The First Italian Microhistory: Primo Levi and Postwar Representations of Alterity

Julia Claire Pucci
Yale University

Abstract: In the final chapter of his not-quite-autobiography, *Il sistema periodico*, Primo Levi claims that the work "È, o avrebbe voluto essere, una microstoria" (229), the implications of which are vast. According to Carlo Ginzburg, it is in this passage that "the word *microstoria* appears in Italian for the first time in an autonomous manner" ("Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It" 15). This article explores the microhistorical tenets manifest in Levi's writing, the history of the term itself, and *Italian microhistory's* ostensible ties to Italian neorealism. Indeed, the composition of *Il sistema periodico* represents an important moment in the progression of popular and scholarly representations of alterity, re-contextualizing Levi in a milieu of partisans and survivors keen on rewriting history.

Keywords: Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico*, Neorealism, Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Microhistory.

Acknowledging the considerable ambiguity of the genre applicable to *Il sistema periodico*, Levi writes:

> Il lettore, a questo punto, si sarà accorto da un pezzo che questo non è un trattato di chimica: la mia presunzione non giunge a tanto, 'ma voix est faible, et même un peu profane.' Non è neppure un'autobiografia, se non nei limiti parziali e simbolici in cui è un'autobiografia ogni scritto, anzi, ogni opera umana: ma storia in qualche modo è pure. È, o avrebbe voluto essere, una microstoria, la storia di un mestiere e delle sue sconfitte, vittorie e miserie, quale ognuno desidera raccontare quando sente prossimo a conchiudersi l'arco della propria carriera, e l'arte cessa di essere lunga (*SP* 229).

As the passage indicates, Levi's *Il sistema periodico* defies categorization in terms of genre. It is not a chemical treatise as its title vaguely suggests – and regardless, quoting Voltaire in a bout of pseudo-modesty, Levi insists that his voice is too weak and perhaps a bit too profane to write such a work anyway.[1] Nor, however, does *Il sistema periodico* fully realize its potential as an autobiography, at least not in the traditional sense. Rather, Levi maintains that the book is – or would have liked to be – *una microstoria*, the

implications of which are vast. Indeed, Carlo Ginzburg claims that this passage represents the first usage of the term "microstoria" in an autonomous manner ("Microhistory: Two or Three Things" 15). Levi's implementation of the term and the tenets it has come to denote not only anticipates the development of Italian microhistory, however. It moreover belies a constellation of postwar thinkers whose intellectual and personal interdependences run far deeper than hitherto understood.

In the following pages I shall be pursuing a number of lines of inquiry related to Levi's usage of the term *microstoria*, including the term's tenets, its history – especially at the time of *Il sistema periodico's* composition, and its ties to Italian neorealism. The first, and perhaps most daunting topic to address, however, is how best to define microhistory as it is understood today. Richard D. Brown writes, "What is a microhistory? There is no simple answer. Indeed the record of the past thirty years indicates that there are several kinds of microhistory, and that the scholars who have led the way have understood it variously (Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge: 10). That is to say, microhistory cannot be described as a school of thought per se, but rather as a methodology within the broader historical discipline. For the purposes of this essay, I shall primarily concern myself with the Italian strain of microhistory for its geographical, ideological, and temporal relevance to Levi's work. And indeed, even Italian microhistory demonstrates enough variation such that it is impossible to call it a unified school of thought.[2] Nonetheless, it is possible to address some basic tenets and objectives that hold true across the manifold implementations of microhistory, Italian or otherwise.

Microhistory, as the name suggests, demonstrably concerns itself with the scope and scale of a given historical inquiry. As Szijártó writes in *What is Microhistory?*, "Microhistory is… the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well defined smaller object, most often a single event, or 'a village community, a group of families, even an individual person'" (4). However, a microhistory does not function simply as biography or local(ized) history, nor can its description be relegated to that of a mere case study. On the contrary, "Microhistory… has an objective that is more far-reaching than that of a case study: microhistorians always look for the answers to 'great historical questions'… when studying small objects" (5). In other words, microhistory at its best ought

to function as an elaborate synecdoche in which a historical actor, community, or event stands to shed light on broader regional and/or global trends. In Microhistory and *the Histories of Everyday Life* Giovanni Levi, one of the founders of Italian microhistory, elaborates on this very point, writing:

> The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved… [P]henomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions (qtd. in Brewer: 97).

I will later address just how "microscopic observation" positions the historian to make broader claims – specifically in the praxis of Italian microhistory, but for now we can best explain the function of this tenet in terms of the microhistorian's asserted authority. Brown writes:

> By exploring a finite subject exhaustively (though not definitively), the microhistorian commands the evidence on that subject beyond challenge; so within that topic readers learn to accept… [the microhistorian's] authority. From this laboriously earned position of authority and trust the microhistorian is positioned to assert broader interpretive statements (16).

Of course, this approach functions on the implicit hope that by meticulously exploring the particular we are better immunized from a misguided generalization.

The final tenet of microhistory is the centrality of agency of the subject(s) themselves. As Giovanni Levi writes in *On Microhistory*:

> [Microhistory] has always centred on the search for a more realistic description of human behaviour, employing an action and conflict model of man's behavior in the world which recognizes his – relative – freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems (98).

Similarly, Szijártó writes:

> For microhistorians, people who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors (5).

