

MICRO, MACRO, OR MEGRIM?

Charles Tilly

Columbia University

August 1997

MICRO, MACRO, OR MEGRIM?

Charles Tilly, Columbia University

ABSTRACT

Methodologically, the linking of small-scale with large-scale processes presents serious problems for historians and social scientists. Whether it poses serious conceptual and theoretical problems depends on the basic ontology the analyst adopts. In the perspectives of phenomenological individualism, methodological individualism, and holism -- the chief competing ontologies in today's actual practice -- the transition between micro and macro presents almost insuperable difficulties. With individualism, macroscopic processes are either emergents or totally reducible aggregates, while with holism microscopic actions occur as local manifestations of system-wide processes. These three ontologies (especially the individualisms) have the rhetorical and pedagogical advantage of corresponding to the story-telling mode in which people customarily cast social accounts and explanations. But standard stories provide misleading pictures of most causal relations in social life at any scale. A relational ontology in the tradition of classical economists, many nineteenth-century social analysts, American pragmatists, or the richer recent versions of network and institutional analysis offers an escape from these difficulties. It provides a simple way of concatenating from the small scale to the large or vice versa; of identifying analogous causal processes at different scales; and of integrating such troublesome phenomena as constructed social identities into sound historical analysis.

Suppose you interview your neighborhood skinhead, asking how he sees himself and the world. Next you witness a motorcycle rally of skinheads, including your neighbor, and hear them shout “freedom for skinheads.” You then sit through a session of your national parliament, where you see a deputy denounce skinheads as a menace to democracy. Thereafter you read a grave social historian who traces skinheads back to disruption of coherent communities by globalization, by television, by capitalism, or perhaps by all of them. Finally you try to trace causal connections among your four different exposures to skinheads. Result: a vicious, vibrating megrim, a massive headache occupying fully half your brain. My job here is to explain what causes your megrim, and how to cure it.

Jacques Rancière is one of those inconsiderate folks who bangs pots and doors while the person down the hall is suffering from an aching head. In *Les mots de l'histoire* he declares that historians of the *Annales* persuasion such as Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel cunningly avoided the reduction to mere time-keepers that full integration of history into social science would have entailed. Instead, says Rancière, they drew on the romantic inspiration of Jules Michelet and built on the great French tradition of human geography by inventing a history of mentalities. Their seductive new history summarized the cumulative experience of living in vast social spaces. Dealing with large, geographically-based chunks of human experience, they could synthesize in terms of unities, common properties, grand themes. In so doing, however, they imposed an impossible burden on historians of the democratic age, whose subject necessarily centered on division rather than unity. Hence a cruel choice:

The social history of a democratic workers' era quickly faces a dilemma. Either it reduces to a chronicle of proper names which lack discursive legitimacy and historical direction – description of a struggle, of an activist, of a party, of a union, or of a newspaper – or it is the science that reduces these particularities and surface agitations to their foundations by identifying the subterranean realities whose local and intermittent expression they form (Rancière 1992: 193-194).

The stopgap effort to attach distinctive “sociabilities”, “cultures”, or even “mentalities” to particular working-class localities or trades stumbled from the start, according to Rancière, simply because the social units in question lacked the kinds of linguistic and geographic coherence that loaned plausibility to the grand histories of Febvre, Braudel, and their disciples. Alas, the objection applies equally well to any effort to treat Skinhead as a collective actor, to write a social history of skinheads that connects the individual, the rally, the parliamentary epithet, and the historical synthesis.

Or equally badly. Rancière recommends escape from the historiographical dilemma through frank recognition of history's poetic genius, of its calling to make peace with its inescapable captor, human language, and to invent ways of conveying the complexity of experience by means of linguistic play. In fact, Rancière and his colleagues have invented both a false dilemma and an exit into a blind alley. They have done so by adopting an ontology that inserts a large, unnecessary distance between microscopic and macroscopic social life.

