

Some comments on the discussion at the Accademia dei Lincei

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I would like to thank those who took part in the discussion for their comments about my work, which were very generous indeed, and for their questions. I will try to answer them in the very circumscribed limits of my abilities and knowledge.

1. I will begin with an observation made by Lina Bolzoni about a passage from my essay “Some Queries Addressed to Myself,” where, after stressing the link between my research into Inquisition trials and the political and social context of Italy in the seventies, I wrote:

But there was another element, which I did not realize until many years later: in the emotional identification with the victims of persecution, and in the impulse to study them, there was an unconscious projection of my Jewish identity, which the persecution had reinforced.¹

Lina Bolzoni cites the passage and comments: “There is a general trend: after the universalism of the sixties, the dimension of identity – of different identities – became stronger.” She then followed her observation with an invitation to rethink historic research, giving it “a new ethical dimension.”

I will not dwell on this invitation now, but rather on the spread, in recent decades, of a politics (and historiography) of identity. Such phenomena are very well known. Would it be right to insert my belated awareness within this general *trend*? To be frank, I do not think it would. A more or less direct connection between the historian’s experience as an individual and his or her approach to research can, it seems to me, be taken for granted. In my case, I retrospectively gained the impression that this connection operated in a subterranean and therefore much stronger fashion. This meant that for many years I dealt with themes which had a metaphoric rather than a literal relation with my identity (a term to which I will return shortly): I did not study Jews, but victims of inquisitional persecution such as witches or heretics. The repressed element surfaced slowly, as I tried to explain recently in a public dialogue with Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library. The title I had proposed – “Being Jewish, Becoming Jewish” – implied a polemic, then developed in the course of the dialogue, towards the notion that identity is something which inexorably orients the behaviour of individuals and populations, on a more or less broad scale.² In the interminable discussions on identity – Italian, French, Jewish, European, and so on – the term “identity” is used as a weapon to separate insiders from outsiders.³

¹ C. Ginzburg, “Some Queries Addressed to Myself,” in *Carlo Ginzburg 2010 Balzan Prize for European History (1400-1700)*, excerpt (revised) from *Premi Balzan 2010* (Milan 2010), pp. 9–17, especially p. 10.

² <http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/live-nypl-carlo-ginzburg>

³ I had touched on these issues at Bordeaux in 2012, in receiving an honorary degree from the Université Michel de Montaigne, and then in the conference that followed: “Peut-on se passer de la notion d’identité? Une réponse à Carlo Ginzburg,” Journée d’études 24 octobre 2013, Université

This notion of identity has always been foreign to me, as confirmed by the flip side of my late realization. The awareness of the repressed individual roots of my emotive identification with the victims of the Inquisition was accompanied by the discovery of an intellectual contiguity, also repressed (for wholly different reasons), with the Inquisitors.⁴ In place of an ego that displays its real or presumed identity like an immutable brand, I found myself faced with a mobile, plural ego, the point of intersection of different and sometimes contradictory senses of belonging.⁵ What am I talking about, an exception or the rule?

2. As seen, I began with a private (and even unconscious) experience relating to research and ended up cautiously proposing a definition of the ego that might be extended (though this remains entirely to be seen) to any individual. Can this propensity for generalization on the basis of a specific case be tied in with the “universalism” of the sixties, evoked, in vaguely nostalgic terms, by Lina Bolzoni? Certainly not. The attempt to generalize a particular case (an issue I will address shortly) cannot be a surrogate of more or less universalistic ideologies. Research cannot be a surrogate of politics (or of ideology), even though it often feeds off it.

This distinction between different levels should also be stressed with regard to the objection made by Perry Anderson and picked up on by Lucio Biasiori. Once again, the discussion focuses on the relationship between norm and exception. “Ontologically,” Anderson says, it is the norm that defines the exception; the opposite is not always the case. Of course. But what I said about norm and exception did not refer to ontology, but to epistemology. It is on the level of epistemology that the exception proves to be richer than the norm, in that it refers, implicitly or explicitly, to it (while the opposite is not true).

Even an exceptional individual like the miller Menocchio had experiences in common, to a greater or lesser degree, with other individuals of his time: working, listening to a sermon, learning to read, etc. Here we are moving close to the notion of exceptional/normal formulated by Edoardo Grendi, and then picked up on by Carlo Poni and myself.⁶ Certainly, the exceptional nature of Menocchio was not just documentary (the inhabitants of his village considered him strange, but not off his head). And yet that exceptionality would have remained unknown if it had not been transmitted by an exceptional document.

Grendi’s “effective oxymoron” appeared in an essay dating to 1977, a year after *The Cheese and the Worms*.⁷ Grendi talked about “micro-analysis”; its synonym, “micro-history,” would become widely used soon afterwards. Both terms referred to the analytic perspective of research, not to the real or symbolic dimensions of its subject.

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⁴ C. Ginzburg, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore 1989), pp. 156–64.

⁵ C. Ginzburg, *The Bond of Shame*, in *Passionen. Objekte – Schauplätze – Denkstile*, edited by C. Caduff, A.-K. Reulecke, U. Vedder (Munich 2010), pp. 19–26.

