History and Theory 0, no. 0 (March 2026), 1–14 ISSN: 0018-2656
DOI: 10.1111/hith.70031

ARTICLE

"THE NORMAL EXCEPTION": "MICROANALYSIS AND SOCIAL HISTORY" (1977)*

EDOARDO GRENDI[1]

ABSTRACT

"The normal exception" has long been a slogan of microhistory. This oxymoronic phrase is the iconic rendering of an incidental sentence that appeared in a 1977 article published by Edoardo Grendi in the Italian journal *Quaderni storici*, which functioned as the incubator of Italian microhistory. Grendi's article, titled "Micro-analisi e storia sociale" (Microanalysis and Social History), is here translated into English for the first time. Although foundational to the project of Italian microhistory, the article is not entirely self-explanatory. A companion piece by Francesca Trivellato in this issue of *History and Theory* places this contribution in the context of the historiographical debates of the time, traces its influence, examines the controversies it generated, and points to some of its continued heuristic potentials.

Keywords: microstoria, *Quaderni storici*, social history, comparative history, social anthropology, historical demography, case studies, peasants

1. In issue 34 of [the journal] *Quaderni storici*, Pasquale Villani and Raffaele Romanelli revive the discussion of modern (social) history. The former, a typical "optimist," tries to discern a new dawn in a series of recent works of unequal value and consistency; the latter, a typical "pessimist," wonders why the dawn has yet

*For a discussion of Edoardo Grendi's article, see Francesca Trivellato, "'The Normal Exception': Edoardo Grendi, Microanalysis, and Generalizations," *History and Theory* 65, no. 2 (2026), which is the previous contribution in this issue.

1. This article was originally published as Edoardo Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 35 (1977): 506–20. It appeared in an issue titled "Oral history: fra antropologia e storia" (Oral history: Between anthropology and history). I have tried to balance the need to make the text intelligible in English and the desire to remain faithful to the author's style, including its opacity. This is why I use square brackets in the text to signal my interventions. I have, however, retained Grendi's liberal use of quotation marks, which function as scare quotes when their purpose is rhetorical emphasis and other times serve to indicate direct quotations. Conversely, I have intervened more in the bibliographical apparatus. Grendi's original article has no footnotes and usually cites authors only by their last names. When Grendi did include references to his sources, he did so parenthetically, with incomplete and occasionally inaccurate information. I have removed all parenthetical references, given full first and last names of authors in the body of the text, and added footnotes with complete bibliographical references, correcting any imprecisions and checking all references from English-language sources against the originals. I am grateful to Angelo Torre for his counsel and for securing the rights to this translation from Grendi's heirs.

to arrive and blames the practical and mental constructs of historians of the modern period for this failure.[2] The "reification" [deplored by Romanelli] unfolds in two directions: against the ideological-political simplification of Marxist analysis as a historiographical principle and against the theoretical simplification resulting from the generalized adoption of categories and interpretive models that were developed to explain a specific historical process—namely, the English Industrial Revolution and English capitalism. Consequently, this [that is, Romanelli's] criticism is twofold, in the sense that one simplification compounds the other: Hence, [he arrives at] a skeptical conclusion, [one that is] tempered or accentuated, as will be seen, by a kind of historiographic eschatology, entrusted to microanalysis. Less dramatically, Villani, who favors a "historicist evolution," regards historical microanalysis as a complementary and subordinate step toward the work of synthesis. He frames the problem of the reconstruction of social stratification on a national scale in terms of a "big problem" perspective—although he does not clarify which analytical tools and modalities might be needed to achieve such a perspective. Is this an example of "theoretical simplification"? Indeed, the [so-called] big problems have acquired a kind of intuitive-ideological dimension: [This occurs in a way that is] not unlike the person who invariably answers your questions by pointing out the complexity of reality—which, in the end, is an invitation to drop the issue.

This attitude is nevertheless widespread: Social history is equated with the problem of classes, stratification, and social structure on the assumption that these categories are objective realities. In this regard, we may recall the polemic of many anthropologists (from Edmund Leach onward) against the essentialization of [social] structures (for example, kinship structures), which is consistent with the view of E. P. Thompson, who denies that class is a reality in and for itself and instead proposes to consider it as a set of "relations."[3] But historians can also draw a lesson from the works of Adeline Daumard and her students and collaborators, in which classes are detailed empirically in specific socio-professional groups, just as in Marxism one distinguishes between "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself" on the basis of the discriminating "consciousness" that Thompson resolves in a set of relations (the fact that he outlined this perspective in impressionistic and literary terms is another matter).[4]

2. Villani's and Romanelli's articles appear in an issue titled "Letteratura ideologia società negli Anni Trenta" (Literature, ideology, and society in the 1930s): Pasquale Villani, "Problemi e prospettive di ricerca: La storia sociale dell'Italia contemporanea," *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 34 (1977): 215–29; Raffaele Romanelli, "Storia politica e storia sociale dell'Italia contemporanea: Problemi aperti," *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 34 (1977): 230–48. Following the conventional label in US academia, in this text, the term *storia contemporanea* has been translated as "modern history" to refer to the period after 1800.

3. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage Books, 1963), 9: "I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something that in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships." Elsewhere, Grendi approvingly cited British anthropologist E. R. Leach's *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge University Press, 1961); see Grendi's introduction to *L'antropologia economica*, ed. Edoardo Grendi (Einaudi, 1972), xviii n1, xli n3.

4. In 1965, Grendi published a long and positive review of Adeline Daumard's *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848* (S.E.V.P.E.N., 1963) in *Studi storici* 6, no. 3 (1965): 562–67. See also

If this is the critical dilemma that we face in the near future, it is necessary to consider the possibilities of historical research from an analytical standpoint. There is no doubt that abstracting in terms of professions and levels of fortune allows for the maximum amount of general aggregation (one only needs to "count"), as long as one disregards the infinite ideological-intuitive aggregations that are possible and that can be manipulated easily. However, in the end, this kind of research reveals its abstract quality, so much so that it requires complementary developments consisting in an examination of concrete behavior, whether to identify a group—for example, by its "lifestyles" or dietary regimes—or the boundaries between groups—how they interact, how one group is reflected in the consciousness of the other. As a result, the aggregative project is in danger of falling apart because the examination of relations between groups (and within a group) demands a rigid social localization that is inevitably partial.

[In short,] we are drawing attention to the analytical shift from the concept of class to that of social group. Eric R. Wolf is correct in lamenting the lack of a theory of social groups in Marxist theory—an absence that has limited the purchase of the concept of class, in the sense that it has deprived it of any analytical-operational validity.[5] These social groups can be qualified differently depending on additional data (age, gender, economic fortune, profession) and behavior (residence, choice of spouse, cooperation/competition, and so on). I would like to remind Villani of some interesting recent research (Marcel Couturier, Michael Anderson, John Foster) that examines social solidarities in strictly quantitative terms precisely by crossing data and behaviors.[6]

In this regard, it is worth noting that the new English urban history systematically resorts not to censuses but to the preliminary surveys known as "census forms," which were compiled before any further elaboration. This choice corresponds to an obvious truth—namely, the difference between the aims of today's historians and those of the census authorities of the time. Recourse to individual household sheets is a prerequisite of any prosopographical study and thus is the concrete foundation of any analytical approach. To start from [the final] census elaborations means to predetermine the research unilaterally, to turn the social

---

Adeline Daumard, "Les relations sociales à Paris à l'époque de la monarchie constitutionnelle d'après les registres paroissiaux des mariages," *Population* 12, no. 3 (1957): 445–66; Adeline Daumard and François Furet, *Structures et relations sociales à Paris au milieu du XVIII^e siècle* (Armand Colin, 1961); and Adeline Daumard, ed., *Les fortunes françaises au XIX^e siècle: Enquête sur la répartition et la composition des capitaux privés à Paris, Lyon, Lille, Bordeaux et Toulouse, d'après l'enregistrement des déclarations de succession* (Mouton, 1973). The incidental criticism of Thompson echoes a fairly negative review of *The Making of the English Working Class* that Grendi published in *Rivista storica italiana* 82, no. 4 (1970): 982–90, soon after the book appeared in Italian translation.

5. This is a loose reference to Eric R. Wolf's *Peasants* (Prentice-Hall, 1966), 92–93.

6. Marcel Couturier, *Recherches sur les structures sociales de Châteaudun, 1525–1789* (S.E.V.P.E.N., 1969), of which Grendi published a laudatory review in *Rivista storica italiana* 82, no. 3 (1970): 758–65; Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge University Press, 1971); John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974). Angelo Torre helped with the identification of these references despite some inaccuracies in the original text, including Marcel Couturier being listed as "Le Couturier" and Michael Anderson being listed as "A. Anderson."

into an abstraction, to bound ourselves to a sterile comparison with the aggregate categories constructed by past administrative authorities.

