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Author

Sabean, D

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Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien

Herausgegeben von

Gunilla Budde
Sebastian Conrad
Oliver Janz

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Jürgen Kocka
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Inhalt

Vorwort	11
---------------	----

Ansätze

<i>Natalie Zemon Davis</i> What is Universal about History?	15
--	----

<i>Michael Mann</i> Globalization, Macro-Regions and Nation-States	21
---	----

<i>Charles S. Maier</i> Transformations of Territoriality. 1600–2000	32
---	----

<i>Jürgen Osterhammel</i> Imperien	56
---	----

<i>Patrick Karl O'Brien</i> The Divergence Debate. Europe and China 1368–1846	68
--	----

✓ <i>Georg G. Iggers</i> Modern Historiography from an Intercultural Global Perspective	83
---	----

✓ <i>Partha Chatterjee</i> A Brief History of Subaltern Studies	94
--	----

<i>Hartmut Kaelble</i> Europäische Geschichte aus westeuropäischer Sicht?	105
--	-----

<i>Manfred Hildermeier</i> Osteuropa als Gegenstand vergleichender Geschichte	117
--	-----

<i>Heinz-Gerhard Haupt</i> Historische Komparatistik in der internationalen Geschichtsschreibung	137
<i>James J. Sheehan</i> Paradigm Lost? The "Sonderweg" Revisited	150
✓ <i>Hans-Ulrich Wehler</i> Transnationale Geschichte – der neue Königsweg historischer Forschung?	161

Felder

<i>Dieter Langewiesche</i> Nationalismus – ein generalisierender Vergleich	175
<i>Shulamit Volkov</i> Jewish History. The Nationalism of Transnationalism	190
<i>Moshe Zimmermann</i> Die transnationale Holocaust-Erinnerung	202
<i>Emma Rothschild</i> Arcs of Ideas. International History and Intellectual History	217
<i>Peter Jelavich</i> Cultural History	227
<i>Victoria de Grazia</i> Globalizing Commercial Revolutions	238
<i>Gerald D. Feldman</i> Business History, Comparative History, and Transnational History	254
<i>Marcel van der Linden</i> Transnationale Arbeitergeschichte	265

✓ <i>David Warren Sabean</i> Reflections on Microhistory	275
<i>Etienne François</i> Europäische <i>lieux de mémoire</i>	290
<i>John Keane</i> Global Publics? Civil Society, Journalism and Democracy across Borders	304
Autorinnen und Autoren	318

Diese Beispiele verdeutlichen, so hoffe ich, die Chancen, die eine transnationale Herangehensweise uns bietet. Ohne die Bedeutung subnationaler und nationaler Studien zu mindern, wird stets deutlicher, dass nur weltumspannende Herangehensweisen uns ermöglichen, „Vorstellungen von einem höheren Grade der Deutlichkeit“ zu erlangen.³⁶

Aus dem Niederländischen von Klaus Mellenthin

David Warren Sabean

Reflections on Microhistory

Despite this or that use of the term (or related terms) “microhistory”, the current practices of microhistorians emerged in the 1970s and 80s, with a generation whose political and cultural experiences were formed in the 1960s.¹ From within the discipline of history, epistemological and stylistic issues were being raised against the “macroscopic and quantitative” model that had emerged after the war, supported by the intellectual presence of the *Annales* and its brilliant and powerful spiritual leader, Fernand Braudel. While by no means derivative from the French school, the most vital movements in England (Anglo-Marxism), Germany (Bielefeld social science history), and the United States (the new social history), developing at slightly different moments and with particular agendas of their own, shared certain features that made for an international focus on hard data (often statistical), long-term structural changes and the social forces behind them, and integrating narratives about class antagonisms or “modernization” that were heavily supported by classical nineteenth-century theory and centered on the nation state as the primary principle of narrative organization.² However monographs were constructed, they were implicitly or explicitly implicated in an overarching perspective that we have come to call “macroscopic”, which at once provided the support for their arguments and gave them their validity.³

A second field of issues arose from the geo-political practices of the period, often characterized by naive and not so naive eurocentrism, assumptions about the necessary path towards modernization, a careless trust in industrialization, and export models of development reminiscent of an earlier faith in the white man’s burden to spread civilization throughout the globe. In an essay reviewing and comparing German *Alltagsgeschichte* and Italian *microstoria*, Brad Gregory suggested that in a similar way the

1 Carlo Ginzburg, *Microhistory. Two or Three Things That I Know about It*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), pp. 10–35; Brad Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful? Micro-history and the History of Everyday Life*, in: *History and Theory* 38 (1999), pp. 100–110, here p. 100.

