Our Words, and Theirs:
A Reflection on the Historian's Craft, Today[*]

CARLO GINZBURG

> "C'est que la chimie avait le grand
> avantage de s'adresser à des réalités
> incapables, par nature, de se nommer
> elles-mêmes."
> Marc Bloch

1. In his methodological reflections, posthumously published as *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (*The Historian's Craft*) Marc Bloch remarked: "To the great despair of historians, men fail to change their vocabulary every time they change their customs."[1]

The result of this divergence is semantic ambiguity. Let us take a fundamental word in our intellectual and emotional vocabulary – 'liberty' whose manifold meanings have for a long time been at the very heart of Bloch's concerns. A closer look at them will cast some light over his ironically emphatic reference to historians' "despair," *vis-à-vis* the gap between the resilience of words and their shifting meaning. Bloch mentioned "historians," thinking of himself: but his personal reactions had more distant, as well as more complex, roots.

2. "History," from the Greek *historìa*, is another word of our vocabulary which, translated into various languages, remained the same along twenty-five centuries but changed its meaning.[2] After being used by physicians, anatomists, botanists and antiquarians in a sense which included both 'description' and 'inquiry,' history has been referred almost exclusively to the realm of human action – although a trace of its previous usage can be detected in expressions such as the "clinical history" of a patient. This narrowing down of its meaning is a side-effect of a turning point which can, symbolically, be identified with this famous passage in Galileo's *Assayer*:

Philosophy is written in this vast book, which continuously lies open before our eyes

[1] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 34; "Car, au grand désespoir des historiens, les hommes n'ont pas coutume, chaque fois qu'ils changent de mœurs, de changer de vocabulaire." Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 872. This passage has been brought again to my attention by Ciafaloni, "Le domande di Vittorio. Un ricordo di Vittorio Foa", 42.

[2] Pomata and Siraisi, eds. *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe.*

(I mean the universe). But it cannot be understood unless you have first learned to understand the language and recognize the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and the characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures. Without such means, it is impossible for us humans to understand a word of it...[3]

Galileo, notwithstanding his close connections with scientists committed to a non-mathematical approach to the study of nature, announced that the language of nature is – or was bound to become – the language of mathematics.[4] On the contrary, the language of history was, and has always been, from Herodotus's time onwards, a human language: in fact, the language of everyday life, even when it is supported by statistics and diagrams.[5] But the evidence the historian relies upon is also mostly written in the language of everyday life.

Bloch reflected intensely on this contiguity, and its implications. "History receives its vocabulary" we read in another section of his posthumous reflections "for the most part, from the very subject matter of its study. It accepts it, already worn out and deformed by long usage; frequently, moreover, ambiguous from the very beginning, like any system of expression which has not derived from the rigorously organized efforts of technical experts."[6] Thus, historians are faced with two alternatives: either to echo the terminology used in their evidence, or to use a terminology which is foreign to it. The former alternative, Bloch remarks, leads nowhere: at times, the resilience of intrinsically ambiguous words conceals the change in their meanings; at others, similar meanings are concealed by a multiplicity of terms. We are left with the other alternative, which is risky: terms like 'factory system,' for instance, may seem to be a substitute for analysis, hence promoting "anachronism: the most unpardonable of sins in a time-science."[7] Only scholarly exchanges, Bloch concludes, will ultimately lead to the construction of a common vocabulary of human sciences; but inventing new words is preferable to a tacit projection of new meanings within commonly used terms.[8]

Hence, a rigorous vocabulary may allow history to cope with its intrinsic weakness – the everyday language it shares with most of its evidence. The reference to chemistry's artificial terminology, which surfaces over and over again in Bloch's pages, is telling enough: rarely had he been so close to positivism. But one of

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[3] Galilei, *Il Saggiatore,* 264: "... la filosofia è scritta in questo grandissimo libro che continuamente ci sta aperto dinanzi agli occhi (io dico l'universo), ma non si può intendere se prima non s'impara a intender la lingua, e conoscere i caratteri ne' quali è scritto. Egli è scritto in lingua matematica, e i caratteri son triangoli, cerchi, ed altre figure geometriche, senza i quali mezzi è impossibile a intenderne umanamente parola ... ." Here I am developing an interpretation of this passage put forward in Ginzburg, "Spie: radici di un paradigma indiziario", 172–173, and in Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm", especially 107–108.

[4] Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History.*

[5] Ginzburg, "Spuren einer Paradigmengabelung: Machiavelli, Galilei und die Zensur der Gegenreformation".

[6] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 158; Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 959.

[7] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 173; "... il fomente l'anachronisme: entre tous les péchés, au regard d'une science du temps, le plus impardonnable ..."; Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 969.

