

# Introduction

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THE term ‘microhistory’ often denotes a very broad and diversified field of research, which, besides, varies depending on national contexts. In his 2015 interview for the Russian journal “Snob”, Carlo Ginzburg defined microhistory as follows: “Microhistory aims to help us generalize better through the study of ‘cases’. Concrete answers, like any scientific generalization, can become obsolete and be refuted, but microhistory as a whole remains a promising project”<sup>1</sup>.

It is interesting, however, that one of the fundamental elements of the theory of microhistory is the tension between its innovative and articulate methodological program and the declarations of its founding fathers regarding the impossibility of successfully tracing its disciplinary boundaries. As stated by Giovanni Levi: “Microhistory is essentially a historiographical practice whereas its theoretical references are varied and, in a sense, eclectic. [...]. Microhistory, in common with all experimental work, has nobody of established orthodoxy to draw on”<sup>2</sup>. Jacques Revel agrees with Levi on this, and defines microhistory in the following terms: “It is by no means a [historiographical] technique, much less a discipline. [...] It should rather be interpreted as a symptom: a reaction to a particular moment of social history, whose requirements and approaches it aims to reformulate. [...] It is a purely practical approach, which does not mean that it lacks theoretical implications or consequences”<sup>3</sup>. In the abovementioned interview Ginzburg, for his

part, concludes that “transforming microhistory into orthodoxy would be grotesque: history can and must be studied from different perspectives”. From Levi’s and Revel’s point of view instead, such a transformation is in no way possible, since microhistory lacks clear methodological foundations and a coherent program.

Yet, one cannot fail to notice that the denial of the theoretical unity of microhistorical research comes with an active methodological reflection, as shown by the extensive and ever-growing bibliography of articles, essays and books devoted to microhistory and its method and reception in different countries and cultures. In most cases, the debate on microhistory raises a series of historiographical issues: the relationship between macro and micro levels of analysis, the problem of ‘cases’ and generalization, the nature and function of the historical context, the epistemological status of the ‘exception’ and the norm, the role of the individual in the ‘macrohistory’ and the ways in which social actors defend their autonomy from authoritarian or totalitarian power, thus daily negotiating it through micro-tactics and strategies; but also, on the broader level of metareflection: the distance that separates the researcher from the object and the ‘characters’ of their research, the experimental nature of historical science, the issue of analytical tools in the human sciences, the functions of narration in the historian’s work, to name the most crucial ones.

Therefore, despite microhistorians’ common skepticism, there is evidence to believe that microhistory methodological program has actually developed.

It is not the focus of this discussion to determine who is wrong and who is right in this debate. Of much greater importance instead is to consider the fact that microhistory, interpreted as a historio-

<sup>1</sup> Karlo Ginzburg: *nedostatchno razoblachit’ lozh’, vazhno poniat’, pochemu ona rabotaet*, “Snob”, 16.06.2015, <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/93932> (latest access: 21.07.2023).

<sup>2</sup> G. Levi, *On Microhistory*, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. by P. Burke, Cambridge 1991, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> J. Revel, *L’Histoire au ras du sol*, in G. Levi, *Le pouvoir au village. Histoire d’un exorciste dans le Piémont du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1989, pp. I-II, XIII.

graphic project, has since its very beginning tackled questions and problems related to a wide range of scientific disciplines, including philology, literary criticism, history of art, history of science, history of ideas, history of philosophy and of political thought. It is somehow possible to regard microhistory as a metascience, since one of its main objectives is to critically reflect on the foundations of the human sciences as such (this is even more so if we consider the theoretical reflection of Carlo Ginzburg, as it becomes clear from the long interview that he kindly granted us while conceiving “Literary Microhistories”). This assumption convinced us to present our Slavist colleagues some issues to reflect upon: how relevant is the microhistorical approach to the literary and cultural research in our field? Are we going to better understand our subject and our discipline if we ask ourselves the questions that have been raised by microhistorians in the last decades? We are convinced that embracing what lies beyond our restricted field of study and reflecting upon our method are the most important challenges that Italian Slavic Studies has to face.