⁶ C. Ginzburg and C. Poni, “Il nome e il come: scambio ineguale e mercato storiografico,” *Quaderni storici* 40 (1979), pp. 181–90. English translation: “The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historical Marketplace,” in *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe*, edited by E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (Baltimore 1991), pp. 2–10.

⁷ E. Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977), pp. 506–20, especially p. 512.

It is significant that Grendi, to illustrate his point, posed a question about a large-scale phenomenon: “Has industrialization distinguished or standardized social structures?” His answer was that this is a problem for comparative history, to be tackled through a series of case-studies “before then, possibly, considering typologies.”⁸

Grendi was perhaps alluding here to Max Weber’s *Idealtypen*: a discussion of such an eventuality would be very far-reaching. In any case, one can agree with what Timpanaro wrote in the passage singled out by Biasiori: “micro-history,” he said, “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.” In other words, “micro-history” has a validity of its own. But the relation between the two perspectives does exist, and it unfolds (as Grendi was quick to point out) through comparative history.

3. Lucio Biasiori observed that, through the reflection on anomaly, the theme of comparative history has gradually become increasingly present in my works. One of these, still unpublished, bears out Biasiori’s view. Another point he mentions, however, requires some qualification, when he says that I was born “within a tradition that developed almost entirely outside of Soviet communism.” This is true, but that “almost” touches on an issue which cannot be avoided: my relationship (and that of a significant part of my generation) with the Italian Communist Party. I voted for the party for as long as it existed, even though I never joined it (or ever thought of doing so). I grew up in an environment marked by the presence of Communists, and above all of ex-Communists, who left the party at different stages and for different reasons. First and foremost, my mother (in 1953); then a number of people who made a deep impact on my formation, such as Felice Balbo (in 1953) and Italo Calvino (in 1956). All of them worked (or had worked, as in the case of Balbo) for the publishing house which my father, Leone Ginzburg, had founded together with Giulio Einaudi. I was shaped by the books brought out by this publishing house (which for many years then published mine as well). I will give just one example. With a significant and carefully pondered decision, the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti, entrusted to Einaudi (not a Communist publishing house, though close to the party) the publication of the writings of Antonio Gramsci. For me, as for many others of my generation, the encounter with Gramsci’s writings (*Letters from Prison, The Prison Notebooks*) was decisive.

As is known, the Italian Communist Party, while drawing its historic legitimacy from the October Revolution, had a history that was at once interwoven with and distinct from the Soviet one. I am recalling this here because I feel I should clarify (to myself, and to my interlocutors) what, in my formation, is derived from intellectual traditions different to those close to or associated with the Communist Party. And the word that immediately comes to mind here is “anomaly”.

Internal party discipline, and the search for alliances outside the party, meant that what might be defined as minority or anomalous intellectual views, and anomaly itself as a research theme, were not viewed with favour. The impulse towards anomaly that has marked, for better or worse, the trajectory of my research, must have another origin. Among my childhood memories is the one when I found out, during the war and in a moment of great danger, that my surname had to be

⁸ E. Grendi, “Micro-analisi,” p. 508.

concealed.⁹ Might the awareness of being Jewish, and therefore different, have subsequently led me to focus in my research on anomalies?

4. “Le moi est haïssable”: Pascal’s famous words sound truer than ever in an age of uncontrolled narcissism such as our own. Reflecting on one’s ego is justified insofar as it helps to build the relationship with the outside, with the world. It is very often an asymmetrical relationship, modelled by what we know, and also by the weight of past history (which holds good for everyone, not just historians). Overturning the centuries-long burden of colonial oppression is difficult, as the historians of the Subaltern Studies group (who, in their first phase, were inspired precisely by Gramsci) are well aware. At the beginning of *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty acknowledged an ineradicable debt towards the categories elaborated by the Enlightenment, in the very moment in which he stressed their ambiguities.¹⁰ Reducing what Chakrabarty calls “asymmetric ignorance” is right (as Giovanni Tarantino recalls), but insufficient. The elements of contrast, beginning with those that pertain to the Enlightenment tradition, remain. It is a vital, lively contrast, which, hopefully, will last for a long time.

5. I have not answered Lucio Biasiori’s question about the possibility of using the fortunes of an author to analyse the writings of that author (in the given instance, Machiavelli), because I am currently writing an essay on this theme. I have not answered Giovanni Tarantino’s question “Does human nature exist?” because I will never be capable of writing anything adequate on this theme. I once answered the question with a “yes,” and I would do the same again. But it is only the beginning of an answer. The rest is up to others.

⁹ S. Hendler, “Of Honor and Shame,” *Haaretz* (Nov. 19, 2010)

(<http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/of-honor-and-shame-1.325590>):

“‘The most important thing for me was that I had to change my name.’ During the war, he [C. G.] continues, his maternal grandmother ‘who was the only “non-Jew” in the family,’ warned him not to reveal his family name, Ginzburg: ‘If asked for your name, say it is Carlo Tanzi’” (Carlo Tanzi was my grand-grandfather).

¹⁰ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton 2000), pp. 4–5.