[8] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 176–177; Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 971.

positivism's classical texts, Claude Bernard's *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale* (1865) – a book which Bloch mentioned with some disagreement – had noted, in a paragraph entitled "Experimental criticism must look at facts, not at words," that ambiguity also threatens science's conventional languages:

> When we create a word to characterize a phenomenon, we then agree in general on the idea that we wish it to express and the precise meaning we are giving to it; but with the later progress of science the meaning of the word changes for some people, while for others the word remains in the language with its original meaning. The result is often such discord that men using the same word express very different ideas. Our language, in fact, is only approximate, and even in science it is so indefinite that if we lose sight of phenomena and cling to words, we are speedily outside of reality.[9]

3. But what is, from the historian's perspective, the relationship between words – the words from the evidence – and reality? In Bloch's answer to this question one may detect many intertwined elements. First of all, a sense of the inadequacy of words *vis-à-vis* what generates them: passions, feelings, thoughts, needs. Bloch exemplifies this inadequacy by evoking an extreme case:

> How instructive it would be – whether as to the God of yesterday or today – were we able to hear the true prayers on the lips of the humble! Assuming, of course, that they themselves knew how to express the impulses of their hearts without mutilating them. For there, in the final analysis, lies the greatest obstacle. Nothing is more difficult for us than self-expression (...) The most usual terms are never more than approximations.[10]

These words, based on Bloch's personal research experience, were not inspired by skepticism – quite the contrary. The awareness of any word's inadequacy, whether written or told, had suggested indirect strategies to Bloch that enabled him to read medieval sources against the grain. One may recall the magnificent pages of *Les rois thaumaturges* dedicated to men and women affected by scrophula, who traveled enormous distances yearning for the miraculous touch of the royal hand.[11] But the same awareness had reinforced his commitment to a comparative history based, as in the case of *Les Rois thaumaturges*, on categories and terms inevitably distant from those used in the evidence.

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[9] Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine,* 188; "Quand on crée un mot pour caractériser un phénomène, on s'entend en général à ce moment sur l'idée qu'on veut lui faire exprimer et sur la signification exacte qu'on lui donne, mais plus tard, par le progrès de la science, le sens du mot change pour les uns, tandis que pour les autres le mot reste dans le langage avec sa signification primitive. Il en résulte alors une discordance qui, souvent, est telle, que des hommes, en employant le même mot, expriment des idées très différentes. Notre langage n'est en effet qu'approximatif, et il est si peu précis, même dans les sciences, que, si l'on perd les phénomènes de vue, pour s'attacher aux mots, on est bien vite en dehors de la réalité." Bernard, *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*, 330–331. Bloch referred to Claude Bernard's *Introduction* in "Apologie pour l'histoire", 831, 908.

[10] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 166–167 (translation slightly modified); "Quel enseignement si – le le dieu fût-il d'hier ou d'aujourd'hui – nous réussissions à atteindre sur les lèvres des humbles leur véritable prière! A supposer, cependant, qu'il aient su, eux-mêmes, traduire, sans le mutiler, les élans de leur coeur. Car là est, en dernier ressort, le grand obstacle. Rien n'est plus difficile à un homme que de s'exprimer soi-même. (…) Les termes les plus usuels ne sont jamais que des approximations." Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 965.

[11] Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, 89–157.

4. These elements come to the fore in the 1928 essay titled "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes:" a kind of methodological manifesto, which is still an indispensable point of reference.[12] In the conclusion to his essay Bloch evoked the lasting prejudice which identifies comparative history with a search for analogies, including the most superficial. The whole point of comparative history, Bloch insisted, is to emphasize the specific *differences* between the phenomena it deals with. For this purpose, one has to cast aside all false resemblances: for instance, in the domain of the European Middle Ages, the alleged equivalence between English villainage and French *servage*. True, some intersections are undeniable:

> *Serf* and *villain* are both considered, by jurists and by general opinion, as individuals devoid of 'liberty': therefore in some Latin texts they are labelled *servi*... Hence men of learning, starting from the absence of liberty and the reference to servitude, were led to compare them to Roman slaves.

But this, according to Bloch, is a

> superficial analogy: the concept of non-liberty, as far as its content is concerned, underwent many variations at different times and places.[13]

To sum up: we have two different geographic contexts, the English and the French, and two different words, *villain* and *serf*. Medieval jurists and men of learning routinely conflated them with *servi*, the term for Roman slaves, since villains, serfs and *servi* were assumed to have been deprived of their liberty. Bloch rejected this conclusion as superficial, on the grounds of an argument put forward by a number of scholars, including Paul Vinogradoff, the great Anglo-Russian medievalist: meaning, that in 1300 or so *villains* had joined the category "free tenants" in England; in France in the same period tenants were sharply distinguished from *serfs*. Bloch traced these divergent historical trajectories, concluding:

> In the fourteenth century, the French *serf* and the English *villain* belong to two completely different classes. Is it helpful to compare them? Certainly, but this comparison will end by fleshing out quite different features, suggesting a remarkable disjuncture in the development of the two nations.[14]

Here, as in other passages from the same essay, Bloch used the word "classes" (*classes*) to identify two different social realities erroneously conflated by medieval jurists. But his comment on the norms assumed by English jurists, which ascribed a lesser degree of freedom to those individuals who had to perform heavy agricultural tasks (*corvées*), headed in a different direction. "Those norms," Bloch wrote, "were far from original. They simply relied upon a layer of collective representations, elaborated much earlier, helter-skelter, within medieval societies both on the Continent and in the British Isles. The idea that agricultural work is in some way intrinsically incompatible with liberty springs from ancient mental habits, exemplified by the words *opera servilia*, applied by barbarians to this kind of work."[15] Abandoning the domain of documented terminology, Bloch abruptly shifted to a more slippery,

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[12] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes".

