

ENTREPRENEUR BIOGRAPHIES AS MICROHISTORIES OF X

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In 2009/10, I spent many weeks in a former beverage market in Bielefeld, Germany.¹ The warehouse — as well as I myself — was cooled down to 60° F in order to guarantee optimal conditions for the storage and preservation of the archival and material legacy of Dr. Oetker. This well-known German consumer product brand unites under its umbrella the production of various foodstuffs — this was the origin of the company, which is well known in the U.S. and Canada as a heavyweight in the frozen pizza market — as well as beer and non-alcoholic beverages; wine, sparkling wine and spirits; an ocean carrier (the Hamburg Süd group); a renowned private bank and luxury hotels. Together with two colleagues of mine, Sven Keller and Andreas Wirsching, I had the chance to take materials of my choosing from the long rows of shelves and to have a work station in the archival warehouse, with the most interesting sources within arm's reach. However, in the long run 60° F proved to be way too chilly for me.

After numerous journeys to communal, state and private archives, we were able to write a comprehensive history of Dr. Oetker in the era of the two World Wars.² The book tells a company's history. It also tells the story of a family. Finally, the book tells the story of two men: Rudolf-August Oetker, the third-generation heir of the family business born in 1916; and Richard Kaselowsky, his stepfather, who replaced Oetker's biological father not only in the family but also in the role of the — albeit temporary — patriarch of the family business. Kaselowsky was a circumspect and successful entrepreneur who was prepared to step aside at the moment young Rudolf-August Oetker was ready to assume his inheritance. Up until then, Kaselowsky maneuvered the firm through the hyperinflation, the Great Depression, and a wartime economy. He also was a *Märzgefallener*, a March violet or March windfall, who compliantly adapted to the Nazi ideology in early 1933 and soon became an ardent admirer of Adolf Hitler. Finally, he became member of the Circle of Friends of the Reichsführer SS, Heinrich Himmler.³

These two biographies, mapped out separately in two long chapters, are central pillars to the edifice of our book, supporting the business story, the family story and the political story. They represent two

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2 Jürgen Finger, Sven Keller, and Andreas Wirsching, *Dr. Oetker und der Nationalsozialismus: Geschichte eines Familienunternehmens 1933-1945* (Munich, 2013).

3 Jürgen Finger and Sven Keller, "Erhalt als Erfolg: Richard Kaselowsky an der Spitze des Familienunternehmens Dr. Oetker," in *Unternehmer — Fakten und Fiktionen: Historisch-biographische Studien*, ed. Werner Plumpe (Munich, 2014), 143-67.

sequences of life, two generational dynamics: although they are linked one to another and both to the family business, each is of individual interest with its own intrinsic value.

Yet, the broad and differentiated research on Nazi economics and German businesses during the interwar period and World War II that already existed made us question why we should write another study.⁴ Was it necessary to narrate the curriculum vitae of these successful entrepreneurs and emphasize their personal “assets”; to reflect, once again, on the politicization of business, of social and private life; to again test the limits of economic rationality in a dictatorial and hawkish political system?

One strategy to cope with this problem was to expand the findings of the individual case to relevant economic contexts and processes and to the concerned social groups, that is, to understand the biographies as studies of lives *and* times. The ascent of Dr. Oetker, for example, runs parallel to the emergence of the consumer goods industry and to the implementation of new consumer practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵ To give a second example: By constructing Richard Kaselowsky’s life course as a form of bourgeois self-mobilization in favor of the Nazi regime, his biography took on scholarly relevance beyond the dealings of this medium-sized family business in Eastern Westphalia.⁶

As with any case study, one can question its representativeness. More generally speaking, one can challenge the epistemological modus through which entrepreneur biographies — as well as studies on individual firms — get linked to more general questions of scholarly interest. This challenge can be described in various ways: the problem of representativeness, the quest for generalization or the establishment of a link between micro and macrolevels. This problem inspired the present paper, which attempts to conceptualize the link between the individual biographical case and more general questions via the concept of microhistory.⁷

I will not give an account of the suspicions voiced by academic historians towards the genre of biography. This reluctance today is particularly widespread in the economic and business history community, where many scholars are eager to renounce naïve heroic legends of self-made men (rarely self-made women). They favor model-based approaches and a thorough theoretical foundation for their work, allowing them to cozy up to either economics or general

4 Norbert Frei and Tim Schanetzky, eds., *Unternehmen im Nationalsozialismus: Zur Historisierung einer Forschungskonjunktur* (Göttingen, 2010).

5 Finger, Keller and Wirsching, *Dr. Oetker*, 17–18.

6 *Ibid.*, 411–15.

7 I would like to thank Sven Keller (Institute of Contemporary History in Munich/Berlin), who is a veteran discussion partner of mine for problems of economic and business history. The second part of this paper is partially indebted to a piece we wrote for a conference on Bavarian honorary councilors of commerce. It covers the range of biographical topics in a similar yet not identical way: Jürgen Finger and Sven Keller, “Erfolgsgeschichten? Über das Schreiben von Unternehmerbiographien,” in *Die bayerischen Kommerzienräte: Eine deutsche Wirtschaftselite von 1880 bis 1928*, ed. Marita Krauss (Munich, 2016).

historiography.⁸ Furthermore, I will not deliver a recipe or assembly instructions for writing an entrepreneur biography with scholarly validity. Microhistory does not present a solution to the micro/macro-link problem, because microhistorians themselves have not found a universal answer to this question in the last fifty years. Rather, I want to use microhistorical concepts to generate sensitivity for the epistemological problems and narrative pitfalls of the biographical genre, and, in a second step, to give an introduction to the broad spectrum of research questions that may go way beyond the chronological sequence of a biographical subject's life course.

After presenting a brief overview of the methodological foundations of microhistory, in this paper I evaluate publications on German sweets manufacturer Gebrüder Stollwerck AG as examples of microhistories of globalization and of kinship in entrepreneurial families. In a third step, I examine the specifics of entrepreneur biographies, paying particular attention to their narrative structure, as they tend to explain developments from within the black box of the entrepreneur or his family. I suggest avoiding such pitfalls of the biographical method by linking the life of the subject to a reference value, to a research question that, in the best case, provides an experimental cardinal point outside of the object of study. In this sense, biographies — as well as case studies on companies — can be understood as microhistories of X.

