

October 2021

## Mentalités and the Search for Total History in the Works of Annalistes, Foucault, and Microhistory

Jason U. Rose  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>

Digital Commons, European History Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality  
Studies Commons, Intellectual History Commons, Medieval History Commons, and the Renaissance  
Network Commons

Logo

---

**Preferred Citation Style (e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.)**

Chicago

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by  
the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has  
been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an  
authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more  
information, please contact [wmu-  
scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).

Footer logo

---

## **Mentalités and the Search for Total History in the Works of Annalists, Foucault, and Microhistory**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

The author would like to thank his family, friends, and professors who supported this and other projects.

*Mentalités* and the Search for Total History  
in the Works of *Annales*, Foucault, and Microhistory

“A remarkable amount of the most innovative, the most memorable and most significant historical writing of the twentieth century was produced in France.”<sup>1</sup>

- Peter Burke

Historians, by nature, need to create periods, or ways to organize time so that events and people can be analyzed in search of patterns that demonstrate change over time. This process is called periodization and it has been done since historians have been telling true stories. For nearly a century, followers of the *Annales school* have attempted to measure history with unique calculations, considering lengthy spans of time as necessary for achieving *histoire total*, the concept of creating a total history of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Total history has been described as the *Annales* attempt to “incorporate the methods of all the other social sciences in one great project of synthesis.” Therefore, making history “the queen of the social sciences by virtue of its ability to assimilate everyone else’s methods and topics.”<sup>3</sup> According to the *Annales*, a holistic study of history can only be achieved by unfolding a society or a region layer by layer over a long span of time. This would be done by studying historical documents, utilizing statistical analysis, and borrowing techniques from other disciplines.<sup>4</sup> This paper will briefly explain the origins of the *Annales* as a theoretical school of thought. Then the paper will go into a deeper analysis of their desire to create a total history through the *histoire des mentalités* (*mentalités*) and how it has permeated modern historical analysis via two unrelated channels: the works of Michael Foucault and microhistory.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-2014* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Forster, “Achievements of the Annales School,” *The Journal of Economic History* (1978): 6-7, 59; Michael Harsgor, “Total History: The Annales School,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (1978): 3, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (W. W. Norton & Company 1994), 82.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 13, 18; Anne Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 91; Harsgor, 8; Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier. *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2001), 110-111.

## Origins of the *Annales*

The history of the *Annales* started in 1929 with the journal “*Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*.”<sup>5</sup> Founded by historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the idea germinated at the University of Strasbourg when they shared the hallways with like-minded academics from other disciplines. The journal was interdisciplinary in nature, publishing articles from history, economics, geography, and ethnology. This foundation helped solidify the interdisciplinary nature of the *Annales* and eventually other social sciences.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the journal encouraged scholars to review or submit research papers in fields outside their expertise, as long as it was broadly historical.<sup>7</sup> This further cemented the legacy of the *Annales* and facilitated the incorporation of multiple disciplines and subfields into their historical analysis.

The second generation of the *Annales* was marked and, in many ways, dominated by Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Braudel fashioned a broad analysis of the geographical, social, and political factors of the Mediterranean, successfully creating a logical and consistent tapestry of historic inquiry that used other fields, which epitomized the *Annales* methodology.<sup>8</sup> In *The Mediterranean*, Braudel argued that there were three main divisions of time: geographic time, social time, and individual time. Geographic time refers to the spatial relationship between humans and their environment, social time delineates historical events within cultures, and individual time is unique to individual people.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that each of these times run at different speeds. Also known as the *longue durée* (long duration), geographic time is considered the quintessential reference for time within the *Annales*.<sup>10</sup> Braudel’s broad approach to history was revolutionary; studies which started with geographical analysis, then expanded to culture, and then finally examined political and individual realities were almost unheard of in the historical profession of the day.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of time as a part of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 371; Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 4, 12; Howell and Prevenier, 110-111.

<sup>6</sup> Harsgor, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Breisach, 376; Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 53; Green and Troup, 89-90; Howell and Prevenier, 110-111.

<sup>9</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39; Breisach, 375; Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 39; Harsgor, 2; Green and Troup, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 17-18; Forster, 63; Howell and Prevenier, 110; Jordanova, 39; Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Forster, 63-64; Howell and Prevenier, 112-113.

discipline was another facet that the *Annales* employed to integrate the social sciences into historical inquiry.