[13] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", 28.

[14] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", 30.

[15] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", 31.

hypothetical ground: "collective representations." This notion is taken from Durkheim, whose name received special emphasis in a footnote. In a previous passage Bloch had alluded to "an old, largely forgotten legacy of popular representations."[16]

Liberty and servitude in the Middle Ages, seen in a longer chronological perspective, surfaced again a few years later in another essay by Bloch. In some cases the juridical terms referring to servitude did not change: but their meaning (Bloch remarked) underwent imperceptible variations over time, as the Carolingian documents show. They display a series of shifts, "obviously unconscious," which must be assessed for what they are: likewise, linguists have pointed out that at a certain moment the word *labourer* took on the meaning of the Latin word *arare*, to plough.[17] Following the example of linguists, Bloch wrote, historians should refrain from replacing interpretations given in the past with their own.[18]

This is a somewhat unexpected statement. In a passage of his previous essay Bloch had rejected the unfounded assimilation of medieval servitude to ancient slavery, inspired by the Latin word *servi*. Nonetheless, one might argue that reconstructing the jurists' perspectives and emphasizing their limitations are not incompatible aims. There is more. The essay in which Bloch urged historians to take linguists as a model is entitled "Personal Liberty and Personal Servitude in the Middle Ages, Particularly in France: A Contribution to the Analysis of Classes" (*Liberté et servitude personnelles au Moyen âge, particulièrement en France: contribution à l'étude des classes*, 1933). For Bloch, "class," a modern category, far from effacing the categories put forward by medieval jurists, inscribed them in a perspective which is ours, not theirs. This point is emphasized in the final passages of the essay:

> Everything brings us to the same conclusion. Since human institutions are realities of a psychological sort, a class never exists except inasmuch as we perceive it. To write the history of servitude means above all to trace, in the complex, changing trajectory of its development, the history of a collective notion: the deprivation of liberty.[19]

Needless to say, the psychological interpretation of class put forward by Bloch can be accepted, debated, or rejected on the grounds of different analytic categories. But his reflections elicit a more general question: what is the relationship between the observer's and the actor's categories, retrieved from medieval documents? Another question immediately follows. The medieval jurists were observers and actors at the same time. What is the relationship between the representation of servitude shared by jurists and the representation of servitude shared by servants?

5. This last question, which Bloch does not explicitly raise, emerges irresistibly

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[16] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", 30 n. 1, 29 n. 2.

[17] Bloch, "Liberté et servitude personnelles au Moyen âge", especially 332.

[18] Bloch, "Liberté et servitude personelles au Moyen âge", 327–328.

[19] Bloch, "Liberté et servitude personelles au Moyen âge", 355: "Ainsi nous nous trouvons ramenés de toutes parts à la même leçon. Les institutions humaines étant des réalités d'ordre psychologique, une classe n'existe jamais que par l'idée qu'on s'en fait. Ecrire l'histoire de la condition servile, c'est, avant tout, retracer, dans la courbe complexe et changeante de son développement, l'histoire d'une notion collective: celle de la privation de liberté." Cf. Ginzburg, "A proposito della raccolta dei saggi storici di Marc Bloch".

from his own research. At this point I must make a personal digression. Reading *Les Rois thaumaturges* in 1959, when I was twenty, convinced me to try to learn the historian's craft. A few months later I decided to commit myself to the study of witchcraft trials, focusing on the men and women who stood before the judges rather than on the persecution as such. Nudging me in that direction were some books (Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Ernesto de Martino's *Il mondo magico*) as well as poignant memories of racial persecution. But only many years later did I become aware that my experience as a Jewish child during the war had led me to identify with the men and women accused of witchcraft.[20]

Following the advice of my mentor, Delio Cantimori, I began to study the Inquisition trials (many of them dealing with witchcraft or related crimes) preserved in the State Archive of Modena. Then I extended my research to other archives – a quite erratic journey, as I had no specific agenda. In the early nineteen sixties, reading through the Inquisition trial records preserved in the State Archive of Venice, I came across a document which was, as I immediately realized, a complete anomaly: a few pages, dated 1591, recording the examination of Menichino della Nota, a young herdsman from Friuli. Menichino replied to the inquisitor's questions saying that he was a *benandante*. The meaning of this word was unknown to me – and to the inquisitor as well, who apparently listened in astonishment to the defendant's story. Since he had been born with a caul, Menichino said, he was compelled to leave his body three times a year, "like smoke," traveling with the other benandanti to fight "for the faith against the witches" in the Josaphat meadow. "When the benandanti won," he concluded, "it was a sign of a good harvest."[21]