Perhaps one of the more obvious critiques of a macrohistorical approach is the lack of agency attributed to common people, the masses most often understood as those affected by history, not makers of it. Trivellato explains, "macrohistory draws abundantly, if not exclusively, on secondary sources (ideally, but not always, written in multiple languages). Second, macrohistory tends to

unfold over many centuries, if not millennia, and often proceeds at considerable speed" (7). In such chronicles even historians of the best intensions must dabble in reductionist narrative strategies to represent those relegated to the lower rungs of society. Microhistory, however, seeks "not to write a history of the exercise of power, but to reconstruct the vision and experiences of those who were its subjects" (Brewer 100). As Brown writes, "microhistorical work… has sought to 'recapture' the hitherto obscure people and to give them voice. That, after all, is one of the purposes of the approach.

And by giving voice and agency to obscure people, we may develop respect or even admiration for our subjects" (13). This "respect" is largely achieved by the shift of focus or perspective necessitated by microhistorical methodology. Zalc and Bruttermann echo this point in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, writing, "The microhistorical level… alters perspectives from the point of view of the victims" (7).

In other words, the focus is oriented on those who are least likely to control the narrative of history. Italian microhistory, however, tends to take a slightly more particular approach, especially with regard to the protagonists chosen by its practitioners and, more generally, the objective of the research itself.

Though manifold strains of microhistory are, "motivated by a skepticism that often leads them to doubt the large generalizations of synthesis that, they suspect, may be oversimplified or reductionist" (Brown: 17), Italian microhistory takes this skepticism as a centerpiece of its praxis. As Trivellato observes:

> Italian microhistorians shared with French and German counterparts the conviction that to reveal phenomena obscured by received wisdom would invalidate the teleology of grand narratives. But they strove less to recover the everyday life of ordinary people than to employ the micro-scale of analysis in order to test the validity of macro-scale explanatory paradigms (5).

Another similarly compelling way to explain this objective of challenging macrohistorical narratives is to recognize that,

> A microhistorical approach systematically involves situating oneself within a broader whole and within relationships to other scales in order to understand the context of a particular case, reproducing "the range of the possible," and placing the emphasis on distortion of the general (Zalc & Bruttmann: 4).

In other words, Italian microhistory seeks to challenge

impressions (or illusions) of uniformity in the quotidian life of the masses. As a result of this ambition, practitioners of Italian microhistory tend to favor protagonists who occupy positions of alterity within their communities and sources that ostensibly defy hitherto accepted norms. Indeed, Italian microhistory is perhaps best characterized by its emphasis on a slightly abstruse concept attributed to Edoardo Grendi: the "'exceptional normal' that is, on extra-ordinary documents that – if subjected to the proper micro-analytical reading – could nonetheless illuminate broad trends" (qtd. in Trivellato 6). With this understanding of the particular's potential to shed light on the general, then, we return to Levi and his treatment – both explicit and implicit – of microhistory.

As we read in the previously cited passage, *Il sistema periodico* was intended as a microhistory "di un mestiere e delle sue sconfitte, vittorie e miserie" (*SP* 229), that is, a microhistory of chemistry as a trade. Of course, the narrative of *Il sistema periodico* suggests otherwise – it is not a microhistory of the trade per se, but rather of the trade's practitioner: a chemist. The chemist is not only the object of study in *Il sistema periodico*, however, but also the narrative voice. This centrality of the chemist holds true even for the works of the allegorical and fictional sort. As we explore Levi's free association of stories with each chapter's title element, we must remain aware that though the narrative voice may change, the author does not. Even in the works of fiction – chapters such as "Piombo," "Mercurio," and arguably "Zolfo," and "Titanio," – we are reading a chemist's creative treatment of the periodic table. Indeed, it is as if these interludes function as primary source documents, offering windows onto creative endeavors of the microhistorical subject: the chemist, or Levi himself. Therefore, we may conclude that Levi's "microhistory" is one of a chemist – and importantly, a Jewish chemist subject to the woes of Mussolini's regime. The exceptional nature of Levi's chemist emphasizes the ways in which alterity stands to disrupt the norms of a trade's practice. As Levi recounts in *Il sistema periodico*, the predictable professional route was not available to him as a Jew. And as Trivellato has observed of Italian microhistories:

> The protagonists of these global microhistories (as we may call them) are individuals who embody geographical and cultural dislocation. Not surprisingly, they often come from minority groups that were bound to be on the move and played a role as linguistic and cultural interpreters; hence the recurrence of Jewish protagonists (16).

That said, Levi's ostensible exploration of microhistory goes far beyond this meta-narrative label named in "Carbonio." Indeed, some of the more striking microhistorical elements of Levi's work are never explicitly named.

In previous passages I discuss microhistory's utility as a tool to challenge macrohistorical narratives through its endeavor to retrieve hitherto understudied or disregarded topics. In short, it is a methodology designed to consider the ranges of the possible in the writing of history. And without doubt, this intention of retrieving alternative narratives features quite prominently in "Oro." Though Levi chronicles his short-lived tenure as a partisan and his subsequent capture by Fascist forces in this chapter, the greatest revelations gleaned from these experiences have little to do with strategic insight or tactical prowess. Rather, Levi's most notable realizations concern themselves with altered perspectives and the construction of alternative narratives. Moreover, it cannot go unmentioned that the opening of "Oro" itself anticipates Levi's ultimate microhistory: that of the carbon atom found in the final chapter of *Il sistema periodico*. Speaking of his time in Milan, Levi writes of his younger self:

> [F]antasticavo di scrivere la saga di un atomo di carbonio, per far capire ai popoli la poesia solenne, nota solo ai chimici, della fotosintesi clorofilliana: ed in fatto l'ho poi scritta, ma molti anni più tardi, ed è la storia con cui questo libro si conclude (131).