While studying the *longue durée*, Braudel stressed the historical importance of slow-changing geographic factors. This is most clearly seen when he discusses the relationship between geography and human endeavors. Focusing on the *longue durée* allowed the *Annalistes* to integrate statistical analysis within their historical examinations, in an attempt to fully describe the geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural components of the past.<sup>12</sup> Proponents of the *longue durée* note that studying the past in the broadest possible time frame reveals patterns, trends, or *mentalités* that may not otherwise be recognized. This could be viewed as a way to measure the true depth and scale of change over time, although this approach of fashioning a total history could become problematic or unwieldy if appropriate chronological boundaries are not established. Both the *longue durée* and its interdisciplinary approach as epitomized by Braudel was an attempt to remove strict adherence to political or “great men” approaches to history. It also echoed the next move within the *Annales*, one that focuses on the *histoire des mentalités* to create a total history.

### ***Mentalités***

As previously mentioned, *Annalistes* incorporated outside fields to strengthen their historical analysis, most notably early on with the use of anthropology, geography, and sociology. To bolster their ability to create a total history, later *Annalistes* employed psychology to help understand the past. In other words, they advocated incorporating psychological considerations, alongside cultural and social factors, when attempting to fully reconstruct and analyze the past. The *histoire des mentalités* (*mentalités*) was around since the beginning of the *Annales*, especially with Bloch’s work on the royal touch, but it really gained prominence in the latter years of Braudel’s academic career; the so-called third movement within the *Annales*. First, however, a definition of *mentalités* is vital to understand this concept.

A working definition of *mentalités* is necessary to see how it fits in within the construction of total history and the legacy of the *Annales*. According to *Annales* historian Jacques Le Goff, “the primary attraction of the *histoire des mentalités* lies in its vagueness: it can be used to refer to the left-overs, the indefinable residue of historical analysis.”<sup>13</sup> Le Goff uses the term “vagueness”

---

<sup>12</sup> Forster, 70; Green and Troup, 91; Harsgor, 6; Howell and Prevenier, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Mentalités: A History of Ambiguities,” in *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 166.

intentionally as it allows historians room to maneuver in an effort to analyze the past with approaches that have not been pursued before the use of *mentalités*. Le Goff continues:

The *histoire des mentalités* operates at the level of the everyday automatism of behavior. Its object is that which escapes historical individuals because it reveals the impersonal content of their thought: that which is common to Caesar and his most junior legionary, Saint Louis and the peasant on his lands, Christopher Columbus and any one of his sailors. The *histoire des mentalités* is to the history of ideas as the history of material culture is to economic history.<sup>14</sup>

As can be seen from Le Goff, the uncertainties and ambiguities that are present in the concept of *mentalités* are what makes it useful for a historian to study parts of the past that were excluded from more traditional historical accounts.

Although Le Goff's explanation of *mentalités* is insightful, it is not a workable definition for analyzing its use in producing total histories. Roger Chartier gives a more concrete definition: *mentalités* "is that of daily life and habits; it is what escapes the individual subjects of history because it reveals the impersonal content of their thoughts."<sup>15</sup> According to Peter Burke, the history of *mentalities* fills "the conceptual space between the history of ideas and social history, in order to avoid having to choose between an intellectual history with the society left out and a social history with the thought left out."<sup>16</sup> But he also cautions that the key to *mentalities* is to look at the people of the past through their eyes. He further warns historians to be careful not to "overestimate the degree of intellectual consensus" and that the belief must be one which is shared "with a number of contemporaries."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in this paper, *mentalités* will be defined as something about a culture or a part of a culture that influences the thoughts and behaviors of its people. It allows historians to analyze past moments as a microcosm of the larger society. At least in theory, this allows the historian to produce an analysis of the past that maintains the agency of the past subject. This definition does have its problems. This is similar to the common historical conundrum: are the people of the past more similar or dissimilar to people of the present; does the building of a historical example of *mentalités*, especially one based on microhistory, reduce the complexities of the society as a whole to one person or one town? Essentially, is there a unitary thought pattern that can be used

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Burke, "Strengths and Weaknesses in the History of Mentalities," in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 165.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 170-171.

for historical analysis? In what ways do these studies, and the subjects thought patterns represent larger groups?<sup>18</sup>

The earliest *Annales* to write about *mentalités* is Marc Bloch. In *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England*, Bloch analyzes scrofula, a disease of the lymph nodes, and the belief that monarchs could heal it by touch due to the divine rights of kings. While Bloch details the events and incidents regarding the royal touch, he digs deeper and argues that the common citizens who went to the king most likely did not believe that they would be healed. Nonetheless, they sought the royal touch, and they did so for well over a century. The study touches on rationalization and cognitive dissonance and attempts to see how people dealt with or ignored it during this time.