Microhistory, an Approximation

What is microhistory? The pioneer of microhistory Giovanni Levi once avoided giving a clear-cut definition or developing a manifesto. He claimed that microhistory was a “historiographical practice.”⁹ In a sort of circular reasoning, one could state that microhistorians know they are microhistorians if they do microhistory. In fact, a uniform theoretical and conceptual basis was never developed for microhistory. As it favored individual research, institutionalization was limited. Researchers and projects often coalesced around periodicals such as the Italian *Quaderni storici* or the German *Historische Anthropologie*.

As a general rule, the foundations were laid in the 1970s and 1980s by studies on premodern and early modern European history. Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davis and others wanted to overcome the macro-perspective of structural and social history as advanced by influential parts of the

8 Simone Lässig, “Biography in Modern History — Modern Historiography in Biography,” in *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, ed. Simone Lässig and Volker R. Berghahn (New York, Oxford, 2008), 1–26, 1–7 for general remarks on historians' widespread skepticism towards biographies. The almost natural certainty of Wilhelm Treue, who without much ado associated business history and the biographical method, seems lost today: Wilhelm Treue, “A Journal for Company Histories and Entrepreneurial Biography,” *Business History Review* 31 (1957): 323–36. Even those who prefer not to reflect too deeply about the nature of scholarly biography do at least advocate an alignment of business history in general and the biographical method in particular as a means of providing empirical data for economics: Thomas A. Corley, “Historical Biographies of Entrepreneurs,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Entrepreneurship*, ed. Marc Casson, Bernard Yeung and Anuradha Basu (Oxford, New York, 2008), 138–60, 151–52. For current considerations on the problem, see Uwe Spiekermann's paper “Why Biographies” in this volume.

9 Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1992), 93–113, here 93, 95. Citations of French and German literature were translated by the author.

10 These groundbreaking studies are listed in chronological order: Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975); Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Turin, 1976); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1983); Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale: Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Turin, 1985); Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: Sur les traces d'un inconnu 1798-1876* (Paris, 1996). In rare cases, women have been placed at the center of these studies, e.g., Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary (1785-1812)* (New York, 1991). For microhistory's place in the history of historiography, see Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, 2008), 250-81; and Lutz Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme: Theorie, Methoden, Tendenzen von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 2010), 96-116, 173-95, 239-40.

11 "Eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit" refers to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of a novella, which emphasizes the mixture of factuality and extraordinariness: "Gespräch mit Eckermann, 29. Januar 1827," in Johann W. Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens: Münchner Ausgabe*, Vol. 19: *Johann Peter Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Heinz Schlaffer (Munich, 1986), 203.

12 On the historical context and examples, see Hans Medick, "Mikro-Historie," in *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie: Eine Diskussion*, ed. Winfried Schulze (Göttingen, 1994), 40-53, 42-43; Otto Ulbricht, "Mikrogeschichte: Versuch einer Vorstellung," »

Annales School or by the German *Historische Sozialwissenschaft*.¹⁰ Inspired by cultural history and by offshoots of social history, such as the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte, histoire du quotidien*) and history from below, microhistorians focused on local, everyday, and commonplace objects of study. Often, they were intrigued and inspired by exceptionally rich sources on singular persons and events, which they then studied in depth. The goal, however, was not a sequential account of a life course or a most detailed *histoire événementielle*. Neither the biography nor the story of a "real unheard-of incident" were ends in themselves, but they aimed at a more thorough understanding of past lives, societies, and worldviews.¹¹ Driven by an intrinsic desire to develop more complex and plural historical narratives, microhistorians, moreover, doubted the explanatory power of entities and concepts like nation, state, or progress.¹²

For Carlo Ginzburg, the "reduction of scale in observation (not of the object of investigation)" is the central operation of microhistory. He urges the researcher to study one single case as intensely as possible and — referring to ethnologist Marcel Mauss — to use it as a starting point for the generalization of both answers and (new) questions.¹³ Jacques Revel's postulate that microhistory's procedure is like gaming with scales, a "jeu d'échelles," points in a similar direction: The scale of historical study should be changed constantly and consciously, so that the historian can construct complex objects and describe the flaky (*feuilleté*) structure of the social tissue. "What counts is the principle of variation, not the choice of a particular scale."¹⁴ Providing metaphors from photography and cartography, Revel states: "Changing the focal length not only means making things appear bigger (or smaller) in the viewfinder; it also means modifying the object's form and background." Likewise, changing the scale in cartography not only modifies the size of the map or the map

» *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 45 (1994): 347-67, 348-54; Richard van Dülmen, *Historische Anthropologie: Entwicklung, Probleme, Aufgaben* (Cologne, 2000), 95-98.

13 Carlo Ginzburg, "Some Queries Addressed to Myself: A Panoramic Synthesis of His Career, Realized by Carlo Ginzburg, on the Occasion of the

2010 [Balzan] Awards Ceremony in Rome," in *2010 Balzan Prize for European History* (Milan, 2010), 9-17, 13-14.

14 Jacques Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social," in *Jeux d'échelles: La microanalyse à l'expérience*, ed. idem (Paris, 1996), 15-36, 19. The Italian title makes the understanding of échelle=scale clearer:

"Giochi di Scala" (2006). Revel did not mean the game "Jeu d'échelles," known as "Serpents et échelles" or "Snakes and ladders." This reference would provide only a poor metaphor for success and failure in history and — in our case — in entrepreneurial life, since the roll of the dice decides the players' moves on the fixed structure of the gameboard.

section, but also the content of the map, the selection of information that can be represented.¹⁵

Hans Medick gives a more hands-on definition of microhistory as an “experimental investigation into networks of social relations and contexts of action” that takes “social, economic, cultural and political conditions” into account. These conditions influence the networks and vice versa. “By avoiding preexisting categorizations such as *the* family, *the* individual, *the* state, *the* industrialization, new insights into the constitution of historical structures, but also in short-term and longer-term processes are opened up.”¹⁶ In the end, most microhistorians agree on focusing on human behavior in a particular historical context that is — at least partially — constituted by just these humans.¹⁷ In such a “history of the whole in all its particulars” (“Detailgeschichte des Ganzen”), the biographical method, just as other qualitative and quantitative methods, has its place.¹⁸

Critics of microhistory intuitively drew an analogy from the scale of the research object to the scope of the analytical question and thus to the relevance of a study. They confused the investigation area and the object of investigation, and insisted that local history could only have local relevance. But, to cite Clifford Geertz, “the locus of study is not the object of study.”¹⁹ Geertz shifted attention from the spatial limitation, deplored by his critics, to a set of relationships, interpretations, and constructions. One might even amend Geertz’s oft-cited statement: The locus of study is not the object of study, and the latter is not the subject matter studied (the topic). Since a binary coding of local/global, top/bottom, important/insignificant would be misleading, all scales are equivalent; none grants privileged access to history. The global scale is not more relevant; the local scale is not more authentic or more immediate.²⁰ An analytical gain is ensured by the changing of the scales, by the change of perspectives, which can produce alienation effects (*estrangement, dépaysement*).