2 Not all of this would characterize E.P. Thompson, e.g., who exercised considerable influence on Italian *microstoria*: Simona Cerutti, *Microhistory. Social Relations versus Cultural Models*, in: Anna Maija Castrén et al. (eds.), *Between Sociology and History. Essays on Microhistory, Collective Action, and Nation-Building*, Helsinki 2004, pp. 17–40, here pp. 22–26.

3 Cerutti, *Microhistory*, p. 20.

36 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadologie*, Übersetzung von Robert Zimmermann, Wien 1847, Prinzip 24, S. 16.

practitioners of both kinds of history "questioned the purported teleology of modernizing historical processes".⁴ And Ginzburg pointed out that the distrust in progress shifted its political orientation during the period from the right to the left.⁵

In my own case, unease about the political assumptions that characterized the literature on economic transformation, nation building, and social reconstruction encouraged the pursuit of history as critical reflection on the history of the West, decentered by a radically comparative perspective designed to outflank if not outrun an inevitable ethnocentrism. The problem I eventually took up was a relatively simple one, but one that seemed to be at the heart of development practices during the 50s and early 60s. The reigning view of the history of the Western family up to the mid 60s understood the process of modernization to affect two groups in similar ways, outfitting them for the task of industrial and agricultural development, economic expansion, and dynamic self-perpetuating productivity. Entrepreneurs emerged – so the story went – as individualists, acting on rational principles of self interest, without consideration for their far-flung relatives. In a parallel fashion, a mobile modern workforce developed, able to dispose of income without extensive kinship obligations. In this "European" model, it was thought that premodern society had been characterized by a close integration of extended kin, while modernization was understood not just to have been accompanied by cutting ties with kin but was in some way driven by changes in the familial dynamics: no nuclear family household, no progress. The degree to which the "nuclear family" distinguished a society became a barometer of its suitability for economic progress. And indeed development specialists of the 60s were busy exporting the model to the rest of the world. The problem for me was that this view of the Western family, sometimes characterized as from "kinship to contract", was hardly an innocent construct. During the post war period, the set of reigning assumptions were also a good deal more than just self-reflection, at least in the United States, where family advisors claimed that the "nuclear family" was the cornerstone of modern society.⁶

The critique of progress led many historians to find ways to break with a European/American centered perspective. That this can be done with a macrohistorical approach has been amply demonstrated most recently by the works of Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz, who have challenged the

4 Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 101; see also Matti Peltonen, *Clues, Margins, and Monads. The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research*, in: *History and Theory* 40 (2001), pp. 347–359, here p. 347.

5 Ginzburg, *Microhistory*, p. 20.

6 Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are. Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, New York 1997, p. 37.

older story of the rise of the West by a systematic testing of each generalization about European economic development against the most recent research on China.⁷ But the task in the 60s and 70s seemed to call for two alterations in perspective. The first was to adopt a stance from outside, to find ways to look at Europe from a constantly shifting perspective. The second was to go inside and to examine the particulars that were neglected or set aside as irrelevant in the larger narrative syntheses. For many of us the discipline that helped most readily escape ethnocentrism was social anthropology, and the fact that the most relevant and critical work in that discipline was done on a small scale supported taking a similar approach to European history. But going inside, taking on a limited object for study and examining it in all of its details by itself was a means to escape from the dominant, inherited assumptions about both the uniqueness of the West and its claim for normativity.⁸

My own unease with the politics of development, on the one hand, and a desire to find a suitable method to reevaluate the dominant interpretations by the great nineteenth-century sociologists and political economists led me to a wide, if unsystematic, reading in social anthropology, which at the time, given my concern to rethink the family, was congenially focused on kinship issues. This exercise prompted in the end two very general questions, which I thought went to the heart of all the theories of modernization and all of the macro accounts of the history of the family. 1) Did people in fact in the far European past live in kinship-structured social milieus and if they did, how could kinship be analysed? 2) Was there a straightforward, linear story to be told about the family? On closer reading of the literature on Europe, it became clear that assumptions about the nuclear family dominated the literature and that most studies concerned themselves with the bounded set of people who lived together in a "family" or "household". Kinship as a study of the dynamics of people who considered themselves connected by alliance or descent was hardly subject to any detailed investigation. Nor were relations among members of the nuclear family given much thought (where were the studies of siblings, for example?). Indeed, at a macro level, the everyday exchanges and practices that make up the set of kin relations get blended out when the focal point of the narration fixes on a

7 Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed. Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*, Ithaca 1997; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2000.

