



33 MICROCOSMIC RESEARCH AND GLOBAL AWARENESS: RETHINKING THE LOCAL HERITAGE

Ray Bromley

The globalization process, initiated by the fifteenth-century European voyages of discovery, has had massive and irrevocable effects. On the negative side, it has been associated with colonialism, imperialism, wars, forced migrations, slavery, genocide, and the eradication of a wide range of ecosystems, species, communities, and cultures. On the positive side, it has been accompanied by considerable economic growth and technological progress, a growing worldwide concern for democracy, human rights and individual freedoms, massive voluntary migrations, reduced morbidity and mortality, and the emergence of cities and neighborhoods with high levels of ethnic diversity and cultural syncretism.

The ordinary neighborhoods of world cities provide a remarkable opportunity to stimulate world awareness and local economic development through examination of local realities. The many-faceted character of the globalization process, experienced over an extended period of time, leaves neighborhoods with numerous historic sites and buildings, and with a great variety of potential historical and cultural artifacts. Documenting, preserving and collecting these elements of local heritage can be an important source of local pride, a mechanism to stimulate local consumption and reinvestment, a means to establish external linkages, a stimulus to tourism, a source of jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, and a fount of global educational material for local residents.

This paper proposes an action research method called "microcosmic research," which can be used to uncover the links between a neighborhood and the wider world, to examine how world events, migratory streams, economic pressures and cultural trends have affected the neighborhood, and to consider how the neighborhood has impacted on the world. Information sources can be highly varied, including field surveys, historic and contemporary censuses, oral histories, diaries, newspaper clipping files, old photographs, architectural surveys of local buildings, books by local authors, and a great variety of local artistic creations. Microcosmic research can be used to awaken the economic development and educational potentials of globalization at the local level, and also to encourage respect for cultural difference, and a genuine appreciation for diversity.

I developed the concept of microcosmic research during the course of a research project summarizing a century of neighborhood history in the Bronx Community Board Six (CB-Six) area of New York City. The first published product (Bromley 1997) describes a bureaucratically-defined locality and cluster of neighborhoods which has never been a center of elite residence or corporate decision-making, but which has a remarkably complex history of immigration and of ethnic

Ray Bromley is Professor of Planning and Geography at the State University of New York at Albany. He has published extensively on urban, regional, and national planning, and on casual labor and microenterprise development. His current research is on planning history, with case studies of the Bronx and Peru.

and religious succession. The area's economy and population have been influenced by all of the major world conflicts, crises and booms of the twentieth century, and the area has had numerous fictitious, real and potential impacts on world history, through education, entertainment and the mass media, through mass murder and attempted assassination, and through immigrant organization in support of former homelands. CB-Six has a special place in history: of silent cinema, cartoons and soap operas; of zoos, expositions and fairgrounds; of the Roosevelt Presidency and the aftermath of the Second World War; of Robert Moses' most titanic expressway; of doo-wop and punta music; of mass murder and the Mariel Boatlift; of Little Italy legends; and of the Jewish, Albanian and Garifuna diasporas. If we add in the great variety of nations, religions and architectural styles represented in the neighborhood, and the global links of Fordham University, the Bronx Zoo and the Botanical Garden just to the north, there is significant potential for global learning and local economic development based on heritage tourism and the creation of new economic niches.

Like all old neighborhoods, CB-Six has unique features, but I believe that many other old, diverse urban areas could generate an equally complex history, with a rich variety of links to global processes and events. My concern in proposing "microcosmic research" as a concept and tool is to develop a simple approach to local history, cultural diversity and economic development, which can be applied in schools and colleges and by community groups and local governments. The approach should be capable of involving local residents and of being directed by them. So as to broaden the base of participation, numerous different skills should be involved and the language used should be simple and free from intellectual jargon.