Many years ago I put forward a retrospective analysis of my reactions to that document which I had come across by pure chance: the first of nearly fifty trials that I later discovered in the Ecclesiastical Archive of Udine. All of them hinge upon a word – *benandante* – which elicited questions from the inquisitors; the answers provided by the defendants were filled with extraordinary details. The trials show that the inquisitors soon made up their minds: the benandanti, who claimed that their spirits fought against witches and sorcerers, were in fact themselves sorcerers. These accusations provoked indignant denials from the benandanti, who insisted on describing their "profession" (as they called it) sometimes with pride, sometimes as the result of an obscure, inescapable drive. But ultimately, after fifty years of investigations, those who believed they had been fighting on the side of good accepted the hostile image their interrogators had constructed. This was the outcome of a cultural clash impregnated with violence – in this case, mostly symbolic. The inquisitors' prestige, as well as the impending threat of torture and death at the stake, had proven ineluctable.

In a book I published in 1966, translated into English as *The Night Battles*, I analyzed the tales provided by the benandanti as a fragment of peasant culture, slowly distorted by the imposition of inquisitorial stereotypes. This argument was based on the heated disagreements between defendants and inquisitors over the

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[20] Ginzburg, "Streghe e sciamani".

[21] Ginzburg, *I benandanti*, 84–87; Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 74–77.

actual meaning of the word *benandante*. What made the extraordinary Friulian evidence so valuable for the historian was the very lack of communication between two sides engaged in a dramatically unequal dialogue.

After a break that lasted many years I resumed my work on witchcraft trials. At that time I realized that my approach to the judges, both lay and ecclesiastical, had been in many ways inadequate. Their behavior was sometimes marked by a genuine attempt to make sense of the defendants' beliefs and acts – in order to eradicate them, of course. Cultural distance could generate an effort to understand, to compare, to translate. Let me recall an extreme but enlightening case. In 1453 the bishop of Brixen – the philosopher Nicholas of Cusa – listened to the tales told by two old women from a nearby valley. In a sermon delivered some time later he described them as being "half crazy" (*semideliras*). They had paid homage to a nocturnal goddess they called "Richella" (from "ricchezza", translatable as 'richness'). The learned bishop identified Richella with Diana, Abundia, Satia: names mentioned in those sections of medieval encyclopedias and treatises on canon law dealing with popular superstitions.[22] This hermeneutic attempt was not exceptional. Less illustrious judges and inquisitors drew up summaries and translations which, contained in a series of nested Chinese boxes, are available to the modern interpreter – in this case, myself. With some embarrassment I discovered, apart from my emotional identification with the victims, a troubling intellectual contiguity with the persecutors: a condition that I sought to analyze in an essay titled "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist."[23]

6. I cannot imagine which direction my research – first of all, the one I did in the Frulian archives – would have taken had I never come across Bloch's writings. In hindsight, I am tempted to compare the benandanti's ecstatic dreams to the "true prayers" of the humble evoked by Bloch: inner experiences that words (documented in the former case, imagined in the latter) record in an inevitably inadequate manner. In the case of benandanti we are faced with words uttered at the inquisitor's behest, and then transcribed by the inquisitor's notaries: a conflictual context (albeit ruled by law) which must be taken into account, yet one that does not make the evidence any the less relevant.

I am inclined to believe that no historian would have missed such a blatant conflict. Much less obvious, in my view, was the perception, which I realized only many years later, of my contiguity with the inquisitors. Perhaps this contiguity imposed itself upon my mind only when I grew aware of the deep roots behind the preliminary choice that had shaped my research project from its very outset.

Emotional identification with the victims, intellectual contiguity with the inquisitors: we are far removed from the elements which, in the model of historical research described by Bloch, look closer to positivism. In his reflections on nomenclature, conflict appears only on the actor's side: for instance, in his remarks on a comparatively late phenomenon like class consciousness, either of the twentieth

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[22] Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba,* 70–73, 107–108; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches's Sabbath*, 94–96.

[23] Ginzburg, "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist".

century workers, or of the peasants on the eve of French revolution.[24] But on the side of the observer-historian's language, which Bloch would have wished to conform, as much as possible, to the neutral and detached language of the natural sciences, conflict is never mentioned.

In the perspective I am advocating, a critical, detached attitude can be a goal, not a starting point. Although the end is not unlike Bloch's, the roads leading to it are. In the light of the risky contiguity between the historian's language and the language of evidence, the sterilization of the instruments of analysis is more urgent than ever – especially in cases that display a contiguity between observer and observers-actors (the inquisitor as anthropologist, the inquisitor as historian).

