

ARTICLE

“THE NORMAL EXCEPTION”: EDOARDO GRENDI, MICROANALYSIS, AND GENERALIZATIONS*

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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 by Edoardo Grendi. His article, titled “Micro-analisi e storia sociale” (Microanalysis and Social History), is cited more often than it is read. In this issue of *History and Theory*, Grendi’s seminal article appears in English for the first time. This companion piece introduces Grendi’s contribution by situating it within contemporary debates between historians and anthropologists. It also sheds light on the fate of the concept of “the normal exception” among its supporters and detractors. Finally, it clarifies some of the possibilities that other Italian microhistorians have laid out for deriving generalizations from case studies.

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

In a short essay on “microhistory” published in 2022, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon wrote: “One of the cornerstones of the microhistorical approach is the normal exception, an individual labelled as exceptional, yet, who from a less official or elite perspective can be seen as normal.”² His summary reflects a common, if not also prevailing, understanding of this well-traveled oxymoron, but it departs from the meanings attributed to it by its earlier proponents. Chair of the Center for Microhistorical Research at the Reykjavik Academy in Iceland, Magnússon has done a great deal to popularize microhistory in the Anglophone world and is

* For the English translation of Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 35 (1977): 506–20, see Edoardo Grendi, “‘The Normal Exception’: ‘Microanalysis and Social History’ (1977),” trans. Francesca Trivellato, *History and Theory* 65, no. 2 (2026), which is the next contribution in this issue.

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2. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “Microhistory,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2022), 367. See also Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Emotional Experience and Microhistory: A Life Story of a Destitute Pauper Poet in the 19th Century* (Routledge, 2020), esp. 28.

hardly alone in conflating microhistory with the study of obscure ordinary people, and thus with the so-called history from below.³

Donald R. Kelley once remarked that “the history of thought is a history of misinterpretation—a ‘map of misreading’ and misappropriation—rather than a ‘perennial philosophy.’”⁴ The same can be said of the reception of Italian *microstoria* and, arguably, the history of historiography in general.⁵ Recognizing the enduring relevance of these intellectual cartographies, I retrace the meandering fate of the notion of “the normal exception” over the past half-century and propose new ways to appropriate it. I thus combine a retrospective view with a prospective impetus, or, in keeping with Kelley, I continue to enlarge the map of misreadings. At a minimum, I aim to demonstrate that once we understand “the normal exception” in reference to a set of documents rather than an eccentric individual, whether of distinguished or humble origins, the concept’s heuristic potential is greatly enhanced.

The phrase “the normal exception” first surfaced obliquely in a 1977 article Edoardo Grendi published in Italian.⁶ This issue of *History and Theory* includes my translation of Grendi’s article, marking the first time this piece has been published in English.⁷ Grendi’s article is not entirely self-explanatory, nor does it account for the ways in which it has been subsequently evoked and utilized. To start, it is what we would call a response. Although it has a strong programmatic impulse, it lacks the forcefulness of a manifesto or even of a full-fledged review essay. Although it contains a case study, it is not a standalone research piece. From a stylistic standpoint, its prose is sometimes allusive or opaque. These features may explain why the article has not been translated or anthologized by those who have sought to introduce Italian *microstoria* to Anglophone audiences.⁸

The following pages do not pretend to offer an exhaustive appraisal of the possible readings of Grendi’s text. Rather, they pursue three interlaced goals. First, I will review the earliest English-language explications of Grendi’s oxymoron as

3. The Center for Microhistorical Research’s initiatives are documented online (www.microhistory.org).

4. Donald R. Kelley, *The Human Measure: Social Thought in the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1990), xi.

5. Recent examples of such creative misreadings include Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó, *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013) and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, Deivy Carneiro, and Thomas V. Cohen, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Microhistory: Origins, Present State and Prospects* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2026). I discussed some of the reasons for the adaptive reception of Italian microhistory abroad in “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5070/C321009025>, and “Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2015): 122–34.

6. Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 35 (1977): 506–20.

7. Edoardo Grendi, “‘The Normal Exception’: ‘Microanalysis and Social History’ (1977),” trans. Francesca Trivellato, *History and Theory* 65, no. 2 (2026). In the present article, quotations from my English translation are attributed to Grendi, “Microanalysis and Social History.”

8. Two other translations exist: one in French (without bibliographical notes) and one in Portuguese (with minimal annotations). See Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analyse et histoire sociale,” trans. Pierre Savy, *Écrire l’histoire* 3 (2009): 67–80, and Edoardo Grendi, “Microanálise e história social,” trans. Henrique Espada Lima, in *Exercícios de micro-história*, ed. Mônica Ribeiro de Oliveria and Carla Maria Carvalho de Almeida (FGV, 2009), 19–38.

they were offered by some of his closest Italian intellectual allies. These texts, dating from the early 1990s, give the phrase “the normal exception” a cogency that its original formulation lacks and open up additional interpretative possibilities. Second, I will recapitulate the content of Grendi’s 1977 article and situate it within the contemporary debates in which it intervened. My third and final goal, then, is to elucidate what I regard as the main paths that other Italian microhistorians have outlined for building new generalizations on the basis of exceptionally normal documents.

Two paradoxes have prompted my effort to reverse-engineer some of what Kelley would term the “misappropriations” of Grendi’s article. In Anglophone scholarship at least, his piece is cited or mentioned more often than it is read. Moreover, the term *microstoria* has been applied only in retrospect (at least in print) to a constellation of works by a small group of Italian historians dating to the 1970s and 1980s. Grendi’s 1977 article, too, is best understood in light of the reflections offered after 1990 by notable figures in this group, beginning with Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg.⁹ Their writings, in turn, highlight points of both convergence and dissonance among the proponents of this project and delineate different afterlives for the notion of “the normal exception.”

As should already be clear, I am not animated by a naive originalism in returning to Grendi’s 1977 article. I decided to translate and revisit it because, no matter how dated and unfinished it might be, it affords us the opportunity to reexamine longstanding debates among historians and social scientists concerning the relationship between case studies and generalizations. Grendi’s intervention helps us to better appreciate how Italian microhistorians have grappled with this vexed topic. The present moment seems like an opportune time for such a reassessment. At recurrent intervals, whether to defend the history of “great men” (or at least “great events”) or to combat the marginalization of their discipline within and beyond the academy, historians of various persuasions have disparaged small-scale inquiries as trivializing, if not also narcissistic, endeavors.¹⁰ With populist sentiments on the rise, it may not be futile to reconsider the views of someone who thought otherwise.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS MICROANALYSIS

Italian microhistory was not born fully formed. Not only have its protagonists always insisted that they never constituted a single, unified school, but the word *microstoria* itself does not appear in their most representative works, including

9. Giovanni Levi, “Il piccolo, il grande e il piccolo,” *Meridiana* 10 (September 1990): 211–34; Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 93–113; Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It,” trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35; Edoardo Grendi, “Ripensare la microstoria?,” *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 29, no. 86 (1994): 539–49.