How, for example, can we overlook the well-established problem of the correspondence between social morphology and settlement morphology, on which ancient and medieval historians, as well as anthropologists and sociologists, insist and which the dynamics of modern cities demonstrate over and over again? The same can be said about the study of marriage behavior, a recent topic in demographic history but an old and obvious one for determining the homogeneity of social groups. The subjects of this kind of analysis will certainly multiply in qualitative terms as well, as soon as an appropriate methodology matures.

Following this approach, which is undeniably demanding in terms of research labor, we can broach the equally important problem of the enlargement of the social scale—that is, the widening of the relevant social sub-unity. Admittedly, we are not yet able to anticipate how this approach can operate historically and analytically to match the diagnosis of the processes of [national] cultural unification deriving from the development of more articulated institutions, such as the rise in literacy, the process of politicization, and patterns of imitation. Let us consider a simple question: Did industrialization render social structures more diversified or more homogenous? Put in these terms, the problem is one of comparative history, and given that it has to be formulated in reference to space and time, it is difficult to see how we can proceed except through a series of case studies—and then, eventually, to arrive at broader typologies.[7] Villani seems to postulate that there is a tacit nationwide map (the census) to be filled in with well-known or at least preestablished categories (the classes or socio-professional groups inferred from the censuses themselves). Here we observe the same process of theoretical simplification denounced by Romanelli. The expectation is that, via this route, we can arrive at a framework that enables comparisons over time and that treats social change as progress while omitting the spatial dimension in accordance with the canons of the liberal-Marxist model. For Romanelli, this is the "historicist evolution," the "meaning" in contrast to which microanalysis serves as "a suspension of judgment, an acknowledgement of the 'loss of meaning,' which seems to me to be the first step toward regaining a sense of truth."[8] We can accept the rhetorical presentation of a reversal of values (meaning/loss of meaning). But we should also acknowledge a disjunction between the theoretical assumptions of the dominant thought considered by Romanelli and the majority of the works by historians, whose analytical results are often independent from those assumptions. The historical microanalysis that I am trying to outline here aims to be a radical alternative to these assumptions, which do not only concern the model of industrial capitalism.

2. At risk of falling into the ridiculous level of abstraction represented by the idea of the concrete totality, we might as well indicate the specific "field of interest" [of

7. Here, Grendi uses English in the original: "*case-studies*" (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 508).

8. Romanelli, "Storia politica e storia sociale," 248: "una sospensione del giudizio, una presa d'atto dello 'smarrimento del senso,' che mi pare il primo passo verso la riconquista d'una verità."

this microanalysis]. Let us say that it is the "relational universe"—that is, the field of interpersonal relations—that, by necessity, is analyzed within a micro-area. This explains the interest in demographic history—that is, [the component of] the historical discipline that poses its problems in direct relation to society as a whole. The fact that this approach happens to have a preference for counting, and particularly for counting life events, is of secondary importance. The method of family reconstruction permits us to identify fundamental family units, to determine their position in a development cycle, and to elaborate further genealogies. Such basic examination can be enriched. First of all, we can map non-secondary relations on the basis of a more systematic utilization of the same primary source, the parish registers, considering, for example, witnesses at weddings or godparents at baptisms and confirmations. Moreover, we can add information especially from other hitherto little exploited types of archival sources, including notarial deeds, civil and criminal court records, land registries, legal and political assemblies, account books, and private deeds that can be linked to "central" sources produced from the judicial, fiscal, and political administration or to the censuses themselves. Each piece of information contains a data point or, more often, identifies a relationship. It is thus possible to reconstruct family histories and sometimes, by a fortunate convergence of sources, individual histories—whether typical or exceptional—that are sufficiently rich; and it is also possible to detect continuous—that is, structured—interpersonal relations (for example, relationships of debt and credit).

Consider, for example, notarial records. We can distinguish different types of information in them, including dowry contracts, last wills, acknowledgements of debt (sometimes with their motivations), debt settlements, sale, rent or hiring contracts, powers of attorney, leases, annuities, as well as [minutes of] meetings of vestries, church oratories, universities, [institutionalized] communities, and the like. The language and the nature of the relationship documented in these records amount to historical sources in the fullest sense of the word: In addition to illustrating the relationship between two or more subjects, they reveal a cultural meaning (custom, typicality).

A specific technical problem arises at this point: how to collect the data and how to process them—a problem that Couturier in particular has been discussing for a long time and that has led others to declare the death of the artisanal historian. I do not wish to address this problem as much as that of the "conceptual" organization of the data, which in any case precedes all the others.

I believe that the study of peasant societies—that is, what has been called the anthropology of complex societies—can offer several suggestions and operational conceptual tools. Of course, I am aware that the cartography of interpersonal relations documented by archival records corresponds only imperfectly to the fieldwork [conducted by anthropologists].