8 Ginzburg, *Microhistory*, p. 22; Renata Ago, *From the Archives to the Library and Back. Culture and Microhistory*, in: Castrén, *Between Sociology and History*, pp. 41–50, here p. 41; Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 104.

wide perspective, and it is only really at the point of local negotiations that the embodiment of "global processes" can be studied at all.⁹

There was another innovation in historical technique – historical demography – flourishing a little earlier than microhistory, whose classical 1958 work by Etienne Gautier and Louis Henry brought rapid advance to the study of populations of the past.¹⁰ The power of the new analysis was based on an exhaustive study of data from a single parish. Building on this earlier French work, a group of British historians in Cambridge attempted to bring the new methodology to bear on old questions of European uniqueness. Peter Laslett pioneered in the study of household structures in an effort to show that the nuclear family household had predominated in England (and northwestern Europe) from the Middle Ages onwards.¹¹ And on that material foundation the coincidence of European economic innovation, productivity, and self-generated progress was once again seen to be clearly coordinated with a unique familial pattern. Despite the move to the parish level to generate a series of data, it can be argued that this was still not microhistory.¹² The Cambridge approach to households blended out differences, obscured social processes, and flattened experience through the construction of homogeneous serial data. In a brilliant critique, Miranda Chaytor revealed the crucial weakness in household studies in an exacting, detailed analysis of a single household, which breaks down the homogeneity of households, reinscribes the household in a field of power, and describes it in the context of interaction among the differentially ordered set of households.¹³ Rather than being bounded, any particular household is better described as porous, as open in many different ways to other households, the regional labor market, and the institutions of government. Her analysis forces a confrontation of the local and global, but also suggests that social forms can best be observed and effectively analysed at the local level.

In my own work, the anthropological concentration on small societies, single villages, and the circle of direct observation encouraged me to consider exploiting the voluminous documentation from a single village. Ethno-

9 Hans Medick, *Weaving and Surviving in Laichingen, 1650–1900. Micro-History as History and as Research Experience*, in: James Scott (ed.), *Agrarian Studies. Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, New Haven 2001, pp. 283–296. This is a shortened version of the introduction to his book, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900. Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte*, Göttingen 1996.

10 Etienne Gautier/Louis Henry, *La population de Crulai, paroisse normande. Etude historique*, Paris 1958.

11 Peter Laslett, *Introduction. The History of the Family*, in: idem (ed.), *Household and Family in Past Time*, Cambridge 1972, pp. 1–89.

12 Ginzburg, *Microhistory*, p. 21.

13 Miranda Chaytor, *Household and Kinship. Ryton in the Late 16th and Early 17th Centuries*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 10 (1980), pp. 25–60.

graphic writing demonstrated that it was possible to get at the actors' language and at the logic of practice through painstaking, exacting analyses of context. Indeed without such careful, detailed reconstruction it was difficult to know about obligation, marriage strategies, and the difference between ideology and practice. And I found that it is probably only at this level that the complex relationships between social being and culture can be dealt with in any satisfactory way.¹⁴

But there lies a further consideration in the comparative view from the ethnographic frontier – its heuristic value (to which I will return). Suffice it to say here that the adventure into the thickets of the 400,000+ pages of documentation in the village (of my choice) Neckarhausen, was prompted by deep reflection on studies about Africans, South Asians, Latin Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Unlike those social-science-influenced historians who sought theory in sociology or political science, historians who read anthropology did so to stimulate their imaginations, to open up possibilities about social interaction, and to consider ways to study social exchanges and the range of claims and obligations people make upon one another both sporadically and systematically. And microhistorical work reversed the direction of theoretical understanding as research became the place for generating theory and exploring new connections.