10. See, for example, John H. Elliott, *National and Comparative History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 10 May 1991* (Clarendon Press, 1991) and Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Ginzburg's 1976 *Il formaggio e i vermi* (The Cheese and the Worms).¹¹ The first recorded use of the term is probably a 1979 letter that Ginzburg sent to Giulio Einaudi, who was then the head of the Italian publishing house that bears his name, in which he proposed the launch of a new series titled, precisely, "Microstorie."¹² Curated by Ginzburg and Levi, with the assistance of Simona Cerutti, the series ran from 1981 to 1991 and published twenty-one volumes consisting of a combination of original works by Italian authors and translations. Even a cursory glance at its titles reveals the distance between this project and the history from below. Only a few studies are biographical in nature, and for the one devoted to the humble Martin Guerre, there are three that center on famous personalities: Piero della Francesca, Galileo Galilei, and Annibale Carracci.¹³

Announcing the new series in the Einaudi publishing house's bulletin, Levi identified the reduction of the scale of observation of historical phenomena as

11. Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Einaudi, 1976), which was published in English as *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). The word *microstoria* does not figure in other landmark titles of Italian microhistorians, such as Ginzburg's *I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Einaudi, 1966), which was published in English as *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Penguin Books, 1983); Ginzburg's "Spie: Radici di un paradigma indiziario," which appeared simultaneously in *Crisi della ragione: Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività*, ed. Aldo Gargani (Einaudi, 1979), 57–106, and *Ombre rosse*, n.s., 29 (1979): 80–107, and was first published in English as "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980): 5–36, and then as "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96–125; Ginzburg's *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del sabba* (Einaudi, 1989), which was published in English as *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Pantheon Books, 1991); and Levi's *L'eredità immateriale: Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Einaudi, 1985), which was published in English as *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

12. Carlo Ginzburg to Giulio Einaudi, 20 December 1979, box 94, Corrispondenza con autori e collaboratori italiani, Archivio storico della casa editrice Giulio Einaudi Editore (1933–1983), Archivio di Stato, Turin, Italy. I thank Tommaso Munari for sharing this document with me. See also Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things," 10, and Serena La Malfa, "La collana Einaudi 'Microstorie' (1981–1991)," *Storiografia* 20 (2016): 197–214, although neither essay cites the 1979 letter. In the paper outlining what would become *The Cheese and the Worms*, which he presented on 30 November 1973 at the Davis Seminar (then directed by its founder Lawrence Stone), Ginzburg spoke of "ce type de recherches microscopiques" (the paper was written in French) (Carlo Ginzburg, "Le fromage et les vers: Le monde mentol [mental] d'un meunier du XVIe siècle," Archives of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center, Department of History, Princeton University).

13. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, 1983), which was published in Italian as *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre: Un caso di doppia identità nella Francia del Cinquecento*, trans. Sandro Lombardini (Einaudi, 1984); Carlo Ginzburg, *Indagini su Piero: Il Battesimo, il ciclo di Arezzo, la Flagellazione di Urbino* (Einaudi, 1981), which was published in English as *The Enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (Verso, 2000); Pietro Redondi, *Galileo eretico* (Einaudi, 1983), which was published in English as *Galileo Heretic*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 1987); and Roberto Zapperi, *Annibale Carracci: Ritratto di artista da giovane* (Einaudi, 1989). Note that, throughout his career, and especially since the 1990s, Ginzburg has written on canonical authors of the European intellectual pantheon. His latest English monograph is *Nevertheless: Machiavelli, Pascal*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2022).

the guiding principle for selecting the projected titles.¹⁴ (The first three books that were planned included a selection of essays by E. P. Thompson, which were edited by Grendi.¹⁵) A small scale of analysis, for Levi, serves to pry open the processes and conflicts underlying broad processes of historical change rather than taking their linearity for granted. Ginzburg later chimed in: “The choice of a circumscribed and close-up perspective reveals a dissatisfaction . . . with the macroscopic and quantitative model that dominated the international historiographical scene between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s.”¹⁶

Microstoria, in short, aspired to nothing less than undoing the most authoritative explanatory schemes of the twentieth century—Marxism, modernization theory, and structural functionalism. Their differences notwithstanding, these theoretical frameworks were premised on a deductive procedure that imposed preestablished analytical categories on an infinite variety of concrete situations. It was this deductive posture that Grendi took aim at when, in 1977, he leveraged “microanalysis” against the abstractions employed by historians of the nation-state and the emergence of capitalism. Although he was not entirely alone in adopting the term “microanalysis,” his 1977 article is a key text that adumbrated several insights that were later bracketed under the more evocative editorial brand of *microstoria*.¹⁷ Grendi, for his part, never abandoned his predilection for “microanalysis.”¹⁸

EARLY INTERCESSIONS

Until now, Anglophone readers have been acquainted with Grendi’s notion of “the normal exception” only at secondhand or thirdhand. The expression as such did not appear in his 1977 article, although Grendi never disputed the lucid and concise summaries of his early interpreters, who were also his close interlocutors and

14. Giovanni Levi, “Microstorie: Una proposta,” *Notiziario Einaudi*, June 1981, 14. At the time, Einaudi was one of Italy’s three largest publishing houses and had a robust subscription program. This means that its bulletin had a limited but not insignificant circulation. In a recent interview, Levi described his short text as “the manifesto” of this book series (“Beyond the ‘Dangers of Geertzism’: Giovanni Levi in Conversation with Giovanni Zampieri,” *Sociologica* 18, no. 1 [2024]: 107). Incidentally, in the same interview, Levi also called Grendi “the real inventor of microhistory” (*ibid.*). We could debate whether the statement was meant seriously or provocatively.

15. Edward P. Thompson, *Società patrizia, cultura plebea: Otto saggi di antropologia storica sull’Inghilterra del Settecento*, ed. Edoardo Grendi (Einaudi, 1981).

16. Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things,” 17.

17. In an anthology of classic pieces in economic anthropology, Grendi tied microanalysis to fieldwork’s inductive approach; see Edoardo Grendi, introduction to *L’antropologia economica*, ed. Edoardo Grendi (Einaudi, 1972), xi–lxiii, esp. xxiii, lx, lxii. He discussed the synergy between anthropology and historical microanalysis in a book on Karl Polanyi that appeared soon after *The Great Transformation* was translated into Italian; see Edoardo Grendi, *Polanyi: Dall’antropologia economica alla microanalisi storica* (Etas, 1978), 91–165, and Karl Polanyi, *La grande trasformazione: Le origini economiche e politiche della nostra epoca*, trans. Roberto Vigevari (Einaudi, 1974). Around the same time, Levi also used the term *microanalisi* in his “Famiglie contadine nella Liguria del Settecento,” *Miscellanea storica ligure* 5, no. 2 (1973): 207–90, which was reprinted in Levi, *Centro e periferia di uno stato assoluto: Tre saggi su Piemonte e Liguria in età moderna* (Rosenberg & Sellier, 1985), 71–149. The title of a 1977 special issue to which Grendi contributed was “Studi di microanalisi storica: Piemonte, Liguria secoli XVI–XVIII,” *Miscellanea storica ligure* 7, no. 2 (1977).

18. Grendi, “Ripensare la microstoria?”

personal friends. This mediated dissemination is indispensable to comprehending *microstoria*'s paths to generalization, to which I will return.