Before reviewing that false dilemma, let me clear the way by insisting that some micro-macro problems do exist. A host of **methodological** difficulties face any historian who seeks to derive descriptions of large-scale changes and collective events from records concerning individuals. **Literary** problems beset any analyst of demographic transformations or international wars who wants to show how the people involved experienced them. **Technically**, sequences, distributions, and configurations consist of relations among elements rather than mere sums of those elements. Like all students of human social life, historians have created their own devices for connecting microscopic and macroscopic observations in these regards: family reconstitution, vignettes of representative persons, maps of geographic variation, and more. Anyone who treats both large-scale and small-scale phenomena in the same historical analysis adopts some set of these methodological, literary, and technical devices.

Genuinely serious micro-macro problems, however, lie elsewhere. They stem from logical and ontological incompatibility between elements that analysts of social life invoke when dealing with small-scale and large-scale processes. As Rancière intuits but does not quite say, to the extent that social experience consists exclusively of individual mental events, collective processes amount at best to changing distributions of consciousness within collections of individuals. To the extent that relevant mental events consist of interior monologues in privately-held languages, collective processes are illusory and the hope of discovering connections or common properties across large populations even more illusory. At best we might identify ways of speaking publicly that bear plausible relations to interior states and recur in a variety of situations. Within such a world view, the micro-micro incompatibility makes any history beyond the experiences of exemplary individuals seem either impossible or trivial.

To see what is at issue more clearly, let us inventory the four main ontologies twentieth-century historians and social scientists have applied to social life: phenomenological individualism, methodological individualism, holism, and relational realism. Rancière and his fellows come closest to **phenomenological individualism**, the doctrine that individual consciousness is the primary or

exclusive site of social life. Phenomenological individualism veers into solipsism when its adherents argue that adjacent minds have no access to each other's contents, therefore no observer can escape the prison of her own awareness (Tilly 1994). Even short of that analytically self-destructive position, phenomenological individualists tend to regard states of body and mind – impulses, reflexes, desires, ideas, or programs – as the chief motors of social action. In principle, they have two ways to account for large-scale social structures and processes: 1) as summed individual responses to similar situations; 2) as distributions and/or connections among individual actions.

In the first case, historians sometimes constitute collective actors consisting of all the individuals within a category such as peasant or woman – precisely the practice about which Rancière complains. In the second case, they take a leaf from those political scientists who see national political life as a meeting-place, synthesis, and outcome of that shifting distribution of attitudes we call public opinion or from the social psychologists who see individual X's action as providing a stimulus for individual Y's action. None of these strategies provides a workable account of large organizations or complex institutions. Macro-micro translations therefore bedevil phenomenological individualism.

Methodological individualism has less of a following in history than its phenomenological cousin, although it does engage many economic historians as well as a large share of historical analysts in economics and political science. Methodological individualism resembles its cousin in insisting on human individuals as the basic or unique social reality. It differs, however, in modeling individuals with thin consciousness or none at all. In more economic versions of methodological individualism, the person in question contains a utility schedule and a set of assets, which interact to generate choices within well-defined constraints.

In every such analysis, to be sure, figures a market-like allocative structure that is external to the choice-making individual – but it is astonishing how rarely methodological individualists examine by what means those allocative structures actually do their work. As a consequence, large disjunctions emerge between microeconomics and macroeconomics, or more generally among choice-making practices of individuals, aggregate causes or consequences of individual choices, and organized institutions such as banks, firms, industries, and governments. Methodological individualists face severe micro-macro problems.

Historians and social scientists who sensed the weaknesses of phenomenological and methodological individualism have frequently turned to **holism**, the doctrine that social structures have their own self-sustaining

logics. In its extreme form – once quite common in history but now unfashionable – a whole civilization, society, or culture undergoes a life of its own. Less extreme versions attribute self-reproducing powers to major institutions, treat certain segments of society as subordinating the rest to their interests, represent dominant mentalities, traditions, values, or cultural forms as regulators of social life, or assign inherent self-reproducing logics to industrialism, capitalism, feudalism, and other distinguishable varieties of social organization. For holists the micro-macro problem runs in the other direction, for they must determine to what extent, how, and why small-scale social life, including individual experience, articulates with these overarching patterns. Holists ordinarily resolve the problem, if they do so at all, with some combination of socialization and sanctions, both positive and negative.