15 Ibid.

16 Medick, “Mikro-Historie,” 45: “Statt einer vorweggenommenen Kategorisierung in Form unterstellter makrohistorischer Substanzen (*die* Familie, *das* Individuum, *der* Staat, *die* Industrialisierung) erfolgt

hier eine experimentelle Untersuchung sozialer Beziehungsnetze und Handlungszusammenhänge, freilich nie nur in der Fixierung auf diese selbst, sondern immer auch im Blick auf die gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen, kulturellen und politischen Bedingungen

und Verhältnisse, die in und mit ihnen, durch und auch gegen sie zur Äußerung und Wirkung kommen. Dadurch werden neue Einsichten in die Konstituierung historischer Strukturen, aber auch in kurz- und längerfristige historische Prozesse eröffnet.“

17 Levi, “Microhistory,” 94–95, 106–107, with a philosophical touch: „Thus all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms. The question is therefore, how to define the margins — however narrow they may be — of the freedom granted an individual by the interstices and contradictions of the normative systems which govern him. In other words, an enquiry into the extent and nature of free will within the general structure of human society.” (94–95)

18 E.g. the family reconstitution method employed by Medick, who integrated all available qualitative and quantitative data on the inhabitants of Laichingen in one huge database. Hans Medick, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900: Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1996), 21–30, where Medick is referring to Michel de Certeau’s concept of “science of singularity”; p. 24 for the citation.

19 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 22.

20 Jacques Revel, “Présentation,” in Revel, *Jeux d’échelles*, 7–14, 12–13. Revel, “Micro-analyse,” 26, 34.

21 Medick, *Weben und Überleben*, 13–16, 20–24. Another classic example is David Warren Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen 1700–1870* (Cambridge, 1990).

22 Hartmut Berghoff, “Unternehmensgeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Konzeptionelle Grundüberlegungen am Beispiel des Aufstiegs Hohners vom Geheimgewerbetreibenden zum kleinstädtischen Großindustriellen,” in *Kulturalismus, Neue Institutionenökonomik oder Theorienvielfalt: Eine Zwischenbilanz der Unternehmensgeschichte*, ed. Jan-Otmar Hesse, Christian Kleinschmidt and Karl Lauschke (Essen, 2002), 243–51; *ibid.*, *Zwischen Kleinstadt und Weltmarkt: Hohner und die Harmonika 1857–1961. Unternehmensgeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Paderborn, 2006), 13–48.

23 Medick, “Mikro-Historie,” 44–45. Levi gives an example of why a specific openness can further our knowledge. Referring to his study on “L’eredità immateriale,” he explains that the idea of a market where prices are determined by supply and demand is anachronistic as it transfers today’s commonplace knowledge to sixteenth-century Italy. Yet, a thorough investigation into transfers of property rights on land showed that to a remarkable extent the price level depended on the timing, different forms of transfer and, especially, kinship. Levi, “Microhistory,” 97–98.

24 Alban Bensa, “De la micro-histoire vers une anthropologie critique,” in *Jeux d’échelles*, ed. Revel, 37–70, 58–62.

25 Jacques Revel, “L’Histoire au Ras du Sol,” preface to Levi, *Le Pouvoir au Village: Histoire d’un Exorciste dans le Piémont du XVIIème Siècle* (Paris, 1989), i–xxxiii. Levi, “Microhistory,” 109–10. Kracauer disapproves >

Microhistory neither rejects theories nor confines itself to a self-contained narrative on local incidents and singular events. The local or individual level is interlinked with the regional, national, or even transnational and global levels. For example, Hans Medick characterized his “local history” of the Württemberg village Laichingen as a “microhistorically grounded general history,” which, for example, made valuable insights into the history of proto-industrialization possible.²¹ In an analogous formula, Hartmut Berghoff wrote a “business history as a history of a society” (“Unternehmensgeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte”) in his study on the accordion manufacturer Hohner.²² Thus, microhistorians, while keeping in mind existing theories and the state of research, try to ensure the experimental character of their studies; the practice encourages their intellectual freedom as they construct their narratives.²³

However, as the different scales of history are not continuous, there is no direct way of generalizing the results of microanalysis, of elevating them to the macro level. The micro constellation cannot be inflated like a balloon in order to get a macro picture. Or, as Alban Bensa put it: Microhistories don’t stand *pars pro toto*.²⁴ Translating the particular to the general level proves to be the major epistemological problem of microhistory. To a certain extent, no solution to this problem has ever been found.

Jacque Revel reduces the problem in his preface to the French version of Levi’s “Le pouvoir au village” to a provocative phrase: “Why make things simple when one can make them complicated.” Giovanni Levi seems to agree with him; however, his harsh solution — the uniqueness of the particular cannot be generalized; the particular may not be sacrificed — is not satisfying intellectually.²⁵ Other exponents of microhistory and historical anthropology also repudiate the idea of generalization and prefer studies on the microlevel. In a more tempered approach, some point out that only on the microlevel can a strong causal nexus be examined, but the micro itself then creates its macrostructures. Historian Angelika Epple suggests that the local and the translocal dimension should always be the starting point of an analysis of overarching structures (regional, national, cultural, global).²⁶

> of this position, wherein meso- and macro-structures are only seen as derivatives of the small entity. Siegfried Kracauer, *Geschichte: Vor den letzten*

Dingen, Siegfried Kracauer *Werke*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 128.