Two of the most cited English-language essays on Italian *microstoria* written by its leading protagonists contain a reference to Grendi's normal exception. The first and most extensive elaboration of this idea is included in an article published by Ginzburg and Carlo Poni in 1979 and translated, in 1991, in a volume titled *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, which, for many, has served as the introduction to the genre.¹⁹ A year later, in 1992, Levi offered the first full account of *microstoria* for an English reading public. This dense chapter remains a go-to reference in the field and includes a brief discussion of "the exceptional normal."²⁰ (Note the instability of the English versions of this catchphrase, which some translate as "the normal exception," others as "the exceptional normal," and a few as "the exceptional typical."²¹)

By virtue of their existence, Grendi and Poni's article and Levi's chapter show that linguistic barriers alone do not account for Magnússon's misreading of the concept. But there is more. Both pieces are misreadings in their own way, in that neither is entirely faithful to Grendi's offhand observation and both mobilize "the normal exception" in order to make wider claims. A case study that defies conventional wisdom, they argue, can pave the way for comparative inquiries, and these can breed new generalizations.

As part of their plea for a prosopography of ordinary people, Ginzburg and Poni emphasized the untapped richness of Italian archives, but they also acknowledged the challenge that historians face in selecting case studies that are both "relevant and significant."²² To be "relevant and significant," they explained, case studies need not be statistically so. Ginzburg and Poni illustrated their point by seizing on a sentence by Grendi, from which they distilled the phrase "the normal exception," and ascribed two meanings to this oxymoron. "First," according to Ginzburg and Poni, "it designates documentation that is only apparently exceptional."²³ The example they offered is that of criminal court records from before 1800: Most of them concern not spectacular murders but rather minor offenses such as brawling and petty theft. The second meaning they assigned to Grendi's

19. Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "Il nome e il come: Scambio ineguale e mercato storiografico," *Quaderni storici* 14, no. 40 (1979): 181–90, which was published in English as "The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historical Marketplace," in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, trans. Eren Branch (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 1–10. *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples* collects five "examples of what might be called cultural microhistory" and "three examples of what might be called social microhistory" (Edward Muir, "Introduction: Observing Trifles," in Muir and Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, xi, xv). Among the latter is Grendi's "The Political System of a Community in Liguria: Cervo in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," in Muir and Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, 119–58.

20. Levi, "On Microhistory," 109.

21. "The 'normal exception'" appears in Ginzburg and Poni, "The Name and the Game," 7–8 (but "l'eccezionale normale" appears in Ginzburg and Poni, "Il nome e il come," 187); Levi, "On Microhistory," 109, speaks of "the exceptional normal"; and "the term 'exceptional normal' or 'exceptional typical'" is attributed to Grendi in Matti Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro–Macro Link in Historical Research," *History and Theory* 40, no. 3 (2001): 348n5.

22. Ginzburg and Poni, "The Name and the Game," 7.

23. *Ibid.*

turn of phrase is more interesting: “If the sources are silent about or systematically distort the social reality of the lower classes, then a truly exceptional (and thus statistically infrequent) document can be much more revealing than a thousand stereotypical documents.”²⁴

It is worth pausing on this elucidation. Ginzburg and Poni made clear that Grendi had in mind an archival paper trail, not an individual. They also provided a compelling explanation of why a document’s atypicality can be a strength rather than a weakness. Moved to study premodern peasant societies and everyday forms of resistance by their political commitments, they spelled out the connection between their subject and their method. Not all historical phenomena have left equally abundant traces in the archives, and exceptions to the anonymity and obscurity that surround the lives of illiterate or semiliterate peasants are few.

In other words, in the 1970s, Italian microhistorians were as interested in the disenfranchised as historical actors as in the challenges of reconstructing the collective actions and beliefs of oppressed people who left few traces of their thoughts. It is in the context of such a history from below that they began to articulate a broader hypothesis according to which, sometimes, only “a truly exceptional (and thus statistically infrequent) document” can alert historians to the existence of a previously unknown phenomenon and stimulate questions that would otherwise remain dormant.

If I insist on identifying “the normal exception” with a set of documents rather than with an individual, it is in order to bring into full view these larger methodological discussions. One might object to my emphasis by invoking the name of Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller who spoke defiantly before the judges about his eccentric (and heretical) theory of the origin of the universe and was executed for it. In fact, Menocchio’s judicial dossier, and how to move beyond its singularity, is as much the protagonist of *The Cheese and the Worms* as Menocchio himself. The book is the exception rather than the rule in Ginzburg’s trilogy on witchcraft and popular culture. Unlike *I benandanti* (The Night Battles) and *Storia notturna* (Ecstasies), it centers on a single individual. But like *The Night Battles*, it revolves around the question of how to access the beliefs of semiliterate peasants on the basis of court records created by the learned men who persecuted them and aimed to eradicate their beliefs. The conundrum that animates *The Cheese and the Worms* echoes Grendi’s notion of “the normal exception”:

Even a limited case (and Menocchio certainly is this) can be representative . . . because it permits us to define the latent possibilities of something (popular culture) otherwise known to us only through fragmentary and distorted documents, almost all of which originate from the “archives of repression.”²⁵

24. Ibid., 8. Ginzburg admitted to having authored these passages (Carlo Ginzburg, “Ricordando Carlo Poni: Una rilettura de ‘Il nome e il come,’” *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 54, no. 161 [2019]: 552–56, esp. 554–55).

25. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, xxi. “A test case” may be a more appropriate translation than “a limited case” (“un caso limite” [Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi*, xx]). In 1973, Ginzburg had already described Menocchio as “un cas . . . assez exceptionnel,” albeit not in print (Ginzburg, “Le fromage et les vers”). In 1979, he drew an explicit parallel between his “evidential paradigm” and Grendi’s “normal exception” (Ginzburg and Poni, “Il nome e il come,” 188; Ginzburg and Poni, “The

If Magnússon could equate "the normal exception" with a nonelite individual, it is in part because he collapsed microhistory's subject matter and method and in part because biographies are prevalent among the books that Anglophone scholars have labeled as microhistories. Natalie Zemon Davis's words about Leo Africanus come to mind: "An extreme case can often reveal patterns available for more everyday experience and writing."²⁶ However, it is telling that Davis did not provide a bibliographic reference to any of the Italian microhistorians whom she knew so well, nor did she ever describe her work as microhistorical. She once even protested: "I rarely find myself thinking about whether I'm doing 'macro-history' or 'microhistory' at any given time. I simply feel I'm doing history *tout court*."²⁷ Not only was Davis impatient with all historiographical straitjackets, but she was also aware that her work was not entirely in line with that of her Italian friends and colleagues.²⁸ After all, *Trickster Travels* uses the historical context in order to illuminate Leo Africanus's life more than it uses his life to illuminate the broader historical context, although, in the epilogue, Davis suggested that his writing opened up subversive cultural possibilities for future readers in Counter Reformation Europe.²⁹

BACK TO THE TEXT

Ginzburg and Poni's glossing of Grendi injected "the normal exception" into the vocabulary of historians. Even so, as a former student of Grendi, Osvaldo Raggio, noted in a brief tribute written shortly after his death, there is more to Grendi's 1977 article than the oxymoron with which his name is invariably associated.³⁰ And of course, there is more to Grendi as a scholar than this article, although, for my purposes, I must stay on course.