In this passage we find Levi imagining how a single atom could stand to shed light on the chemical process by which carbon dioxide and water are converted into sugar and oxygen: photosynthesis.

Indeed, Levi's narrative of photosynthesis prefigures his evolving sensitivity to the perspective from which history is written. As he writes of himself and his companions, "[n]el giro di poche settimane ognuno di noi maturò, più che in tutti i vent'anni precedenti" (133). It is with this maturity that Levi develops a more subtle understanding of the past, namely by way of a burgeoning skepticism of his education under Fascist rule. He writes of his newly-found teachers:

> Uscirono dall'ombra uomini che il fascismo non aveva piegati, avvocati, professori ed operai, e riconoscemmo in loro i nostri maestri, quelli di cui avevamo inutilmente cercato fino allora la dottrina nella Bibbia, nella chimica, in montagna. Il fascismo li aveva ridotti al silenzio per vent'anni, e ci spiegarono che il fascismo non era soltanto un malgoverno buffonesco e improvvido, ma il negatore della giustizia (133).

Much akin to the practitioners of microhistory, Levi is favoring the voices of those relegated to positions of alterity within their own communities, of those hitherto silenced in the shadow of Fascism. Proffering a unique perspective that offers insight into the plurality of experiences under Fascism, Levi elevates a narrative of what would later be considered an "exceptional normal."

Effectively, he is challenging the impression of a homogeneous society under Mussolini's regime. Speaking of this marginalized group that had exited from the shadows, Levi writes: "Ci dissero che la nostra insofferenza beffarda non bastava… ma non ci insegnarono come si fabbrica una bomba, né come si spara un fucile" (133). Indeed, Levi's newfound teachers understood that to resist the "menzogna sistematica e calcolata" (133) of the Fascist regime demanded a resistance that went beyond physical force.

Rather, resistance required an augmentation of consciousness, of historical awareness. He continues:

> Ci parlavano di sconosciuti: Gramsci, Salvemini, Gobetti, i Rosselli; chi erano? Esisteva dunque una seconda storia, una storia parallela a quella che il liceo ci aveva somministrata dall'alto? In quei pochi mesi convulsi cercammo invano di ricostruire, di ripopolare il vuoto storico dell'ultimo ventennio, ma quei nuovi personaggi rimanevano "eroi", come Garibaldi e Nazario Sauro, non avevano spessore né sostanza umana (134).

Coyly, Levi openly wonders if perhaps there exists a second history – an alternative to that which dominated his own formal education. He answers this question implicitly through his depiction of those who rejected Fascist society and the *sconosciuti* of whom they spoke, successfully undermining the narrative set forward by Mussolini *dall'alto*. In essence, these passages function as a doubling of microhistorical narrative: on the first level, the young Levi offers an account of those who experienced acute forms of alterity under Fascism, the "uomini che il fascismo non aveva piegati." On the second level, these men disseminate narratives of the *sconosciuti*, the unknown actors from the time before the war.

Beyond these narratives, however, there remains an extra-textual element worthy of consideration: the author. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that these passages are not only a doubling, but a tripling of microhistorical narrative when one recognizes that beyond the extant strata of the narrative there remains the creator of it: the authorial Levi who writes of the young Levi and his band of partisan compatriots, themselves persons who occupy the

fringes of society. Within each narrative level of the text one can extrapolate a resolve to give voice to those previously forgotten by history, a key intention of Italian microhistorical study. Moreover, this series of passages tacitly emphasizes the microhistorical value of portraying historical actors with a depth such that readers are positioned to theorize conclusions beyond a narrative of the actors' deeds.

As Levi laments the lack of human substance attributed to the characters of his education, he implicitly critiques the reductive nature of certain historical accounts, suggesting that truth content is diminished when we omit complicating factors for the sake of a clear narrative. This desire to problematize historical narrative evokes the slogan for microhistory once proposed by Jacques Revel, "why make things simple when one can make them complicated?" (qtd. in G. Levi On Microhistory: 114). That is to say, why offer a simple historical narrative when one is equipped to relate a narrative of far more nuanced, if not outright contradictory factors? Beyond the problematization of history through the restoration of alternative narratives or the spaces of the possible (Zalc & Bruttmann: 4), it is moreover feasible to read these passages through the lens of another key microhistorical trope: the rejection of rhetoric. After all, a pronounced disdain for rhetoric is a key characteristic of Italian microhistory. Trivellato writes:

> In highlighting the Italian character of this circle [of microhistorians], [Edoardo] Grendi noted the existence of a common "style" marked by a strong theoretical awareness and by a rejection of idealism in philosophy, ideological dualism in politics, as well as rhetorical pomposity and grand syntheses in historical writing (5).

Certainly, this rejection of idealist philosophy and rhetorical pomposity easily accounts for microhistorians' skepticism of macrohistorical narratives. In certain terms, it is the implicit foundation of microhistory's role in challenging such versions of history. And clearly, it bears a resemblance to Levi's own rejection of rhetoric. As readers ought remember, Levi's skepticism of the Fascist historical narrative prescribed *dall'alto* is by no means the only instance in which Levi expresses his wariness of rhetoric.