26 Jacques Revel, “Présentation,” 12–13; Angelika

Epple, “Lokalität und die Dimensionen des Globalen: Eine Frage der Relationen,” *Historische Anthropologie* 21 (2013): 4–25.

The micro/macro-link also generates concerns for the structure of a study: Representativeness is difficult or even impossible to achieve, as microhistories often depend on exceptionally rich and dense sources and on the curiosity of individual historians. Even if possible, the sheer multiplication of studies with a similar layout would produce pointless redundancies. Looking for analogies on different scales would also be misleading as we tend to find what we are looking for: Moreover, the logics of agency, social relations, or representation on different levels of analysis are incommensurable. Finally, the idea of mutual pervasiveness of micro- and macrolevels, stated by sociologist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer in a posthumous manuscript, is intellectually interesting, but it is not very helpful for the pragmatics of historiography.²⁷

Even if one does not agree with these different preferences and simply sticks to Revel's idea that no scale is to be preferred and that each should be examined in its own right, the great challenge remains to examine the interaction of individuals within different social systems on different scales.²⁸ Probably, the micro/macro-problem can only be solved in a distinct way within each single study.

An Example: Gebrüder Stollwerck AG

Different publications on the Gebrüder Stollwerck AG can illustrate the opportunities and challenges but also the pitfalls of entrepreneurial microhistory. Stollwerck, founded in 1839, was a German, family-owned joint-stock company until banks took over the majority in 1932 as a consequence of the Great Depression. From the 1890s, Stollwerck was a multinational sweets manufacturer and one of the then biggest market players in the U.S. Its business model relied especially on vending machines, which represented both an efficient and trendy new distribution channel. The global commodity flows of cocoa and the ascent of modern consumer practices make Stollwerck an interesting object of study.

Angelika Epple in her 2010 book explicitly suggests reading the family's and firm's history as a "microhistory of globalization." Instead of composing a master narrative along the lines of Christopher Bayly,²⁹ she combines globalization with the allegedly conflicting methodology of microhistory by analyzing Stollwerck in its transnational interconnections over the course of almost a century. She bases her analysis on various macroconcepts, thereby framing her study in advance: the end of the era of nation-states replaced by multinational

27 Kracauer, *Geschichte*, 128–43, here 135. Medick, *Weben und Überleben*, 30–32.

28 Levi, "Microhistory," 96–97.

29 Christopher Alan Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2004).

corporations (Alfred D. Chandler/Bruce Mazlish); globalization as economic, social, and cultural homogenization (Anthony Hopkins/George Ritzer), which is counterbalanced by cultural heterogeneity and regionalization — or in fancier terms: glocalization (Ronald Robertson) and hybridity.³⁰

Epple proposes to transcend the one-sided coding of *economic* globalization, on the one hand, and *cultural* bonds with strong local ties, on the other hand — an assumption that is often present in the idea of glocalization. She focuses on the dynamic interplay of the various local and global, economic and cultural dimensions: how do they mesh, how are they mutually interdependent, how do they blend, how do they obstruct and how do they hustle things on? Yet, the interplay between global and local sometimes remains abstract. This is evident in the way she describes the family structure and the governance by the second Stollwerck generation. The transposition of ideas of global “homogenization” and “heterogeneity” to the family level and to the level of corporate governance strikes me as a problematic analogy of macro- and micro-analysis.

Epple presents the network of five brothers sharing the management of the family enterprise and performing in horizontal modes of operation. Yet, the scope of this “fraternalism” seems to be limited as it complements the hierarchical structure of patriarchalism towards further stakeholders outside of the fraternal bubble. The concept emphasizes the relation within the (family) management at the expense of their relations — as individuals or as a collective body — towards workers, business partners and, more generally, their social and economic environment.³¹

Epple voluntarily limits not only her focus but also her choice of sources: By putting at the center of her considerations all things global and by focusing on the correspondence between identifiable stakeholders, grouped around the five Stollwerck brothers, she strictly frames the picture and probably accepts microhistorical blind spots.³² Processes sometimes remain abstract; the interplay of the different levels is difficult to assess and to narrate. Epple gives an interesting micro analysis of “fraternalism” but the nexus to the macrolevel remains sketchy, for example, in the way the invisible hand of globalization occasionally seems to guide the family members’ action.³³ No doubt Epple followed advice she gave some years earlier: “think globally, study the local.”³⁴

30 Angelika Epple, *Das Unternehmen Stollwerck: Eine Mikrogeschichte der Globalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010), 13–35.

31 Epple, *Das Unternehmen Stollwerck*, 25–27, 320–25. Hartmut Berghoff describes a similar constellation without such neologisms: Berghoff, *Zwischen Kleinstadt und Weltmarkt*, 209–20, 143–45. Some of Epple’s findings are more conventional: Economic rationality can be identified only in hindsight; the fraternalist structure necessitates consensus, or, as she puts it, the horizontal production of homogeneity balances the heterogeneity of the fraternal management. Epple, *Das Unternehmen Stollwerck*, 23, 412–16.

32 *Ibid.*, 45–46.

33 Cf. the review by Julia Laura Rischbieter, “Das Unternehmen Stollwerck [Review],” *WerkstattGeschichte* 59 (2011): 116–18.

34 Angelika Epple, “‘Global History’ and ‘Area History’: Plädoyer für eine weltgeschichtliche Perspektivierung des Lokalen,” in *Area studies und die Welt: Weltregionen und neue Globalgeschichte*, ed. Birgit Schäbler (Vienna, 2007), 90–117, 113. Epple’s formula is similar to a series of microhistorian’s set phrases that play with the fact that the paradox is elevated to methodology. For example, Giovanni Levi paraphrased Clifford Geertz: “Historians do not study villages, they study *in* villages.” Levi, “Microhistory,” 96; Geertz, *Interpretation*, 22.