However compelling the ethnographic local study might have been, it would have been quite impossible to take up the challenge without the new methodology of family reconstitution, expanding the range of data collected for individual and family dossiers to include tax records, court minutes, mortgages, inventories, and all kinds of lists, such as bake oven accounts, generated in the everyday life of the village. I described the procedure I followed in an earlier account this way:

"The first step is to smash the records into constituent bits, taking each element out of its context, out of all its relationships, and to treat it as a single isolable, individual datum. For example, the researcher records each baptism from a list onto a single form (to be subsequently reshuffled), with each piece of data – a date, the forename of a grandparent, etc. – placed into a separate box. And the computer can whirl these about according to the logical demands of the researcher."¹⁵

There appears here to be a contradiction with the micro-historical approach, at the heart of which is the establishment of context, "the opposite of the isolated contemplation of the fragments".¹⁶ I think this is quite right, but I

14 Ginzburg, *Microhistory*, p. 22; Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 104.

15 David Warren Sabean, *Exchanging Names in Neckarhausen around 1700*, in: Peter Carsten/John Modell (eds.), *Theory, Method, and Practice in Social and Cultural History*, New York 1992, pp. 199–230, here p. 200.

16 Ginzburg, *Microhistory*, p. 33. See also Matti Peltonen, *Clues*, p. 349.

would argue that there are various levels at which context can be established. In principle (but by no means universally carried out), anyone concerned with family reconstitution ought to maintain the original registers and critically inspect them for the conditions of their original production. It should be said that these documents – like any other kind of list – must be approached as having an implicit, underlying aspect of argument. And just because at one level any list is or contains an argument, it becomes necessary to derive new readings by establishing a set of alternative relationships from its constituent elements. An entry in a baptismal record is an act that transmits many different discursive trajectories – confessional identity, pastoral latinity, generational shift, familial alliance, birth order, social stratification, ethical choice, and aesthetic display. Unpacking the layers of meaning involves breaking the tyranny of the text to evoke the multiple contexts in which it is embedded by establishing and reestablishing relationships hidden by the social practice of recording events.

The starting point, therefore, is not the individual item of data but the reflexive constitution of meaning as things are queried in new combinations and tensions with each other. Names and signs, for example, have unstable meanings, changing in every new context in which they occur. It is not just that they convey multiple meanings and can be ambiguous but that they are constituted in fields of relations, in the contexts, in which they occur. Naming a child for a father, for example, is a different act according to the alliance system the father is a part of, the list of relevant possible alternatives, and the distribution of practices in the particular culture.¹⁷

How does the microhistorical investigation of kinship in Neckarhausen disrupt an overarching narrative of modernization? To begin with, the shift of focus to the small unit brings activities and practices into view that simply have not been seen at the macro level, and kinship itself is one of those objects. It might be possible to say that kinship could have been dealt with at a macro level or made part of a larger narrative about general change within European society. But it wasn't and those researchers who have rediscovered the central importance of kinship in European societies – like Levi, Delille, Derouet, Segalen, Goy, and others – did so by taking up the historian's equivalent of the microscope. The general problem is not to reject grand narratives tout court but to locate a suitable level to rethink the issues of historical process and change and to refocus attention on all kinds of issues that Weber, or Morgan, or Simmel did not see.

What did I find in the village that called into question the macro-historical narrative of the history of the Western family? Let me contrast two periods: the seventeenth and early eighteenth century (ca. 1700) with

late eighteenth/nineteenth century. I will concentrate on kinship and marriage here but there are many other aspects of kinship which offer equally instructive information. Around 1700, marriage partners paid little attention to wealth, which in turn was largely determined by inheritance. Marriage connected people from different wealth strata, of different political position, and with different access to capital, equipment, land, and labor. At this period people also never married others related to themselves by blood, nor did they marry close affines. They did marry extended affines in such a way that 3, 4, sometimes 5 households were connected through in-law ties – households relating to each other through patronage and clientage.

This contrasts sharply with the situation around 1800. Beginning in the 1740s among the politically dominant members of the village, and practiced systematically by the 1780s by the landed peasantry as a whole, and extended to artisans and construction workers by 1800, there was developed a practice of consanguineal endogamy. At first villagers began to marry second cousins, and by 1800 peasants found their first cousins the object of erotic desire. I have spent a great deal of time examining Lévi-Straussian categories of elementary kinship (cross-cousin marriage, e.g.) and Bourdieuan notions of practice, to elucidate what was going on. Suffice it to say, a system of reciprocity between families across many generations developed – modified in the long run by “matrifocality”, a situation where the key players in constructing and maintaining the alliances were older, strategically-placed women. At the same time as the new kinship structure emerged – by 1860, 30% of all marriages in Neckarhausen were with close consanguines and 50% with close kin – partners also began to match endowments closely. Homogamy (and hypergamy – the systematic marriage of women upwards) replaced heterogamy. Kinship and class formation had a great deal to do with each other.

