand the contexts in which social movements develop or fail. Other contributors question the theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed in microhistory. Eiss challenges the "positivism" he sees in some microhistory, its reliance on "optical metaphors," and the defense of scientific method against relativism raised by at least one of its exponents, Giovanni Levi. Eiss does not reject the methodological language of lens, scale, and scope but argues that microhistory must be opened up to include "the hermeneutics and politics of writing." In a related vein, Harkin argues that microhistory "attempts to maintain unities by circumscribing the frame of reference to a particular time and place" rather than by exploring the possibilities of unbounded comparison, analogy, and contrast. These are provocative challenges, new avenues that the authors pursue with profit in their contributions. Conversely, enthusiasts of microhistory find nothing positivistic in its tradition (quite the reverse, Levi notwithstanding), no restriction on the politics and hermeneutics of writing (for example, Natalie Davis's subject in *Martin Guerre*), and a positive relish for extending the range of time and space comparisons (for example, Ladurie's carnival rebels in *Romans* as "forerunners of equality").

The question is not whether these critical ideas are constructive—they are—but whether they diverge from or more fully express the potential of microhistory. Disputing these matters is a good thing. It is a starting point that may inspire researchers to move on in their own work with new analytical insight. This collection is about how twelve authors have done that in their own disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical ways. Microhistory never was one thing, never a codified procedure that one could embrace or reject. Rather, it is a loose, unrestricted label for a variety of works—many, but not all, European and produced in response to global meta-narratives—that discounted or undervalued the importance of the local, individual, or event in historical interpretation. In *Local Knowledge*, Clifford Geertz (1983:233) writes:

> We need, in the end, something rather more than local knowledge. We need a way of turning its varieties into commentaries one upon another, the one lighting what the other darkens. There is no ready method for this, and for myself I rather doubt there ever will be. But there is by now some accumulated cunning. We are learning…something about bringing incommensurable perspectives on things, dissimilar ways of registering experiences and phrasing lives, into conceptual proximity such that, though our sense of their distinctiveness is not reduced (normally, it is deepened), they seem somehow less enigmatical than they do when they are looked at apart…it is through comparison, and of incomparables, that whatever heart we can actually get to is to be reached.

The papers in this volume, individually and collectively, pose the challenge of comparing incomparables. We urge that potential commonalities of archaeology and history, sociology and anthropology, be recognized, and that historical interpretation move freely across disciplines. Historical study should be held up to the present and individual lives understood as the intersection of biography and history. Our authors develop these themes in a kaleidoscope of places and periods, small worlds that are the only worlds we experience, study, and sequentially fit together in bigger pictures. Although Geertz (1996:262) observed a decade ago that "no one lives in the world in general," these essays suggest that we all dwell in worlds larger than "some confined and limited stretch of it—'the world around here.'" We hope that this volume polishes a lens capable of the deeper depth of field necessary to bring worlds at once small and grand into full relief.