In the chapter "Zinco," Levi writes of Professor P's (whom Levi unabashedly holds in high esteem) disdain for rhetoric. Levi contends that it was solely by virtue of his rejection of rhetoric that he remained immune from the lures of Fascism – "per questo, e solo per questo, era anche antifascista" (*SP* 23). Moreover, this insistence

on maintaining a well refined sense of skepticism in response to rhetoric is not only localized to the characters of *Il sistema periodico* itself. Rather, Levi implicitly establishes and exercises the agency of the reader, urging his readership to remain wary of rhetorical flourishes and to avoid accepting reductionist narratives simply because they are commanded to do so. That is to say, a key extra-textual element of *Il sistema periodico* is the agency of the reader.

This emphasis on the intellectual involvement of the reader dovetails with an oft overlooked aspect of microhistory: the reader's role in the composition and reception of microhistorical narratives. Giovanni Levi observes that the reader is never a *tabula rasa* (On Microhistory: 109), and thus ought not be treated as such. As a result, microhistory endeavors to eschew narrative strategies that stand to obfuscate the writer's methodology, allowing the reader to engage with the processes of research itself. G. Levi continues:

> [A] characteristic [of microhistory] is that of incorporating into the main body of the narrative the procedures of research itself, the documentary limitations, techniques of persuasion and interpretive constructions. This method clearly breaks with the traditional assertive, authoritarian form of discourse adopted by historians who present reality as objective (110).

Much akin to Levi's cherished classroom experience described in "Zinco," the emphasis in microhistorical narrative is not on the conclusions yielded, but rather the process by which conclusions may be gleaned. Borrowing from P. Levi's language, microhistory, like "la chimica di P." does not endeavor to offer "la chiave del Vero" (*SP* 30); instead, it seeks to illuminate methodologies by which a series of truths may be deciphered. The readers must be privy to the process of methodological development rather than have it prescribed for (or hidden from) them. Ginzburg, too, echoes this point in "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It." He writes:

> [Italian microhistory is] based on the definite awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are constructed and not given: the identification of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analyzed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader (32).

The point of this praxis – of delineating the methodological processes – is to keep the reader fully apprised of the inner workings and potential limitations of the microhistorian's argument. It is the antithesis of "the traditional assertive, authoritarian form of discourse adopted by historians who present reality as objective"

and the ostensible methodological solution to P. Levi's critique of history offered *dall'alto*. As G. Levi contends, it is by virtue of this narrative strategy that, "[t]he reader [of microhistory] is involved in a sort of dialogue and participates in the whole process of constructing the historical argument" (On Microhistory: 110). Of course, this "dialogue" is somewhat of an illusion – after all, the reader cannot interpose her words in the text itself. Rather, the reader realizes her agency in the differentiation and deciphering of fact and opinion. Though she may not be a co-author in the text, she is the judge of its content, of its efficacy of argument. To rewrite P. Levi's well-cited words from our perspective as readers of microhistory: *i giudici siamo noi*.

Beyond these parallels, perhaps the most spectacular microhistorical element of *Il sistema periodico* is the (microhi)story of the carbon atom. We have already learned some of the ostensible intentions behind the composition of this episode, namely through Levi's own words in "Oro." As I have previously discussed, microhistory at its best functions as an elaborate synecdoche in which the analysis of a hitherto overlooked subject illuminates broader historical trends. And that is precisely what Levi does in the episode from "Carbonio": he seeks to elucidate the process of photosynthesis through the documentation of one of its smallest parts, a single carbon atom. This intention well mirrors both the objective and composition of microhistorical works, albeit in a fictionalized account. At its most ambitious – and arguably its most presumptuous – however, microhistory ventures to offer yet a broader commentary by way of its findings. "As Lepore argues, microhistorians often believe that the examination of their case can be 'an allegory for… the culture as a whole.' They treat individuals as a means of 'explaining the culture,' and not in order to celebrate the singularity of their subject" (Brown: 14). Clearly, Lepore is not lauding this practice; he is merely acknowledging its occasional incidence in the realms of the microhistorical methodology. That said, it is worth exploring Levi's own forays into allegory through his account of the carbon atom.

As readers ought reasonably suspect, it is unlikely that Levi included the chronicle of "Carbonio" simply to make people understand the "solemn poetry of photosynthesis." Certainly, Levi does achieve this objective in offering new perspectives on

photosynthesis; though, throughout the chapter – and especially in the final lines – it seems a relatively minor point in a far more profound allegorical commentary. As Levi writes in the introduction to the (microhi)story of the carbon atom:

> Al carbonio, elemento della vita, era rivolto il mio primo sogno letterario, insistentemente sognato in un'ora e in un luogo nei quali la mia vita non valeva molto: ecco, volevo raccontare la storia di un atomo di carbonio (*SP* 230).

This passage offers some notable clues to Levi's true intentions for this unorthodox conclusion to his not-quite autobiography.