What emerged from the study of Neckarhausen called the modernization story into question: a tight, endogamous pattern of alliance could be seen as “modern”, not archaic, certainly in the sense of being developed during a period of capitalized agriculture and wage-labor, and it was also tied to the transformation of class relations in the village. Class differentiation went hand in hand with kin integration. In a village swollen in population, undergoing capitalization and intensification of agriculture, where class differentiation was increasing and the pains of harsh economic cycles and subsistence crises were sharply felt, where regional mobility was increasing and the village becoming economically more integrated into wider markets, where property holdings were becoming decimated and subject to rapid turnover, and where pauperization came to characterize many villagers and affect the pattern of social relations, with all this going on villagers consoli-

¹⁷ Medick, *Weaving and Surviving*, p. 287.

dated and extended the system of marriage alliances developed in the fifth, sixth, and seventh decades of the eighteenth century.

With this instance in hand and with the detailed mapping of one system of kinship alliance, the possibility of reevaluating kinship in other contexts was opened up – the question was not, can we generalize beyond this instance (the case study approach) but how can we pose fresh questions (the heuristic issue)? Precisely the surprising results attained at the microlevel suggested new procedures for inquiring about similar phenomena at other levels.

But there is another issue of scale that is by no means unproblematic: at the microlevel, the historian discovers things that no one has been talking about, which initially moves him or her out of the mainstream of current discussion, and that can be extremely disorienting, as the relevancy of what one is doing is often not easy to see. Moreover, doing this kind of history, Giovanni Levi pointed out, is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and it is not apparent that anyone wants to read an account of it. Self-irony aside, precisely the disorienting character of the work can be seen as its strength: it could be argued that microhistory is for the historian exactly what basic research is the natural scientist.¹⁸

Of course, comparison, typicality, and generalization cannot simply be brushed aside by the microhistorian, however much he or she would like to exorcise them. But it should be pointed out at the outset of this problematic that generalization and comparison have to be carefully distinguished from each other and cannot be considered aspects of the same request for significance beyond the narrow confines of a particular village study or examination of a singular event.¹⁹ The demand for generalization can be thought of in at least three ways. First, there is the desideratum of typicality or statistical representativeness. In what way does Neckarhausen, for example, represent practices and behaviors which can be found elsewhere, either over a larger geographical area or across cultures to embrace certain kinds of social formations – peasant, agricultural, partible inheritance, rural, protestant pietist, and so forth? The answer to this has in part to do with scale. I could have taken one family or a region or a state to study, or I could have cast my research in terms of a particular criterion such as small peasant society in periods of intensification and capitalization, selecting as the object of study one farm, one village, one epoch, or a series of different examples. It is not the scale of the exercise which determines the importance of its questions, since any unit of analysis is open to the same demand to go

18 Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power. The Story of an Exorcist*, Chicago 1988, p. 43.

19 I am leaning here on an earlier discussion in David Warren Sabean, *Property, Production and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 7–14.

beyond its limits.²⁰ The microhistorical enterprise does not attempt to add a series of local studies together: it is not – in the phrasing of Brad Gregory – “accretionist”.²¹ The relevance of scale has largely to do with the nature of the questions. The demand for generalization distorts complex issues of social interaction by implying that frequency of use and areal distribution are relevant criteria for judging significance. Comparison, by contrast, helps pose strong analytical questions about ideology, social differentiation, and the chronology of economic and social change rather than weak ones about statistical spread.

Here it might be useful to give an example of a comparative approach: the brilliant study by Gérard Delille, who worked on rural Naples (Valley of the Irno and the coast), a cultural area that contrasts remarkably with South Germany, including its system of inheritance, partible, like in Neckarhausen, but by contrast with immovable property shared only among sons.²² Both “classical” periods for the two regions had similar variations on the theme of kinship. In the eighteenth century, both shifted to endogamy of both kinds: family and class. Delille like I connects the break in the alliance system to the land market and class formation. The comparison of the two situations provides a new perspective and questions to ask about kinship and property and about kinship and capitalization and points up the interesting problem of how two societies so far apart spatially and culturally could have parallel histories of kinship and marriage. It suggests new ways that local studies can connect and reconfigure the understanding of global shifts in capital flows, markets, social formations, and state structures.

