

## **BIOGRAPHY AND MICROHISTORY. ABSTRACT.**

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The theme of Biography and Microhistory poses a fundamental problem: how to talk in general terms without losing sight of the individual?

Or vice versa: how to describe individual situations and persons without falling into generalisations/stereotypes and without losing sight of the wider issues?

It is perhaps because they start with this unresolved problem that historians often speak of their dissatisfaction, sometimes imagining that it is possible to resolve it with the discovery of new facts and new subjects,.

The outcome risks becoming empathetic but not methodologically innovative: history has partially cancelled the marginal classes, woman, oral cultures, daily life, societies different from our own. But it is not enough merely to talk about someone to include them in world history, to show their existence and relevance. What is crucial, is the *way* in which they are talked about.

Microhistory needs, therefore, to be above all, an attempt: to narrate openly, without concealing the rules of the game followed by the historian. This, certainly, cannot be simply with reference to new sources – this is part of normal professional ethics. But with an open declaration of the the process through which history has been constructed: the right ways and the wrong ones, the way in which questions have been formulated and answers sought. This way, detailed laboratory work is not hidden and the recipe does not remain the cook's secret. Because perhaps those truly excluded from the attention of historians are not only the protagonists, neglected by events, but the readers, caught between heavy, generalising interpretations, authoritative opinions, simplified causal mechanisms and facile judgement. Those really excluded the reader from these investigations made as a detective story in wich the name of the killer is already known.

Microhistory is not, therefore, necessarily the history of the excluded, the powerless and the far away. It needs to be the reconstruction of moments, situations and people who, studied with an analytical eye, in a defined context, regain both weight and colour: not as examples, in the absence of better explanations, but as points of reference within the complex contexts in which human beings move.

The scale is a smaller one than usual and this immediately places in discussion the conceptual instruments of our craft: trivialized by long use, lying somewhere between allusion and metaphor, they are covered with the rust of ambiguity. Take, for example, the convenient definitions which are now given to explain political organisations and behaviours, or social stratifications and power structures: popular culture, middle classes, working classes, the modern state, peasants. Notwithstanding their usefulness, we need today, more than ever, to specify and verify the concrete situations in which concrete individuals belong; in a social reality, the concrete circumstances of which, help us to understand the successes and failures of efforts to change.

Studies focus on situations and people within their context, that is, in the complex relationship between free choice and necessity/constraints that individuals and groups create in the interstices of the contradictory plurality of the normative systems that direct them. These choices and these contradictions are the internal motors of social change, which are not seen only in one way, with an unmovable and unmodifiable power if not in the extraordinary moments of open revolt, but as the fruit of a continuous conflict the effects of which are for the historian to measure.

The normal, the every day, thus become protagonists of history and individual situations acquire an intensity of point of view from which we can explain the complex social functions.

Biography is, therefore, the meeting point for many questions posed by the historian today. In responding to this statement, we would therefore suggest that our session avoid reducing biography to the typical or, vice versa, to the specific, and at the same time

avoid using microhistory as the study of minor realities, unable to ask general questions.

History must be the science of generalised questions and localised answers.

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