Microcosmic research seeks to understand the links between neighborhoods and the wider world, considering those neighborhoods as both affected by global processes and trends, and also directly influencing those processes and trends. It assumes that globalization is deep-rooted, multi-faceted, and syncretic in character. Microcosmic research uses the neighborhood as a means to understand and order the wider world. The neighborhood is viewed as a microcosm of the world, and the strands of local history and ethnic succession are viewed as resources. In turn, those resources are treated as comparative advantages and the bases for market niches in an intensely competitive world. Ideally, microcosmic research is "action oriented", generating policies and projects to overcome neighborhood problems of disinvestment, blight, poverty, unemployment and inter-ethnic tension.

Migration generates physical, financial, cultural and emotional links between migrants' origins and destinations. Most cities which have experienced rapid growth have had major inflows of migrants. Many cities have also served as springboards for emigration. Microcosmic research is most likely to be fruitful in urban areas of countries which have experienced large-scale immigration or emigration over several decades. It is particularly appropriate for urban neighborhoods of major metropoli and capital cities, and for multi-ethnic

neighborhoods which are relatively old, predominantly residential, have not undergone widespread urban renewal, and are not in a state of total collapse.

Research Methods

Microcosmic research uses a wide variety of research methods derived from various academic disciplines, and from such hobbies and professions as photography, sketching, genealogy, journalism, popular culture, and local history. Typical sources include: field surveys of streets, buildings, institutions and activities; local maps, directories, and property records; censuses; archives of documents, photographs, drawings, and newspaper clippings; oral histories; ethnography; photography, tape and video recording; and, literature, art and music originating in the area. Ideally, information is stored locally and made publicly accessible.

The microcosmic approach mixes historical and contemporary information, qualitative and quantitative data, pure and applied research, participatory research and individual projects. It also mixes and interrelates a variety of different backgrounds and academic specializations, including history, geography, sociology, anthropology, international relations, planning, architecture, social welfare, education, and public health. The aim is to find and diffuse information which can contribute to the knowledge, pride and identity of the community, and to the prospects for local economic development. Local information centers and websites should be developed, usually based at local libraries, schools and historical societies. It is vital that all studies done on the area—from books to newspaper articles, theses and official reports—be deposited in several obvious places, and be catalogued and indexed. If microcosmic research is to succeed, the familiar old complaint that "the communities studied are the last to see or receive the documents written about them" must be laid to rest forever.

For microcosmic research to succeed, it requires and encourages constant attention to global links and great awareness of, and tolerance for, human diversity. It usually also requires a flexible definition of city, area, or neighborhood, considering everything within a certain zone, but also examining the immediate vicinity. The most interesting links are sometimes on or across the border, and local events and patterns often cannot be understood without looking at a wider area. Border zones are generally better than borderlines, and maps should be continued to the edge of the frame, so as to incorporate fragments of adjacent areas, rather than stopping all the lines and distributions at the city, area or neighborhood limit.

In studying the people of the city, neighborhood or area, it is important to consider those who have died, those who have left, and those who are leaving, as well as the resident population. They and their descendants are part of the neighborhood heritage, and they represent an obvious potential market for local goods and services. Heritage tourism has become a major source of revenue for countries and regions

like the Irish Republic, Scotland, Southern Italy, and Portugal, and it generates a lot of business for America's Chinatowns, Little Italys, Irish pubs and ethnic restaurants. Old personal homes, ancestral homes, and places of birth, education, worship, recreation, marriage, death and burial can all be of interest, as can anything which symbolizes the feel of the old neighborhood.

The most obvious potential institutional participants in microcosmic research are local libraries, local schools and colleges, local religious communities and places of worship, local non-profit organizations concerned with community development, and local businesses and business associations. In addition, of course, it is important to allow the participation of interested local residents without institutional affiliations, and of academic researchers and project teams who take a special interest in the city, area or neighborhood.