Another example of a similar phenomenon is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error and Cathars and Catholics in a French Village*, a key work in the study of *mentalités*. In this work, Le Roy Ladurie explores Montaillou, a small mountain village in Southern France that was largely made up of Cathars, a sect deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. The evidence used by Le Roy Ladurie comes primarily from the Fournier Register, which was a set of records from the Inquisition by Jacques Fournier (later Pope Benedict XII) who investigated Catharism in the region. The book, squarely fitting within the *Annales* tradition by describing the geography of the area before exploring the lives and beliefs of a handful of characters in the village: brothers Pierre and Bernard Clergue, poor but talented shepherd Pierre Maury, and countess Béatrice de Planisoles. This work, much like Bloch's, contains a set of main protagonists that suffered from cognitive dissonance as well. Pierre Clergue was a serial adulterer and a Catholic priest, while also a Cathar. His brother was the main magistrate, and consequently, the two were key power brokers in the area and were able to help keep the Inquisition away from Montaillou for several years. Béatrice de Planisoles was also a serial adulterer, including a dalliance with Pierre that resulted in a child. These interactions all took place while they were Cathars, who believed that intercourse was disruptive and procreation increased suffering.<sup>19</sup> This again demonstrates the *mentalités*, while showing rationalization and cognitive dissonance of the town's citizens.

It should be noted that the study of *mentalités* does more than just show patterns of inconsistent beliefs within communities, although that is a great benefit of it as a theoretical approach.<sup>20</sup> Another excellent example of the *histoire*

---

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (Vintage Books, 1979), 167-169, 194, 238-242.

<sup>20</sup> And one that could be used to help understand this phenomenon in the present as well. This approach could be a more effective means of understanding people working against their own best

*des mentalités* during the height of its popularity is Jacques Le Goff's *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*. In this book, Le Goff uses both textual and material evidence to demonstrate the controversy surrounding two conceptions of time during the Middle Ages. The dispute is noted and couched in the following language:

Question: is a merchant entitled, in a given type of business transaction, to demand a greater payment from one who cannot settle his account immediately than from one who can? The answer argued for is no, because in doing so he would be selling time and would be committing usury by selling what does not belong to him.<sup>21</sup>

So, what happened? According to Le Goff, there was a change in understanding of time during the Middle Ages, and how it can be quantified and commodified, which emerged from differing understandings of time between merchants and the church.<sup>22</sup> One valued time as the ability to gain or maintain profit, while the other believed that time is immutable and cannot be sold as it belongs solely to God.

The new understanding of time was not developed by an individual, states Le Goff, or even a group of individuals. It was formulated by people "in the West between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries who were in possession of sufficient cultural and mental equipment to reflect on professional problems and their social, moral and religious consequences."<sup>23</sup> Using a wide variety of primary sources, including commercial documents and treatises from theologians, Le Goff builds a solid case that there was a shift in the *mentalité* of the people regarding time and not some form of top down mandate. Rather unusual for a historical work, Le Goff does not show a turning point, but he unabashedly states that the "essay has no other purpose than to stimulate a more intensive study of a history which raises numerous problems."<sup>24</sup> He is seeking to show that there are explanations in both *mentalités* regarding time and they can, and should, be explored. Merchants needed a more functional use of time just as the church still operated under a more rigid system based in antiquity. Yet one thing is unequivocally true, the new concept of time was not teleological. This nonteleological approach to other *mentalités* is also echoed in the works of Michel Foucault.