The rapid expansion of community studies in Europe during the 1960s and in the current decade [that is, the 1970s] has raised the specific problem of how to use historical sources. William A. Douglass, commenting on some of the works that use those sources, insists that the data available to anthropologists are not merely

"the flow of social life as it unfolds before his eyes as a participant observer."[9] Fieldwork is usually too short, nor can it follow the many cycles of activity that characterize even the smallest communities; hence the use of surveys, sampling techniques, informal and direct interviews, and written documents. What distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines in the human sciences, then, is less a methodology than its distinctive emphasis on a holistic approach to the study of human behavior, despite the fact that, for obvious heuristic reasons, it is necessary to set boundaries that demarcate a research project. Douglass insists on the complementarity of historical and anthropological work; John Davis, the author of a study of [the Southern Italian town of] Pisticci, speaks in this regard of a "creative use of history."[10] What he means is clear from chapter 6 of his *People of the Mediterranean*.[11] It is difficult, however, to find further developments or illustrations of these and similar themes, because the importance of history to anthropology entails a corresponding definition of historical work, which cannot be reduced to the use of written sources. John W. Cole and Wolf identify the importance of history on the basis of their fieldwork experience: "a history of the structures pertinent to our area, their determination over time and their mutual relations."[12]

[As historians,] we look at the problem from the other side of this complementarity [between history and anthropology]. But it is clear that the issue is not the corresponding relevance of the present for the past as much as it is an "analogical" relevance, so to speak, that grounds the possibility of the employment of concepts and heuristic schemes connected with the aforementioned holistic approach. This analogical perspective has radical consequences for certain divisions that govern historical research and break it down into discrete fields of inquiry (the political, the economic, the religious, the demographic, the social, et cetera), which often map onto specific disciplines (economics, demography, and so forth).

Problems such as the historical-demographic question of family planning in peasant societies of the Old Regime have been recently linked to necessity or cultural coercion within the family and the society at large. These accounts may prove to be congruent with general explanatory models such as Edward C. Banfield's "amoral familism" or George M. Foster's "image of limited good."[13]

9. This quote is from Jan Brøger's commentary in *Current Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (1975): 622, which is a response to William A. Douglass, "Issues in the Study of South Italian Society," *Current Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (1975): 620–22.

10. This quote is from John Davis's commentary in *Current Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (1975): 623, which is a response to Douglass, "Issues in the Study of South Italian Society." For Davis's study of Pisticci, see *Land and Family in Pisticci* (Athlone Press, 1973).

11. The reference is to Davis's criticism of the dilettanteish appropriation of historical and literary sources by anthropologists of the Mediterranean, and those inspired by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in particular, in chapter 6 ("Anthropology and History in the Mediterranean") of *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (Routledge & K. Paul, 1977), 239–58.

12. Here, Grendi offers a citation and includes quotation marks for what is, in fact, his summary of the approach to history followed by John W. Cole and Eric W. Wolf in *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (Academic Press, 1974).

13. Edward C. Banfield, with the assistance of Laura Fasano Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Free Press, 1958), 10; George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 67, no. 2 (1965): 293–315.

Historians insist more on economic necessity, but they also turn their attention to other problems, including the degree of separation in marital alliances within the family, the critical phases of the family cycle, or the practices of inheritance, and emphasize their conditioning effects. On these themes, an exchange between historians and anthropologists is already taking place. However, while the determination of factual behavior is a common goal in both disciplines, anthropology seems to be characterized by a broader cultural purview. Consider, for example, the meaning that the "cycle of societal and property relations within the domestic unity" acquires in the aforementioned work by Cole and Wolf, the dichotomy it proposes between ideology and practice, and, at the same time, the relevance of the ideological distinction—primogeniture in Saint Felix, partible inheritance and egalitarianism in Tret—for the overall organization of social relations in the two Alpine villages.[14] This is a definite advantage of fieldwork: the possibility of grasping the connections between different phenomena, between the object of analysis and "the rest." By contrast, historians seem destined to juxtapose a series of distinct analyses, although nothing prevents them from planning and orienting their overall (and subsequent) analytical strategy in a similar fashion.