In many cases, higher-level interest, support or sponsorship may eventually come from municipal government, state government, federal/national agencies, foundations, think-tanks, municipalities and organizations in areas which have sent/received migrants, universities, corporations, trade unions, human rights organizations, and architecture, preservation and local history organizations. Some local libraries, schools and community organizations have developed considerable experience of fund-raising, grant-getting and the formation of strategic alliances. In principle, all such external links are desirable, but it is important to develop local capacity and leadership in parallel with the gradual establishment of external links.

The key models and sources for developing microcosmic research methods are characterized by their simple style and their focus on research which can be conducted with little or no external funding. Investigative journalism may provide a model (Evensen 1995), especially when it focuses on neighborhood history (Jonnes 1986) and transfers its documentation to a local library.¹ Most research should be "grounded" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and qualitative (Burgess 1984, Wiseman and Aron 1970), with theories emanating from the data gathered, rather than driven by the logic of hypothesis-testing, sample frames and social surveys. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation and oral history, are enormously useful (Salmen 1987, Slim and Thompson 1995, Van Maanen 1988), supplemented by the tools of local history (Danzer 1987, Kyvig and Marty 1982). The interface between architectural history and social history is a particularly fruitful field for neighborhood studies, as illustrated by the pioneering works of Dolores Hayden (1984, 1995). Field survey methods are also very valuable, including the rich tradition of British regional survey and mass observation (Fagg and Hutchings 1930; Madge and Harrison 1939), of the New Deal Works Progress Administration writers and photographers (WPA Federal Writers' Project 1939), and of William H. Whyte's 1970s street life project (Whyte 1980, 1988). Finally, photographers interested in documenting the characteristics of supposedly ordinary peoples and neighborhoods are of great importance (Wagenvoort 1976), especially when they pioneer new topics or document change

through time (Jackson and Vergara 1989; Vergara 1995).

Microcosmic research can serve as a means of empowerment, enabling local people to gather information about their neighborhood and giving them a place in history. Neighborhood studies may lead on to analyses of city, regional and national sources. Neighborhood researchers gain the know-how and information to work with, inform, learn from, and exchange materials with, professional journalists and academic researchers. For many, the experience of gathering information will stimulate a desire to bring about positive changes in the neighborhood, city and nation. It will increase citizen and voter participation, and for some, it will lead to neighborhood and community activism. Activists can turn their new-found research skills to investigating corporations, property titles, code compliance, tax arrears and the administration of public services (Hartman, Keating and LeGates 1982; Hofrichter 1993; Medoff and Sklar 1994). This information can then be used to resist evictions and new projects which will damage the neighborhood, to petition for housing and environmental code compliance, to demand sanctions against delinquent landlords and corporations, to resist service cutbacks, and to develop projects for affordable housing, community policing and enhanced public services.

Why Now?

"Think globally, act locally," is a much-quoted maxim encompassing the microcosmic research agenda. The ongoing globalization process constantly poses new challenges and opportunities. New information technologies provide near-instantaneous communication with almost every country on earth, and access to unprecedented volumes of information. They also provide remarkable opportunities to develop graphics, communication and design skills. World awareness, willingness to tap global networks, ability to build strategic alliances, and the capacity to innovate and adapt to constantly changing circumstances are all vital! Yet, how can ordinary people escape from the humdrum realities of life: home, street, school, workplace, junk food and TV, and the endless media parade of crime, scandal and celebrity gossip? There is no simple or universal answer, of course, but any activity which encourages participation, creativity, and the linking of the local area with the wider world is certainly relevant. If "diversity" can be understood and appreciated in the process, if tolerance and mutual appreciation can be fostered, and if young people can be encouraged to overcome apathy, to inquire and to volunteer, then a solution is well on the way.