Of course, the time and place to which Levi is referring is the above cited episode recounted in "Oro." What is noteworthy here, however, is that the emphasis is not on communicating the process of photosynthesis, but rather on carbon as the element of life – and Levi's own worth as a life. Photosynthesis, though referenced and candidly cited several times in the narrative, serves primarily as a vehicle – as the literal and metaphorical point of entry to the true concern at hand: life. As every atom of carbon "entra e rientra nel ciclo della vita, attraverso la porta stretta della fotosintesi" (236), so too do the carbon atom's interactions in photosynthesis function as Levi's narrative device to compose an allegory of life. With this in mind, it is possible to read the final sentence of *Il sistema periodico* with new clarity. As Levi describes the final phase of the carbon atom's journey into a human cell:

> Questa cellula appartiene ad un cervello, e questo è il mio cervello, di me che scrivo, e la cellula in questione, ed in essa l'atomo in questione, è addetta al mio scrivere, in un gigantesco minuscolo gioco che nessuno ha ancora descritto (*SP* 237).

From carbon comes both the *primo sogno letterario* and the organic, mechanical ability to realize it. In light of the allegory woven throughout this chapter, however, it is moreover possible to appreciate implications of this passage that far transcend Levi's immediate experience. With the understanding that this saga of the carbon atom is intended as a synecdoche for all life, an ostensible significance of the *gigantesco minuscolo gioco che nessuno ha ancora descritto* comes into clear focus. It too is life: gigantic because it is everything, minuscule because we can intuit its elements down to the atomic level.

Remarkably, it seems as though Levi implements all of the fundamental tenets of Italian microhistory in *Il sistema periodico*, a consideration that offers a far richer reading of the text. Then

again, I have hitherto largely omitted a crucial point that deeply problematizes this observation: Levi's usage of the term *microstoria* predates Italian microhistory by nearly half a decade. Levi writes "Carbonio" of *Il sistema periodico* in 1970,[3] whereas Carlo Ginzburg's seminal *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* was not available for public consumption until 1976.[4] That being so, it is lamentably anachronistic to label Levi's case studies as examples of Grendi's "exceptional normal." Though Levi's commentaries may embody the spirit of this concept, they are not implementations of the concept itself. With these temporal revelations in mind, it appears that an alternative interpretation of Levi's *gigantesco minuscolo gioco che nessuno ha ancora descritto* could be microhistory itself. Levi is not mimicking microhistorical methodology as we now know it; rather, he is anticipating it.

The composition of *Il sistema periodico* on the cusp of Italian microhistory's emergence is a co-incidence that has remained largely uninterrogated, though not unnoticed. Indeed, it was Ginzburg himself who first remarked on Levi's spectacular timing, writing on the genesis of Italian microhistory,

> Microhistory, microhistoria, microhistoire:from which of these independent traditions did the Italian microstoria derive? On the strictly terminological level… the answer would seem to be clear: from the French microhistoire. I am thinking first of all of the splendid translation by Italo Calvino published in 1967 of Les Fleurs bleues [I fiori blu]; second, of a passage in Primo Levi in which, to the best of my knowledge, the word microstoria appears in Italian for the first time in an autonomous manner ("Microhistory: Two or Three Things" 15).

The passage to which Ginzburg is referring, of course, is that of "Carbonio" in *Il sistema periodico*. He continues:

> Primo Levi probably encountered it [the word microhistory] in Calvino's Italian translation, which he must have checked against Queneau's original text. Knowledge of the translation of Les Fleurs bleues seems certain, given the close relationship that united Levi to Calvino (15).

So it seems that *microstoria* found its place in the Italian vernacular by way of two literary novels: first by translation (Calvino, 1967), and then by appropriation (Levi, 1975). The story, however, does not end here. As Ginzburg recounts:

> Shortly after its [microhistory's] appearance in The Periodic Table, the word microhistory entered historical usage, losing, as often happens, its original negative connotation.[5] Giovanni Levi… was undoubtedly behind this transposition (15).

As the adage goes, the plot thickens. I have previously noted that Giovanni Levi, like Carlo Ginzburg, is widely recognized as one of the key proponents of Italian microhistory. What I have yet to address, however, is that he was a cousin of Primo Levi (Ginzburg: 15).[6] Lamentably, there exists paltry record of a relationship in adulthood. However, it does appear that Giovanni Levi did in fact begin using the term *microstoria* shortly after the publication of *Il sistema periodico*. As Ginzburg attests: "I believe that I heard of microhistory for the first time from Giovanni Levi in 1977 or 1978, and I adopted this previously unheard-of word without asking what it meant literally" (10). Then again, this timeline proffered by Ginzburg is somewhat perplexing: after all, *Il formaggio e i vermi,* the exemplum of Italian microhistory, was published in 1976. How is this possible? In the following passages I hope to untangle the curious and complicated origin of Italian microhistory, revealing an intellectual landscape in post-war Italy that sought to reinvent the portrayal of human experience.

In the case of Italian microhistory, the methodology predates the label. Osvaldo Raggio writes in *Treccani*:

> L'idea [di microstoria] era forse nell'aria, come ha tentato di dimostrare Carlo Ginzburg (1994); ma in Italia questa nuova tendenza storiografica è comparsa per la prima volta sotto la voce 'microanalisi storica' in alcuni lavori di Edoardo Grendi (L'antropologia economica, 1972) e di Giovanni Levi (Famiglie contadine nella Liguria del Settecento, 1973) all'inizio degli anni Settanta.