It is undeniable that a general cultural model may privilege a synthetic and intuitive diagnosis, which a close scrutiny does not fully substantiate and is thus inevitably biased. At any rate, even topics such as the role of envy as a mechanism of social control or the values of honor and shame in generating conformity within a community can result from the examination of interpersonal relations, which are more difficult to reconstruct from historical sources. This is particularly true in the absence of the institutionalization of such relations, although one can never rule out the possibility of a "revelation" (especially in judicial papers). Most often, historians work with a multiplicity of indirect pieces of evidence: In those circumstances, an exceptional document may become exceptionally "normal" precisely because it is revelatory.[15]

The common synchronic orientation [adopted by anthropologists] undoubtedly suggests a functionalist epistemology: The diachronic nature of the family cycle presupposes the "simple" cultural reproduction of any society, which is somehow essentialized in its structure. From this point of view, it is not enough to consider a typology of community structures (Wolf), although this is an indirect way of accepting the principle of transformation (a morphological comparison that postulates the transition from one type to the other). It is also necessary to solve analytically the problem of the nexus between individuals and society. In social anthropology, this is the heart of the problem for the so-called methodological individualism (Fredrik Barth).[16] Historians assume not that the combination of analytical levels occurs along a convergent and unilinear course but rather that it follows multiple directions, bringing to the fore margins of statistical deviation from congruences or correlations, whose significance is undisputed. Historical

14. Cole and Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier*, 176. Grendi's wording ("ciclo di succession ereditarie") is an adaptation of the original.

15. The original reads: "in questa situazione il documento eccezionale può risultare eccezionalmente 'normale,' appunto perché rivelante" (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 512).

16. Fredrik Barth, *Models of Social Organization* (Royal Anthropological Institute, 1966).

demographers record phenomena of divergence with respect to the continuity of residence and endogamy, both at the top and at the bottom of any community. These divergences in behavior, however, are primarily useful to delineate a social group—that is, to highlight differential regularities. This is not to say that, in some instances, the verification of correlations cannot be unique to a group (as defined by its correspondence to others). In those instances, the identification of statistical deviations can be interpreted as the existence of innovative or disruptive phenomena or simply phenomena that are marginal to the overall community's culture. A pattern of group divergence at the top of the social pyramid (including exogamy and residential mobility) expresses a typical anthropological concept, that of the elite broker,[17] which mediates between the community and the larger society. Such a position is of fundamental strategic importance for the local political system. At the same time, the distinctive feature of peasant societies, which have been defined as "part-societies with part-cultures" by Alfred Louis Kroeber, is not limited to this mediation.[18] The "economic" alternatives that affect the whole community postulate a demographic mixing[19] of varying significance and, above all, forms of temporary mobility that often differ by age and sex.

In this and other respects, historians of European societies rediscover, by delving into folk traditions, the persistence of social structures distinguished by sex and age groups.[20] Similarly, the history of the European countryside seems to point to the extraordinary endurance of territorial associations, which aggregate neighbors who were not necessarily kin but supported one another in the performance of certain tasks, such as the apportionment, arrangement, or provision of resources of common interest. "One of the major potential contributions of European research to social anthropology would, I suspect," writes Susan T. Freeman, "grow out of a comprehensive ethnological and historical survey of forms of community organization."[21] Hence the interest in the study of patterns of settlement and the possibility of drawing a mobile and functionally differentiated picture of socio-territorial configurations. To be sure, all social structures have a spatial dimension: In this respect, they are best defined on the basis of relationships that indicate homogeneity (for example, marriage exchange) or others that indicate asymmetry (such as, usually, economic exchange).

> The interest [among historians] in institutions such as clientele [networks] and ritual kinship—which so far have been best explored by anthropologists—derives

17. Here, Grendi uses English in the original: "*élite-broker*" (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 512).

18. Alfred Louis Kroeber, *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*, new ed. (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 284. For Kroeber, peasants occupy an intermediate place between tribal and urban societies: "They constitute part-societies with part-cultures. They lack the isolation, the political autonomy, and the self-sufficiency of tribal populations; but their local units retain much of their old identity, integration, and attachment to soil and cults" (ibid.). Grendi speaks of "società e cultura parziali" ("Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 513).

19. Here, Grendi uses French in the original: "*brassage*" (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 513).

20. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford University Press, 1975); Yves Castan, *Honnêteté et relations sociales en Languedoc, 1715–1780* (Plon, 1974).

21. Susan T. Freeman, introduction to "Studies in Rural European Social Organization," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 75, no. 3 (1973): 746.

from the fact that they facilitate the mapping of interpersonal relationships, whether vertical or, in the case of fictive kinship, horizontal, both of which, at least in the Mediterranean, are perhaps better subsumed under the rubric of what George M. Foster calls the "dyadic contract."[22] In practice, these relationships postulate an exchange that, in some cases, can be systematically documented, as, for example, in the event of monetary loans. The expansion of these relations beyond the space occupied by a community automatically enlarges the territorial dimension of the social structure and generates a fundamental asymmetry within the community, which does not exclude an in-depth analysis of the specific structure of the subaltern community. Political conflict, as well as feasts and ceremonies, are revealing moments of the underlying social structure, which historians have already mapped on the basis of a laborious and systematic reconstruction of interpersonal relations. The analysis of rituals and symbols that is typical of anthropology thus demonstrates its relevance for historical research.