Another way to construct a microhistory of globalization was presented by Julia Laura Rischbieter. Her actor-centered historical analysis, presented as a “micro-economy” of globalization, focuses on a number of stakeholders of the Hamburg coffee trade, who did not directly act on the international level. In this way, Rischbieter makes sure that her analysis does not presuppose the processes of globalization and its long-distance effects on the local level.³⁵

In a certain way, another book on Stollwerck delivered an excellent example of what microhistory can achieve — without calling it microhistory. Tanja Junggeburth linked the perspective of business history to the history of the middle classes (*Bürgertumsforschung*) by taking into account concepts of the New Institutional Economy, the interlocking of capital forms (Pierre Bourdieu), and the idea of a horizon of bourgeois values (“bürgerlicher Wertehimmel” according to Manfred Hettling and Stefan Ludwig-Hoffmann). Junggeburth can show how — to different degrees during a sequence of three generations — kin and business interests were interlocked by bourgeois values and common interest. As one might expect, especially the transfer of property rights to the next generation engendered conflict and dissatisfaction among all stakeholders.³⁶

In a third monograph on Gebrüder Stollwerck AG, the example is used in a completely different way. Its analysis helps us to better demarcate microhistory from another widespread method of gaining and representing knowledge in human science: the case study. Alfred D. Chandler presents in “Scale and Scope” (1990), meanwhile a still influential classic, the family firm as an example of cooperative managerial capitalism. Yet, his analysis is strongly streamlined to make the case fit the concept. Stollwerck represents a case study, oriented to a specific generalization wanted by Chandler: the empirical work was limited, and similar to the *ceteris paribus* assumption, neighboring aspects were not assigned relevance, so that essential contexts were not represented in the picture.³⁷ In contrast, the microhistorian’s approach would — to take the metaphor further — destroy the picture frame.

Yet, it is legitimate to ask whether one needs to resort to the concepts of microhistory and to its sometimes flabby methodology. Couldn’t one simply call each biography a case study? Certainly not. The Chandler example demonstrates that the relation between the particular and the general is different with case studies. Case studies are the traditional instrument for the production, the verification,

35 Julia Laura Rischbieter, *Mikro-Ökonomie der Globalisierung: Kaffee, Kaufleute und Konsumenten im Kaiserreich 1870-1914* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 2011), 8-10, 17-20.

36 Tanja Junggeburth, *Stollwerck 1839-1932: Unternehmerfamilie und Familienunternehmen* (Stuttgart, 2014), 27-35.

37 Alfred Dupont Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA, London, 1990), 398-409.

and the representation of knowledge in medicine, law, and the social sciences. The idea is to exemplify structures and processes, often already known or deduced from systematic knowledge. This refers also to techniques of subsumption by classifying individual cases under general rules or within a typology (of maladies, of legal provisions), and to techniques of training (e.g., the business education developed by Harvard Business School in the 1920s).³⁸ In order to clarify the wording, one should not speak of “the case of A” when speaking of a case study. Instead, we should prefer to speak of “A as a case of B,” A being the particular and B being the general or the ideal type in a Weberian sense. Both relate to each other in a well defined way by the act of representation.

38 Therefore, the narrative structure is at the heart of research on the methodology of case studies, presented by science history and cultural studies. Johannes Süßmann, “Perspektiven der Fallstudienforschung,” in *Fallstudien: Theorie — Geschichte — Methode*, ed. Johannes Süßmann, Susanne Scholz and Gisela Engel (Berlin, 2007), 7–27, 19–22; Susanne Düwell and Nicolas Pethes, “Fall, Wissen, Repräsentationen: Epistemologien und Darstellungsästhetik von Fallnarrativen in den Wissenschaften vom Menschen,” in *Fall — Fallgeschichte — Fallstudie: Theorie und Geschichte einer Wissensform*, ed. Susanne Düwell and Nicolas Pethes (Frankfurt am Main, New York, 2014), 9–33. Integrating the history of science, literary studies, and moral philosophy: Lucia Aschauer, Horst Gruner and Tobias Gutmann, eds., *Fallgeschichten: Text- und Wissensformen exemplarischer Narrative in der Kultur der Moderne* (Würzburg, 2015); Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, eds., *Penser par cas* (Paris, 2005).

39 Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, “Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing and Microhistory,” *Storia della Storiografia* 59–60 (2011): 32–42, 33–34.

40 Levi, “Microhistory,” 106.

Interim Wrap-up: Microhistories of X

The microhistorical method, in contrast, is not looking for an illustration of existing generalizations. Biographies should not be “commemorative and therefore confirmative,” chosen only on the basis of existing knowledge and already established judgments on their subjects’ relevance.³⁹ Theories may be used as a starting point, but the goal is neither to exemplify a general rule nor to construct a (new) typology. Microhistory tends to dissolve boundaries between the parts and the whole; the relation between the general and the particular is at best dialectical.⁴⁰ The interlinkage between micro- and macrolevels in the construction of a project, as well as the interlinkage in the narration of its results, seem to remain two major problems of microhistory that can only be solved from case to case.

To sum up:

- 1) The locus of study is not the object of study, and the latter is not the subject matter studied (freely adapted from C. Geertz).
- 2) Insight is produced by the conscious variation of the scale and of the perspective of study, which can produce alienation effects (Ginzburg/Revel).
- 3) But, there is no continuous transition from the micro- to the macrolevel: The first doesn’t stand pars pro toto for the latter (Bensa). Therefore, microhistory also is incompatible with the epistemology of classifying case studies.
- 4) Biographies as well as the story of a real unheard-of incident are not ends in themselves.
- 5) Microhistorically grounded biographies have to relate to a cardinal point outside of the object of study. The experimental character (Medick) is ensured by the biographer who chooses

the cardinal point as freely as possible, regardless of existing judgments on the subject's life and his presupposed historical relevance or even irrelevance.

In this sense, biographies can be perceived as microhistories of X. Although a broader subject matter is maintained when scaling down on the individual object of study, the links between the different levels need to be determined in the process of research. The analytical perspective thus oscillates between the various levels.

Medium-range Perspectives

This part of the paper suggests ten abstract dimensions of biographical study, of which some are specific to entrepreneur biographies. Of course, the list is not exhaustive.⁴¹ The perspectives are open to adaptation, and they are compatible, for example, with concepts of New Institutional Economics in business history, like property rights, transaction-cost theory, modes of governance, bounded rationality, etc. However, these are not at the center of my current considerations.⁴² The dimensions should be seen as interconnected. Investigation into the unique setting of these factors is a difficult but promising goal for an entrepreneur biography.

