In memory of
Professor João Eduardo Rodrigues Villalobos,
a brilliant teacher, thinker and conversationalist

The New History

Confessions and Conversations

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Carlo Ginzburg

Few historians at work today are as original as Carlo Ginzburg, few write as well as he does, and even fewer share his remarkable breadth of interests. Ginzburg, who for the last few years has been teaching at the University of California and dividing his year between Los Angeles and Bologna, was born in 1939 into a family of Russian Jews who had settled in Turin. His father, Leone Ginzburg, who died in a fascist prison in 1944 when Carlo was just five years old, had been a professor of Russian literature, while his mother, Natalia Ginzburg[1], became one of the most famous and respected Italian authors of the twentieth century. Having given up the idea of devoting his life to literature, Ginzburg chose history instead, influenced especially by the Italian historian Delio Cantimori[2], known for his pioneering work on sixteenth-century Italian heretics. The academic community was soon astonished by the originality of Ginzburg's intellectual production. 'An intellectual to watch!' as one American reviewer remarked in the early 1970s.

His first book, *I benandanti* (*The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*) published when he was only twenty-seven, was an extremely polemical and innovative work. The starting point for this study was the disconcerting reply given to the Inquisitorial court by a group of Friuli peasants accused of witchcraft:

1 Natalia Ginzburg (1916–91), author of *Lessico famigliare* (translated as *The Things We Used to Say*); *Le voci della sera* (translated as *Voices in the Evening*); *La famiglia Manzoni* (translated as *The Manzoni Family*); *Tutti i nostri ieri* (translated as *Dead Yesterdays*); etc.

2 Delio Cantimori (1904–66), author of *Eretici italiani del '500* (1939), *Prospettive di storia ereticale italiana* (1960).

The cover photograph of Carlo Ginzburg produced by kind permission of Luisa Ciammitti.

calling themselves the *benandanti* ('wellfarers'), they said they were do-gooders who fought witches at night armed with stalks of fennel against the witches' sorghum reeds. This unexpected response, confounding the inquisitors' expectations, was the basis for this work which has made a notable contribution to witchcraft studies.

However, it was *Il formaggio e i vermi* (*The Cheese and the Worms*), a study of the cosmology of a sixteenth-century miller (also interrogated by the Inquisition on charges of heresy), which made Carlo Ginzburg internationally famous, almost overnight, in 1976. Again, while researching the Inquisition trials in Friuli, Ginzburg had come across the intriguing case of the miller Menocchio, who differed from most of the suspects, who spoke unwillingly, in that he adored talking. So the garrulous peasant used his trial as an excellent opportunity to explain to an audience from outside his village his view of the cosmos as an enormous cheese full of worms. According to Ginzburg, although Menocchio was literate and had read a few books, he could be seen as a spokesman for an essentially traditional, oral and popular culture. Citing Gramsci and using as an epigraph a passage from Brecht's 'Worker reading history' – 'Who built seven-gated Thebes?' – Ginzburg's book was acclaimed as a manifesto of 'history from below' and historical anthropology. From then onwards, too, despite his dislike of labels, he became known as a leading writer of so-called 'micro-history', a term which soon afterwards became fashionable when it was used as the title for a series of books published by Einaudi, edited by Ginzburg and his friend Giovanni Levi.

Other books by Ginzburg deal with the painter Piero della Francesca (1981), the history of the idea of the witches' sabbath over the last 2,000 years in Europe and Asia (*Ecstasies*), and a tragic episode in the recent history of Italian justice and the relation between the role of the judge and that of the historian (*The Judge and the Historian*). These reveal the diversity of topics and approaches used by Ginzburg in his work, making him a difficult historian to classify – something he finds very satisfying.

Ginzburg has published much of his ground-breaking work not as books but in the form of essays. The best-known of these, translated into thirteen languages, is intriguingly entitled 'Spie' (Clues), and itself provides clues to an understanding of Ginzburg's whole *oeuvre*. In this brilliant essay he stresses the importance of the apparently insignificant detail, the seemingly trivial phrase or gesture which leads the investigator – a detective like Sherlock Holmes, a psychoanalyst like Freud or a historian like Ginzburg himself – to make important discoveries. Using this special detective talent and almost always starting from apparently trivial details, he writes with elegance, verve and enthusiasm on topics and areas of knowledge about which he initially knew nothing. As he himself has remarked, when he is about to learn something that is totally new to him, he experiences an

intense feeling of what he calls 'the euphoria of ignorance', which he compares to the pleasure a skier must feel when skiing on fresh snow.