3. Given that economics has so far offered important contributions to historical research, it seems useful to show the implications of the approach outlined above with regard to such "orthodoxy."

I cite a petition from the late seventeenth century by the community of Monterosso [al Mare] (today in the province of La Spezia [in Liguria, Italy]), which was affected by [a tax known as] *méta* imposed by Genoa on *Rossese* wine, one of the few resources of the area.[23] The petition decries the fact that the same merchants come to the village every year and offer shoddy cloth and spoiled grain at prices that they set at will in exchange for wine whose prices are fixed by the authorities. In terms of economic analysis, the asymmetry in these exchanges results from the contrast between a free and a controlled meeting of supply and demand. But the "freedom" of the former remains a function of the narrowness of the market, something that is absolutely normal in a preindustrial society: The market is not only restricted but also erratic, and its intermittence is closely linked with the presence of "those" merchants. That the price of grain is the result of the meeting of supply and demand is at least tautological: It is assumed that this is the case when, in fact, there is no reason to neglect the analysis of the exchange process. The poor winegrowers of Monterosso are perfectly justified in presenting their situation in terms of an interpersonal relationship: They cannot expect the arrival of other merchants—that is, they have no alternative. The merchants "add[ed]" to their goods a discretionary profit, as was often the case, but this time it was not possible to counter-bargain with a price of the *Rossese* that might compensate the excess. This is the key difference from customary exchange situations and the reason for the protest and the utopian demand of other interpersonal relationships, which, as such, are not in question. As has been suggested, all exchanges have always been unequal, which is why exchange relations are an essential mirror of

22. George M. Foster, "The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village," *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 63, no. 6 (1961): 1173–92.

23. The Rossese from this area in eastern Liguria, known as the Cinque Terre, is a white wine, whereas the *Rossese* from western Liguria is a red wine.

social articulations and structures.[24] This point is connected to what we noted in the previous paragraph. But the exceptional nature of the protest, motivated by the innovation of the *méta* system, suggests that, in "normal" times, peasants adapted to the existing exchange situation.

Farmers needed grain and had nothing but their wine to offer. In this particular case, there does not seem to exist an elite of local merchants (brokers or intermediaries with the larger society), but there is no doubt that the recurring seasonal visits [by merchants] created personal relationships between buyers and sellers that went both ways, with the possibility, perhaps more difficult in the case of occasional merchants, of compensations over time. Given that the terms of the exchange were elementary, we can reasonably assume that the administrative novelty consisted in the possibility of getting less grain with the same amount of wine as the previous year—short of output fluctuations that, in any case, tested the solidarity among the merchants (the monopoly of buyers).

This was a natural exchange, then, but it was conducted with the monetary values conditioned by the *méta* as a reference point. This feature was certainly a constant trait of preindustrial commercial transactions and reinforced the personal element of the transaction, which, in turn, was connected to the custom of deferring and resolving monetary compensations over time. Nonetheless, these compensations were limited, given the frequent urgent need of producers to sell to, or buy from, other producers or merchants—a need that favored the consolidation of the elites who were able to expand their position of economic privilege: large landlords, merchants, and transporters. The existence of a connection between clientele and indebtedness is thus beyond doubt. And it is evident that it is difficult to distinguish between social, economic, and political relations: Underlying this assertion is the fact that relations of "economic" significance were first and foremost interpersonal relations; as a result, there is no reason to privilege the schemes of economic analysis. We can assume that the larger market first and foremost concerned the ruling groups (who exerted the function of "mediation") and only partially the subordinate groups, on whom the former could offload the effects of an economic downturn, but always in ways and to degrees that cannot be ascribed to "economic rationality." The analysis and comparison of price variations must therefore be situated within this framework, which accounts for sudden crises in the social structure, shifts in solidarity, emigration, et cetera. As mentioned above, notarial (and civil judicial) sources enable us to reconstruct these structures of dependency: If mercantile transactions are only rarely reported as such, certifications and discharges of debts are recorded more regularly, particularly given that the extinction of a debt often led to a new credit. On the basis of the notation of credits in *postmortem* inventories (especially those drawn up to divide an estate among siblings living in a common property regime), we can map the clientele of a notable and follow specific relationships from