Beyond the texts delineated above, Ginzburg's *I benandanti: stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (1966) similarly illustrates this burgeoning methodology, effectively anticipating the style of argumentation later realized in *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Trivellato). In light of these earlier publications, it appears that *microanalisi storica* was the precursor to Italian microhistory in the historical discipline. Calvino's translation, P. Levi's appropriation, and G. Levi's implementation of the term *microstoria*, then, were merely events that contributed to a rebranding of an already extant methodology. Furthermore, this methodology was preceded by yet another documentary concern in Italy following the Second World War. And remarkably, the true origins of Italian microhistory appear to reside not in the written word, but on the silver screen. Angela Dalle Vacche writes:

> Before and after the fascist period, Italian cinema splits between two major

> impulses (the recording of the daily and a fascination with the historical), two scales (the documentary and the operatic) and two allegorical extremes (the anonymous and the monumental) (Review of *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* 120).

These dichotomies well mirror several essential features of modern microhistorical praxis. The bifurcated impulse to document the quotidian and reevaluate the historical prefigures the dialogue between micro and macro analyses essential to microhistorical study. Or, as Brown observes, "Like ethnographers, they use the micro study to discover variations in general patterns of behavior, or to reveal larger [historical] patterns" (4). The two scales of the documentary and operatic reflect the narrative interplay of microhistory. As Ginzburg writes of his own book, "[*Il formaggio e i vermi*] does not restrict itself to the reconstruction of an individual event; it narrates it" (23). Finally, the two allegorical extremes of the anonymous and the monumental anticipate the paradox of Grendi's "exceptional normal." Indeed, these dichotomies that so closely resemble the intellectual and ideological trappings of microhistory formed the backbone of cinema's answer to Fascism: Italian neorealism.

Shiel writes in *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City:*

> Neorealism is [...] a historically- # and culturally-specific manifestation of the general aesthetic quality known as "realism" which is characterized by a disposition to the ontological truth of the physical, visible world. (1)[7]

This "realism" captured in films such as *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), and *La terra trema* (1948) attempted to rewrite the hitherto narrative monopoly of Fascist rhetoric and propaganda, constituting "a part of a larger post-war cultural movement intent on ending the ideological and aesthetic obfuscation of real, everyday life…and as a way of recuperating the harsh experiences of the Second World War" (Brewer 101).

As is evidenced in several early neorealist films, it both reflected a paradigm shift in the collective Italian psyche and established the ideological heritage of Italian microhistory.

The first major film released in the wake of the Second World War, Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta,* foregrounds several seminal features that would form the basis of Italian microhistory. First and foremost, Rossellini sidesteps the bombastic grand-narratives of Allied victory to focus on a group that had occupied a position of alterity for much of the war: partisan fighters. As Marcus has

commented, "The neorealist resolve 'to plant the camera in the midst of real life, in the midst of all that struck our astonished eyes' enabled filmmakers and their audiences to see an Italy that Mussolini had concealed for two full decades" (xiv). Not only are the protagonists partisan fighters, however. They moreover include those generally portrayed as neutral or inconsequential in retellings of history: women and children. And as Brewer writes, "all [schools of microhistory] concern themselves with the lives, beliefs and practices of those who had previously been 'hidden' from history" (90). Indeed, it is similarly worthy of note that even though the partisans portrayed end on the "victorious side" of the war, several of the key protagonists do not survive Nazi occupation to bear witness to their own experiences.[8] Moreover, the temporal scale of *Roma, città aperta* focuses on a relatively short period of the war. Marcus writes:

> The term "chronicle" has been applied again and again to describe the experiences of a group of Resistance fighters, set in Rome between the onset of the Nazi occupation in September 1943 and the Allied liberation of the city in June 1944 (Marcus: 35).

Perhaps most notably, however, *Roma, città aperta* exhibits a rejection of rhetoric that would later become central to the "Italian character" of Italian microhistory described by Grendi.

Marcus opens her first case study in *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* with a telling indictment delivered by the Gestapo chief, Bergmann, to the imprisoned Manfredi: "You Italians, whatever party you belong to, are all addicted to rhetoric. But I'm quite sure that you will see things my way before dawn" (33). She continues:

> Bergmann is proven twice wrong, both in his certainty that Manfredi will break under torture and in his characterization of all Italians as creatures of rhetoric whose deeds will never match their extravagant promises… [and] it extends to all of Fascist Italy, whose penchant for rhetoric was so well exploited by that archjournalist and manipulator of headlines, Benito Mussolini (33).

Marcus has remarked that "neorealism became the repository of partisan hopes for social justice in the postwar Italian state" (xiv), and a key facet of realizing this social justice meant prioritizing truth content over rhetorical flourish. In response to this shift in narrative priorities, neorealist cinema has been characterized as "an aesthetics of rejection" (qtd. in Shiel 2). This observation underscores a paradigm shift regarding the role of rhetoric in narrative and visual witness bearing and storytelling. Marcus argues:

> By linking Manfredi's imminent martyrdom to Bergmann's indictment of Italian rhetorical excesses, Rossellini makes the partisan's death an expiation of that cultural weakness, and a prophecy of a new national style free of empty bombast (33).

Indeed, Rossellini's prophecy seems to have come to fruition. The rejection of rhetoric is manifest in P. Levi's work and microhistorical methodology. Moreover, the commitment to anti-rhetorical-realism is apparent in the post-war work of "writers such as Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, photographers such as Mario De Biasi and Frederico Patellani, and… architects such as Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi" (Shiel: 2). Yet, Rossellini's cinematic reflection of Italy's ideological reinvention post-Fascism and anticipation of microhistorical methodology does not end with *Roma, città aperta*.