The second way that the call for generalization might be understood is in terms of a particular narrative of development, i.e. Neckarhausen as an instance of a stage in the process of modernization, as representative of a particular form of domestic group formation, as a typical instance of an economy of household production, or as a case of pre or proto-capitalist agricultural development. This approach views the varieties of human society as a “sequence of specialized adaptations to different economic circumstances”.²³ Attention is turned away from the dynamic of social relations in a particular society to the grand narrative of human progress, and each new study recodes its findings to fit an objectified story, almost always already known to the observer. It is only the residue when all the local color is washed away that counts for essential knowledge of the subject. I might add that it is the lack of surprise that makes so much social history tedious.

20 Peltonen, *Clues*, p. 350.

21 Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 104.

22 Gérard Delille, *Famille et propriété dans le royaume de Naples (xv^e–xix^e siècle)*, Rome 1985.

23 Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology*, New York 1982, p. 121.

It seems to me that microhistory does two things at once – it calls attention to important aspects of human reality not captured by “master” narratives and it reconfigures these narratives rather than reproducing them. Indeed there are some strong positions among microhistorians that argue that historical change does not even arise from large-scale institutions, structures, or mechanisms, like the state, or class, or the market, finding these simply to be abstractions. Change, they would maintain, is really the result of the “dynamic flux of the myriad, concrete, human transactions” that produce and transform the macro-phenomena over time.²⁴ However class is imagined, for example, it is lived locally and is produced locally. Its boundaries are never fixed, nor is it unified at the core. Even in the hey-day of class formation in the nineteenth century, its dynamic was a process of making connections across localities and regions between more-or-less well-articulated milieus, neighborhoods, clans, and strata and among occupational, propertied, professional, and craft groups, all themselves in flux.²⁵ It could be argued that the present aporias in class analysis are the result of failing to find the proper level for viewing class formation and interaction, and here, once again, the global can best be understood by consideration of the local.

A third form of generalization asks how a particular formation is to be measured against some criterion such as rationality – to what degree does it fulfill needs, master nature, or conform to an abstract concept of lawful behavior. Ultimately such questions come down to a notion of humanity rooted in Enlightenment notions of universal human nature. Each man is thought of as representing the essence of humanity, and the analytical problem is to go beyond the particulars to his essential rational or sensual core. Many historical studies influenced by German anthropology are oriented towards universal categories of human behavior. This approach is open to the critique of artificial standards and norms. It postulates individuals who at their core are without relations and leads to objectification and reification of the categories, which by remaining static and abstract are of little use for the historian’s task of chronicling change.

One objection to this dismissal of generalizing as a fundamental desideratum of historical work contends that microhistory is a reversion to historicist individualist assumptions or an inclination towards the nominalism of post-modern skepticism: the facts of history as peculiar, individual, concrete, unrepeatable entities or as fragments. However, the turn to a particular object for analysis has not at all been a turn to individualism as a starting point. The local is interesting precisely because it offers a locus for observ-

24 Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 105.

25 Renata Ago, *From the Archives*, p. 41.

ing relations. And we must be careful not to confuse the particular and singular with the individual, a point made by de Certeau, who speaks of a “science of singularity”, which he glosses as the “science of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances”.²⁶ Once we center our attention on relationships, I think, we are forced into research strategies which favor the local and the particular. That is why anthropology has focussed its attention on small, particular localities.²⁷ When interest is centered on how consciousness is formed in social intercourse, on dialogical processes of value, and ideological construction, then “particular, concrete contexts” become the locus of serious work.

To argue for comparability is to underline the heuristic nature of micro-historical work.²⁸ In present day cultural studies, a reified notion of culture is being dispensed with in favor of socially specific, exacting accounts of power, resistance, and constraints in loci where many voices contend each for its own view of reality. Rather than mapping and recoding the results onto new situations, the new perspectives offer a loose set of procedures and examples of possibilities for finding coherence. In the study of Neckarhausen, the search for singularity, for particular coherence, for the contextual logics of performance suggests that significance does not lie in generalization or extension of a particular paradigm or a plea for typicality. Nor does it lie in a presumption of individuality, whether it is of the kind which argues that each epoch or culture or polity is unique (historicism) or whether it is of the kind which presumes that continuous unity can be broken into “innumerable separated discontinuities” (sociology), which can then be matched for their common properties. To say that the point to studying Neckarhausen is not to generalize or argue for typicality does not presume some special kind of unity to the community on the one hand or on the other, the lack of similarity elsewhere.²⁹

I have been following an argument from its starting point in the challenge to macro-historical accounts: however, calling them into question and discovering new levels to deal with historical causation is only part of the microhistorical project. It also claims to be able to rethink “major historical developments”. The issue is how this newly captured image found in the

26 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1984, p. ix; Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, *The Singularization of History. Social History and Microhistory within the Post-modern State of Knowledge*, in: *Journal of Social History* 36 (2003), pp. 701–735, esp. pp. 720–723; Norbert Elias, *Court Society*, New York 1983, p. 24.