1. *Family and kin*: This perspective is thoroughly connected to all of the following. Family can be seen as either a stabilizing and destabilizing factor in an entrepreneur's life, or both at the same time. An analysis of the differing logics of family and business not only provides valuable insight into structures and relations within the two entities. It can also help to explain conflicts arising from the integration of the two rationales. Family also can include the relations to other stakeholders like members of the management, major shareholders, and even competitors (e.g., Adidas/Puma).

The key challenge for a biographer is to “keep family, household, kin, property, inheritance and production flexible in such a way that they never appear to be rigid categories or mere structuralist concepts but can always be recognized as intersections of social actions.” In other words: “Family happens” since persons (and things!) are interconnected by emotions and interests, constituting a dynamic and intimate tension field with complicated and reciprocal dependencies.⁴³

Family — just like other social institutions, which between the lines of historiographical texts often appear as immutable, a priori, ahistorical in a certain sense — is less precisely limited than commonly

41 A different, more specific set of research questions has been proposed for the GHI Washington's project on “Immigrant Entrepreneurship”: Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann, “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: The German-American Business Biography, 1720 to the Present. A GHI Research Project,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (2010): 69–82, here 76–80. Another hands-on collection of research topics can be found in Jürgen Finger and Sven Keller, “Erfolgsgeschichten?”

42 Clemens Wischermann et al., eds., *Studienbuch institutionelle Wirtschafts- und Unternehmensgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2015).

43 Thomas Sokoll, “Familien hausen: Überlegungen zu David Sabeans Studie über Eigentum, Produktion und Familie in Neckarhausen 1700–1870,” *Historische Anthropologie* 3 (1995): 335–48, 339–45, praising the seminal monograph by Sabean, *Property*.

assumed: Who is part of the family and who is not? Why? Is the affiliation contested? How and when do affiliations and assignments change?⁴⁴ Similar things could be said of other categories already mentioned (nation, society, local/immigrant/religious, community, etc.), which often frame our interest. Is the enterprise defined only by corporate law and property rights, or does the entrepreneur perceive his economic endeavor as wider, more complex, and multifaceted?⁴⁵

2. Family and kinship refer to the wider phenomenon of *private life*. Entrepreneurs are not (at least not always) monomaniacal economic heroes.⁴⁶ Family and friends present not only a mere enabling structure for business, delivering comfort, heirs or occasions for recovery. Contrary to what such a functionalist view suggests, private life has a rationale of its own, or even more than one rationale: family, friends, extramarital affairs, hobbies, etc. Gender roles and gender relations can be one important perspective within this dimension, as they structure the family and the business sphere, and shape ideas of economic masculinity and femininity.

3. *Emotions*: The objective of a biographical approach cannot be to unduly psychologize the entrepreneur, his behavior, or his opinions on political, business, or personal issues. Often, adequate sources are not available, and the methodology of psychohistory is virgin soil for most biographers, who occasionally are seduced by speculative layman's psychology.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, we may not pass over experiences of success and failure (in private life, business, and elsewhere), over sentiments of pride, (self-)confidence, or frustration. This is all the more true as success and failure with all of their personal, structural and contingent causes constitute a central momentum in the life of an entrepreneur.⁴⁸ These emotions may be handled with care, especially by avoiding any simplifying causal nexus. The concepts and methodological considerations of a new history of emotions may be helpful in this context.⁴⁹

4. *Business models*: Experiences, formal and informal knowledge, the disposal of property rights, and cultural factors can shape business

44 Simone Derix analyzes the affiliation problem within the Thyssen family, a transnational wealthy family par excellence, and gives further insight into scholarly research on families: Simone Derix, *Die Thyssens: Familie und Vermögen* (Paderborn, 2016).

45 Werner Plumpe, "Unternehmer — Fakten und Fiktionen: Einleitung," in *Unternehmer*, ed. idem, 1–26.

46 Werner Plumpe, "Funktionen der Unternehmerschaft: Fiktionen, Fakten, Realitäten," in *Unternehmertum: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil einer riskanten Lebensform*, ed. Ludger Heidbrink and Peter Seele (Frankfurt am Main, 2010), 43–60, 55–56. For problems of defining an entrepreneur in the emphatic sense, as proposed, e.g., by Joseph Schumpeter: Werner Plumpe, "Unternehmer — Fakten und Fiktionen: Einleitung," 8–11, 13–14, 22–25. Boris Gehlen, *Paul Silverberg (1876–1959): Ein Unternehmer* (Stuttgart, 2007), 24, gives a less emphatic definition: Entrepreneur is the name of the person, who has "decisive influence on strategic decisions in an enterprise, i.e., decisions that are effective in the long term (and who bears the entrepreneurial risk), whereby he is in the formal and actual position to delegate these decisions."

47 Lässig, "Biography," 11–12; Alexander von Plato, "Geschichte und Psychologie — Oral history und Psychoanalyse: Problemaufriss und Literaturüberblick," *Historical Social Research* 29, no. 4 (2004): 79–117; Nikolas R. Dörr, "Zeitgeschichte, Psychologie und Psychoanalyse, Version: 1.0," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* 29.04.2010, http://docupedia.de/zg/Zeitgeschichte_Psychologie_und_Pschoanalyse.

48 A businessman who stops being successful may not be an entrepreneur anymore: Jürgen Kocka, "Braucht der Kapitalismus erfolgreiche Unternehmer, und wenn ja, gibt es sie?," Sebastian Fischer and

Michael Frese, "Erfolgreiche Unternehmer"; Alfred Kieser, "Braucht der Kapitalismus erfolgreiche Unternehmer: Oder: Warum werden immer mehr Unternehmer charismatisiert?," all in *Unternehmer*, ed.

Plumpe, 81–96, 57–80, and 27–56, respectively.

49 Ute Frevert, "Was haben Gefühle in der Geschichte zu suchen?," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 35 (2009): 183–208.

models and forms of organization. Entrepreneurs may choose business models or forms of organization for their functionality or for context-sensitive and highly individualistic, even private, reasons. The formative influence of the entrepreneur's attitudes to (disruptive) innovation and risk, and his willingness to act proactively and with initiative, cannot be overstated. The social role of the entrepreneur cannot be separated from his or her enterprise. At the same time, the urge for autonomy is characteristic of the entrepreneurial lifestyle. Therefore, questions of organization, hierarchy, and deliberative processes may be a touchstone for the entrepreneur's temper and self-image, as they relate to his/her capacity both for leadership and for tolerating reliance on others.