Though historically-oriented, microcosmic research differs from conventional local history because it runs through to the present. It focuses primarily on the last 150 years and tends to increase in detail and complexity as we move towards the present. It is not rooted in the official history syllabus. In most of the U.S., for example, this syllabus emphasizes the Revolutionary War, the Constitution, the Civil War, and the Presidency. The conventional syllabus is political and military, with a tremendous emphasis on the origins and institutions

of nationhood. In contrast, the microcosmic agenda places primary emphasis on the local and the global, and on immigration, cultural pluralism and syncretism.

Though geographically-oriented, microcosmic research differs from conventional world regional geography, with its rapid survey of every part of the globe, continent by continent. The world is not reviewed region-by-region, or topic-by-topic. Instead, it is explored, using concepts of identity, heritage, migration, network, flow, diaspora and syncretism.

Microcosmic research involves young people as well as older people, and it consciously seeks to involve people of every ethnicity, national origin, age, gender and religion, so as to diversify the range of perspectives and links involved. In general, breadth of coverage and social inclusion are preferred to in-depth case studies. The concepts of "landmark," "preservation" and "heritage" are tremendously widened, to include all environments and activities which give character to a place. These include monuments, landscaping, public art, places which are ugly but memorable, buildings and businesses representative of popular and minority cultures, social clubs, houses of worship, cemeteries, and notorious crime sites.

The fine-grained detail and local color of microcosmic research helps participants to abandon traditional classificatory categories, and to recognize mixed, complex and personally-defined identities. Aggregate descriptive categories like Asian, African and Hispanic have little meaning, and often perpetuate simplistic stereotypes. People may be of mixed descent or origin, and national, ethnic, religious, class or regional origins may be more important to the people being described than any official category. Meeting black Hispanics, East Asians from the Caribbean, Cherokees, Kurds, Rastafarians, Israelis of Iranian, Russian and Ethiopian origin, and Chicanos whose ancestors lived in what is now the United States before the Mayflower landed, can induce a healthy skepticism about official aggregate categories and a new interest in human diversity. A look at any major Western European national or club soccer team, or their U.S. equivalents for soccer or baseball helps to illustrate this process. What used to seem simple, obvious relationships between nationality, race, language, name, religion, appearance, behavior and tastes are no longer so clear, and increasing numbers of people don't fit the classic stereotypes.

Policy Dimensions

For microcosmic research to achieve its full potential, substantial public support is needed for local libraries, historical societies, and schools. These key institutions need a new infusion of resources, and a major reorientation of their agendas. Some changes can take place slowly, incrementally, and through local initiatives, but most will depend on higher-level policy decisions to favor microcosmic research. Public libraries will need to expand their files of newspaper clippings, local photographs, sound recordings, video materials and

neighborhood artifacts, to make more of this material permanently available through microfiche, multiple copies and albums, and to strengthen their websites and outreach to local schools and community centers. Schools will need to develop and test new experimental curricula, based on two key maxims: "know and plan your neighborhood;" and, "use your neighborhood as a key to learning about the world." These curricula would introduce children to maps, photography, census data, computer atlases, simple forms of GIS and CAD, e-mail and web-searching, classic reference sources (e.g. Thernstrom 1980), and the possibility of careers in such fields as planning, architecture, engineering and landscape architecture.

Building on the enhanced support for local libraries, historical societies and schools, legislation and institutional support for landmarking, historic preservation, and adaptive re-use of historic structures would need to be strengthened. The quantity of effort is important, but the direction and diversity of effort is also crucial. Interest is needed in the preservation of unique landscapes and streetscapes, as well as in the preservation of individual buildings. Similarly, interest is needed in preserving and adaptively re-using a range of environments, significant to peoples of different ethnicities, religions, social classes and national origins. Old neighborhoods can benefit enormously from measures to encourage community reinvestment, to outlaw mortgage and insurance redlining against areas which are mixed-use, mixed-age, and mixed-race, and to modify tax codes to favor rehabilitation and adaptive re-use over new construction.

