

Some Queries about “Some Queries”

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Discussing a paper by Carlo Ginzburg makes me feel like the Italian singer Mino Reitano, when he had to open a Beatles concert in Hamburg in the ‘60s. But joking apart, it is not easy for me to talk about a man who is at the same time so distant and yet so close to me: a methodological polestar for historians all over the globe, who I was privileged to have as my teacher and mentor in Pisa. All that I can say is that, although Ginzburg never conceals the personal circumstances that shaped his historical trajectory,¹ this essay is, as far as I know, the first occasion on which historical writing and self-reflection are interwoven from start to finish. Among the various ways in which one could read a text like this, it would nonetheless be limiting to approach it as a short intellectual autobiography. Limiting and, I would add, misleading. By doing so, one would be completely paralyzed not only by the breadth of Ginzburg’s expertise, but also by the eminence of his interlocutors. In a few pages one can find names like Auerbach, Bloch, Cantimori, Contini, De Martino, Dionisotti, Spitzer (to name just the scholars, but even two popes are mentioned!). As a dwarf on the shoulders of a giant, I will try, on the contrary, to raise some queries about *Some Queries*.² In other words, my purpose is to render explicit the methodological implications hidden behind the “team” Ginzburg has enlisted and, tentatively, to propose to him a couple of substitutions in this extraordinary line-up.

I will limit myself to just one point: the relationship between exception and norm, cases and their generalization, and I shall begin from so-called microhistory. Although Ginzburg has always professed that he has little interest in labels, especially with regards to those that have been applied to his activity, he has devoted a self-reflective essay to the origin of the category: “Microhistory. Two or three things I know about it.”³ An important passage was apparently left aside by Ginzburg’s genealogy of microhistory. Reviewing Pietro Treves’s *Lo studio dell’antichità classica nell’Ottocento*, Sebastiano Timpanaro wrote:

The preference for a prevalently ethical-political historiography is linked, in Treves, to a disdain for philology in the narrow sense of the term (textual criticism, interpretation), which he describes time and time again as mere “technique”, clearly distinguishing it from history. In opposition to a certain kind of over-reliance on philology – and there is a risk that it may become predominant in historical studies today – which presumes to expunge any “practical-political” interest from historiography, Treves’ protest has a certain value. But slipping into a Crocean conception of a philology that is purely instrumental with respect to ethical-political history or to literary criticism is not, in my view, the right way to react to such an over-

¹ Just think of the self-examination contained in the foreword to *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*.

² Carlo Ginzburg, “Some Queries Addressed to Myself,” first published in *Premi Balzan 2010* (Milan), now in *Cromohs* 18 (2013).

³ *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), pp. 10–35, now in Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces. True, False, Fictive* (Los Angeles 2012).

reliance. The interpretation of a passage and the reconstruction of a badly transmitted text are historiographic tasks: they are, if you like, “micro-history.” This should certainly not stifle the need for a broader cultural or political-social history, but nor is it simply a means for those vaster syntheses. Textual and exegetic philology – the philology of the likes of Porson, Herman or Leopardi – is autonomous to the same degree that one can consider autonomous any human activity which, insofar as it is distinct from others due to a practical necessity for a division of labour, always carries within it the danger of the sectorialism of specialist narrowness.⁴

These words were written in 1963, more or less when Ginzburg decided to become an historian, by a man who was very close to him in the early period of his intellectual life. My question therefore is: How important was Timpanaro not only for “the impulse that generated microhistory” (as he says in his paper and as the aforementioned passage could suggest), but for the turn from a social, “low” microhistory (think of *Night Battles*, or *The Cheese and the Worms*) to a cultural, “high” one (as in the works on Piero della Francesca, Aristotle, Montaigne, Voltaire, Augustine and now on Dante).⁵ It is perhaps no coincidence that the text in which this turn is most evident, *Clues* (1979), is deeply influenced by Timpanaro’s *Freudian Slip* and that Ginzburg used to call his way of interpreting the past “philology à la Giambattista Vico,” a definition behind which one can clearly recognize Auerbach, but which Timpanaro would not have disliked, although he mentioned Porson, Hermann, Leopardi and not Vico.

