



## Microhistory and the Historical Imagination: New Frontiers

Thomas Robisheaux

Duke University

Durham, North Carolina

The idea for this special issue of *JMEMS* came up in conversations between Tom Cohen and myself about the craft of microhistory. At the time I had been surprised at the reception of my own microhistory, where, for smooth reading, I had kept my scholarly explanations of method, sources, and interpretation discreetly under wraps.<sup>1</sup> At panel discussions scholars often pressed me: “How did you *do* it?” In Tom Cohen I found a rigorous but also imaginative scholar who, more than I, revealed his archives and craft, and whose collection of microhistories explored the possibilities of narrative with enthusiasm and care.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not they spell it out, microhistorians tend to be self-reflexive about the craft of history that they practice. Ours was, and remains, an open-ended conversation about archives; the many ways to read a document; the possibilities of story-telling; the nature and limits of historical knowledge; and how best to relate our findings to readers, other scholars, and students, among many other things. Together we helped each other understand how microhistory, far from being a brief and controversial experiment in history writing of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, had become one of the most creative ways to tackle the difficult problems of writing history in our time.

When I asked Tom to collaborate with me in commissioning a set of articles for a special volume on the new frontiers of microhistory, we decided that the volume should reflect the openness and self-reflexivity that often characterizes microhistorians and their craft. Our plan was for Tom Cohen to write a provocative piece, “The Macrohistory of Microhistory,” that each contributor would respond to while writing his or her article. We then invited the contributors to meet in a set of workshops on microhistory at Duke University in November 2015, where we would discuss the state of microhistory today and read and critique each other’s work. Given that microhistory tends to be practiced differently in Europe from North America, we also invited István Szi-jártó (from Eötvös University, Budapest,

Hungary) to join our workshops and engage our work critically. His recent introduction to microhistory, written together with Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, is the best introduction to microhistory today.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we invited to take part scholars who agreed to challenge us and engage our work as skeptics, critics, and *provocateurs*. These participants in the roundtable discussion would, we hoped, show how microhistorians consider these challenges and doubts as crucial to the self-critical quality that characterizes this particular historical craft today. No one is more aware of microhistory's pitfalls and limitations than microhistorians themselves.

The volume therefore opens with our roundtable discussion about the practice of microhistory today. Here we begin with a discussion of what defines microhistory, what sets it apart from the classic case study, and how microhistories germinate and develop. Does the microhistorian begin with a problem to solve or with the discovery of intriguing sources? From there a lively discussion develops about the appeal of microhistory. Why do so many scholars, students, and readers still find microhistory so engaging? Discussants also note that the current context for researching and writing microhistory has changed. Some of the liveliest discussion concerns narrative and how microhistorians have been important in bringing narrative back into history writing, though in ways quite different from the classic historical narratives of the early twentieth century. We also turn to problems of scale in writing history—what is gained but also lost by close, small-scale analysis and by large-scale macrostudy. The group also explores the desire of many microhistorians to get as close as possible to lived historical experience and individual agency, two noble but difficult-to-achieve goals. Readers will also discover that this group of microhistorians sees their craft closely tied to teaching and writing for nonspecialized audiences.

The first of the articles, Tom Cohen's reflections on the "macro-history of microhistory," touches on microhistory's origins and challenges us to use microhistory to address a number of problems of current interest to scholars. The exciting and controversial early period of microhistory in the 1970s and 1980s has given way since 2000 or so to open-ended explorations of a wide variety of historical problems and issues. Where some types of history from the late twentieth century—social history and the new cultural history, for example—have been defined by theoretical and ideological assumptions, microhistory, while having some theoretical foundations, has instead evolved into a flexible bundle of methodological practices. These practices have been used to tackle different historical problems from different time periods and subfields of history. While Tom notes that the "linguistic

turn” had some “baleful consequences,” he also stresses that microhistory’s flexibility continues to make it one of the best ways to explore historical agency, material culture, the body, space, experience, and time. He closes by suggesting that one of the best ways to write global history may be at the microhistorical level, the scale of life where people actually experience and shape global networks and feel their influences.

Paul Dutton’s article is a tour de force that provokes us to ask: How far can one take microhistory? Where are its limits? While medieval historians in general have not widely adopted microhistorical methods—the landmark works of microhistory by Georges Duby and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie are exceptions to the general rule—Dutton suggests that the methods may actually be an extension of the close reading of sources so essential to medieval history.<sup>4</sup> His starting point is a puzzling and strange colophon—an inscription at the end of an early ninth-century Carolingian manuscript. Unique among colophons, this single sentence notes that the manuscript was written while on a military campaign. A monk transcribing texts in the field with a Frankish army! Why? Why would this monk also select certain texts for this expedition, those of the desert fathers? Could his choice say something significant about the scribe, his monastery, and perhaps even the world of Carolingian monasticism? The manuscript’s scribe, Dutton shows us, was Ellenhart, a deacon and monk at the Benedictine monastery of St-Emmeram in Regensburg. Bringing together his keen skills working with early medieval manuscripts and his knowledge of Carolingian society in general, Dutton argues that the choice of the desert fathers actually tells us surprising things about Carolingian monasticism. Where many scholars have seen Benedictine monastic culture of this time as closed in, separated from the world, Dutton suggests that Ellenhart was taking monastic life out into the world, on military campaign, and reproducing its values while encountering the outside world. Dutton also pushes the limits of microhistory and historical imagination: just how much can a single colophon tell us?