Released in 1946, Rossellini's *Paisà* similarly captured the burgeoning zeal to reclaim and rewrite the Italian narrative of the Second World War. Indeed, Brewer has argued that, "Rossellini's *Paisà* was one of the first works of Italian microhistory" (101). As I have previously noted, Italian microhistory seeks to challenge the reductionist teleologies characteristic of macrohistorical narratives.

This is certainly the case in *Paisà*, of which Brewer writes:

> Rossellini's film takes one grand narrative, the progressive liberation of Italy by the British and Americans in 1943-4, which frames six stories set in different regions of Italy from Sicily to the Po Valley. The stories reduce the conflict to a human scale, yet in doing so they undercut or rewrite the positive story of liberation, showing how time's arrow is often diverted (101).

Indeed, Rossellini systematically problematizes the narrative of the Allied invasion and subsequent liberation, exposing the quotidian toil, hardship, and confusion that came with the presence of multiple occupying armies. Beyond the challenging of macrohistorical narrative, however, *Paisà* furthermore establishes its own documentary limitations through its camera work, anticipating the strategy taken by microhistorians to render the reader active in the process of narrative construction. Brewer writes:

> The viewer is made conscious of cinematic artifice – conscious of the presence of the camera – but also aware of Rossellini's curious sense of detachment. Throughout there is a tension between veracity and verisimilitude, between the patterns of everyday life and the forces of larger history (101).

Again, the emphasis is placed on the process by which conclusions may be gleaned, not on conclusions yielded, a practice in direct opposition to baseless rhetoric.

Beyond Rossellini's films, De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* anticipates

yet another facet of *Italian microhistoy*: the interplay of scale, perspective, and synecdoche. Though the film ostensibly follows the story of one man, Antonio Ricci, and his struggle to support his family, De Sica implicitly suggests that it is a synecdochic portrayal of Ricci's socio-economic class. The film opens with a large group of men gathered around an employment officer. Ricci's name is called with a job offer, and though his joy is palpable, the viewer remains acutely aware of his exceptional status: many more remain unemployed.

This episode reflects Ginzburg's comment that, "[the] anomaly implies the norm (whereas the opposite is not true)" ("Some Queries Addressed to Myself" 93). Moreover, *Ladri di biciclette* exploits the perceptual tension between the particular trials of the Ricci family and the general state of economic strife in Italy. For example, as viewers sympathize with the family's sacrifice of dowry bedsheets for a bicycle, a camera-pan of the pawn shop shows many more bedsheets likely forfeited under similar circumstances.

In microhistorical terms, the entire narrative of *Ladri di biciclette* functions as what would later be called an "exceptional normal" case. Viewers are reoriented through the particular case of the Ricci family to draw broader conclusions on the state of Italian society.

Scola has remarked that, "Neorealism, as the artistic expression of a historical period represents an important revolutionary moment, not only of cinema, but of Italian thought" (qtd. in Marcus xv). Indeed, this seems not to be an overstatement. The end of the Second World War saw not only regime change but the emergence of new authors and auteurs. Notwithstanding the fact that Italian neorealism may appear somewhat far removed from the heyday of microhistorical publications,[9] the early microhistorians were indeed part of the same milieu. In "Some Queries Addressed to Myself" Ginzburg writes:

> I decided three things: that I wanted to be a historian; that I wanted to study witchcraft trials; that what I wanted to study was not the persecution of witchcraft, but the victims of persecution – the women and men accused of being witches and sorcerers…But there was another element, which I did not realize until many years later: in the emotional identification with the victims of persecution, and in the impulse to study them, there was an unconscious projection of my Jewish identity, which the persecution [during the Second World War] had reinforced (90)[10].

Giovanni Levi acknowledges similar formative experiences in "Il piccolo, il grande e il piccolo."

> Io penso che un altro elemento della mia formazione abbia contato moltissimo nei miei rapporti con la microstoria: quello che mi stupiva di più è come io abbia avuto delle esperienze che non mi avevano stupito, esperienze che raccontate dagli storici sono stupefacenti – per esempio la guerra, il fascismo, l'antisemitismo, ecc. (216)

Though it has been alluded to across popular and scholarly writings, it bears repeating that many of the neorealists had experienced life at the margins of society during Fascism. "'We made Open City,' wrote Sergio Amidei in 1947, 'under the impression, the suggestion, and the influence of what we had just lived through'" (qtd. in Marcus 36). And the same can be said of the early microhistorians like G. Levi and Ginzburg: in writing histories of those relegated to the margins of society, they were really telling stories of their own alterity. Chang has written that "one important yet overlooked approach to reading *Il sistema periodico* is as testimonial literature about the history of Otherness in twentieth-century Italy – a history that has for the most part gone ignored" ("Chemical Contaminations" 544). While this is certainly true, I hope this essay demonstrates that *Il sistema periodico* not only alludes to a history of Otherness in twentieth-century Italy. It moreover represents an important moment in the progression of popular and scholarly representations of alterity.