Ginzburg gave this interview in his flat in Bologna. At first it seemed rather strange to be interviewing someone who has written at length about interrogations conducted by sixteenth-century inquisitors and twentieth-century police officers, but the interview soon became more like a conversation between friends. Always extremely pleasant, spontaneous and expressive, Ginzburg spoke for a long time with his characteristic enthusiasm about his intellectual trajectory and choices, his attitude to fame, his views on the role of the historian, his opinions of Foucault, Borges, postmodernism, and so on.

MARIA LÚCIA PALLARES-BURKE *Which aspects of your origins and education do you consider crucial for the understanding of your ideas and interests?*

CARLO GINZBURG There are many but, being a historian, I'm sceptical about the teleological approach that sees a sort of straight line going from the childhood of an individual to his or her maturity. I may not be able to recognize the crucial elements in my life, so I'm not the best judge. But having said that, I can try to tell you something about my background. Except for my maternal grandmother, I have a Jewish origin on both my father and my mother's side. My father was born in Odessa, came to Italy as a child, grew up in Turin and became an Italian citizen in his youth. He was extremely attached to his Italian identity as well as to his Russian identity. He studied Russian literature, translated Gogol's *Taras Bulba* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* into Italian, and as a very young man became *libero docente* in Russian literature. I recall all this because immediately after that the Italian fascist regime demanded an oath of allegiance from all the university professors and my father refused to take such an oath; in fact, it was at this point that he abandoned his academic career and became involved in the anti-fascist movement. For him, to fight against fascism was part of being Italian (he had become an Italian citizen a few years before). Arrested in 1934 (at the age of twenty-five) as part of a small left-wing but non-communist group, he received a four-year prison sentence. Released under an amnesty after two years in jail, he was involved with Giulio Einaudi in the founding of the Einaudi publishing house, which was to become the leading anti-fascist publisher of the time. When Italy entered the war in 1940, as an anti-fascist he was sent into residence under surveillance with the whole family to a small village in the Abruzzi. So I, who was born in Turin, grew up in that village, where we lived for three years. The only dialect that I ever spoke was the dialect of that village, which I then forgot entirely. When Mussolini was arrested and the regime collapsed in 1943, my father went to Rome to return to his political activities as the director of an underground newspaper. Immediately after the Nazi troops occupied the city, though, he was arrested, recognized as a Jew and an anti-fascist and died in jail at the beginning of 1944, when I was five years old. Then we moved to Florence and ultimately to Turin where my mother – who had already published her first novel, *La strada che va in città,* under the pseudonym Alessandra Tornimparte – since after 1938 Jews were not allowed to publish – started working with Einaudi. It was also for this publishing house that she translated the first volume of Proust's *Recherche* into Italian and it was with Einaudi that she published all her works.

If I think about my life and about my choices as a historian, the question I put to myself (or, in fact, to anybody else) is: which choices were the crucial ones? In a way, it's like a chess game, in which the crucial moves take place early in the match. Obviously, there are crucial elements we don't decide, like our genetic inheritance, being born a male or female, and so forth. But when I select a moment in which I made a sort of crucial decision I can see that there was some freedom of choice, but also a lot of constraints. On the other hand, there was an enormous amount of unawareness. In fact, I'm always struck by the way in which all the crucial decisions in one's life – like falling in love or choosing a profession – are taken with blind eyes, with insufficient information. We think we are really choosing, but retrospectively one discovers that there was a powerful push, a drive that was not related to a real knowledge of the options. My choice to be a historian can illustrate this. When I was an adolescent I wanted to become a novelist like my mother, but soon discovered that I would be a bad one. Well, my involvement with writing as such is something that is still very much with me, as if my passion for writing fiction was diverted to my passion for historical writing. In a way it's like a dam or a ditch: when you block something there is a stronger push into a neighbouring direction, all the elements which were blocked becoming part of that new drive. The same happened with my wish to become a painter. Again, I soon discovered that I wouldn't be a good one and left all my paintings behind when we moved from one apartment to another; but this passion for painting became part of me, as if the negative moves were transformed into positive moves. I even thought of becoming an art historian, which I eventually tried in some way to do later.

You once confessed that the idea of becoming a historian never crossed your mind when you were an adolescent. All the same, you became a precocious historian who published a path-breaking article at the age of twenty-one. Were there any encounters which made you want to spend your life in the study of the past?

As I said, I used to read novels mostly, but when I was finishing the *liceo* I started reading Benedetto Croce's *History of Europe in the Nineteenth*

morally and politically despicable – to a perfectly legitimate question about the relationship between biology and culture.