Name and the Game," 8). On the extent to which *The Cheese and the Worms* developed independently from Grendi but espoused the same idea that a liminal case can disclose general hypotheses, see Ginzburg, "Ricordando Carlo Poni," 554–55. In a postface to the re-edition of his 1966 *Night Battles*, Ginzburg described that book as anticipating Grendi's views because its arguments emerged not in spite but because of the exceptionality of the inquisition trials it examined (Ginzburg, "'I benandanti', cinquant'anni dopo," in *I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* [Adelphi, 2000], 289–90). Elsewhere, Ginzburg drew a direct line between his first published essay ("Stregoneria e pietà popolare: Note a proposito di un processo modenese del 1519," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 2nd ser., 30, no. 3/4 [1961]: 269–87) and his third book in what I referred to as a trilogy, *Ecstasies* (1989), noting that, in the former, he had already articulated the "paradigmatic value" of "an anomaly" (Ginzburg, "Philology and Microhistory: A Conversation with Carlo Ginzburg," interview by Islam Dayeh, *Philological Encounters* 7, no. 1–2 [2022]: 207–8).

26. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (Hill and Wang, 2006), 11.

27. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Martin Luther, Martin Guerre, and Ways of Knowing," *Common Knowledge* 20, no. 1 (2014): 6.

28. Carlo Ginzburg, "Proofs and Possibilities: In the Margins of Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 113–27. This essay was originally published in 1984 as the postface to the Italian translation of Davis's book, *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre*.

29. Francesca Trivellato, "Renaissance Italy and the Muslim Mediterranean in Recent Historical Work," *Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 1 (2010): 127–55, esp. 145–49.

30. Osvaldo Raggio, "La storia come pratica: Omaggio a Edoardo Grendi (1932–1999)," *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 34, no. 100 (1999): 6.

Edoardo Grendi (1932–1999) distinguished himself from the majority of Italian historians due to the breadth of his expertise and to his international experience and reputation.³¹ He had particularly close ties to England, where he spent two years (1958–1960) as a research student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and where he returned regularly for the rest of his life. It is not surprising, then, that British anthropology and the new social history loom large among the influences that nourished his approach to microanalysis. He was ahead of his time, not only in Italy, in engaging with the work of anthropologists and sociologists, including Karl Polanyi. As a specialist noted a few years ago, “it’s hard to remember just how few people knew of Polanyi in the late 1970s.”³²

A prolific and wide-ranging author, Grendi combined theoretical insights from the social sciences with deep dives into local archives. After writing about nineteenth-century English labor movements early in his career, he turned to the social, political, and economic history of early modern Genoa and its territorial state. His publications demonstrate a constant feedback loop between archival research and historiographical reflection, with the occasional forays into (unconventional) textbooks. From 1970 onward, he was one of the editors of, and a frequent contributor to, the journal *Quaderni storici*, which functioned less as Italian *microstoria*’s official organ than as its incubator.

It was in this journal that, in 1977, Grendi published “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” in which the phrase that Ginzburg and Poni summarized as “the normal exception” first appeared. The piece is framed as an extended commentary on two articles by scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy that were published in the previous issue of *Quaderni storici*. As a result, some passages read like inside baseball. This is also why Grendi’s 1977 article begins by deploring the long shadow cast by the idealist historicism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile on Italian historiography, which, as a result, favored bird’s-eye syntheses of political transformations infused with a nationalist pedagogy.

Grendi then turns to his central question: What is a social group? His chief targets are the concepts of class and occupational group as predetermined aggregate categories of analysis used by historians of the nation-state and capitalism to describe social stratification. Building on this criticism, Grendi makes a dual case for social history and a microscale of observation—two approaches that historians of medieval and early modern Europe had already embraced and that, he was certain, would benefit the study of the modern period as well.

He borrows generously from then-current trends in French and British historical demography and British social anthropology, to which he adds a tempered endorsement of Thompson’s conception of class as a relational process.³³ He praises

31. This paragraph builds on Raggio, “La storia come pratica” and Osvaldo Raggio and Angelo Torre, preface to *In altri termini: Etnografia e storia di una società di antico regime*, ed. Osvaldo Raggio and Angelo Torre (Feltrinelli, 2004), 5–37. For a list of Grendi’s publications, see Osvaldo Raggio, ed., “Bibliografia degli scritti di Edoardo Grendi,” *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 35, no. 105 (2000): 823–34.

32. Margaret R. Somers, “Margaret Somers in Conversation with Daniel Hirschman,” *Sociologica* 16, no. 1 (2022): 157. I thank Simona Cerutti for sharing this article with me.

33. After citing E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage Books, 1963) approvingly, Grendi hints at his criticism of the book, which he had reviewed quite harshly upon its

"the new English urban history" for discarding the synthetic tables of population censuses in favor of the so-called census forms—that is, the sheets on which surveyors recorded the information about each household with a much greater degree of idiosyncrasy than the final classifications let transpire.³⁴

Denouncing the passive acceptance of "aggregate categories constructed by past administrative authorities," Grendi speaks of a "liberal-Marxist model."³⁵ What may seem to be an unlikely amalgamation of two incompatible political philosophies is meant to emphasize their common tendency "to turn the social into an abstraction."³⁶ This insight dovetails with what was becoming a mantra of social history, exemplified by Davis's essays on sixteenth-century Lyon—namely, the multidimensional quality of collective forms of identification.³⁷ As Grendi puts it, "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)."³⁸

One of the two historians to whom Grendi responds in his 1977 article, Raffaele Romanelli, had expressed sympathy for "microanalyses" as a counterbalance to the grand narratives of the nation-state. But, for Romanelli, these microanalyses still constituted a mere "suspension of judgment"—that is, they did not yet amount to a coherent theoretical alternative to the synthetic narratives that he found deficient.³⁹ Outlining such a coherent theoretical alternative was Grendi's ultimate goal. He thus asks whether "industrialization [had rendered] social structures more diversified or more homogenous."⁴⁰ Having posed the question, however, Grendi stops short of providing an answer and instead shifts gears, stating that the question itself was premature, in the sense that microanalysis had yet to yield conclusions capable of replacing existing generalizations with new ones.

His 1977 article will thus disappoint those seeking a quick recipe for how to turn local studies into new syntheses. It certainly should not be misconstrued as implying that the latter are the sum of multiple local studies. Rather, its operational value consists in discussing a variety of procedures through which local studies can lead to the demise of master narratives about the nation-state and industrialization. Grendi describes "the 'relational universe'" as microanalysis's

publication in Italian; see Grendi's review of *Rivoluzione industriale e classe operaia in Inghilterra*, by E. P. Thompson, trans. Bruno Maffi, and *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America*, by J. F. C. Harrison, in *Rivista storica italiana* 82, no. 4 (1970): 982–90. Grendi had a distinct preference for Thompson's essays on popular culture that were collected in *Customs in Common* (Merlin Press, 1991) and for *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (Allen Lane, 1975). See also Grendi, "E. P. Thompson e la 'cultura plebea,'" *Quaderni storici*, n.s. 29, no. 85 (1994): 235–47, and Grendi's introduction to Thompson, *Società patrizia, cultura plebea*.

34. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History." No mention is made of D. V. Glass, ed., *Social Mobility in Britain* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), the crowning achievement of the LSE sociologists in the 1950s, which was still influential two decades later.

35. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History."

36. *Ibid.*

37. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford University Press, 1975).

38. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History."