Notes

[1] Mirna Cicioni writes of Levi's citation, "Il secondo verso del primo canto del poema satirico *La Pucelle d'Orléans* di Voltaire (Vous m'ordonnez de célébrer des saints: / Ma voix est foible, et même un peu profane) non è tradotto, e la fonte della citazione resta ignota alla maggior parte dei lettori, a meno che essi non leggano la relativa nota dell'autore nell'edizione scolastica o facciano ricerche elettroniche. Ma anche i lettori incapaci di risalire alla fonte, vedendosi direttamente interpellati dalle prime parole, sanno che attraverso il terzo interlocutore, chiunque questi sia, l'io narrante parla a loro, e riconoscono la funzione autoironica della citazione, che sembra svalutare tutta la rete dei significati (storici, autobiografici, scientifici, letterari) del *Sistema Periodico* prima dell'ultimo volo narrativo e autoreferenziale" ("Parole esportate" 59).

[2] Trivellato writes in "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?", "By everyone's account, Italian microhistorians never amounted to a unified school of thought" (5).

[3] Though Einaudi publishes *Il sistema periodico* in 1975, Levi offers 1970 as the year of composition of "Carbonio."

[4] According to Brown, "Effectively, the term 'microhistory' was invented

by Italian historians of the early modern period, first winning international acclaim with Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller" "Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge"* 11. As I will demonstrate later in the text, however, this history of the term "microhistory" is reductive.

[5] The word "microhistory" floated around in multiple languages before entering into Italian. However, it generally referred to local and biographical histories that were decidedly regarded as unserious (Ginzburg 11-12).

[6] Anissimov claims that G. and P. Levi were related through the Vitale Della Torre lineage, the same maternal lineage recounted in "Argon" (*Tragedy of an Optimist* 16).

[7] As to the technical attributes of Italian neorealism, Shiel continues: "This was typified by a preference for location filming, the use of nonprofessional actors, the avoidance of ornamental *mise-end-scène*, a preference for natural light, a freely-moving documentary style of photography, a non-interventionist approach to film directing, and an avoidance of complex editing and other post-production processes likely to focus attention on the contrivance of the film image" (1).

[8] A pregnant Pina is gunned down at the midway point of the film, Manfredi does not survive the night of torture at the hands of the Gestapo, and Don Pietro is shot dead by a firing squad.

[9] The academic journal *Quaderni storici* (particularly between 1976 and 1990) and the book series "Microstorie" (published by Giulio Einaudi from 1981 to 1991) were their primary publication venues. (Trivellato 4)

[10] Well over a decade earlier, *The New York Times* published the words: "Strangely, for a man acclaimed as a born detective, Ginzburg says he failed to perceive the link between these family traumas and his choice of hidden heretics and witches as prime subjects of his research, until it was pointed out by a fellow historian some 20 years ago. 'Freud would have said the fact that I overlooked the connection indicates how deep and important it really was,' he says with a laugh" (Kandell).

Works Cited

Anissimov, Myriam. *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*. Trans. Steve Cox. London: Aurum, 1998. Print.

Brewer, John. "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life." *Cultural and Social History*, 7.1 (2010): 87-109. JSTOR. Web.

Brown, Richard D. "Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge." *Journal of the Early Republic* 23.1 (2003): 1-20. JSTOR. Web.

Chang, Natasha V. "Chemical Contaminations: Allegory and Alterity

in Primo Levi's 'Il Sistema Periodico.'" *Italica* 83.3-4 (2006): 543-562. JSTOR. Web.
Cicioni, Mirna. "Parole esportate e lettori (im)perfetti: echi di altre lingue nei testi di Levi." *Italianistica Ultraiectina* 8 (2014): 51-61. Web.
Dalle Vacche, Angela. "SubStance." Review of *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. 19.61 (1990): 120-122. Print.
De Sica, Vittorio. *Ladri di biciclette*. Produzioni De Sica (PDS), 1948.
Ginzburg, Carlo. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It." *Critical Inquiry*. Trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi. 20.1 (1993): 10-35. JSTOR. Web.
_____. "Some Queries Addressed to Myself." *Premi Balzan 2010* (Milan), now in *Cromohs* 18 (2013): 90-122. Web.
Kandell, Jonathan. "Was the World Made Out of Cheese?" *The New York Times Magazine* 17 (Nov. 1991): 6006045. Web.
Levi, Giovanni. "Il piccolo, il grande e il piccolo." *Meridiana* 10 (1990): 211-234. JSTOR. Web.
_____ and Peter Burke. "On Microhistory." *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 2nd ed. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2001, 97-119. Print.
Levi, Primo. *Il sistema periodico*. Torino: Einaudi, 1994. Print.
Magnusson, Sigurour Gylfi and István Szíjártó. *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice.* New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.
Marcus, Millicent. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987. Print.
Raggio, Osvaldo. "Microstoria e Microstorie." *Treccani*, 2013. Web.
Rossellini, Roberto. *Paisà*. Organizzazione Film Internazionali (OFI), 1946.
_____. *Roma, città aperta*. Excelsa Film, Minerva Film, 1945. Shiel, Mark. *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*. New York: Wallflower, 2006. Print.
Trivellato, Francesca. "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?" *California Italian Studies* 2.1 (2011): 1-26. EScholarship. Web.
_____. "Re: Microstoria, Neorealism, and Primo Levi." Message to Julia Pucci. 9 September 2018. E-mail.
Zalc, Claire and Tal Bruttmann. *Microhistories of the Holocaust*. Oxford: Berghan Books, 2016. Print.