---

interests such as the elections of Thatcher and Reagan as well as the worldwide populism revival of the last five years.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

## Foucault

French theorist Michel Foucault may be the most influential, thought producing, and provocative intellectual in the latter half of the twentieth century. Additionally, his ties to the *Annales* School is also complicated. The first lines in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* clearly discuss the role of the *Annales* and seemingly give them praise for their recent developments. Foucault says,

For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events.<sup>25</sup>

Later in the introduction, he mentions several people who were influential to him and his work. This included Georges Canguilhem, his mentor, and someone who had longstanding ties with the *Annales* at the University of Strasbourg during the Second World War. Foucault mentions that Canguilhem should be praised for “the distinction...between the microscopic and macroscopic scales of the history of the sciences” and consequently “a different history is being written.”<sup>26</sup> This has ties to the *Annales*, and the ties run deeper than a pedigree with ties to the *Annalistes*.<sup>27</sup>

Another telling example of Michel Foucault as a historian that shows how his methodology relates to the *Annalistes* deals with how he tries to recover “lost people.” By studying lost people, Foucault and others seek ways to recover the past of people who were not in power, much like the *Annales*. He notes in *The Lives of Infamous Men* that:

All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces – brief, incisive, often enigmatic—only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been ‘in a free state’; they can

---

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge; And, The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 130.

no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and power relations presuppose.<sup>28</sup>

Foucault wants to know, just as Le Roy Ladurie regarding Montaillou, why were these people confessing. Foucault seeks to understand how knowledge was created and circulated, which he calls discourse. He is also concerned with how this was used by those in power, the regulation of this discourse. Additionally, Foucault argues that humans literally police themselves, and that too is a part of the discourse: a person confesses to a priest, psychiatrist, or their partner regarding their “deviant” behavior. That person might also console their own conscious by confessing their improprieties to these parties. In return, these people judge the other person in some manner, whether conscious or not and this makes the confessor internalize social norms. Eventually, the person starts to regulate their own behavior according to the other peoples’ terms. Foucault constantly uses this method throughout his works and details the approach in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* is Foucault’s definitive statement on his methodological approach to history. In it, Foucault details how he does history and how structures are supported via “discourses,” which he defines as all the statements that remains to be discovered by future historians. According to Foucault, using discourses does not remove individuals, but rather multiplies their subject positions allowing for a deeper understanding of the subject and their discourses. Furthermore, the discourse should be explored across several individuals to get an understanding of the conditions or environments where the discourse took place. It is in this particular manner that Foucault can illustrate historical change (and sometimes the lack of change) over time. In the introduction of *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault discusses in detail how he approves of much that the *Annales* School has been doing and outlines how he was expanding their ideas.<sup>29</sup> He initially does this by showing how *Annales* historians, the historians of ideas, are focusing on continuity, while Foucault is interested in disruptions.<sup>30</sup> Any discussion of Foucault, however, is incomplete without talking about power and that is key to understanding his beliefs regarding continuity.

In spite of the importance of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault’s work is probably best known through his discussions on power. While Foucault has better known works on power, his *History of Sexuality* might be the most useful as it shows how he refined his views over time. According to Foucault,

---

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Vol. 3. James D. Faubion ed., trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: The New York Press), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 3.

power works in the smallest of daily transactions, and therefore it is harder to discern. This power is “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it came from everywhere.”<sup>31</sup> Power is upheld through what Foucault calls power relations, which maintain society.<sup>32</sup> These relations are invisible, and societal attitudes are how cultural norms are maintained. Power relations are sustained through discourses, which, according to Foucault, are clues or aspects of the dominant power relations where they were produced. Therefore, Foucault is not so much interested in the actual words, but how they show the landscape surrounding a subject and how it supports power. “Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; [rather] it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”<sup>33</sup> Power relations are entwined with every other form of relations, including production, kinship, and sexuality and they do not need to maintain itself via coercion, prohibition, repression, or chastisement.<sup>34</sup> Essentially, what is said (discourse) about sexuality, or any other topic, is a primary site of power in modern societies. According to Foucault, we are literally “policed” by society’s discourse about norms, that what discourses say are licit or illicit behaviors, thoughts, or activities helps shape the behavior of individual persons.<sup>35</sup> This is why Foucault is interested in evidence such as Catholic confessionals, which are prime examples of how the policing of behaviors became internalized.