39. Raffaele Romanelli, "Storia politica e storia sociale dell'Italia contemporanea: Problemi aperti," *Quaderni storici* 12, no. 34 (1977): 248.

40. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History."

field of study and stresses that, “by necessity, [it] is analyzed within a micro-area.”⁴¹ In the parlance of the time, this implied gravitating toward villages and rural communities.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism was the focus of consequential historiographical debates in the 1960s and 1970s, and the transformation of village life was their epicenter.⁴² It was therefore only natural for Grendi to locate the explanatory value of microanalysis at the village level. The village was also the site of much ethnographic fieldwork, and his partiality for social anthropology was rooted in an explicit analogy: “Old Regime Europe has characteristics that are not dissimilar from those of today’s non-industrial societies.”⁴³

Grendi’s case study in the 1977 article concerns the formation of wine prices in a village community ruled by the Republic of Genoa in the late seventeenth century. Here, Grendi expresses an uncompromising hostility to economics (“la scienza economica”), whose postulates he finds wholly inadequate for understanding premodern societies.⁴⁴ It is telling that while Grendi displays a deep knowledge of the work of several social scientists, he does not mention any economists by name, instead portraying them all as staunch believers in the under-socialized model of the *homo economicus*, who exploits his complete information to calculate how to maximize his utility (the use of the masculine pronoun here is not accidental). Elsewhere, Grendi took the British economist Lionel Robbins as representative of the discipline as a whole.⁴⁵ A towering figure at the LSE and beyond, Robbins was a follower of Friedrich von Hayek and an opponent of John Maynard Keynes, but he did not lack a social consciousness. Fearful of government encroachment on individual liberties, he was a tireless advocate of public education.⁴⁶

In his introduction to *L’antropologia economica*, Grendi faulted economists not only for assuming the existence of a universal rationality aimed at

41. Ibid.

42. I will cite only one assessment of the influence of social anthropology on English social history and the boom of village studies that was published in the same year as Grendi’s article and yet did not share his agenda: Alan Macfarlane, “History, Anthropology and the Study of Communities,” *Social History* 2, no. 5 (1977): 631–52.

43. Grendi, introduction to *L’antropologia economica*, xxi. Discussing the challenges to this premise posed by postcolonial scholars would take us too far, but mentioning that such a premise has not gone uncontested is obligatory.

44. Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” 511, 514.

45. Grendi, introduction to *L’antropologia economica*, xxiv, borrows Robbins’s definition of economic behavior as the act of choosing among alternative and scarce resources in order to achieve a predetermined goal. Such actor “has to economise” (Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* [Macmillan, 1932], 12).

46. In 1932, in a highly charged political moment, Robbins wrote that “economics does depend, if not for its existence, at least for its significance, on . . . the affirmation that rationality and ability to choose with knowledge is desirable” (Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, 141). This passage is also quoted in Emma Rothschild, “Wartime in the History of Economic Thought: Episodes in European History,” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 30, no. 6 (2023): 1005. Soon after Grendi left the LSE, the British government tasked Robbins with chairing a committee that promoted a dramatic expansion in the access to university education. The so-called Robbins Report was published and adopted in 1963. See Ralf Dahrendorf, *LSE: A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895–1995* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 210–21, 427–60.

optimization but also for favoring "a normative macroeconomics."⁴⁷ This cryptic but prescient indictment helps explain why, for all his intellectual adventurism, Grendi treated economics as a foil. He was uncurious about those who were working within the discipline's mainstream to challenge the assumptions underlying the *homo economicus*, including the pioneer of "bounded rationality," Herbert Simon, or an early theorist of transaction costs such as Oliver Williamson.⁴⁸

Premodern actors, according to Grendi, and peasants in particular, aspired to self-sufficiency rather than to produce a surplus. The writings of the Soviet scholar of agrarian societies A. V. Chayanov, which had been translated into English a decade earlier, provided him with a model of the balance between work and consumption in peasant families: These are assumed to be freeholders of small plots or tenants rather than casual laborers and to deploy the labor of different household members (young and old, men and women) so as to achieve self-sufficiency.⁴⁹ Before 1977, the Dutch economic historian Jan de Vries had already put forward an alternative view of early modern peasant societies, which, in time, developed into his well-known thesis of the "industrious revolution."⁵⁰ No Italian microhistorian, to my knowledge, has ever engaged with de Vries's work on the strategic participation of peasant households in labor and commodity markets and thus tested his claim that such behavior was exclusive to Protestant societies of northwestern Europe.⁵¹ As we will see, this lack of dialogue will reverberate for decades to come.

In the section of Grendi's 1977 article devoted to his case study on the wine market in seventeenth-century Liguria, microanalysis's *pars destruens* is more pronounced than its *pars construens*. By this I mean that, by arguing that the negotiations between producers of *Rossese* wine and private merchants in seventeenth-century Liguria did not conform to the logic of rational choice theory, his case study crystallizes the alterity of early modern peasant societies more than it offers a new way of thinking about the transformative process of industrialization.

More generative are the parts of Grendi's article that seek to link the spatial dimension of social structures to the heterogeneity of cultural practices—a spatial dimension to which the pretended universalism of "the canons of the

47. Grendi, introduction to *L'antropologia economica*, xxii. In the 1970s, macroeconomics was losing its empirical grounding and incorporating the universalist fundamentals of microeconomics. In a pithy account, "micro largely swallowed macro" (Jonathan Levy, *The Real Economy: History and Theory* [Princeton University Press, 2025], 10).

48. Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Man: Social and Rational—Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in Society Setting* (John Wiley, 1957), 196–206; Oliver E. Williamson, *Markets and Hierarchies: Analysis and Antitrust Implications* (Free Press, 1975).

49. A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, and R. E. F. Smith (Richard D. Irwin, 1966). It is important to specify this implicit assumption because it obviously does not capture the totality, and possibly not even the majority, of rural labor, given that the cities of the Italian peninsula were supplied by regional agriculture, not only by foreign imports.

50. Jan de Vries, *The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age, 1500–1700* (Yale University Press, 1974); Jan de Vries, "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution," *Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 2 (1994): 249–70; Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Demand and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

51. For a partial rebuttal based on the study of the Tuscan countryside in the eighteenth century, see Paolo Malanima, *Il lusso dei contadini: Consumi e industrie nelle campagne toscane del Sei e Settecento* (Il Mulino, 1990).

liberal-Marxist model” are indifferent.⁵² To bring the point home, Grendi references a then recent anthropological study of two neighboring Alpine villages, poignantly titled *The Hidden Frontier*.⁵³ In spite of the geographical proximity, primogeniture prevailed in one village and partible inheritance in the other. This divergence led to a greater or a lesser egalitarian organization of social relations in each locale. The salience of radically different institutional arrangements adopted by nearby villages and towns remained a hallmark of Grendi’s approach and represents his sharpest weapon against the homogenizing presumptions of grand narratives about state-building and the rise of capitalism.⁵⁴

Two facets of Grendi’s attention to highly localized institutional morphologies should be brought out. The first is his attempt to rethink the relationship between social practices and cultural values. According to Grendi, the “examination of concrete behavior” can enable us “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.”⁵⁵ The second is an unresolved tension between Grendi’s admiration for anthropology’s “emphasis on a holistic approach to the study of human behavior” and his advocacy for a microanalysis of social formations—a tension that stems at least in part from the different archives available to anthropologists and historians.⁵⁶ “The normal exception” is, in my view, the connective link between these two facets of Grendi’s microanalysis.