24. Sydney W. Mintz, "Internal Market Systems as Mechanism of Social Articulation," in *Intermediate Societies, Social Mobility, and Communication: Proceedings of the 1959 Annual Springs Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. Verne F. Ray (University of Washington Press, 1959), 20–30. Thank you to Angelo Torre for this reference.

generation to generation. A debt relationship can change over time: Debts can be consolidated in an annuity or a sale for which land is the principal collateral; as a result, a former landowner becomes a tenant or the holder of a long-term lease.[25]

Examined analytically, as Giovanni Levi has shown, the land market brings to the fore not only the logics of family cycles but also differences [in price] depending on the object of the transaction.[26] As A. V. Chayanov has explained, prices do not correspond to the value of capitalized returns. Do we agree with him that prices are simply a function of demographics and therefore, once again, of demand?[27] In light of the "vertical" model that we have outlined above, this is definitely not the case. The fiction of the meeting of supply and demand becomes laughable in the case we examined. One wonders whether economic analysis gains greater purchase when supply and demand acquire a "mass" character, and if that is the case, which are the strategic thresholds. We cannot discard lightly the wealth of interpretive rationalization of social processes and historical change that economic analysis has bestowed to us.

Naturally, the exchange of goods and services also has a horizontal dimension. Indeed, this is the typical dimension of peasant reciprocity, which is generally understood as a deferred reciprocity of services (labor), a phenomenon that is difficult to illustrate historically. But horizontal transactions go beyond these exchanges, as is evident today in many peasant societies in which intermediation is particularly developed and a series of dyadic preferential ties solidifies the channels of trade through the institutionalization of interpersonal relationships.[28] Obviously, these kinds of transactions are even more rarely documented by notarial records. In these records, however, it is possible to find minute transactions that concern not only small portions of land but also shares of livestock as well as the smallest of debts. Dowry transactions in particular are recorded systematically: For the poorest, the cross-exchange of expenses to be detracted from the amounts of dowries represents a form of strictly balanced reciprocity.

We tend to imagine that the degree to which a community is involved in the mercantile economy and the role of self-subsistence within it mark the differences and thresholds between communities. This may also mean that certain transactions encounter cultural objections. As David Riches has written, "the protection of the subsistence sector is a likely basis for the spheres of exchange ideologies of many peasant economies."[29] Indeed, the anthropological concept of spheres of exchange can be generalized and even applied to a monetary economy, in which, for

25. Here, Grendi uses the term *enfiteuta* to mean the holder of a contract (*emphyteusis*) that assigned long-term and inheritable rights over a parcel of the land to those who cultivated it (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 516).

26. Giovanni Levi, "Terra e strutture familiari in una comunità piemontese del '700," *Quaderni storici* 11, no. 33 (1976): 1095–121.

27. A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, and R. E. F. Smith (Richard D. Irwin, 1966).

28. Sidney W. Mintz, "*Pratik*: Haitian Personal Economic Relationships," in *Symposium: Patterns of Land Utilization and Other Papers—Proceedings of the 1961 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. Viola E. Garfield (University of Washington Press, 1961), 54–63.

29. David Riches, "Cash, Credit and Gambling in a Modern Eskimo Economy: Speculations on Origins of Spheres of Economic Exchange," *Man* 10, no. 1 (1975): 21.

example, the transaction of certain goods involves a resolution within the credit system, while the transaction of other goods requires the immediate disbursement of money. In those instances, we can peg different goods to two relatively distinct spheres of exchange. We can interpret this pattern as a third line of defense of peasant societies after self-subsistence, which involves an articulated productive orientation and the cultural disapproval for transactions concerning basic foodstuffs, and after horizontal exchanges, which often operate as a form of mutuality.[30] All this occurs in the framework of a common resistance of peasant societies against the radical monetization of exchanges that affected them.