But the case is in Ginzburg’s methodological view just the starting point, because “one intensely studied case can be the starting point for a generalization. I would add: yes, above all if it is an anomalous case, because anomaly implies the norm (whereas the opposite is not true).”⁶

In the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson made a radical objection to Ginzburg’s argument, turning it inside out: “By definition, an anomaly is only such in

⁴ Sebastiano Timpanaro, “Classicismo e ‘neoguelfismo’ negli studi di antichità dell’Ottocento italiano” [review of *Lo studio dell’antichità classica nell’Ottocento*, ed. by Piero Treves (Milan-Naples, Ricciardi, 1962)], *Critica storica* 2 (1963), pp. 603–11 [republished in Id., *Aspetti e figure della cultura ottocentesca* (Pisa 1980), pp. 371–86]: “Con la predilezione per una storiografia orientata in senso prevalentemente etico-politico si connette, nel Treves, il disprezzo per la filologia in senso stretto (critica testuale, interpretazione), che egli qualifica più e più volte come mera “tecnica”, distinguendola recisamente dalla storia. Contro un certo tipo di filologismo che oggi rischia di prevalere negli studi storici, e che presume di espungere dalla storiografia ogni interesse “pratico-politico”, la protesta del Treves ha il suo valore. Ma ricadere nella concezione crociana di una filologia puramente strumentale rispetto alla storia etico-politica o alla critica letteraria, non è, a mio parere, il modo giusto di reagire al filologismo. L’interpretazione di un passo, la ricostruzione di un testo mal tramandato, sono lavoro storiografico: sono, se vogliamo, “micro-storia”, la quale non deve certo soffocare l’esigenza di una storia più ampia, culturale o politico-sociale, ma non è neppure semplice mezzo per quelle più vaste sintesi. La filologia testuale ed esegetica – la filologia di un Porson, di un Hermann, di un Leopardi – è autonoma nella stessa misura in cui si può considerare autonoma qualsiasi attività umana, la quale, in quanto distinta da altre per una necessità pratica di divisione del lavoro, reca sempre in sé il pericolo del settorialismo dell’angustia specialistica.” I warmly thank my friend Ignazio Veca, who brought this text to my attention.

⁵ This does not mean the existence of two microhistories, as suggested by Alberto Mario Banti, “Storie e microstorie: l’histoire sociale contemporaine en Italie (1972–1989),” *Genèses* 3 (1991), pp. 134–47.

⁶ See Ginzburg, “Some Queries Addressed to Myself.”

terms of a rule, which ontologically commands it. If there is no rule, there can be no exception to it. But the converse does not hold. A rule does not depend for its existence on an exception. For there are rules that admit of no exceptions: mathematical ones, in the first place, but not only them.”⁷ I am not strong enough on epistemology to be able to say if Ginzburg or Anderson is right. Rather, I wonder if this divergence could be rooted in their respective political formation: the Marxist intellectual on the one hand, and on the other, Ginzburg, born as he was within a tradition that developed almost entirely outside of soviet communism. By the way, in an interview with the *Corriere della Sera*, Ginzburg complained about the tendency of Italian students to hide the elements of novelty of their work, in favour of those referable to a norm; he ascribed this tendency to three factors: the catholic tradition, the communist one, and the corruption introduced by Berlusconi.⁸ Leaving aside the simplification introduced by journalists, I am very curious to know whether the fact that in *Some Queries* he mentioned (for the first time, as far as I know) the founder of the catholic-communist movement, Felice Balbo, could be read as a sort of mitigation of that harsh statement.