7. These retrospective reflections on the research I carried out in the Friulian archives in the nineteen sixties and seventies are partly inspired by my later encounter with the writings of Kenneth L. Pike. Pike, the American linguist, anthropologist, and missionary, emphasized the opposition between two levels of analysis, the observer's and the actor's, labeled, respectively, as *etic* (from *phonetic*) and *emic* (from *phonemic*). Starting from language, Pike set up a unified theory of the structure of human behavior – the title of his most ambitious work, first published in three parts between 1954 and 1960, and then reprinted, in a revised and expanded version, in 1967.

The *etic* point of view, Pike explained, examines languages and cultures in a comparative perspective; the *emic* point of view is "culturally specific, applied to one language or culture at a time."[25] But this static, and rather perplexing, opposition is subsequently reworked into a more effective dynamic perspective:

> Preliminary versus final presentation: Hence, *etic* data provide access into the system – the starting point of analysis. They give tentative results, tentative units. The final analysis or presentation, however, would be in *emic* units. In the total analysis, the initial *etic* description gradually is refined, and is ultimately – in principle, but probably never in practice – replaced by one which is totally *emic*.[26]

Most historians, familiar with Bloch's nuanced and sophisticated reflections, would react with some impatience to these remarks, deeming them to be exceedingly abstract. True, Pike was addressing himself not to historians but to linguists and anthropologists.[27] For a long time those two groups have been dealing with the

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[24] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 167; Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 96.

[25] An echo of this definition in Subrahmanyam, "Monsieur Picart and the Gentiles of India", especially 206: *etic*, i.e. "universalist" vs. *emic*, i.e. "internalist".

[26] Pike, Kenneth L. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 37–39. The last sentence of this passage is quoted (with disagreement) in Harris, Marvin. "History and Significance" 329–350, which ends with a criticism of Claude Lévi-Strauss's attitude, labelled as "obscurantist" and inspired by Berkeley's idealism. Lévi-Strauss, whose huge four-volumes work *Mythologiques* (1964–1971) had just come out, had dismissed the distinction claiming that etics is "nothing but the emics of the observers." Lévi-Strauss, "Structuralisme et écologie", 143–166, above all 161–162. Helpful remarks (which strangely enough do not mention Lévi-Strauss's essay) in Olivier de Sardan, Jean Pierre. "Emique", 151–166 (many thanks to Simona Cerutti for having brought this piece to my attention). My own disagreement with Harris and (at an incomparably higher level) with Lévi-Strauss will emerge from what follows.

[27] "I am not a historical linguist," Pike wrote in "On the Emics and Etics of Pike and Harris", 40.

distinction between *emic* and *etic* levels; historians, on the contrary, have ignored it, with few exceptions. (I myself became aware of the *emic/etic* divide twenty years ago, which was twenty years after the publication of Pike's *magnum opus*.)[28] But it might not be pointless to attempt a translation of the aforementioned passage, using words associated with historical research. The result might sound like this: "Historians start from questions using terms that are inevitably anachronistic. The research process modifies the initial questions on the grounds of new evidence, retrieving answers that are articulated in the actors' language, and related to categories peculiar to their society, which is utterly different from ours."

My translation of the "tentative results" generated by the *etic* perspective – "Historians start from questions using terms that are inevitably anachronistic" – echoes a remark made by Bloch.[29] Questions, not answers: a distinction which has been missed by those who either carelessly emphasized the role of anachronism in historical research, or dismissed anachronism altogether as a pertinent category.[30] One starts from *etic* questions aiming to get *emic* answers.[31]

We may compare my tentative translation with one of the rules of the decalogue that Arnaldo Momigliano proposed many years ago titled "The Rules of the Game in the Study of Ancient History." The rule applies to the history of any period:

> As soon as we enter the field of historical research, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marx, Weber, Jung, and Braudel teach us to subject the evidence to specific questions; they do not affect the answers that the evidence provides. The historian's arbitrary will vanishes as soon as he has to interpret a document.[32]

In my view Pike's passage, my translation of it, and Momigliano's rule do not differ significantly. What I regard as a divergence lies elsewhere. The residual *etic* element which, according to Pike, cannot be erased, should be seen in positive terms: as an intrinsic element of the translation activity which is, etymologically, synonymous with interpretation. The tension between our questions and the answers we get from the evidence must be kept alive, although the evidence may well modify our initial questions.[33] If the difference between our words and theirs is carefully

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[28] [Ginzburg], "Saccheggi rituali. Premesse a una ricerca in corso". A relevant exception is Simona Cerutti, "Microhistory: Social Relations versus Cultural Models?" (see my comment, footnote 31).

[29] Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 158; "Les documents tendent à imposer leur nomenclature; l'historien, s'il les écoute, écrit sous la dictée d'une époque chaque fois différente. Mais il pense, d'autre part, naturellement selon les catégories de son propre temps …" Bloch, "Apologie pour l'histoire", 959–960.