27 See the remarks by Simona Cerutti, *Microhistory*, pp. 17ff.

28 Medick, *Weaving and Surviving*, p. 287.

29 Microhistorians have had recourse to a language of “significant deviation”, “exceptional normal”, “typical exception” to deal with the problem of linking macro and micro levels; see Peltonen, *Clues*, pp. 353, 356.

local, then becomes the basis for reconceptualizing the macrohistorical picture.³⁰ If the story of the family, for example, that modernization theorists told can no longer be defended, can there be a long-term history of kinship, or better, systems of kinship, for Europe? One of the images that microhistorians are used to using (frequently found in this essay) comes from filmmaking, zeroing in for closeups and drawing back for macro shots. Another frequently used notion is one of "levels", with the issue being one of finding the relevant level for a particular question, even though the problem of how the levels connect to one another remains difficult to solve.³¹ Gregory proposes the image of "maps", the key being knowing which map is relevant for the particular task at hand.³² The consideration I want to develop here, however, is how to integrate the maps, or how to use the closeup to reevaluate what one sees when some of the details disappear as one draws back.

Here I am going to use the findings in Neckarhausen about the reconfiguration of kinship to ask larger questions about kinship dynamics in Europe as a whole. The point that I want to emphasize is that I could not have made the discoveries that I did otherwise than to have carried out a systematic microhistorical project.³³ What the material from the Kingdom of Naples and Neckarhausen shows is that the new class/kin endogamy was designed to provide multiple forms of exchange and the broad coordination of a class in its effort to manage credit, land markets, office holding, and corruption, all of which could only have been done by real but flexible structures and a well-coordinated system of reciprocities. We have, then, two contrasting systems which succeeded one upon the other – one built around clientage and vertical integration of groups and one built around class and horizontal integration, perhaps no longer of "groups" but of flexibly coordinated strata. Delille is quite right to insist that the mechanisms of kinship and marriage which we see today are not the product of a linear evolution. But the work also implies that global history is often best carried out through intensively studied local comparisons.

In shifting the focus to larger, encompassing trends, I have tried to delineate one strategy in the reconfiguration of nineteenth-century kinship – repeated alliances between familial lines, most simply described as "partilines", defined by close association among relatives recognized through male descent principles. Such "lines" entered into systematic alliances and multiple exchanges over several generations with associated lines, making

30 Peltonen, *Clues*, p. 357.

31 Cerutti, *Microhistory*, pp. 18f.

32 Gregory, *Is Small Beautiful?*, p. 109.

33 Medick, *Weaving and Surviving*, p. 293.

for tight, overlapping, endogamic kindreds, with the mechanisms most simply described as "cross-cousin" marriage. That did not mean that the most frequent connection between two lines was a first cousin but that a man most consistently sought a spouse among his mother's kin, friends, or network. This "system" characterized many families from all parts of Europe and from all property-holding classes and raises the issue of how to locate and describe other similar or contrasting mechanisms. To observe this phenomenon, the best and simplest data comes from the science of genetics, which needed to document rates of endogamy to study the hereditary consequences of close marriage.³⁴ Studies, prompted by biological and genetic sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concur in the description of a high point in consanguineal marriages reached between 1880 and 1920, with a regular and sometimes abrupt decline to a point in the 1950s when such marriages became almost everywhere insignificant.

The rise of endogamy is less well documented than its fall, but available studies suggest that in Europe endogamy rates rose towards the end of the eighteenth century, although there are some areas where the phenomenon can be observed already by mid century. Taking all the data together, it appears that for Catholic and Protestant Germany, Catholic Italy, Spain, France, and Belgium, and Protestant Sweden and Norway, the overall trend in the rise of endogamous marriage was similar. There was no significant endogamy before the eighteenth century anywhere in continental Europe. None of the available studies examine second-cousin marriage before the nineteenth century, but the study of Neckarhausen suggests that people may well have started to marry more extended consanguineal relatives before they got on to first cousins. Whatever relationship one uses to track the rise (uncle/niece, brother-/sister-in-law, first cousins, affines), the overall trend appears to have been the same throughout wide areas of Europe.