The comment by Grendi that led to coining the expression “the normal exception” figures amid a discussion of the different source bases available to social historians and anthropologists and the implications of this difference for their respective methods. In this discussion, Grendi does not idealize fieldwork, noting that participant observers rarely have the time to reconstruct all aspects of a community’s life and organization and thus supplement their field notes with documentary records. He is critical of those anthropologists who assume that such records do not require expert handling, but he also expresses a certain envy for anthropologists who have “the possibility of grasping the connections between different phenomena.”⁵⁷ Grendi praises historians who, by then, had expanded their documentary range and begun to mine a wealth of notarial deeds, account books, minutes of local assemblies, and the like in order to counter the top-down representations conveyed by the records of central administrative bodies. Nevertheless, he laments that social historians are at pains to analyze the adherence of different groups and ordinary people to specific cultural values because they lack self-reflexive ego documents. Microanalysis can fill this gap. For him, “even topics such as the role of envy as a mechanism of social control or the values of

52. Grendi, “Microanalysis and Social History.”

53. John W. Cole and Eric W. Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (Academic Press, 1974).

54. For example, Edoardo Grendi, “La pratica dei confini: Mioglia contro Sassello, 1715–1745,” *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 21, no. 63 (1986): 811–45.

55. Grendi, “Microanalysis and Social History.”

56. *Ibid.* On the different meaning that Grendi and Ginzburg attribute to morphology, see note 83.

57. *Ibid.*

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."⁵⁸

As Jacques Revel has noted, both Grendi's 1977 proposal and Ginzburg and Poni's rendition of it betray a longing for "the old dream of a total history, but this time reconstructed from the bottom up."⁵⁹ At first glance, this longing can appear strangely at odds with the tenor of microanalysis. Upon closer inspection, in Grendi's case at least, it stems from a lifelong interest in dissecting the nexus between the individual and large-scale processes of change, as evidenced by his admiration for Norbert Elias.⁶⁰ One suspects that, for Grendi, the social and psychological genesis of the "civilizing process" outlined by the German sociologist amounts to a successful example of microanalysis, in that it musters the variation of scales of analysis in order to reconstruct macro categories—in this case, the linkages between table manners and state-building.⁶¹

It is worth noting that, in spite of his emphasis on the value of combining serial data and microanalysis, Grendi makes no mention of David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's work on the 1427 Florentine *catasto*, which put the tools of historical demography, quantitative social history, and social anthropology at the service of cultural analysis.⁶² Instead, he asserts that, on a few lucky occasions, historians can overcome the limitations of archival records if they stumble across a "revelation,"⁶³ a serendipity made particularly likely by court papers—a possible hint at *The Cheese and the Worms*, although Grendi had reproached

58. Ibid.

59. Jacques Revel, "Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, trans. Arthur Goldhammer and others (New Press, 1995), 497. See also Jacques Revel, "Microanalisi e costruzione del sociale," trans. Marco Battistoni, *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 29, no. 86 (1994): 556.

60. Edoardo Grendi, "Norbert Elias: Storiografia e teoria sociale," *Quaderni storici* 17, no. 50 (1982): 728–39.

61. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, 2 vols. (Blackwell, 1978–1982). For Italian microhistorians, too, the ultimate goal is a combination of various scales of analysis rather than the superiority of the small scale. See Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Seuil-Gallimard, 1996).

62. Their monumental study, *Les toscans et leurs familles*, appeared in 1978 but was anticipated in several articles. See David Herlihy, "Problems of Record Linkages in Tuscan Fiscal Records of the Fifteenth Century," in *Identifying People in the Past*, ed. E. A. Wrigley (Edward Arnold, 1973), 41–56; Christiane Klapisch, "Sources et méthodes de la démographie médiévale: Le Catasto florentin de 1427–30," *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public* 1 (1970): 53–61; Christiane Klapisch, "Household and Family in Tuscany in 1427," in *Household and Family in Past Time*, ed. Peter Laslett, with Richard Wall (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 267–81; and David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Les toscans et leurs familles: Une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1978), which was published in an abridged English edition as *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (Yale University Press, 1985). Note that, in 1977, Macfarlane cited Herlihy's "Problems of Record Linkages" (Macfarlane, "History, Anthropology and the Study of Communities," 644n63).

63. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History."

Ginzburg for neglecting to examine Menocchio's social networks and thus privileging cultural over social contextualization.⁶⁴

It is in the course of this discussion of archival revelations that we encounter the sentence—an incidental sentence, it must be said—from which the slogan of “the normal exception” has been lifted: “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.”⁶⁵

Grendi's wording is less than unequivocal (What can such a document reveal?), so much so that Revel has detected a number of different, although not mutually exclusive, allusions behind it.⁶⁶ Or, at least, it lacks the poignancy it acquired through the mediation of Ginzburg, Poni, and Levi. This is not a coincidence. Grendi shied away from generalizations to a greater extent than Ginzburg and Levi. Although these authors shared a firm conviction in the heuristic potential of documents that are not statistically representative, they gave different declinations to the same insight. Absent the minutes from *Quaderni storici*'s editorial meetings, we need to rely on its editors' published works. There, we find that three main proposals for putting microanalysis in the service of generalizations have emerged over time from a cluster of common ideas.

MICROANALYSIS AND GENERALIZATIONS

In 2019, John-Paul A. Ghobrial edited a supplement issue of *Past and Present* titled “Global History and Microhistory.” In addition to eight topical articles, the volume includes two historiographical contributions by de Vries and Levi. Despite having been asked by the editor to exchange views on the basis of earlier drafts of their respective papers, these two eminent scholars end up like ships passing in the night.

An economic historian with a penchant for quantification and hypothesis-driven analysis, de Vries expressed suspicion toward what he regarded as the umbilical cord connecting “microhistory to the larger ‘cultural turn.’”⁶⁷ For him, “many microhistorians deny outright that any universal process or generalized claims are either possible or desirable,” preferring instead “archival virtuosity and empathetic storytelling.”⁶⁸ De Vries recognized that “the strong bond between microhistory and cultural history . . . is not a necessary bond” but settled

64. Edoardo Grendi, “A proposito di ‘famiglia e comunità’: Questo fascicolo di *Quaderni storici*,” *Quaderni storici* 11, no. 33 (1976): 891. Grendi repeated this criticism in “Ripensare la microstoria?,” 541.

65. Grendi, “Microanalysis and Social History.” The original sentence reads: “Caratteristicamente lo storico lavora su molte testimonianze indirette: in questa situazione il documento eccezionale può risultare eccezionalmente ‘normale’, appunto perché rivelante” (Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” 512).

66. Revel, “Microanalisi e costruzione del sociale,” 567. This passage was omitted from “Micro-analysis and the Construction of the Social,” the abridged English translation of Revel's essay, but appears in the complete French version (Revel, “Micro-analyse et construction du social,” in Revel, *Jeux d'échelles*, 31).