5. *Transfers of knowledge* not only refer to formal education but especially to knowledge about business practices, in particular, and social and cultural practices, in general.⁵⁰ This can include transfers within the family, within industry, regional, or transnational networks, by migrating, or within a particular local, immigrant, or religious community.

6. *Transfers of property rights* refer to different models for mobilizing social, cultural and economic capital, e.g., within kinship networks and across borders, cultures, and generations. The last case has proven to be a major problem especially with family businesses: The prospect of future dynastical succession both intrigues and appalls many founders who consider themselves irreplaceable. The handling of an unscheduled, controversial, or poorly planned succession produces problems not only within the family but also within the corporation or the network of business partners.

Both dimensions of transfer — knowledge and property rights — relate to family and kin, which turned out to be important agents in the constitution of transnational networks.⁵¹ They also influence the constitution of business models or may resonate with the emotional category.

7. *Embeddedness*: The idea of embeddedness of economic activity refers both to social relations in a wide sense of the word (family and kin, friendship, labor relations, business partners, and even competitors) as well as to the cultural embeddedness of markets, sectors, and business procedures.

8. *Space*: The spatial dimension of a businessman's or businesswoman's life can be understood as his or her resonance space. It

50 Sandra Maß, *Kinderstube des Kapitalismus? Monetäre Erziehung im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich, forthcoming).

51 Simone Derix, "Transnationale Familien," in *Dimensionen internationaler Geschichte*, ed. Jost Dülffer and Wilfried Loth (Munich, 2012), 335–51; David W. Sabean and Simon Teuscher, "Re-thinking European Kinship: Transregional and Transnational Families," and David W. Sabean, "German International Families in the Nineteenth Century: The Siemens Family as a Thought Experiment," both in *Transregional and Transnational Families in Europe and Beyond: Experiences since the Middle Ages*, ed. Christopher H. Johnson (New York, 2011), 1–21 and 229–52, respectively.

is defined by the spheres of his or her private, social, political, and economic activity.

9. *Temporality*: The idea of taking into account the time of history not only reminds us to situate the object of a biography within a generational succession. It invites us to integrate historical change into the biographical narrative and to reflect on the relation of dynamics and stability, on periods of acceleration and deceleration, and on the possibility of different “speeds” on the various biographical levels (business/family/politics, etc.). Important moments and decisions may be densely narrated, but they are not the only moments of change and dynamics; change over the long run may be as fundamental. Putting the focus on decisive moments can evoke the false illusion of biographical straightness, of an obstacle course from one point of culmination to another. Thinking about temporality may also remind us that the outcome of a decision is unknown to entrepreneurs as they make them.

The life courses of the biographical subjects were not linear — and their biographical depiction should not be either. Supposedly non-decisive phases in the lives of entrepreneurs should not be contracted inappropriately in biographical accounts. The difference between narrated time and narrative time hints at temporal gaps and distortions that are present in the (self-)representation of biographical subjects as well as in our own construction of their life tales. We do not need to renounce them as a means of representation, but we may choose them consciously.

10. *(Self-)Representation*: The self-image of biographical subjects as well as their outside perception and depiction can be important dimensions of biography. This includes the (self-) representation of entrepreneurs within their country of origin, within an immigrant, religious, or local community, or on other levels. Such narratives of self-made men and women versus nouveaux riches, and tales of rise and decline represent unspoken biographies written long before biographers started their work.

Examining these narratives and the ways biographies and even the memories of the subjects have been written, rewritten, and overwritten by the subjects themselves, by family, contemporaries or successors — like some sort of palimpsest — prevents us from unconsciously borrowing for our own historiographical narrative. This might be a particular pitfall in cases where ego-documents — although

rare with businesspeople — exist and are made available to the researcher. They allow a rich and dense narration, they give coherent explanations for decisive moments that often are difficult to assess if written sources are missing and decisions were made only after oral deliberation. Thorough source critique can prevent biographers from overvaluing these instruments of self-historicization and from uncritically adopting the perspective of the person who ought to be the object of study.

Epistemological and Narrative Pitfalls

Understanding entrepreneur biographies as microhistories “of X” can provide us with various epistemological reminders. First of all, microhistory reminds us of the pitfalls of the biographical method, which ought to be not (only) about giving a life story. Biographies tend to individualize corporate decisions, to reiterate the self-perception of businesspeople and their posture of omnipresent dominance within the enterprise. Biographies run the risk of retroactively reinforcing hierarchies as they often neglect forms of cooperation, shared responsibility, and joint management. Scholarly biographies should never be like a saint’s legend, focused on a heroic and monomaniacal entrepreneur. Such people might exist, but in most cases, historical reality is more complicated.

Apart from the problems of macro- and micro-levels, microhistory reminds us also that family, kinship and enterprise, local and immigrant communities, as well as local, regional, national, and transnational fields of activity do not represent secluded and closed up islands. They are interconnected in manifold ways and on different levels. If there were functional relations, they do not resemble a one-way street and were neither evident to the agents nor clear to us.

The problem of (self)-representation reminds us that there are preexisting ideas of how to arrange accounts of entrepreneurs’ lives, ideas that may even have influenced them, and that may predetermine our way of “reading” them, as well as their successes and failures: the ideal of a dynastical order; the idea of preserving an enterprise: not only wealth in an abstract way but a specific ensemble of property rights; the later rationalization of early failures, which are justified by claiming learning effects, or by construing an acid test for the entrepreneurs’ ability to carry on and to make a new start; or, in contrast, complaints about allegedly irrational decisions, jeopardizing the enterprise or complicating generation change in later years.