Foucault also elaborates on how historians should use research and analysis. Later in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault details his major opposition to traditional historical methods concerning the use of archives, and what makes up an archive. For Foucault, everything written, as well as material culture, is a part of the discourse and thus, the historical record.<sup>36</sup> Historians have taken it as their “primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it.” Foucault continues, “history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not,

---

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality (Vol. I: An Introduction)*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 6-7, 135.

discovers elements, defines units, describes relations.”<sup>37</sup> Essentially, historians do not find facts, they fashion them out of more basic elements.

Foucault as a writer is complicated, but so is his relationship with the *Annales*. This can be seen in *The Discourse on Language*, where Foucault declares that “history, as it is practiced today, does not turn its back on events; on the contrary, it is continually enlarging the field of events, constantly discovering new layers.” A statement that harkens back to the *Annalistes* and their interest in finding untold historical subjects. He goes on to say that contemporary historians look for things “more superficial as well as more profound — incessantly isolating new ensembles — events, numerous, dense and interchangeable or rare and decisive...”<sup>38</sup> In this passage, there are differences from some *Annalistes* like Braudel, but also some continuity with him as well as other *Annalistes* who pushed the boundaries of historical knowledge and fields of study such as the *histoire des mentalités*. Another difference is how Foucault liked to focus on disruptions as opposed to continuities.<sup>39</sup> The key to remember regarding Foucault and his theoretical ties to the *Annales* is that they were not monolithic, they were multifaceted, and they encouraged and enjoyed innovation.

## Microhistory

Related to both *histoire des mentalités* and the works of Michel Foucault is microhistory. It is sometimes called *Alltagsgeschichte* in German or *histoire quotidienne* in French, both meaning everyday life or history. According to historian David Crew, *Alltagsgeschichte* is the historical attempt to understand working-class cultures, the reconstruction of their values and attitudes, and the identification of their needs, wants, and desires.<sup>40</sup> By studying the past in this manner, historians can demonstrate “the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions of popular experience,” the everyday life experiences of lesser studied cities and villages.<sup>41</sup> This research trend originally developed in West Germany as a counternarrative to the prevailing social history and its use of structures. Crew further states that “*Alltagsgeschichte* questions accepted understandings of the ‘big structures’ and ‘large processes’...by deconstructing these arid abstractions in the flesh-and-blood human beings whose conflicting ideas and actions produced

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> David Crew, “Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History ‘From below?’” *Central European History* 22 no. 3/4, *German Histories: Challenges in Theory, Practice, Technique* (September-December, 1989), 395.

<sup>41</sup> Crew, 406.

history.”<sup>42</sup> In *Alltagsgeschichte*, the historians seek to show how ordinary people repudiated their assigned roles as passive “‘objects’ of impersonal historical developments and attempted, instead, to become active historical ‘subjects.’”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, just as in *mentalités*, the scholars of microhistory seek to maintain the historical dignity and agency of their studies.

One of the most renowned examples of microhistory is Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Ginzburg refers to this and his other works as the study of “peripheral phenomena.”<sup>44</sup> In *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg uses inquisitor trial records of a miller, Menocchio, to study this phenomenon. Born Domenico Scandella, Menocchio was far from a common miller of the day as he was literate and owned several books, which was unusual for the time. But these books, as Ginzburg notes, did not seem to influence the thoughts of Menocchio, but served to reinforce his existing beliefs. The most notable example, represented by the title of the book, was when Menocchio was asked about the creation of the world. He states that “in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed—just as cheese is made out of milk—and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels.”<sup>45</sup> He then explains that god was created out of the same material as the angels and became the greatest of the angels and was declared lord over them. Just like other historians in this essay, Ginzburg realizes that trials are treasure troves on *mentalities*. By nature, inquisition trials were designed to extract details from those being questioned, thus leaving a detailed account of the past.

Ginzburg’s book, however, is more than just a work about a poor miller in northeastern Italy. The goal is to understand society through the work of inquisitors, their relationship with the accused Menocchio, and the information that they were able to ascertain from people. This allows Ginzburg to obtain information about the times, class structures, and ordinary people of the past. There are several overlaps between Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s understanding of the people of *Montaillou* and Ginzburg’s understanding of Menocchio. Both raise questions concerning nascent working-class politics and their resistance against exploitation, their use of popular culture, and the ability to glean this information from diverse sources that may not seem reliable. Ginzburg chooses to look at inquisition records, specifically those of Menocchio’s trial. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie used similar techniques in *Montaillou*. Michel Foucault also explored comparable documents to a lesser extent. This approach to history has comparable

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Kandell, “Was the World Made Out of Cheese?” *New York Times*, November 17, 1991.