One of the simplest ways to link microcosmic research and local economic development is to encourage the emergence of new concentrations of ethnic enterprise, and primarily of restaurants, bars, clubs, specialized grocery stores, public markets, and food wholesaling. These would be located in areas with substantial populations or notable existing businesses of a particular ethnicity. "Little Greece," "Little Brazil," "Little Thailand" and other concentrations can emerge, following the highly successful model of U.S. Little Italys, and of Chinatowns in quite a wide range of countries. The aim would be to develop prosperous concentrations of small businesses with a strong ethnic flavor, to cater to their own co-ethnics in the city, to attract persons of similar ethnic descent who have migrated to the suburbs, and to attract tourists seeking a real ethnic flavor. In some cases, these concentrations might become Business Improvement Districts, and in most cases they would require significant changes to local plans and zoning ordinances.

In some cases, neighborhood character and business can be promoted by reviving traditional markets, or by establishing new farmers' or artisans' markets. A weekend street market, or the authorization of a few street vendors, may help to give the neighborhood character, and to make more goods and services available to local residents. Sports practices and tournaments may also be useful to neighborhood revitalization, especially when the sports are minority concerns with strong links to the neighborhood. Just as polo, croquet and bowls marked the elite English enclaves of

yesteryear, hurling, sapo, jai alai, cricket and field hockey can mark contemporary ethnic concentrations. Also important are annual festivals held in parks, plazas and community centers, block parties, and national and religious parades. All these institutions assert neighborhood character, help to maintain the identity and pride of particular communities, and attract visitors and some purchasing power to the neighborhood.

Microcosmic research may reveal international links which can be used to build connections and obtain foreign investment or technical assistance. Sometimes, they can also lead to formal "place-twinning," linking the neighborhood, area or city to somewhere in a foreign country, and encouraging exchanges. At worst, of course, twinnings are just taxpayer-subsidized tourism for local officials! At best, however, they can attract donations, develop a broader tourist base, and provide the basis for exchanges of messages, materials and pupils between schools. In studying international migration, schools and libraries can benefit enormously from twin institutions in the other country. Joint research and exchanges of documents and photographs can strengthen the information base on migration and encourage more people to seek their roots and find their long-lost relatives.

As neighborhood leaders become more conscious of a neighborhood's ethnic heritages and identity, demand will grow to express this character through innovative urban design features. Flags, banners and illuminations may help to give character, but there are also more permanent opportunities to symbolize ethnic identities through paving, street furniture, public art, color schemes, and architectural designs for buildings. When done effectively, such schemes will emphasize the distinctive character of the neighborhood and awaken the curiosity of casual visitors to learn "why is this place different?" Together with historic buildings, streetscapes and landscapes, distinctive neighborhood design features may be instrumental in attracting film crews to use the neighborhood as a set for television or movies. As well as bringing a little business, filming in the neighborhood can provide useful publicity, attracting future tourism.

Part of the authenticity of an ethnic concentration is the widespread use and general fluency in the language of that ethnicity. As well as giving an ethnic flavor to a place, immigrant languages can potentially serve as an economic development opportunity. As globalization gathers momentum, multilingualism will be at a premium in the next few decades. It is well known that the key to linguistic fluency is "complete immersion," the opportunity to develop language skills during extended periods of conversation with native speakers. In many cities and neighborhoods with substantial numbers of recent immigrants, native speakers who could do low-budget translations or provide complete immersion experiences are available and anxious to increase their incomes. With an appropriate body to organize, publicize, and handle payments, cities like London, New York and Los Angeles could offer wonderful translation services and complete immersion language-learning opportunities. In many cases, dates and times could be chosen to avoid clashes

with pupils' and native-speakers normal work schedules, and business could be channeled to local ethnic restaurants. In some cases, local schools and colleges could be used after-school, at weekends and during vacations, and in a few cases paid homestays might be arranged with families willing to board a language-learner for a few days.