[30] See, respectively, Loraux, "Eloge de l'anachronisme en histoire"; Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*; Rancière, "Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien", 53–68.

[31] "*Emic* is a *method* of analysis, not the immediate context of behavior," S. Cerutti wrote, criticizing my own approach (Cerutti, "Microhistory", 35; italics in the text). But in my view the *emic* perspective can be grasped only through the mediation of an *etic* perspective: hence the active role (which Cerutti finds arbitrary: *ibid.*, 34), played by the researcher in the research process.

[32] Momigliano, "Le regole del gioco nello studio della storia antica", 483.

[33] Curiously, the revision of the initial questions is missing in Clifford Geertz's version of the hermenutic circle: see Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding".

preserved, it will prevent us from falling into two traps – empathy and ventriloquism.[34] These are indeed related: by assuming the transparency of the actors we ascribe to them our language and our categories. The result is an insidious distortion, which is much more dangerous (because more difficult to pinpoint) than grossly anachronistic assumptions such as *homo oeconomicus* and the like.

The Latin word *interpres* reminds us that any interpretation is a translation, and vice versa. Translation surfaces in the debates inspired by Pike's arguments. A group of reactions was published in a book entitled *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, based on a conference held in Phoenix in 1988. One of the participants, Willard Quine, the philosopher famous for his reflections on "radical translation," ended his lecture as follows:

> And yet there remains, between outside and inside, a vital asymmetry. Our provisional but responsible commitment to our science extends to what we say about the exotic culture, and does not extend to what the insiders say within it.[35]

The asymmetry between our words and theirs, emphasized by Quine (and by Pike before him), has been experienced by historians as well: as the saying goes, "The past is a foreign country."[36] It is not surprising, after all, that such an asymmetry was articulated and theorized by an anthropologist. The distance, both linguistic and cultural, which usually separates anthropologists from the so-called "natives" prevents the former from assuming, as historians so often do, that they have become the intimates of the characters they are dealing with. As I pointed out before, ventriloquism is a professional illness many historians succumb to. But not all of them, obviously.

Somebody once spoke of an *emic* anthropology, specifically committed to rescuing "the native's point of view," as Malinowski put it.[37] By analogy, one could speak of an *emic* historiography. Three splendid examples will suffice: Paul Oskar Kristeller's and Augusto Campana's essays on the origins of the word "humanista" and Ernst Gombrich's little known lecture on the Renaissance as a period and as a movement.[38] All three attempt to reconstruct the actors' categories as distinct from the observers' categories – the latter categories often inform the thinking of a group that extends far beyond the circle of professional historians. At the end of his essay Campana remarked that recently (this was written in 1946) somebody had spoken of "a new humanism: and the old word has been impregnated with new ideals. Future philologists and historians will deal with them." But in a postscript published the following year, Campana used stronger words: he believed that Kristeller, in the essay he had written independently on the same subject, had demonstrated that the

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[34] Only after having written these pages I realized that the same metaphor has been used in Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 257: "to ventriloquize nature," (but the entire context is relevant).

[35] Quine, "The Phoneme's Long Shadow", 167.

[36] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

[37] Feleppa, "Emic Analysis and the Limits of Cognitive Diversity", 101 ff.

[38] Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance" (see also introduction, XI–XII); Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist'"; Dionisotti, "Ancora humanista-umanista"; Gombrich, "The Renaissance: Period or Movement".

modern concept of "Renaissance humanism ... is untenable."[39] Untenable, of course, from a philological point of view. This does not prevent us from using categories like "Renaissance" (as Campana himself subsequently did).[40] But we must always be aware that however useful they may be, such labels remain conventional. Those who make such efforts to uncover the intrinsic features of humanism, the Renaissance, modernity, the twentieth century, are – to put it mildly – wasting their time.

8. The *emic* dimension which I proposed, by way of experiment, to find in historiography, can be described using more ancient and more familiar words: philology, antiquarianism. (Anthropology was born from antiquarianism, so the circle is closed.) But a mechanical transfer of the opposition between *emic* and *etic* into the historiographic discourse would be misleading. Drawing on their own practice, historians might point out that the *emic/etic* dichotomy is somewhat simplistic. As my Friulian case shows, both the *emic* and the *etic* dimension are theatres of conflicts: between inquisitors and benandanti (in the former case), between scholars of varying orientations (in the latter). But becoming aware of the *emic/etic* distinction may help historians to free themselves from an ethnocentric bias: a task which is becoming more urgent in a world shaped by globalization – a process that has been going on for centuries, but has taken on a truly frantic pace in the last decades.