If we consider agrarian societies as a whole, economic history poses the fundamental problem of the relationship between population and resources and usually treats it on a broad territorial scale (from the region and up). The ex post construction of a homeostatic Malthusian hypothesis stems from the use of this scale. At the microanalytical level proposed here, we can broach the problem of individual household units that invested their labor (which is not accountable in monetary terms) and acquired goods intended for the defense and reproduction of their existing "status," partly through market conversion. Given that this "status" is culturally defined, and is thus eminently relational, it is the forms of social organization of the community that are in question and have "economic" relevance. Although the productive base is narrow and atomized, with the cultural attitudes that come with that condition, there is nevertheless a solidarity of destinies that ultimately explains the forms of social integration. Marshall Sahlins has shown how the application of Chayanov's model (the evolution of the proportion between consumption and production according to the life cycle of the domestic unit) does not explain the continuity of some simple societies, which is thus unaccountable without the presence of institutionalized forms of co-participation—this is a way of highlighting the "economic" character of social structures.[31] In complex societies, the mobility of supportive or substitute resources increases: intensification of labor, different ways of exploiting resources, "external" opportunities (work, market). In other words, the community, if it is true that even the family is able to control its size to some extent, can adapt and ensure its survival in different ways. It is by no means automatic and necessary that a community reaches an irreparable and fatal "contradiction" with the resources at its disposal; rather, this eventuality must be verified. The dramatic dialectic between population and resources as an explanation of historical change is merely a hypothesis, and one that cannot be verified at the territorial scale for which it was formulated, so much so that Ester Boserup was able to advance the opposite hypothesis with full plausibility.[32] We could even say that the dialectic between population and resources represents a fallback thesis, a retreat from the other great historical-ethnocentric

30. Mintz, "Pratik."

31. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Aldine-Atherton, 1972).

32. Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (George Allen and Unwin, 1965). Grendi refers to the French translation: *Évolution agraire et pression démographique*, trans. [Jacques] Métadier (Flammarion, 1970).

projection of European "civilization": the idea of historical development as the progressive triumph of the merchant, the market, and the city.

4. We thus return to our initial theme. If Romanelli denounced the anchoring of contemporary historiographical perspectives to a univocal and not very "elastic" model, it can be argued, I think correctly, that he pointed to a more general historiographical tendency, one that is largely conditioned by economics as the "most advanced social science." The "loss of meaning" [identified by Romanelli] is the rejection of largely preestablished meanings—meanings that we may call "ideological."

My more or less explicit goal is to bring history-writing back to that contextual analysis that is its vocation and in which a series or a network of interpersonal relations are the fundamental object of study: hence the choice to focus on small-scale societies such as peasant villages, a choice guided no doubt by the example of anthropology. In principle, one could also choose to focus on an urban neighborhood. But aside from the scale of analysis, I believe that this perspective, as long as it satisfies the "virtue" of a holistic approach, retains its general validity for social history—that is, a perspective in which the high road is indicated by the study of behavior and interpersonal relations (as the paradigm of reference). Obviously, for the modern period there is more abundant quantified or quantifiable documentation, while the benefit of local convergences in the records that can be used for the purpose of prosopography is probably lost to some extent. But as the examples already mentioned demonstrate, this means that studies that are at once more partial but also more rigorous can be multiplied.

For a micro-social analysis, the character of the data that are taken into consideration is more important than the size of the social area that is being analyzed. In this sense, there is no friction between medieval and modern history. However, today, we observe a gigantic hiatus in the criteria of relevance of the two historiographical fields: In one area [medieval history], historically and analytically innovative approaches are held in high regard; in the other [modern history], at least in Italy, the dominant expectation remains that of political-ideological syntheses, which systematically neglect social processes, taking them for granted as the outcomes of an a priori grid of theses and themes that, in fact, are often a hodgepodge of "received ideas."

It is curious that anthropology, which, by necessity, is concerned with contemporary societies, has long stimulated mainly the writing of medieval, if not ancient, history. This cannot be attributed to the object of analysis (relatively "simpler" societies). Anthropologists have discussed and illustrated analytically the problem of social change.[33] What can the history of the modern period be if not a history of social transformations? And why should the nation rather than the community or the city or the craft be the chosen site for the study of these transformations?

33. Here, Grendi uses English in the original: "*social-change*" (Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale," 519).

At bottom, the argument that I have tried to illustrate in this intervention amounts to the defense of a principle—namely, that social history is the history of relations between individuals and groups. The additional and fundamental problem of how to identify concepts and methods that render this approach operative, which here I have pursued only to a very limited degree, can be enriched indefinitely; and it seems unquestionable to me that, in light of contemporary social events, the value of this perspective is growing rather than diminishing, even apart from the suggestions coming from oral history (which, in any case, one cannot overlook). The growth of "administrative systems" has multiplied the availability of data, producing surveys and innumerable documentary repositories (sectional, functional, or related to associations), which are now destined to be pulped but are likely to become the object of unexpected historical-analytical elucidations.

The task of a [new] social history of the modern period is to attain a cultural distance from the society in which we are living, to objectify it in its relational aspects, and to reconstruct the evolution and dynamics of social behavior.

Translated by Francesca Trivellato