Conclusion

Microcosmic research is not a universal panacea. Many of its ingredients have already been tried in a few places and projects, and their successes have helped to inspire the concept. As already outlined, microcosmic research is appropriate for certain types of cities and neighborhoods, and not for others. It requires sustained support and significant policy changes. Some of its benefits can be achieved in individual communities if community leaders give their wholehearted support, but many of its benefits require broader changes at the city, regional and national levels. Hopefully, a few pilot projects will be started, and they will eventually inspire some cities and one or two national governments to try this approach. In turn, their successes may inspire others.

Microcosmic research will achieve its immediate objectives if it enhances local pride and global awareness, improves inter-ethnic relations, and stimulates local economic development through increased employment and consumption for neighborhood residents, an increase in the number and turnover of local small businesses, and a growing flow of outsiders visiting and making purchases in the neighborhood. In the longer term, microcosmic research can help both to revitalize and preserve the neighborhood, and to stimulate the imagination of those involved in the research process. That enhanced imagination can lead to community activism and further revitalization, to higher levels of education, to new forms of entrepreneurship, and to new achievements in the arts, sport and technology.

The traditional vision of an old, multi-ethnic urban neighborhood was that of the slum—a place that most of its residents would leave at the first possible opportunity, and a place that government and the elites considered ripe for demolition and renewal. Microcosmic research can change that old vision to a new one; a vision of a unique place with significant resources and potential, an active community thinking strategically in the global arena. It can help to make urban neighborhoods dynamic and distinctive again, presenting a real and vibrant alternative to the suburbs and exurbs.

Notes

- ¹ Jill Jonnes, whose *We're Still Here* (1986) is a wonderful resource for Bronx neighborhood studies, donated all her research materials to Special Collections, Lehman College, CUNY.

References

- Bromley, Ray (1997) Globalization and the inner periphery: A Mid-Bronx view. *Annals of the American Association of Political and Social Science*, 55 (May 1997): 191-207.
- Burgess, Robert G. (1984) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Danzer, Gerald A. (1987) *Public Places: Exploring their History*. Nashville, TN: American Association of State and Local History.
- Evensen, Bruce J., ed. (1995) *The Responsible Reporter*. Northport, AL: Vision Press.
- Fagg, C.C., and Hutchings, G.E. (1930) *An Introduction to Regional Surveying*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Strauss, Anselm L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hartman, Chester, Keating, Dennis, and LeGates, Richard (1982) *Displacement: How to Fight It*. Berkeley, CA: National Housing Law Project.
- Hayden, Dolores (1984) *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Hayden, Dolores (1995) *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hofrichter, Richard, ed. (1993) *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.
- Jackson, Kenneth T., and Vergara, Camilo José (1989) *Silent Cities: The Evolution of the American Cemetery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jonnes, Jill (1986) *We're Still Here: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of the South Bronx*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Kyvig, David E., and Marty, Myron A. (1982) *Nearby History: Exploring the Past around You*. Nashville, TN: American Association of State and Local History.
- Madge, Charles, and Harrison, Tom (1939) *Britain by Mass Observation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Medoff, Peter, and Sklar, Holly (1994) *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood*. Boston: South End Press.
- Salmen, Lawrence F. (1987) *Listen to the People: Participant-Observer Evaluation of Development Projects*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slim, Hugo, and Thompson, Paul (1995) *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.
- Thernstrom, Stephan, ed. (1980) *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, Paul (1978) *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Maanen, John (1988) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vergara, Camilo José (1995) *The New American Ghetto*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Wagenvoort, James (1976) *City Lives*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Whyte, William H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Washington DC: Conservation Foundation.
- Whyte, William H. (1988) *The City: Rediscovering the Center*. New York: Doubleday.
- Wiseman, Jacqueline P., and Aron, Marcia S. (1970) *Field Projects for Sociology Students*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- WPA Federal Writers' Project (1939) *WPA Guide to New York City*. New York: Random House, for the Works Progress Administration. Republished 1992.