Historians must meet this challenge – but the question is how? An answer has been offered by debates over literary texts. One can start from Erich Auerbach's "Philology of World Literature [*Weltliteratur*]": a famous essay that appeared in 1952, and that today has an almost prophetic ring to it.[41]

A gloomy prophecy. In the middle of the Cold War Auerbach saw a widespread tendency towards cultural homogeneity: a phenomenon which, notwithstanding the obvious differences, affected both blocs. The world was becoming more alike; even nation states, which had been in the past agents of cultural differentiation, had lost part of their power. Mass culture (a term Auerbach did not use: but this was the gist of his analysis) was spreading across the entire surface of the globe. A *Weltliteratur* was emerging, in a context completely different from the one imagined by Goethe: a world literature in which Europe had a marginal role. Faced with this enormous expansion in space and time, even a wide-ranging scholar like Auerbach sensed the inadequacy of his instruments. So he gave young literary scholars some advice, both negative and positive. On the one hand, he suggested that they should avoid both general concepts like Renaissance or Baroque and a monographic approach based on the oeuvre of a single author. On the other, he recommended that they should look for specific details that might serve as connecting points (*Ansatzpunkte*).

Auerbach was alluding to the method which had inspired his great book, *Mimesis*. But in 1952 the reflections he had put forward less than a decade before, in the concluding section of *Mimesis*, were developed in a different direction. If the relevance of the European literary tradition could not be taken for granted any more, the issue of generalization came to the forefront, albeit implicitly. Generalization –

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[39] Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist'", 280–281.

[40] Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist'", 405.

[41] Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur". See also the introduction: Salvaneschi and Endrighi, "La letteratura cosmopolita di Erich Auerbach".

but starting from where, and for what purpose?

A few years ago, in an essay entitled "Conjectures on World Literature" (which curiously enough does not mention Auerbach), Franco Moretti bravely addressed those issues.[42] Faced with the challenge provided by an enormous number of texts which no scholar working on comparative literature could ever master, Moretti suggested a drastic solution: second-hand reading. Scholars committed to a comparative approach to literature would raise general questions by absorbing the insights of scholars who had been working in a more circumscribed perspective, devoted to a specific national literature. Therefore, the comparative study of literature would be based not on close reading but on distant reading. This proposal, put forward in a deliberately provocative tone, was framed by an argument based on the Marc Bloch essay I had started from: "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies." A comparison between the two relevant passages – first Moretti's, then, in translation, Bloch's – will be helpful. Here is Moretti:

> Writing about comparative social history, Marc Bloch once coined a lovely 'slogan,' as he himself called it: 'years of analysis for a day of synthesis'; and if you read Braudel or Wallerstein you immediately see what Bloch had in mind. The text which is strictly Wallerstein's, his 'day of synthesis,' occupies one third of a page, one fourth, maybe half; the rest are quotations (fourteen hundred, in the first volume of *The Modern World-System*). Years of analysis; other people's analysis, which Wallerstein's page synthesizes into a system.[43]

"The old dictum is always true: years of analysis for a day of synthesis," Bloch wrote. He was referring to a passage from Fustel de Coulanges's introduction to his *La Gaule romaine*, published in 1875. In a footnote Bloch provided the exact quotation: "For a day of synthesis, years of analysis are needed." No reassessment of the dictum's inventor is as important as Bloch's subsequent comment:

> Too often this dictum has been quoted without adding its indispensable correction: the 'analysis' can be used for the 'synthesis' only if it takes the latter into account and tries to put itself at its service from the beginning.[44]

Bloch's qualification points in the opposite direction from Moretti's reading.[45] One should not, as positivists think, accumulate bricks, that is monographic research, for a building that exists only in the mind of the architect (or of the professor of comparative literature). Evidence must be collected according to an agenda which is already pointing towards a synthetic approach. In other words, one has to work out *cases*, which will lead to generalizations. But since most evidence has been collected, filtered or approached by previous scholars, who started from questions different from ours, the history of historiography must be incorporated within historical research. The greater our distance from the primary evidence is, the greater the risk of being caught out by hypotheses put forward either by intermediaries or by

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[42] Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature"; Arac, "Anglo-Globalism?" suggests a parallel reading of Moretti's and Auerbach's essays.

[43] Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", 56–57.

[44] Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes", 38.

[45] Bloch's passage is quoted first-hand (without the qualification which follows immediately) in Moretti, *Il romanzo di formazione*, "Prefazione 1999".

ourselves actually becomes. In other words, we risk finding what we are looking for – and nothing else.