However, different areas, different occupational groups, and different classes created forms of alliance quite different from each other. While some may have relied on reiterated first-cousin exchanges, others made use of more extended consanguines, and still others integrated kindreds (Segalen on the Pays Bigouden) through highly flexible forms of affinal alliance.³⁵ All of these forms began to be utilized in the eighteenth century and became crucially important for social organization in the nineteenth century – at different rates but everywhere. What we see here is an overall

34 A complete bibliography is found in David Warren Sabean, *Kinship in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870*, Cambridge 1998.

35 Martine Segalan, *Fifteen Generations of Bretons. Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany 1720–1980*, Cambridge 1991.

pressure to reconfigure familial alliances and kinship interaction, with different strategies, forms, and mechanisms (totally unresearched) brought to bear in different circumstances.

A second aspect of the reconfiguration of kinship is its relevance for understanding class formation in the nineteenth century. Certain social institutions were important for creating networks and cultural values, which played a role in constituting and giving coherence to class: *Vereine*, neighborhood, confession/church – and kinship.³⁶ For the middle classes we have widespread evidence about the practices of kinship: weekly family meetings, sociability, house music, periodic gatherings and festivals, genealogical investigation, guardianship and care of orphans, socialization and training of children, correspondence, investment, the placing of kin in strategic positions in business enterprises, care of elderly, travelling, vacations, politics of dowries, cousin exchanges among children, and gift exchange.³⁷ Such social commerce was important for the formation of class consciousness.³⁸ It was in the everyday pattern of kinship reciprocity that specific values and behaviors were developed: witness the large kinship groups that formed around branches of the economy, who came to share social and political values.³⁹

Reading business history gives the impression that kinship arose most centrally out of male activities. But there is growing evidence to suggest that women were more active maintaining the linkages between family members. Joris and Witzig suggest a division of labor between male *Vereine* and female-run kinship groups.⁴⁰ They argue on evidence from correspondence and diaries that this kinship work arose first in the nineteenth century. I find evidence in Neckarhausen of a third stage after the early one of patronage/clientage and its successor – patrilineal exchange –, namely what I have already referred to as a “matrifocal” system. Women came to form networks and acted as gatekeepers of the alliance system. Marion Kaplan finds a similar function among the late nineteenth-century Jewish

36 Hartmut Zwahr, *Zur Konstituierung des Proletariats als Klasse. Strukturuntersuchung über das Leipziger Proletariat während der industriellen Revolution*, Berlin 1978.

37 I have examined these aspects of kinship in detail in *Kinship in Neckarhausen*; good introductions to the problem are provided by Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class. Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany*, New York 1991; Elisabeth Joris/Heidi Witzig, *Brave Frauen, aufmüpfige Weiber. Wie sich die Industrialisierung auf Alltag und Lebenszusammenhänge von Frauen auswirkte (1820–1940)*, Zürich 1992. The clearest overview and important pioneering analysis is provided by Jürgen Kocka, *Familie, Unternehmer und Kapitalismus. An Beispielen aus der frühen deutschen Industrialisierung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte* 24 (1979), pp. 99–135.

38 Friedrich Zunkel, *Der Rheinisch-Westfälische Unternehmer 1834–1879. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Bürgertums im 19. Jahrhundert*, Köln 1962, p. 82.

39 For a few examples in the literature, see Sabeau, *Kinship in Neckarhausen*.

40 Joris/Witzig, *Brave Frauen*, pp. 239ff.

bourgeoisie.⁴¹ And Werner Siemens himself pointed to an aunt as the central figure of his large extended family.⁴² If all of this is so – if kinship politics were largely taken over by women, that helps explain why there is so little male sociological enquiry about its dynamics.

I have described microhistory as a kind of experimental approach to historical research. And a great deal of its promise has to do with discovery, mapping unexplored areas, and providing clues for reconfiguring the larger stories we tell ourselves. Microhistory, as I have argued, is to history what basic research is to the natural sciences. On the one hand, it acts as a solvent for older paradigms, and on the other, forces new perspectives onto the horizon. If it began in dissatisfaction with the grand master narratives of Marxism and modernization, its continued use is supported by an interest in maintaining a dialectic between understanding and grasping long-term change and the logic of action, overarching complex structures and the creative energies of local practices, and comfortable synthetic judgments about protracted processes and the unsettling surprises that accompany the view from the ground.

41 Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, pp. 82ff., 89.

42 Werner von Siemens, *Personal Recollections*, London 1893, pp. 5ff.; many other examples are given in Sabeau, *Kinship in Neckarhausen*, chaps. 22 and 23.