Nonetheless in Ginzburg’s books the study of anomaly has never become something for its own sake. He rejects the analysis of anomaly *per se* and often says that one of the aspects dividing him from Michel Foucault and his school is his treatment of anomaly not as an eccentricity to admire, but as a cognitive model.⁹ A model to reconstruct, “a generalization,” to reach “the norm.” And here comes my question: is Ginzburg really interested in the norm? As a keen reader of his books and as one of his pupils, I have to say that I have never see any norm as being the end of his works. Is the norm actually the ultimate object of his research, or is the “force of the anomaly” – as Anderson puts it – to be found elsewhere? Clifford Geertz once wrote that Cromwell was the most typical Englishman of his time because he was the weirdest. I have to say that this statement does not satisfy me. Do we really have to use such refined tools, delving into the extremely small, exploring problems neglected or misunderstood by scholarship, to discover the normal, the typical? In other words, and drawing on an example from Ginzburg’s research, is Menocchio the true Renaissance Man? And if so, how is it actually possible to achieve the norm by starting from the anomaly? And what kind of norm do we reach? What is not clear, at least to me, is how we can rise from the anomaly to the norm. On this point Ginzburg mentioned the famous oxymoron of the Italian historian Edoardo Grendi, “eccezionale/normale.” Grendi himself said that his formula was “certainly overrated.”¹⁰ I do not want, on my part, to overrate Grendi’s understatement, but it is no accident that on both occasions when those words crop up, they have a particular meaning. In 1977, when the oxymoron appeared for the first time, “the historian works on many indirect sources. In this situation the

⁷ Perry Anderson, “The Force of the Anomaly,” *London Review of Books* (26 April 2012) pp. 3–13.

⁸ *Il corriere della sera* (28 october 2010), p. 41 (interview by Dino Messina)

⁹ The first time Ginzburg distanced himself from Foucault is in a forgotten review of Foucault’s *History of Insanity*, in *Studi medievali*, (1963), pp. 412–14. In that short text many arguments of the introduction to *The Cheese and the Worms* are anticipated.

¹⁰ Edoardo Grendi, “Ripensare la microstoria,” *Quaderni storici* 86 (1994), 539–49: 549.

exceptional document can be exceptionally normal, just because it is relevant.”¹¹ In 1994, when Grendi ironically distanced himself from the success enjoyed by his own statement, he added that “the document is exceptional inasmuch as it mirrors a normality, so normal that often it remains silent.”¹² Grendi spoke about “exceptional documents” useful for knowing something about a “reality” that is otherwise “silent”. Taking into account also the dismissive tone Grendi adopted to reflect on his own statement, it seems that the relationship between exception and norm concerns most of all our way of approaching the past, not the reconstruction of the past itself. In other words, it has more to do with method than with the object of the history. The new turn Ginzburg’s work impressed on Grendi’s “eccezionale normale” does not lie, in my view, in applying this movement from exception to the norm to the objects, but in exploiting its methodological potential in two opposite directions. The first one, as in the first part of Ginzburg’s career, where there was an almost complete lack of sources, the second one where the documental situation was too crowded. In both cases, this exception-norm relationship is more visible at the beginning of any of his works, rather than at their end, more evident in questions than in answers, unless the rule he mentioned is the very possibility of a contact with the past itself.

I think – but I do not claim to know more than he does about his own work, nor am I sure that we are really at odds on this point – therefore that his interest in anomalies does not have the philosophical background he insists on, going back to Kierkegaard through Schmitt (see n11), but rather an anthropological one, where the guardian angel could be identified in James George Frazer, not so much as the author of the *Golden Bough* but as the commentator of Ovid’s *Fasti*.¹³ In that monumental commentary, Frazer recollected a lot of strange customs drawn from savages in order to explain Roman culture. Like him, and like his beloved 17th-century antiquarians, Ginzburg seems to go in search of the anomaly not in order to reconstruct the norm, but rather with an eye to the breaking point of the past, the “ring that does not hold”, in order to make contact with the other culture. What might appear to his reader to be the longest way to reach the past is for him the shortest one, and the anomaly can thus be seen as the best way to read between the lines, or to grasp pieces of the past that slipped the notice of contemporaries themselves.

From this point of view it is not surprising that the centre of Ginzburg’s work has shifted from clues to an interest in anomalies, visible in *Ecstasies*, through to comparison, as in his last writings.¹⁴ The reflexion on the anomaly can indeed be seen as the *trait-d’union* between his interest in the evidential paradigm and in the origin of comparison. To recognize something as anomalous, that is, uncontrolled by the observed object, as in *Clues*, raises the comparative question: “Why do they do this

¹¹ Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977), pp. 506–20: 512.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ On this text, see Maurizio Bettini, “Comparare i Romani. Un’antropologia del mondo antico,” *Studi Italiani di filologia classica* (2009), supplement to 1/2009 [“La stella sta compiendo il suo giro”: *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Siracusa 21–23 maggio 2007*], pp. 1–47.

