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Amelang on Magnússon, 'Archive, Slow Ideology and Egodocuments as Microhistorical Autobiography: Potential History'

This is a difficult book to describe, much less assess. The overloaded title suggests that the author has much to say, and that he presents much of his message as deliberately unconventional comes as little surprise. What is more, much of the text is autobiographical in character, or at least reports and reflects on the author's own experience as a historian. This follows from, or at least fits in well with the author's view of history as a means of obtaining greater awareness of self on the part of the historian (e.g., p. 17). The tone is personal, even confessional throughout, and the repeated references to the author's own experience as well as (at least initially) the history of his own family fit in well with overall autobiographical cast of the work.

In my view the first of the book's two major strengths is its effort to probe the actual practice of microhistory in several directions. Most interesting by far is the "non-autobiography" that occupies the middle pages of the book. This consists of a series of photos of partially identified individuals on whom the author comments one by one. The presentations note distinctive features of their personae and their location (so to speak) within local society, mostly in the city of Reykjavík. Social margins are at the forefront, and the reader is treated to a colorful (albeit in black and white) panorama of local inhabitants in a removed and largely undated past.

The second plus of the book is its focus on Iceland. I realize that those like me who know little of that country's history have only ourselves to blame for our ignorance. Still, the availability in English of a work that conveys a sense of the strong tradition of first-person writing produced in that linguistic and literary sphere is clearly a welcome addition to the growing corpus of studies of European autobiography. The conjunction of photographic portraits and autobiographical or
quasi-autobiographical statements conveys a strong sense of social cohesion leavened by individual and familial singularity. At the same time, enigma presides over the entire text. Identifications are brief and contained, as are the contexts in which individuals all too briefly appear. This reader at least was always hoping for more news about the newcomers on virtually every page.

These strengths are offset by at least two missed opportunities. For a book devoted to microhistory, there is relatively little discussion of the approach itself. Its origins, offshoots, and departures receive virtually no mention. (There are two brief references to Carlo Ginzburg; the other two founding fathers of microstoria, Giovanni Levi and the late Edoardo Grendi, appear nowhere, nor is there any sustained discussion of its development.) One supposes this can be chalked up in part to the book’s deliberately idiosyncratic presentation. Still, the author’s more extensive engagement with derivatives of French literary theory, while not objectionable in itself, testifies to a lost chance to revisit the relatively brief yet highly stimulating statements and comments that emerged from the original Italian crucible and its subsequent offshoots elsewhere. Moreover, the unusual amount of personal reference by the author perhaps suggests that we may be looking at a new normal, and one at a substantial remove from much microhistorical writing thus far, which, while deliberately drawing attention to authorial presence and intervention in the text nevertheless has clearly eschewed converting the author into the protagonist of the study. Magnússon draws a fine line in this regard, as he and his family and acquaintances loom large throughout the work. (NB: I do not wish to be misunderstood; these are hardly objectionable choices, as long as the goods are delivered. And indeed, the most interesting, if sometimes cryptic parts of the work are the author’s “Family Matters,” in which the reader is introduced to a wide range of characters, mostly from the three most recent generations of the author’s ancestors.)

In short, this is an interesting work, and occasionally provocative, although perhaps not as much as the author intended. Most of its prescriptions—and there are many—make good historical sense, beginning with the advice always to look for personal perspectives within historical documents. Others raise some eyebrows, for example, the counsel on p. 17 that the study of history helps the historian obtain greater awareness of him or herself. (I would have thought that an even greater gain is to obtain awareness of others). Magnússon also shows a certain weakness for “idiosyncratic” statements, often in the form of occasional departures from his argument to introduce asides, some of which struck this reader as overly categorical. (One such example occurs on p. 49, when he chastises Michael Mascuch, Rudolf Dekker, and Arianne Baggerman—all major theorists and practitioners of the history of autobiographical writing—for the “mistake” of postulating a connection between the development of microhistory and egodocuments on the one hand and the history of “mentalités” on other. This was no mistake; the genealogical connection was clearly there, even if mentalités as a term was headed out the window at the time.) Finally, readers should be prepared to confront some long stretches of belabored prose, including some unusual combinations of cryptic wordiness. Still, that this is an interesting and occasionally provocative work is beyond question. That it is set in an unusual context confers on it even greater added value.
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