Relational realism, the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties, and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life, once predominated in social science, if not in history. Classical economists, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel all emphasized social relations, regarding both individuals and complex social structures as products of regularities in social relations. During the twentieth century, however, relational realism lost much of its ground to individualism and holism. Only in American pragmatism, various versions of network analysis, and some corners of organizational or labor economics did it prevail.

Since I saved it for last, you will not be surprised to learn that I think relational realism deserves revivification. In relational analysis, logical and ontological micro-macro problems dwindle to insignificance as compared with their almost intractable nature in phenomenological individualism, methodological individualism, and holism. They dwindle because relational realism concentrates on connections that concatenate, aggregate and disaggregate readily, form organizational structures at the same time as they shape individual behavior. Relational analysts follow flows of communication, patron-client chains, employment networks, conversational connections, and power relations from the small scale to the large and back.

Intellectual genetic engineers can, of course, create hybrids of the four basic ontologies. A standard combination of phenomenological individualism and holism portrays a person in confrontation with society, each of the elements and their very confrontation having its own laws. Methodological individualists, I have already said, often assume the presence of a self-regulating market or other allocative institution. Individualists vary in how much they allow for emergents, structures that result from individual actions but once in existence exert independent effects on individual actions, much as music-lovers enter a concert hall one by one, only to see the audience's distribution through the hall

affect both the orchestra's performance and their own reactions to it (Barth 1981: 1-118, Bunge 1996: 248-253). Relational analysts commonly allow for partly-autonomous individual processes as well as strong effects on interaction by such collectively-created structures as social categories and centralized organizations. The existence of such combinations, however, neither denies nor solves the characteristically different micro-macro problems that result from the adoption of one ontology or another.

As one might guess from Jacques Rancière's frequent play with multiple meanings of the word *histoire* -- as lived experience, written history, and stories people tell -- the two individualisms and holisms have a crucial advantage over relational realism. They correspond to the mode in which people, or at least contemporary western people, commonly organize their own accounts of social life. They incorporate, or at least accommodate, **stories** in which connected, self-propelled actors, individual or collective, cause events, outcomes, and each other's actions. Although relational analysts do not deny the existence of sentient individuals or collective actors, they typically make two moves that render their accounts incompatible with such stories. First, they portray both individuals and collectivities as continuously changing products of interaction. Second, they incessantly invoke indirect effects, cumulative effects, unintended effects, and effects mediated by the non-human environment.

I began my career as a historian in dismay over the way that chroniclers of the Vendée insisted on constructing the counter-revolution of 1793 in the form of individual and collective actors -- Cathelineau, la Rochejacquelein, Carrière, The Peasantry, The Clergy, and so on -- each having unitary mentalities that explained their actions. Really fierce disputes among historians of the counter-revolution, after all, concerned proper attribution of intentions and efficacy to different actors (Tilly 1964: 6-9). As a slow learner, however, it took me forty years to realize that historians of the French West were following practices that pervade social life, and that pervaded the *histoire événementielle* against which the *Annales* historians originally rebelled (Tilly 1978, 1996, 1997). To put my own account in story form: as Rancière intuits, some of the attraction to cultural anthropology that eventually drew Lucien Febvre's heirs away from their earlier infatuation with other social sciences surely sprang from the greater receptivity of interpretive anthropology to story-telling.

But stories as usually told inhibit explanation of social processes and erect almost insuperable barriers to the discovery of connections between micro and macro processes. Let me summarize my argument about stories all too quickly, without essential qualifications:

1. For reasons that lie deep in childhood learning, cultural immersion, or perhaps even in the structure of human brains, people usually recount, analyze, judge, remember, and reorganize social experiences as **standard stories** in which a small number of self-motivated entities interact within constricted, contiguous time and space. Although prior and externally imposed conditions enter standard stories as accidents, facilities, and constraints, all meaningful action occurs as consequences of the designated actors' deliberations and impulses.
2. People's construction, negotiation, and deployment of standard stories does a wide variety of important social work. That work certainly includes accounting for skinheads and counter-revolutions, but it also includes autobiography, self-justification, social movement mobilization, jury deliberation, moral condemnation, cementing of agreements, and documentation of nationalist claims.
3. Few social processes actually have causal structures that conform to the logical requirements of standard stories. Even those few – for example, chess matches and some kinds of bureaucratic decision-making – typically rest on extensive if usually implicit institutional foundations and previous histories.
4. Analysts of social processes who wish to explain them must therefore translate material that comes to them largely in the form of standard stories created in the course of social interaction -- and consolidated after the fact - - into other idioms that better represent their actual causal structure.
5. Following programs called by such names as interpretation, discourse, narrative, and cultural analysis, many historians and social scientists have committed themselves to the view that standard stories do provide viable explanations of social processes, that the principal responsibility of historical analysts is the construction of superior standard stories, or even that nothing accessible to analysis exists beyond the limits of the standard stories participants in social processes tell.

Let me be clear about this: I enjoy well-told standard stories, often communicate in standard stories, frequently use standard stories to discipline my memory, and regard standard stories as doing crucial work in routine social life. Over forty years or so, my professional work has consisted largely of collecting, coding, criticizing, recasting, analyzing, and explaining standard stories in the form of administrative correspondence, newspaper reports, life-history interviews, historians' published accounts, and similar materials.

Reflection on what I have been doing has finally led me to the conclusions I have just summarized.

What sorts of social processes contradict standard stories? All those in which indirect effects, incremental effects, unintended effects, collective effects and/or effects mediated by the non-human environment play a significant part. Those conditions apply generally in the generation of inequality, organizational change, contentious politics, network-mediated communication, state transformation, revolutionary struggle, labor market operation, nationalism, and migration, to stick with topics about which I know something. My claim is that they apply just about everywhere else in social life.

Even if it turns out to be wrong in some regards, the claim has two beneficial features: First, it focuses attention on empirically-verifiable causal mechanisms, which have been much neglected in recent social science and history. Second, it implies an empirical program identifying, examining, and explaining the stories people tell, then comparing and connecting those stories' logical structures with our best causal accounts of relevant social processes. Whether or not my preliminary formulation holds up, we can hardly lose.

Let us reconsider the concocted skinhead story with which I began. It actually concerns a common micro-macro problem, entails a choice among ontologies, and embroils us with standard stories. Who or what are these skinheads? How shall we describe and explain their identities? In particular, how do they constitute publicly-recognizable political identities?

The central difficulty is the one that so exercises Jacques Rancière: if, in the style of standard stories, we assume that identities exist inside social units, we must characterize those units. We must choose among phenomenological individualism, methodological individualism, holism, and some combination among them. If we choose either individualism, the collective identity Skinhead becomes mysterious. If we choose holism, we must construct an account of how individuals attach themselves to the collective identity. If we choose a combination, we still lack the means of transition from one version of the identity to another. How shall we reconcile your neighborhood skinhead's account of himself, the gathering of self-identified skinheads, the deputy's reference to skinheads as a menacing political category, and the historian's imputation of collective continuity to skinheads?

Answer: turn away from individualism and holism to relational realism. Recognize that a substantial part of social reality consists of transactions among social units, that those transactions crystallize into ties, that they shape the social units involved, that they concatenate into variable structures.

Identity will then become not an essential feature of an individual or a group but a characteristic and consequence of social interaction. An identity is an actor's experience of a category, tie, role, network, or group, coupled with a public representation of that experience; the public representation often takes the form of a shared story.

The ubiquitous concept "identity" has remained blurred in political analysis for three reasons: First, identity is in fact not private and individual but public and relational. Second, it spans the whole range of relational structures from category to group. Third, any actor deploys multiple identities, at least one per tie, role, network, and group to which the actor is attached. That others often typify and respond to an actor by singling out one of those multiple identities – race, gender, class, job, religious affiliation, national origin, or something else – by no means establishes the unity, or even the tight connectedness, of those identities. That sickness or zealotry occasionally elevates one identity to overwhelming dominance of an actor's consciousness and behavior, furthermore, does not gainsay the prevalence of multiple identities among people who are neither sick nor zealots. It actually takes sustained effort to endow actors with unitary identities. That effort, furthermore, more often impoverishes social life than enriches it. We often call it brainwashing.