Microhistory reminds us, finally, to avoid or at least handle with care common narrative patterns that are often inspired more by literature and proverbs than by scholarly evidence. Such narratives may help researchers to cope with the complexity of an entrepreneur's biography — but they tend to obscure more than they reveal. Kim Christian Priemel mentions at least four problematic topoi: “(a) social advancement from humble beginnings; (b) the ability to be a *homo universalis* [i.e., an all-round genius]; (c) the unity of man and work; and (d) individual frugality.”⁵²

These are often integrated into two master narratives that were — and sometimes still are today — common: The myth of the founder tends to boil down the reasons of success to only one factor — the temper of the entrepreneur; his cleverness, agility, and skills. Most often, this narrative is as monocausal as it is linear. Second, such founding myths are integrated into a generational sequence. The subsequent generation often gets moralized, and false historical necessities are constructed. As the personal qualities of the “creative destroyer” (Joseph Schumpeter) cannot be inherited, the “decline and fall” of a once prosperous enterprise seems inevitable.⁵³

Thomas Mann's novel *Die Buddenbrooks* (1901) provides the source for the name of the German variant of this tale of rise and fall, of decadence and punishment: The first generation founds and builds up the enterprise, the second generation secures and may expand the enterprise, but the third generation loses all and fails.⁵⁴ Proverbs from England (“Clogs to clogs in three generations”), Italy, China, and Japan seem to confirm this seemingly natural law, emphasized by the magic number of three. This fable is deeply moral: On the one hand, the sense of justice is engaged against inept heirs and attracts sympathy for the disappointed founder. On the other hand, many observers stress the exceptional nature of the founder and, at the same time, enjoy the triumph of mediocrity in the long run: By means of his incapable heirs, Icarus finally gets punished for his hubris. These observers and storytellers ignore the fact that there are often good reasons for a change in lifestyle, for organizational change and withdrawal from operating business, and, finally, for a shift from entrepreneurship to investment. These changes, even if primarily privately motivated, can be both economically rational and socially accepted.

To put it bluntly: If the narration is too coherent and linear, if the biographical subject is represented as a stereotypical “entrepreneur,”

52 For the following, see Kim C. Priemel, “Wider die Typologie: Entrepreneure, Familien und Manager — Flick 1912–1985,” in *Familienunternehmen im Rheinland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Netzwerke — Nachfolge — soziales Kapital*, ed. Susanne Hilger and Ulrich S. Soénius (Cologne, 2009), 139–58, 139–45; Kim C. Priemel, “Heldenepos und bürgerliches Trauerspiel: Unternehmensgeschichte im generationellen Paradigma,” in *Generation als Erzählung: Neue Perspektiven auf ein kulturelles Deutungsmuster*, ed. Björn Bohnenkamp (Göttingen, 2009), 107–28, 111–17, citation on 111.

53 Edward Gibbon's “History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” (1776–1789) delivered a long-lasting narrative that inspired historians to write hundreds of books about empires, world orders, and corporations with similar titles (“decline and fall of . . .”, “rise and fall of . . .”).

54 Dirk Schumann, “Buddenbrooks Revisited: The Firm and the Entrepreneurial Family in Germany during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” in *Authority and Control in Modern Industry: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Paul L. Robertson (London, 1999), 221–39.

fit to serve as a textbook example, we have probably overlooked something. This is the last reminder of the microhistorical approach. Its methodological framework fosters our intellectual openness and discourages us from telling easy tales of biographical success and failure.

Instead of a Conclusion

Biographies and group biographies (and the history of individual businesses) can and need to be studied in their own right. Nevertheless, the biographical approach includes the methodological problem of interpreting particular cases against the background of cultural, social, and economic processes. This exceeds the elementary demand for historical contextualization, which, by the way, is not simple at all. It is necessary to look for a surplus of insight that transcends the individual life course, regardless of the scope of the individual's agency: whether it is an immigrant entrepreneur, the miller Menocchio of Carlo Ginzburg's "The Cheese and the Worms," or the biographies of the great men and women who traditionally gather on the shelves of libraries and station bookshops.

It is helpful to understand biographies as microhistories of X, related to a reference value that has to be defined by the biographer. The microhistorical approach encourages us to choose X in an experimental way, putting aside presuppositions and obvious reference points: Relating the biography of Henry Ford to the history of automatization would only lead us to reproduce what we already know about him and the Tin Lizzy.

The flexible selection of methods and sources ensures the openness of the research process, so that existing theories (like globalization, bureaucratization, and managerial revolution) and seemingly timeless categories (like "family" or "enterprise") can be historicized in the individual case; the experimental character of microhistory may help to transcend them. The microhistorical approach can increase the historian's sensitivity to the analytical pluses of the biographical method, since biographies can radiate to different fields of research. Complexity is added not only to a limited area of observation, to the particular biography, but also to relevant theories and conceptions of business, economy and society, which unconsciously underlie our assessment of past and present reality.

Considering the case of immigrant entrepreneurship, at the center of this volume, biographies can relate to broader fields of migration and

society. They may help to explain how family structures and inter-generational relations are influenced by migration, and by a change of national, cultural, and social status; how bourgeois and middle-class culture get shaped; how experiences of individual migration and specific patterns of group migration produce comparative advantages; how these favor or afflict social advancement; how migration fosters cultural coherence and identities, and how it helps to disintegrate them; how religiousness and piety are affected; how globalization affects migration and vice versa; and so on. The biographies of immigrant entrepreneurs, therefore, can be “histor[ies] of the whole in all its particulars” (Hans Medick), relating people — via their economic activity — to their society of origin, migration process and new homeland. In this way, microhistory encourages us to increase the complexity of entrepreneur biographies. It leaves us the freedom and the responsibility to decide on the scales of the study and on our experimental perspectives.

Barbara W. Tuchman once admitted that when she used biographies as a skeleton in her writing, it was “less for the sake of the individual subject than as a vehicle for exhibiting an age, as in the case of Coucy in *A Distant Mirror*; or a country and its state of mind, as in the case of Speaker Reed and Richard Strauss in *The Proud Tower*; or a historic situation, as in the case of *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*.” She didn’t consider herself a biographer, but she occasionally used the genre and its methods as a form “to encapsulate history.” For her, biography was like a “prism of history,” evoking the idea of a modus of history that allows one to fan out the spectrum of insights contained in one single life.⁵⁵ In this same way, exhibiting an age, its culture and economy, its numerous practices and identities should be at the core of a biographical microhistory of X.

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55 Barbara W. Tuchman, “Biography as a Prism of History,” in *Biography as High Adventure: Life-writers Speak on Their Art*, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Amherst, MA, 1986), 93–103, 93 (originally published in 1979).