That distorted reading of Bloch's passage is especially surprising, since Moretti himself, in a brilliant essay, published simultaneously with "Conjectures on World Literature," shows that the only way to meet the challenge stemming from the enormous, and unmasterable, mass of published and forgotten texts, is to work on a case study: a first-hand analysis of a limited series of texts, identified by way of a specific question. This second essay, entitled "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" (an allusion to an aphorism of Hegel), deals with a literary device which Conan Doyle put, almost unwittingly, at the heart of his detective stories: clues.[46] Many years ago I wrote an essay entitled "Clues" that deals with Sherlock Holmes and other topics in quite a different perspective.[47]

If I am not mistaken, both essays, Franco Moretti's and mine, imply the device known as *mise en abyme*: since clues, as a topic, are analyzed by means of an approach based on clues, the details replicate the whole.[48] But clues require first-hand reading: the person responsible for the final synthesis cannot delegate this task to others. Moreover, a close, analytic reading is compatible with an enormous amount of evidence. Those familiar with archival research know that one can go on leafing through innumerable files and quickly inspecting the contents of countless boxes before coming to a sudden halt, arrested by a document which could be scrutinized for years. Likewise, a chicken (I hope that nobody will be upset by such a comparison) walks back and forth, glancing around, before abruptly snatching up a worm until then concealed in the ground. Once again we come back to *Ansatzpunkte*: the specific points which, as Auerbach argued, can provide the seeds for a detailed research program provided with a generalizing potential – in other words, a case. Anomalous cases are especially promising, since anomalies, as Kierkegaard once noted, are richer, from a cognitive point of view, than norms, insofar as the former invariably includes the latter – but not the other way round.[49]

9. For a certain number of years cases have been the object of growing attention, partially related to ongoing debates about microhistory: a term whose prefix – micro – alludes, as has been repeatedly emphasized (but never enough, perhaps) to the microscope, to the analytic gaze, not to the dimensions, alleged or real, of the object under scrutiny.[50] Yet microhistory, based on analytic (and thus first-hand) research, aims at generalization: a word which is usually, and wrongfully, taken for granted. Further reflection is needed to explore the wide range of its varieties, based on different starting points (questions or answers) different kinds of analogy

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[46] Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature".

[47] Ginzburg, "Spie: radici di un paradigma indiziario"; Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Indiciary Paradigm".

[48] Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme*.

[49] Cf. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 33, referring to an unnamed "Protestan theologian." Many thanks to Henrique Espada Lima who made me aware of the source of this remark, which I had unknowingly made my own.

[50] The best introduction to the subject is still the chapter "Kasus" in Jolles, *Einfache Formen*. See also Forrester, "If p, then what? Thinking in cases"; Passeron and Revel, eds. *Penser par cas.*

(metonymic, metaphoric) and so forth.[51]

One could object that in a globalized world there is no room for microhistory. I would argue the opposite. The international reception of microhistory can be easily interpreted in a political perspective. The first wave of interest in microhistory, after its birth in Italy, manifested itself in Germany, France, England, the United States. It has been followed by a second wave, related to peripheries or semi-peripheries: Finland, South Korea, Iceland.[52] Microhistory has provided an opportunity to subvert pre-existing hierarchies thanks to the intrinsic relevance – demonstrated *a posteriori* – of the object under scrutiny. This is completely different from what has been labeled "Anglo-globalism:" the unintentionally imperialistic privileging of studies in comparative literature written in English, based on studies mostly written in English, dealing with literary texts mostly written in languages other than English.[53]

Relying on microhistory to subvert political and historiographic hierarchies sinks its roots in the distant past. It is not Tribe X which is relevant, Malinowski once said, but the questions addressed to Tribe X. In a similar spirit, Marc Bloch argued that local history must be addressed through questions bearing general implications. In the light of what I have been saying so far, the convergence between anthropology and history will seem obvious. In a world like ours, in which some historians, reacting against the pseudo-universality of Mircea Eliade's *Homo religiosus*, emphasized the ethnocentric dimension, Roman and Christian, of the word "religion," case studies related to specific contexts look promising, as they allow for new generalizations, generating new questions and new research.[54] *Emic* answers generate *etic* questions, and vice versa.

I did not want to end my reflections by singing the praises of microhistory. I am not interested in labels; bad microhistory is bad history. No method can protect us from our limitations and our mistakes. When we speak to the next generation we must be frank in admitting our shortcomings, while describing what, against all odds, we had been trying to do. The next generation will listen to us and will do something different, as has always happened. "*Tristo è lo discepolo che non avanza il suo maestro*" ("Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master") Leonardo said.

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[51] Jakobson, "Due aspetti del linguaggio e due tipi di afasia". Much help will come from Melandri, *La linea e il circolo: Studio logico-filosofico sull'analogia*.

[52] Some bibliographical references: Chasob, ed., *Mishisa ran muoshinga*; Ginzburg, Ólafsson and Magnússon, *Molar og mygla: Um einsögu og glataðan tíma*; Magnússon, "The Singularization of History: Social history and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge; Muir and Ruggiero, eds. *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe*; Peltonen, "Carlo Ginzburg and the New Microhistory"; Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research"; Revel, ed. *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*.

[53] This criticism has been raised by Arac, "Anglo-Globalism?" In his answer Moretti does not address this issue: cf. Moretti, "More Conjectures", (note 8 deals with the language used by the critics, not with the second-hand or third-hand approach to translated texts supposedly performed by the meta-critic working in a comparative perspective).

[54] Momigliano, "Questioni di metodologia della storia delle religioni"; Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*.

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