This monographic section of “eSamizdat”, far from willing to provide comprehensive answers or a ‘right’ paradigm, rather seeks to launch a series of initiatives aimed at sharpening some epistemological tools that we hope will be useful to interpret the global crisis that the Slavic world is going through. A laboratory of ideas and potential approaches to develop in a dialogic and collective way, rather than a *status quaestionis* and the conclusions of an already held debate. The authors of this number, to whom we express our deep gratitude for accepting our invitation, have captured the true essence of the journal’s project, thus providing the readers with examples and models to test the microhistorical method and to employ it in several fields. Alexander Martin gauges its effectiveness in the study of the ‘cultural memory’, moving from Assman’s definition and then following the transcultural track of the reception of Lutheran pastor J. A. Rosenstrauch’s writings; Guido Carpi uses it instead to highlight the ‘parallel convergences’ between sociopolitical and cultural-literary series, in the context of *Petra-*

*shevtsy’s* ideological discussions and the genesis of Dostoevskii’s *povest’ The Landlady*; Iris Uccello carries on the exploration of Imperial Russia emerging public sphere, thus presenting us with the case of two trials equally characterized by the previously unknown intersectionality of gender and social deviance; lastly, Maria Mayofis and Maxim Lukin deal with the Soviet literary field, an extremely fertile ground for microhistorical analysis: the former reports Paustovskii and M. Ryl’skii’s debate on Ukrainian identity in order to make more general observations on the “rules” and the “exceptions” of public communication, whereas the latter searches in D. Danin’s personal archive the “threads” and the “traces” of the State’s cultural politics.

Alongside them, to bridge the past and the future, the East and the West, we decided to translate and reprint two essays that contributed to spark the debate on microhistory in the Slavic area, thus making them accessible to non-Russian readers<sup>4</sup>. The author, the founder of “Kazus” as well as one of the first ambassadors of microhistory in Russia<sup>5</sup>, developed his approach in contrast with the historiographic tradition that examines serial and statistic data in order to disclose big social structures, ‘long-term’ processes, universal models and a certain way of considering the history of mentalities, far from the individual and the social practices. First in *What is “Kazus” about?* and then in *Multi-Faced History*, Iurii Bessmertnyi explained how the almanac program is rather based on “the idea of the individual who stands out of the ‘conformists’ and is able to resist the levelling effect of the ‘general’ norms (even though not on a political level, but ‘only’ in the ‘private life’), thus creating new models of behavior and contributing to the change of the norms, and, eventually, of the society as a whole”<sup>6</sup>. Taking into account atypical cases has allowed historians

<sup>4</sup> The articles, respectively published in 1997 and 2000, appear on “eSamizdat” courtesy of Iurii Bessmertnyi’s (1923-2000) daughter, Ol’ga Bessmertnaia, whom we thank.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *Kazus. Individual’noe i unikal’noe v istorii. Antologija*, Moskva 2022; S. G. Magnusson – I. M. Szijsartó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, London-New York 2013, pp. 66-68.

<sup>6</sup> M. Boitsov – O. Togoeva, *Delo “Kazusa”*, “Srednie veka”, 2007 (LXVIII), 4, p. 150.

to approach their job from a very peculiar perspective: Bessmertnyi believed that microhistory's main goal (and therefore its distinctive feature) is to “understand the options” available for ordinary social actors in different cultural spaces.

Before giving the floor to the Authors, we would like to warmly thank Carlo Ginzburg, who contributed to this “eSamizdat” project by taking part to a stimulating conversation in February 2023, whose transcription is included herein. This dialogue gave us the chance to tackle some important methodological issues raised by the Italian leading microhistorian, thus addressing them in a way that might prove to be intuitively useful to an expert of Slavic cultures: the legacy of some of the major 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers (Shklovskii, Propp, Bakhtin) and their influence on the microhistorical method, the dialectic relation between morphology and history and the “circularity” between high and low genres, the possibility to read literary texts “against the grain” in order to grasp their “unintentional revelations” and, lastly, the hope that, facing the current Inquisition, microhistory can work not only as an effective hermeneutic tool, but also and foremost as a practice of resistance.

◇ **Introduction** ◇**Emilio Mari – Mikhail Velizhev****Abstract**

Introduction and preliminary remarks by the editors of the section “Literary Microhistories”.

**Keywords**

Microhistories, Slavic Studies, Literary Studies, Social History.

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