Like Paul Dutton, Sara Petrosillo also uses microanalysis to hunt through medieval and early modern texts for clues about an overlooked phenomenon—in this case, women’s experience of the womb. Petrosillo, a literary scholar, suggests that the kind of literary analysis that interests her, informed by feminist theory and the “New Formalism” in literary analysis, has much to learn from microhistory.<sup>5</sup> We welcome her contribution for many reasons, but not least because it represents a feature of microhistory’s new frontiers often overlooked: how scholars in other disciplines—from biology and the cognitive sciences to literary analysis and anthropology—find inspi-

ration in microhistory's methods. By reducing the scale of her analysis to the womb, and looking for clues in texts not overtly focused on this issue, she looks for an understanding of the womb as a "felt operation within the body." The medical literature, written by male physicians, she argues, actually obscures the ways in which the womb could be felt as intimately connected with the mind. It is precisely in texts not designed to focus on this experience—theatrical works—that these perspectives are revealed in the texts' "unguarded moments." By deploying her method of microanalysis, Petrosillo is able to make a large claim that others have not yet noticed, that the womb carried a kind of knowing, a felt knowledge within a woman.

Peter Arnade and Elizabeth Colwill's article about pardon tales connects the new microhistory with its roots in the work of the first generation of microhistorians. Recalling the work of Natalie Davis, they turn to a familiar source for early microhistory and produce compelling new understandings of crime and identity through a heightened critical awareness of legal sources informed also by recent feminist theory and the new literature on "life narratives."<sup>6</sup> The perspective from life narratives helps them reveal the tropes, contexts, and rhetorical strategies developed by petitioners before the courts of the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. In contrast to other linguistic analyses of texts, Arnade and Colwill suggest that using life narrative helps to move beyond the limited world of the texts themselves and into the complex, even contradictory, social realities and identities of the fifteenth century. Following the tales by and about Mathieu Cricke, a street actor, and Marie van Hoeven, a woman of many identities, Arnade and Colwill explore gender roles within the rich, contradictory worlds of late medieval violence. Marie's case in particular illustrates just how protean social identities could be in towns in the late medieval Low Countries. Mining "traditional" microhistorical legal sources, bringing new perspectives and concepts to bear on the issues, and concentrating with exceptional attention on language and small clues, Arnade and Colwill entice us with the sharp, compelling, interpretive possibilities of microhistory.

While microhistory's painstaking attention at the microlevel to details remains with us, the intellectual context for practicing microhistory today has changed dramatically. Global and transnational history, even Big History, has captured the attention of many historians and students.<sup>7</sup> But Jon Gebhardt demonstrates that microhistory promises a productive strategy for researching global history. Global history pays a big price for its focus on massive temporal and geographical scales. At such a macrolevel, historical patterns too readily thin out into intellectual abstractions, the forces

shaping people appear massive and impersonal, and individuals and their agency get lost. Some recent global microhistories offer a strong counterpoint, and this is the starting point for Jon Gebhardt's work. Gebhardt takes up the study of a rebellion in Manila, one of the new global cities, part of the Spanish Empire, involving two leaders of the Chinese community. The bigger question here comes from studies of empires and global cultural communities—how cultural brokers or intermediaries operate at the boundaries. Where many global histories tend to see brokers as “successful” in knitting these ties together, Gebhardt shows how fragile, how delicate, how difficult, even tragic, the position often was for these go-betweens. Debates about microhistory in the 1980s and 1990s often pitted the micro- against the macroperspective. But that debate offered a false dualism. Gebhardt and others are showing that the new frontiers of microhistory shrewdly combine the macro with the micro, that the real issue is about effective scaling of a historical study.

We cannot survey all of the new frontiers of microhistory in one volume. Medievalists and early modernists focused on Europe should know, for example, that microhistory provides new perspectives on Jewish history, Asian and African history, the history of medicine and science, American history and the history of slavery in the Caribbean and Latin America, and even intellectual history, to name just a few.<sup>8</sup> To hint at this diversity, and to illustrate the interest in microhistory among historians in Europe as well, we close the volume with comments by István Szijártó. Our Hungarian colleague, who works on the eighteenth century, points us toward the potential of microhistory in general. Szijártó sees in these articles glimpses of the significant potential of microhistory to address big problems in social and cultural history, legal history, the history of crime, gender history (making use of the often overlooked potential in literary texts), and global history.



## Notes

- 1 Thomas Robisheaux, *The Last Witch of Langenburg* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).
- 2 Thomas V. Cohen, *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 3 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 4 See Georges Duby, *Le dimanche de Bowines, 27 juillet 1214* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973);

and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village Occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). Paul Dutton's own collection of microhistories suggests the intriguing possibilities of microanalysis for a variety of problems in medieval history. See his *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

- 5 For a brief introduction to the "New Formalism," see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69. For a study of its theory, practice, and place in literary theory today, see Frederic V. Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 6 Peter Arnade and Elizabeth Colwill's article builds on the earlier work on pardon letters by Peter Arnade and Walter Prevenier, *Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble: Pardon Letters in the Burgundian Low Countries* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015). And see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).
- 7 See Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), at [escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq).
- 8 A small sample of this new wave of microhistories in English since 2000 includes Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009); Rebecca Scott, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Tonio Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 4 (2011): 573–91; Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Holly Tucker, *Blood Work: A Tale of Medicine and Murder in the Scientific Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005); and Martin Mulrow, *The Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680–1720*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).