¹⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, “Provincializing the World. Europeans, Indians, Jews (1704),” *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (2011), pp. 135–50.

and why do we not do this?," a question that in my view can be found at the roots of Ginzburg's recent interest in the emic/etic dichotomy¹⁵ and in the category of comparison.

The last question I would like to ask, the one closest to my own work, is also linked to the relationship between exception and rule. Ten years ago he wrote a paper entitled: "Machiavelli, the exception and the rule."¹⁶ The conclusions of that essay are well known: far from being the discoverer of the rules that govern politics, Machiavelli was rather a thinker of the exception. Has Machiavelli helped Ginzburg to formalize the opposition between rule and exception or was this issue something he had previously reflected on and which he tried to apply to Machiavelli?

While Ginzburg's essays are invariably very influential, the ones he wrote on Machiavelli have remained almost totally unheard by the international scholarship on the Florentine Secretary.¹⁷ Why has this happened? Is it only because most of them have been published in Italian, or are not collected in a single volume (and they deserve to be)? Meanwhile, an English version of "Machiavelli, the exception and the rule" has been released in a *Festschrift* in memory of Giovanni Aquilecchia.¹⁸ So let's wait for it to circulate before answering this question. But it is precisely this English translation that prompts my last question, or rather a curiosity: between the original text and the translation there are just a couple of differences. Yet one of them is significant, and I would like to ask the reason for the change, because it touches on a point from which my own work on Machiavelli started as well. One of the most striking findings of that article is that the history of the reception of Machiavelli's work, going back from Leo Strauss and Maritain through to Pierre Bayle, Caspar Schoppe and Agostino Nifo, can be used to shed light on aspects of Machiavelli's thought that we had lost sight of. A risky tool, but one with very great potential indeed. As an example of this approach Ginzburg mentioned the work of the famous art historian Roberto Longhi. But in the Italian text the reference is to *Frammento siciliano*, in the translation to *Fortuna storica di Piero*. A small detail, but it is Carlo Ginzburg himself who taught us that God loves to hide in the detail. Is he of the same opinion thirty years later? And where is God for him today?

¹⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, "Our Words and Theirs. A Reflection on the Historian's Craft Today," in *Historical Knowledge. In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, ed. by S. Fellman and M. Rahikainen (Cambridge 2012), pp. 97–119, now in *Cromobs* 18 (2013).

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, "Machiavelli, l'eccezione e la regola," *Quaderni storici* 112 (2003), pp. 195–214.

¹⁷ Id., "Diventare Machiavelli. Per una nuova lettura dei *Ghiribizzi al Soderini*," *Quaderni storici* 121 (2006), pp. 151–64; Id., *Ein Plädoyer für den Kasus*, in J. Süßmann, S. Scholz, G. Engel eds. *Fallstudien. Theorie Geschichte Methode* (Berlin 2007), pp. 29–48; Id., "Spuren einer Paradigmengabelung. Machiavelli, Galilei und die Zensur der Gegenreformation," in S. Krämer, W. Kogge, G. Grube eds. *Spur. Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst* (Frankfurt am Main 2007), pp. 257–80; Id., "Pontano, Machiavelli and Prudence. Some Further Reflections," in D. Ramada Curto; E. R. Dursteler, J. Kirshner, N. Koniordos, F. Trivellato eds, *From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond. Essays in Honour of Anthony Molho* (Firenze 2009), pp. 117–25; Id., "Machiavelli e gli antiquari," in M. Donattini, G. Marcocci, S. Pastore eds, *L'Europa divisa e gli altri mondi. Per Adriano Prosperi*, vol. 2 (Pisa 2011), pp. 3–9.

¹⁸ Dilwyn Knox and Nuccio Ordine eds, *Renaissance Learning and Letters. In memoriam Giovanni Aquilecchia* (Oxford-London 2012).