

Carlo Ginzburg and the Historian's Craft: Questions and Remarks

GIOVANNI TARANTINO
University of Melbourne

It was a real honour for me to be invited to join the first session of **IinteR-La+b 2012** in the prestigious setting of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome, and to share with such an informed audience a few brief considerations, hopefully pertinent, stimulated by the talk given by Carlo Ginzburg on that occasion and which, unsurprisingly, offered just a glimpse of an extraordinarily original and fertile path of studies, research and writings.

I believe that we can attribute to Carlo Ginzburg, without any risk of flattery, what Lucien Febvre acknowledged in Marc Bloch, namely that his works “seem to make one more intelligent as one reads them; they clarify a great many things and stir endless curiosity.”¹ That said, Lucio Biasiori and I have been set a hard task, because it is difficult to ask Carlo Ginzburg questions that he has not already heard first hand from the devil's advocate, a very rigorous, on-the-ball and far-from-shy interlocutor who seems to have come along with him to this public conversation as well.

Each of us, I believe, will have been profoundly struck when reading Ginzburg's works, not just because they reveal a highly curious, attentive, “slow” reader, but also because it is evident that he takes great pains in his narrative. One of the finest passages he has ever written, for me, is the one in which he guides viewers of Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* to recognize that the gaze of one of the characters in the picture — a handsome, barefooted young man — is that of a dead man, looking fixedly at something that we cannot see (*The Enigma of Piero*).

It would be fascinating if Carlo could tell us a bit more about his writing. His intended readership, which I believe also includes, in ideal terms, many of his extraordinary mentors. And about the extent to which his writing has been influenced by some twenty years' teaching in an Anglophone context, where there is perhaps a more widespread concern to make academic writing accessible to a broader readership.

It would also be very interesting if he could explain whether his constant effort to involve the reader in every phase of his research, including the difficulties, the false trails, and the dead-ends, is a response not only to the need to document the *modus operandi* of the rigorous historian, but also to what is in a sense a ‘bewitching’ narrative strategy: the plausibility of a reconstruction acquires greater cogency by being presented together with discarded hypotheses, but not always — Perry Anderson has recently objected — is it accompanied by an explanation of the causes of the phenomenon so skilfully pieced together.²

¹ Cited in Jacques Le Goff's “Préface” to Marc Bloch, *Les rois, thaumaturges. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Nouvelle édition, Paris 1983).

² Perry Anderson, “The Force of Anomaly,” *London Review of Books* 34, 2012.

A Ginzburg reader might happen, then, to imagine seeing him at work, peeping over his shoulder, to use the effective image Carlo used for himself when he reconstructed the trial strategies of the Inquisitor, and felt — besides an emotional identification with the victims — an embarrassing intellectual affinity with the Inquisitor, because he was also, albeit with different purposes and methods, trying to understand a culture reluctant to be inscribed within the stereotypes of his own culture.³ E. H. Gombrich (*Art & Illusion*) also referred to the privilege we would all like to have to look over the shoulder of the artist intent on painting a landscape, in order to share his point of view. As if this were sufficient to explain that painted landscape. As if the image on the artist's retina could correspond to the image in the mind. As if art was born from nature and not from art. How much culture is the Ginzburg reader assumed to have! And how much culture is required by the historian!

Let's come now to the historian's trade. One of the historian's most common problems is to separate from their representation the thoughts, emotions, beliefs and relationships of men and women who lived in a past that is "foreign" to us.⁴ Ginzburg suggests we sharpen our gaze, vary the scale of observation, arming ourselves metaphorically with a microscope — not to limit ourselves to details, but so that significant details do not elude observation. He recommends that we identify cases that may be a prelude to a new generalization, to rummage around in the detritus of the dig, to train the eye to spot a discard, a dissonance, an anomaly, because it is here that we will find what has eluded the re-elaboration, typicization and contamination wrought by tradition.

There is no need to recall the best known examples of dissonances and anomalies that have enabled Ginzburg to reconstruct intricate transcultural and diachronic processes, or to investigate the circularity between popular and elite culture, or to paradoxically discern, in the bad conscience of the theorizers of European colonialization, or at least some of them, early signs of the principles that inspired the anti-slave and anti-colonial movements.⁵ I would like instead to prompt Carlo to further clarify how the historian can discriminate in a document of any kind—literary text, treatise, etching, trial act—between a deliberate distortion and an anomaly that has escaped the control of the person who produced the document. Without considering the further distortions induced by the self-censoring or dissimulation of that person's ideas. Or perhaps by the interpretative audacity of a copyist, or an intentionally unfaithful proof-reader, if I may allude here to Saramago's novel on the siege of Lisbon (*História do Cerco de Lisboa*).

Above all, I would like to ask Carlo what antidotes historians need to equip themselves with so that, in the tricky task of reading "between the lines," they do not get caught in the snares of the ventriloquist.⁶

³ "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist," in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore 2013), pp. 156–64.

⁴ See Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (London 2002).

⁵ See Carlo Ginzburg, "Latitude, Slaves, and the Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory," *Critical Inquiry* 31, 3 (Spring 2005), pp. 665–83.

⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg, "Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian's Craft, Today", *Quest of*

The historian's profession is a difficult one. It requires a long apprenticeship, the rigour of philology, the ability to interrogate textual and non-textual sources, the awareness of the irreducibility of the past to the categories of the hegemonic culture and even less so to those of the present. Moreover, there have been major changes over the last two decades in ideas about how socio-historical knowledge is produced. By stressing the specificity of the local, the "culturalist turn" has helped us to achieve a greater understanding of the different ways in which societies and cultures function. To scholars associated with Subaltern Studies, intent on "de-provincializing non-Europe," the critique of ethnocentrism precociously elaborated by Italian micro-historians dissatisfied with the functionalist images of coherent cultural systems appears insufficient to offset its Eurocentric leanings.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously noted that while "third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate."⁷ This is a very topical issue, which also involves historians' language skills, and which has prompted historians to question how they can meet the challenge posed by reflexivity, comparativism and global history.⁸

Perhaps rather than practices as such, a whole new set of historiographic labels—connected histories, shared histories, entangled histories, *histoire croisée*—has emerged, "relational approaches" that explore the ties between a range of historically constituted formations. All of them, according to Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, stress the importance of examining "empirical intercrossings consubstantial with the object of study."⁹ Yet, in my view, a significant example of entangled histories (though without ever subscribing to this or other restricting terms or to this kind of jargon-ridden prose) was highlighted a few years ago by Ginzburg in *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, when he examined an early eighteenth-century letter by a Jesuit Father describing the island of Taiwan: the criticism of European civilization was implicit in the criticism of Chinese civilization that emerged from the comparison between the latter and the matrilineal customs, the meekness and the love of justice of the Taiwanese.¹⁰

I would like to ask Carlo, then, whether having been included by Dipesh Chakrabarty among the group of illustrious Western historians who "produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories" surprised or irritated him, or whether, as I believe, it encouraged a further clarification regarding the exportability

Theory, Method and Evidence, ed. by Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 97–119; 110 (now also on *Cromobs* 18 (2013)). See also *L'étrangement. Retour sur un thème de Carlo Ginzburg*. Études réunies par Sandro Landi (*Essais. Revue interdisciplinaire d'humanité*, Hors série n° 1, 2013).

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton 2000), p. 28.

⁸ See Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?", *California Italian Studies* 2 (1) (2011), Permalink: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>.

⁹ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond comparison: Histoire croisée and the challenge of reflexivity", *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 30–50.

¹⁰ See "Alien Voices: The Dialogic Element in Early Modern Jesuit Historiography", in Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (London and Hanover 1999), pp. 71–91.

and subversiveness of a research method committed to the analytic study of first-hand sources and therefore wary of standard narratives.

The work of Carlo Ginzburg also encourages further reflection about another constantly expanding field of research, as the number of conferences, journals and even research centres of excellence attests: the history of emotions. Jonas Liliequist has recently argued that emotions are now part of cultural history, and no longer to be viewed as unchanging and invariable constituents of human nature. Cultural historians are interested in the various articulations, styles and conventional expressive forms of emotions, together with historical categories and concepts, and cultural and gendered meanings. These are examined in a wide range of fields and genres, including music, art, religion and politics.¹¹ Very significantly, in comparing the historian's investigative method with that of a medical researcher conducting a double blind experiment (which seems to bring out more differences than analogies), Ginzburg has recently observed how the historian's concern is to interpret precisely the background noise, that is to say, the plurality of voices, expectations, fears and hopes, which, by contrast, appear, perhaps inevitably, to the coordinator of the double-blind experiment, as an element of disturbance that might prejudice the scientific value of the work.¹² I say "perhaps," because the existing reservations regarding the scientific and ethical status of medical experiments, which Ginzburg does not fail to mention, bring to mind the first chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, where Chakrabarty raises the issue of "the undemocratic foundations of democracy" and recalls the violence characterizing the Indian campaign to eradicate smallpox in the 1970s.

But aside from this further, and, I think, significant connection with Subaltern Studies, I would like to press Carlo to return to a theme which I believe has been a constant source of stimulus in his thought and research: the relationship between nature and culture, or perhaps I should say, between structure and history. His current research programme on the origins of the comparative study of religions also presupposes this thematic issue, whether the focus is on the connection between seventeenth-century antiquarian studies and the birth of ethnology or on charting the establishment and ambivalence of the Enlightenment idea of a universal history articulated in terms of stadial development.¹³ But it is above all in *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (1989; Engl. trans. 1990) that you have brought together the formal analogies between myths and beliefs coming from different cultural environments, as "a probe," you wrote, to fathom "a layer unreachable with the customary tools of historic knowledge." You therefore regard morphology as a useful instrument for historic research and not as an alternative to it. And you have rejected as pseudo-explanations those interpretations that trace back to intellectual archetypes or to the collective unconscious the formal analogies between historically independent phenomena. In a wonderful essay on Freud and the Wolf Man, you

¹¹ See Jonas Liliequist ed., *A History of Emotions, 1200–1800* (London 2012).

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, *Schema and Bias. A Historian's Reflection on Double-Blind Experiments*, (Ludwik Fleck Lecture 2012).

¹³ See Carlo Ginzburg, "Provincializing the World: Europeans, Indians, Jews (1704)," *Postcolonial Studies* 14 No. 2 (2011), pp. 135–50. See also "Tolerance and Commerce: Auerbach Reads Voltaire," in Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive* (Berkeley 2012).

rejected the phylogenetic hypothesis that “the psychological and cultural experiences of our ancestors form part of our cultural baggage.”¹⁴

Bodies (and, brains, as we are told by social constructionists) are shaped by culture. I would like to invite you, Carlo, to clarify whether, and to what extent, the biological, animal nature of human beings, which does actually surface at times in the folds of your writings, is of relevance to the historian. Or to be more precise: how important is it for cultural and social historians of the emotions to consider the biological substrate of the emotions? And lastly: what answer would you give today to a question that has long troubled you: does human nature exist?

¹⁴ See “Freud, the Wolf Man, and the Werewolves,” in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (London 1990), pp. 146–55.