<sup>45</sup> Ginzburg, 6.

problems to those who study *mentalités* and Ginzburg acknowledges the limitations of the sources he uses as well as the difficulties in building a cogent and accurate microhistory. In his introduction, he praises works by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and notes that there are limitations when trying to unearth “collective mentalities” especially when what historians know of these people are through the lens of the literate upper classes, and how *they* interpreted *them*.<sup>46</sup> David Crew notes that these scholars were interested in “everyday survival strategies and symbolic practices” that “comprised an alternative politics of everyday life separate from the official and formal politics...”<sup>47</sup> Since these sources can be highly individual, how can we be sure if they are magnifying the particular as a universal?<sup>48</sup> Additionally, microhistory allows historians to examine “the apparently ‘irrational’ features of working-class behavior. Moreover, it has demonstrated the importance of symbolic and expressive ‘needs’ as well as material and instrumental ‘interests.’”<sup>49</sup> As outlined earlier, the study of seemingly inconsistent or contradictory beliefs is relatively common amongst those who study *mentalités*.

Also noteworthy is how practitioners of microhistory reconstruct the past. According to Ginzburg, “the historian’s task is just the opposite of what most of us were taught to believe...he must destroy our false sense of proximity to people of the past because they came from societies very different from our own. The more we discover about these people’s ‘mental universe,’ the more we should be shocked by the cultural distance that separates us from them.”<sup>50</sup> This is clearly in line with the work of Foucault, as well as people like Braudel and Le Goff. Crew argues that for these historians to explore the past of everyday people, they need unconventional primary sources, “photographs... non-verbal forms of popular expression such as the ‘body language’ ... [and] oral history.”<sup>51</sup> This would all be a part of the archeology and discourse that Foucault details in his works. Robert Darnton, author of the microhistory “The Great Cat Massacre,” states that “what is most valuable about” Ginzburg and microhistory in general is the insistence that “common people of the past were not as passive as they are traditionally portrayed... [it] shows them actively engaged in constructing a mental or cultural world of their own that was often at odds with literate society.”<sup>52</sup> As shown above, there seems to be a clear bridge from the *Annales* movement to Foucault, and to microhistory, with each asking a variation of a fundamental question:

---

<sup>46</sup> Ginzburg xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>47</sup> Crew, 398.

<sup>48</sup> Crew 405.

<sup>49</sup> Crew, 399.

<sup>50</sup> Kandell, “Was the World Made Out of Cheese?” *New York Times*, November 17, 1991.

<sup>51</sup> Crew, 396.

<sup>52</sup> Kandell, “Was the World Made Out of Cheese?” *New York Times*, November 17, 1991.

“How do you really get into a generation’s mindset and understand them as people?” Additionally, how does these mindsets relate to their larger society as well as our own?

## Conclusion

This paper examined the common links between the *Annales*, the works of Michael Foucault, and microhistory through the theoretical lens of *histoire des mentalités* (*mentalités*). Just as the *Annalistes* incorporated interdisciplinary research to strengthen their historical analysis, both Foucault and micro-historians used outside fields, notably literature and philosophy, in their attempts to create a total history. Using the definition of *mentalités* outlined in this paper and Jacques Le Goff’s concept of “vagueness,” this demonstrates how historians can analyze the past in ways that manifests and reflects the similarities and differences between the three groups outlined in this paper.<sup>53</sup> Related to this is how these groups sought to recover “lost people,” whose lives, as noted by Foucault, were “destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear” except were they had “contact with power.”<sup>54</sup> The methodological approaches of these groups are also related to the way they use sources as evidence for their historical analysis.