67. Jan de Vries, “Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano,” *Past and Present* 242, S14 (2019): 23.

68. *Ibid.*, 24, 25.

for an opposition between microhistory and "histories that rely on patterns, trends and regularities."⁶⁹

What distinguishes these two approaches, in his view, are different attitudes toward "a common problem: the outlier—the exceptional case, the extreme value or the seemingly inexplicable event."⁷⁰ De Vries conceded that outliers "say something useful and important to the investigator, even that the assumed theory with which the data are approached is flawed."⁷¹ But, he hastened to add, more often than not, they are the result of errors in observation, transcription, or mere chance:

In these cases, outliers stand as an obstacle to correct interpretation; attempting to read meaning into such outliers is a fool's errand. They should be discarded. Historians are understandably more reluctant to make this move than are most social scientists. A historical event or observation, unless it is truly an error, can be of interest to historians even as it puzzles and confounds them, while for the investigator testing a hypothesis, it is more important to separate noise from signal. It is the signal that counts.⁷²

His conclusion is foregone: "If the social science historian engages in nanohistory to find regularities and discards outliers, the microhistorian is specifically attracted to the study of the exceptional."⁷³ The verdict is without appeal: Microhistory is trivial.

De Vries is right to say that many historians—or at least many social historians of the premodern world—believe in the heuristic power of outliers but not to attribute this fondness solely to their "archival virtuosity and empathetic storytelling." His diagnosis imagines the outlier as a number rather than as a document. It stems from a purely statistical preoccupation and downplays not only the difficulty of locating serial records from the preindustrial period but also the normative assumptions underpinning the sources from which we can infer the thoughts and behaviors of ordinary and oppressed people.

Social historians began wrestling with this problem long before the silence of the archive took center stage in the humanities. To quote Margaret R. Hunt, a specialist of early modern England and in no way a card-carrying member of any microhistory circles: "Nonconformists frequently break the unspoken rules, often at some cost to themselves, but in so doing they tell the historian a great deal about what those rules were."⁷⁴ Having sketched the life stories of two eighteenth-century "unusual" women, Hunt added: "The most unexpected thing about them is

69. *Ibid.*, 26, 34.

70. *Ibid.*, 34. De Vries affirmed that "microhistory became a vehicle to advance postmodernism in historical writing" (*ibid.*, 25). As it is well known, most historians use "postmodernism" as a shorthand for relativism. Leaving aside important questions raised by this simplification, it should be noted that Ginzburg, Grendi, and Levi, justly or wrongly, have loudly denounced the pernicious influence of the kind of postmodernism that de Vries accused them of embracing. See, for example, Giovanni Levi, "I pericoli del geertzismo," *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 20, no. 58 (1985): 269–77; Edoardo Grendi, "Storia sociale e storia interpretativa," *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 21, no. 61 (1986): 201–10; and Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (University Press of New England, 1999).

71. De Vries, "Playing with Scales," 34.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, 35.

74. Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (University of California Press, 1996), 94.

that they wrote autobiographies that have survived, not that they antagonized their fathers, attempted to support themselves independently, traveled widely, insisted on determining their own love lives, or attempted to encroach upon the social and cultural monopolies of men.”⁷⁵ Without mentioning Grendi, Hunt echoed him. It would not be a stretch to call her autobiographies normally exceptional documents that open up a window through which to peer into more generalized phenomena.

De Vries ruled out this possibility.⁷⁶ His aversion to microhistory points to something at once deep and elusive, confirming what James S. Amelang already observed in the early 1990s—namely, that “Grendi, Ginzburg, and Levi have all discussed the (to them false) problem of representativeness. Still, the misunderstandings persist.”⁷⁷ In 2019, having been given the opportunity to address this confusion, Levi pulled no punches:

To give an example of unwarranted generalization: Jan de Vries—I’m sure he’ll excuse the irony—would have microhistory, “broadly defined,” be “petites narratives at a human scale,” “lacking an agreed methodology to achieve its goals,” “the belief that this is the only way to honour and recover human agency and to leave room for contingency and subjectivity,” “motivated by an animus against social science history, *Annales* School models and especially economic history,” “a history that starts with the sources rather than with the problem.” Might it not have been better had he actually looked at the research undertaken and the results produced by microhistorians? The general is in fact the starting point and not the endpoint of our researches, and it is precisely unwarranted generalizations that microhistorians criticize while using them to suggest new issues and new questions.⁷⁸

How could de Vries have missed this core argument of Italian microhistory? After all, scientists in disciplines as diverse as molecular biology and astrophysics use both deductive and inductive methods. Statisticians, for their part, identify various types of outliers and recognize that not all should be discarded. More to the point, sociologists and political scientists have long used “deviant cases” as a robust method to “refin[e] the theoretical structure of empirical studies [and] increase the predictive value of their findings.”⁷⁹ In spite of these well-established research practices, de Vries dismissed the possibility that an outlier, in the form of an anomalous document, might be the springboard of a new research hypothesis with an intensity that betrays a raw nerve.

75. *Ibid.*, 98.

76. This is not to say that de Vries has expressed indifference toward social outcasts as a subject or to the limitations of serial sources, as demonstrated by his study of the management of destitute men and women on the move by Dutch city authorities: Jan de Vries, “On the Road: Poor Travelers in Mid-Seventeenth-Century Friesland,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 52, no. 4 (2022): 477–511.

77. James S. Amelang, “Microhistory and Its Discontents: The View from Spain,” in *Historia a debate: Actas del Congreso Internacional “A Historia a Debate” celebrado el 7–11 de julio de 1993 en Santiago de Compostela*, ed. Carlos Barros, 2 vols. (Historia a Debate, 1995), 2:308.

78. Giovanni Levi, “Frail Frontiers?,” *Past and Present* 242, S14 (2019): 45.

79. Patricia L. Kendall and Katherine M. Wolf, “The Analysis of Deviant Cases in Communications Research,” in *Communications Research, 1948–1949*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton (Harper & Brothers, 1949), 153. Many mainstream political scientists today defend the merits of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Amid a massive literature, see John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Dan Slater and Daniel Ziblatt, “The Enduring Indispensability of the Controlled Comparison,” *Comparative Politics Studies* 46, no. 10 (2013): 1301–27.

More sympathetic interpreters of Italian microhistory, by contrast, have situated it alongside influential currents in both the quantitative and interpretive social sciences, including sociology and economics, which are concerned with the relationship between micro and macro scales of analysis.⁸⁰ For some, more specifically, microhistory shares its radical style of demonstration with other case-oriented methodologies, ranging from clinical medicine and psychoanalysis to certain forms of legal thought, moral theology, and secular ethics.⁸¹

These more congenial assessments identify inductive reasoning as a legitimate scientific procedure and place microhistory in a broader disciplinary camp. I would like to suggest that we can go a step further. In the writings of Ginzburg and Levi, more clearly than in those of Grendi, I detect two different modalities of constructing generalizations from singular, even anomalous documents.⁸² Ginzburg relied primarily on morphology as a heuristic tool for comparing and connecting seemingly disparate historical contexts. This approach is on full display in his *Ecstasies*, which charts morphological cultural configurations across vast spatial and temporal swaths, stressing that they had gone unrecognized by more conventional histories of the transmission and dissemination of beliefs and ideas.⁸³

Levi's premise is different. For him, "history is a discipline of general questions and 'local' answers."⁸⁴ Put simply, the results of empirical research that begins with an outlier are inevitably bounded by their time and place. But when those results deviate from the existing consensus, they can be used to raise questions that have not been asked before and that can be verified elsewhere. In this way,

80. Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads."

81. Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, "Penser pas cas: Raisonner à partir de singularités," in *Penser par cas*, ed. Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel (Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2005), 9–44. Obviously, not all case-oriented methods are open to "the normal exception." See Angela N. H. Creager, Elizabeth Lunbeck, and M. Norton Wise, eds., *Science Without Laws: Model Systems, Cases, Exemplary Narratives* (Duke University Press, 2007) and Monika Krause, *Model Cases: On Canonical Research and Sites* (University of Chicago Press, 2021). William Theiss kindly brought the latter to my attention.

82. For a fuller summary and discussion of the arguments presented in this and the next two paragraphs, see Francesca Trivellato, "What Differences Make a Difference? Global History and Micro-analysis Revisited," *Journal of Early Modern History* 27, no. 1–2 (2023): 19–25.

83. Ginzburg's use of morphology is already apparent in "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm." Crisper articulations appear in Ginzburg's "Medals and Shells: On Morphology and History, Once Again," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (2019): 380–95, and in Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln's *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). Ginzburg described *Ecstasies* as his extended answer to a question that he had formulated in his first book: "To what extent was it possible to generalize the case—exceptional in the documents—of the *benandanti*?" (*Ecstasies*, 11). I am not aware of a discussion of the different meanings that Ginzburg and Grendi have attributed to "morphology," a term that the latter used in a literal (spatial) sense, without any robust theoretical elaboration but with a clear reference to the power of comparisons across small geographical distances to disrupt grand narratives. The term appears in passing in his 1977 article as well as in other writings, while it is front and center in Grendi's "Morfologia e dinamica della vita associative urbana: Le confraternite a Genova fra i secoli XVI e XVIII," *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria* 79, no. 2 (1965): 239–311. Angelo Torre has suggested to me that Grendi likely borrowed it from Maurice Halbwachs, *Morphologie sociale* (Armand Colin, 1938), which appeared in English as *Population and Society: Introduction to Social Morphology*, trans. Otis Dudley Duncan and Harold W. Pfautz (Free Press, 1960).

84. Levi, "Frail Frontiers?," 45.

Levi's work refutes de Vries's objection that an outlier cannot be a trampoline for new testable hypotheses.

More recently, Cerutti, a historian of early modern Europe who, as mentioned, participated in the launch of the "Microstorie" book series in 1981, and Isabelle Grangaud, a scholar of Ottoman North Africa, have joined forces to delineate a third way of bridging the gap between local specificity and general patterns. Their goal is to show that "specificity [is] not an impediment to comparison" but can, in fact, "function as its cornerstone."⁸⁵ For this reason, they have sidelined secondary sources (a typical fallback of comparative history) and argued that a close analysis of archival documents need not lead exclusively to locally contingent conclusions. As they have written, "comparison . . . provides an important method for denaturalizing objects."⁸⁶ To prove their point, they have examined institutions that distributed the properties of the deceased in eighteenth-century Turin and Algiers and found that, contrary to what one might expect, the authorities in both places responded to similar problems and offered similar solutions. Conceived as a reclamation of comparison in current debates on global and connected histories, their proposal can also be seen as an inventive intersection of microanalysis and morphology, demonstrating the vitality of a tradition that harkens back to the 1970s.⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

Grendi's 1977 "Micro-analisi e storia sociale" is an early and discerning articulation of *microstoria's* ambition "to be a radical alternative" to existing grand narratives starting from the close scrutiny of ostensibly anomalous case studies.⁸⁸ It is, however, far from a full articulation of either Ginzburg's "hard" approach or Levi's "soft" approach to moving from "the normal exception" to new historical generalizations. Nor does it anticipate the latest developments of these visions. In these respects, it confirms that Italian microhistorians have never spoken with one voice but also that their intellectual project is not frozen in time.

The oxymoronic catchphrase to which the article gave birth caught fire in the historiographical lexicon, eliciting enthusiasm, skepticism, and outright dismissal in almost equal measure. Part of this mixed reception stems from the tendency to isolate "the normal exception" from ongoing conversations, both past and recent. In my act of critical recovery, I have tried to strike a balance. On the one hand, Grendi's article has lost its freshness. It takes us back to a time when social history had to assert its legitimacy against the primacy of political history. Moreover, many of its references have since lost their immediacy and its vigorous defense

85. Simona Cerutti and Isabelle Grangaud, "Sources and Contextualizations: Comparing Eighteenth-Century North African and Western European Institutions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 1 (2017): 8.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Here, I depart from Cerutti and Grangaud by hinting at a continuity between Ginzburg's morphology and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's connected histories. The standard reference for the latter is Subrahmanyam's "Connected Histories: Notes Toward a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–65.

88. Grendi, "Microanalysis and Social History."

of microanalysis uses examples from premodern agrarian societies that have increasingly receded into the background of historical inquiries. On the other hand, especially when paired with the work of Ginzburg, Levi, Cerutti, and Grangaud, it continues to speak to present-day concerns, if only because the distaste of many historians and interpretive social scientists for both abstraction and particularism has not waned. Read in this key, Grendi's article from half a century ago takes on a resonance that transcends the slogan it inspired.

Returning to it with the benefit of hindsight reveals the importance of understanding "the normal exception" as a critique of the asymmetries of archival repositories and thus as more than a narrative device. Those who look to Italian microhistory for inspiration usually find it in its rebuke of teleology and its instigation to trace the names of obscure individuals through notarial deeds or court records. Grendi substantiated both credos, but he did not stop there. Writing when the limitations of structural-functionalist models of change over time were a more pressing issue for most historians than Eurocentrism, he maintained that reducing the scale of analysis exposes the mechanistic assumptions underlying those explanatory models. Put differently, the tension between the particular and the general in the 1970s was not invariably subsumed under the rubrics of the local and the global and these categories had other valences. Even so, microanalysis foregrounded questions about the constructed nature of units of comparison that remain vital.

Grendi's claims that "all social structures have a spatial dimension" and that there is no a priori reason to choose "the nation rather than the community or the city or the craft" as the site for studying structural transformations will resonate with more recent criticisms of national and imperial frameworks by self-described global historians.⁸⁹ However, in 1977, Grendi was adamant that "the character of the data that are taken into consideration is more important than the size of the social area that is being analyzed."⁹⁰ Today, this admonition sits uncomfortably with most manifestations of global history, but it is a good reminder not to confuse size with relevance.

For Grendi, comparison does not need to involve large geopolitical units or span extensive distances. In fact, comparison is eminently compatible with microanalysis, if not even inseparable from it. Crucially, both methods share an inductive approach that can begin with a normally exceptional document. In his classic definition of the comparative method as a means for historians to employ the logic of hypothesis testing, William Sewell did not broach the question of whether such a procedure might be ignited by a seemingly anomalous paper trail.⁹¹ Nothing in his account, however, rules out this possibility. To the extent that case studies remain central to historical writing, we can read Grendi and other Italian microhistorians as inviting us to consider how documents that do not reflect dominant interpretations might be the starting points for further comparison and generalization.

Institute for Advanced Study

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. William H. Sewell Jr., "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory* 6, no. 2 (1967): 208–18.