The widespread adoption of phenomenological individualism, however, makes these homely truths hard to grasp. Phenomenological individualists have often confused themselves with respect to identities by assuming that language entraps individuals, that preexisting presumptions and categories of language provide filters through which all social experience passes, hence that reliable knowledge of social relations is impossible. Such a view disregards the deeply interactive character of language itself, its location in constantly-negotiated conversations rather than individual minds. Indeed, language provides a medium for establishment and renegotiation of identities, seen as an actor's experience of a category, tie, network, or group, coupled with a public representation of that experience. The narrative offered in such a public representation ordinarily stresses interplays of social relations and individual traits: we are Xs by virtue of experiences we share with other Xs in relation to all those (very different) Ys.

Political identities are simply those identities to which at least one of the parties is a government. For all their enormous variation in form and content:

- political identities are always, everywhere relational and collective
- they therefore alter as political networks, opportunities, and strategies shift

- the validation of political identities depends on contingent performances to which other parties' acceptance or rejection of the asserted relation is crucial
- that validation both constrains and facilitates collective action by those who share the identity
- deep differences separate political identities embedded in routine social life from those that appear chiefly in public life

Political identities embed in social ties that accumulate their own shared understandings. Thus to assert identity as a Chechnian or a Croat is not to summon up primeval consciousness but to draw a boundary separating oneself from specific others (in the instance, most often Russian, Serb, or Muslim), to claim solidarity with others on the same side of the boundary, and to invoke a certain sort of relationship to those on the opposite side. Skinheads become skinheads in relation to and distinction from other people – skinheads, non-skinheads, and anti-skinheads. Similar relational constructions of identity occur repeatedly in social movements, racial conflicts, and interactions of trade diasporas with local communities.

These propositions break with two very different but common ways of understanding political identities: 1) as straightforward activation of durable personal traits, whether individual or collective, 2) as malleable features of individual consciousness. The first view appears incessantly in interest-based accounts of political participation, which generally depend on some version of methodological individualism. The second view recurs in analyses of political commitment as a process of self-realization, and correlates closely with an assumption of phenomenological individualism. My view denies neither personal traits nor individual psyches, but places relations among actors at the core of social processes.

Have I fallen into Rancière's trap by proposing to absorb history wholly into social science, thus obliterating its individuality? Yes and no. Yes, the program I have outlined calls for rapprochement of social-scientific and historical analyses. But it does not reduce history to mere timekeeper or to the teamster who simply brings wagon-loads of facts for grinding in the great social-scientific mill. On the contrary, to the extent that social processes are path-dependent – that sequences and outcomes of causal mechanisms vary by space-time setting, that the order in which events happen affects how they happen, that small-scale or large-scale collective experience accumulates and congeals as culture – historians who understand the effects of context on social process will

teach their fellows in something like the way that geologists, seismologists, ecologists, paleontologists, and other historically-oriented physical scientists keep their universalizing brethren in touch with reality. They will perhaps recognize their affinity with Oliver Sacks, the superb clinician and historical analyst of neurological conditions, whose book on migraine – or megrim – inspired this paper's title.

NOTE

I have adapted a few passages in this paper from Charles Tilly, "International Communities, Secure or Otherwise," Preprint 206, Center for the Social Sciences, Columbia University, 1996.

REFERENCES

Barth, Fredrik (1981): *Process and Form in Social Life. Selected Essays of Fredrik Barth: Volume I*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bunge, Mario (1996): *Finding Philosophy in Social Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rancière, Jacques (1992): *Les mots de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir*. Paris: Seuil.

Sacks, Oliver (1985): *Migraine. Understanding a Common Disorder*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tilly, Charles (1964): *The Vendée*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (1978): "Anthropology, History, and the *Annales*," *Review* 1: 207-213. (1994): "Softcore Solipsism," *Labour/Le Travail* 34: 259-268. (1996): "Invisible Elbow," *Sociological Forum* 11: 589-601. (1997): "The Trouble with Stories," forthcoming in Ronald Aminzade & Bernice Pescosolido, eds., *Teaching for the 21st Century* (Pine Forge Press).