Another example of their complementary nature deals with the sources used by the *Annales*, Foucault, and Ginzburg. Since the records of “lost people” in the distant past are irrevocably tied to authorities, the need to study public documents and trial transcripts is imperative and this is the precise kind of evidence used by the *Annalistes* as well as Ginzburg and Foucault. As previously mentioned, trials are a cornucopia of *mentalities* as inquisition trials were designed to get the entire minutiae of the story, thus leaving a detailed, albeit biased, account of the past. This is the reason why Le Roy Ladurie, Foucault, and Ginzburg were interested in analyzing Catholic confessionals and trials. Those records served as their primary evidence to resolve their various historical questions: the relationship between early working-class politics and their resistance, its connection to power and self-policing, and understanding popular culture. Foucault takes it a step further with his theories of archaeology and genealogy and how they relate to power discourses. According to Foucault, all written records and material culture produced by a society are a part of the public discourse and, therefore, useful for analysis.<sup>55</sup> That is not unlike the microhistories produced in the former West Germany which use more “unconventional” sources like photographs and oral history, in addition to reading

---

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Mentalités: A History of Ambiguities,” 166.

<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” 6.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 6-7, 135.

through the biases of those who wrote about these groups.<sup>56</sup> Ginzburg even notes that the “fact that a source is not ‘objective’ does not mean that it is useless” and tapping into them as evidence “permits us to construct a fragment of what is usually called ‘the culture of the lower classes’ or even ‘popular culture.’”<sup>57</sup> Both Ginzburg and the microhistories above seem to fall under the purview of the archeology and discourse that Foucault details in his works.

A less compelling argument, but one that is noteworthy and cogent, is how both Ginzburg and Foucault praise their *Annales* predecessors, even when going against some of their approaches. As noted earlier, Foucault studied with Georges Canguilhem who was at the University of Strasbourg alongside traditional *Annales* historians. Canguilhem even wrote about the history of science which has clear ties to the *Annales* as *Annalistes* continually expanded the field of history.<sup>58</sup> Ginzburg also praises the works of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Robert Mandrou even as he admits the limitations of exploring “collective mentalities,” especially when constructing them via sources that originated from the literate upper classes.<sup>59</sup> Ginzburg’s analysis here is very instructive, as Foucault also demonstrates his differences by focusing on the disruptions in history as opposed to the continuity that seems to preoccupy some of the *Annalistes*.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, most *Annales* historians believe that the history of *mentalities* is a single aspect in the creation of total history and that it can be seen in various forms.<sup>61</sup> As has been shown, the *Annales* Movement praised innovation and is continuing to expand its scope of inquiry. Therefore, even with some differences between the *Annales*, Foucault, and those who write microhistories, the relationship is present, and understanding them in their own words and from this perspective can help the historical field grow. In addition, understanding the nuisances and similarities of each group as well as developing and harnessing them cohesively is a positive step toward a total history of humankind.

---

<sup>56</sup> Crew, 396.

<sup>57</sup> Ginzburg, xvii, xiv.

<sup>58</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Ginzburg xxii-xxiv.

<sup>60</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 131.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Hutton, “The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History,” *History and Theory* 20, no. 3 (1981): 239.

## Bibliography:

- Appleby, Joyce, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. *Telling the Truth about History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Breisach, Ernst. *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983.
- Burke, Peter. "Strengths and Weaknesses in the History of *Mentalities*" in *Varieties of Cultural History*. Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Burke, Peter. *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-2014*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Chartier, Roger. "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories." In *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, edited by Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Crew, David. "Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History "From below"?" *Central European History* 22 no. 3/4, *German Histories: Challenges in Theory, Practice, Technique* (September-December, 1989), 394-407.
- Forster, Robert. "Achievements of the Annales School." *The Journal of Economic History* (1978): 58-76.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge; And, The Discourse on Language*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality (Vol. I: An Introduction)*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Lives of Infamous Men" in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* vol. 3. Edited by James D. Faubion, Translated by Robert Hurley et al. New York: New York Press.
- Green, Anne and Kathleen Troup. *The Houses of History*. New York: New York University Press. 1999.
- Gutting, Gary. *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2005.

- Harsgor, Michael. "Total History: The Annales School." *Journal of Contemporary History* (1978): 1-13.
- Howell, Martha and Walter Prevenier. *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2001.
- Hutton, Patrick. "The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History." *History and Theory* 20, no. 3 (1981): 237–259.
- Jordanova, Ludmilla. *History in Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2000.
- Kandell, Jonathan "Was the World Made Out of Cheese?" *New York Times*. November 17, 1991.
- Le Goff, Jacques. "Mentalités: A History of Ambiguities." In *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, edited by Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, 166- 180. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Le Goff, Jacques and Pierre Nora. *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1974.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.
- Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel. *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*. Translated by Barbara Bray. Vintage Books, 1979.