You have referred to your taste for significant detail and have often been praised for your gift for story-telling. Would you say that your narrative style is related to the novelist you would like to have been, to your wish to follow in the footsteps of your mother? And what, in your view, is the relation between historians and novelists?

I think that my mother's example was important for me, but it also shows how constraints don't work in a definite direction. You can become an atheist because you are the son of a priest, but you can also become a saint. The outcome is predictable only retrospectively. The fact that I am the son of Natalia Ginzburg could have worked as a direct impulse or as an impulse to resist. You can see a connection, but what kind of connection is it?

As to the notion of narration in history, I think it has long been modelled on late nineteenth-century novels, but if one thinks about twentieth-century novels, like Proust's or Joyce's, you can see how the distinction between fiction and non-fiction can become blurred, even in the novel.

I'm very fond of thinking of the relation between fiction and history as implying mutual challenge and competition. History was a challenge for novelists like Balzac, for instance, who reacted to this challenge saying: 'I'll be the historian of the nineteenth century.' But then, after him, we have novelists like Stendhal and Flaubert who challenged historians in their turn. The relation between history and fiction is one of competition in which each challenges, responds to and learns from the other.

Who are your main interlocutors? Is there anyone you imagine as looking over your shoulder as you write, and criticizing or discussing it with you?

I'm involved in a constant intellectual exchange with a group of friends, and there are times when even after writing a single sentence I think about one of them reacting to it. Interaction with people is very important to me; but on a general level I think that too much communication is bad. Many years ago I suddenly had the feeling that I was somewhat in the mainstream and I felt rather uncomfortable about it. My first book, *I benandanti*, for some time had no audience, and there is certainly something very good in being isolated. This happened when I published a book called *The Cheese and the Worms*, which was an immediate success – although (and possibly because), it was less innovative than my first book, *I benandanti*. The same happened when I published my piece on 'Clues'. There was an immediate reaction, in part, I think, because the

article was simultaneously published in a miscellaneous collection of essays (*Crisi della ragione*) as well as, without footnotes, in a small left-wing magazine, and this probably attracted a much wider audience. I remember that for two weeks I was inundated by calls from all over Italy, from Catania, Milan and elsewhere inviting me to speak about 'Clues' – which I did for a while. It was fun. But I also felt the danger of being swallowed up in a sort of flux of communication, losing all the advantages and the fun of being isolated.

Are you trying to say that there is something in success that can be disastrous for an intellectual?

Yes, there is something very dangerous about success – even in the case of a moderate success like mine. It's like a tiger that should be controlled. As in the case of gambling, there is a sort of temptation to repeat oneself in order to repeat the success. I myself am a failed gambler. I played roulette maybe five or six times and loved it. Once in Las Vegas I bet on a single number and won. I was terrified and fled, having realized how strong the drive was. I mention this because there is a gambling element in my research, a sort of temptation to go on to higher stakes, which can be dangerous.

Looking back, I would say that I was afraid of success and of being in a sort of mainstream, and this made me decide to resist. I agree that there is a kind of contradiction involved in all this, because I like talking, I like to communicate, I like writing a lot, I like very much to be translated, I love success. But on the other hand, I committed myself to research projects that would take me back to the periphery. I'm not saying that I thought of a conscious strategy to isolate myself again, but I soon realized that this was really the case. Maybe I'm wrong, but my perception is that this happened to me twice. First, the success of the essay on clues seemed to invite me to play the role of 'tuttologo', a derogatory Italian word meaning someone who writes about everything, who comments on all sorts of different issues. The essay was, in fact, so broad that it generated (it seemed to me) that kind of public expectation, which I felt I had to resist. All of a sudden I found myself immersed in a piece of research on Piero della Francesca – an unexpected revival of my interests in art history. And then I started a long-term project which I had postponed for some time: an offspring of *I benandanti*. The book I published after fifteen years – *Ecstasies* – disappointed many critics. And since then, I've become more and more erratic in my curiosities, more and more perplexed, as you can see from the essays that were collected in *Occhiacci di legno* (*Wooden Eyes*).

Your work sometimes reveals a vision of the world as an interweaving of texts and traditions that reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges [1899–1986]. Has he inspired you in any way?

encounter with Raskolnikov will always affect our way of thinking about human beings. Nevertheless, I would hesitate to give the same answer today, because I wouldn't like to associate myself with the current trend that blurs the distinction between fiction and history. I am still very much in favour of reading a lot of novels, but I would add the following warning: 'read novels, but be aware that history and fiction are distinct genres which relate to each other by a sort of competition and mutual challenge.'

With other disciplines such as medicine and divining, history, as you once said, shares a conjectural character that makes the knowledge they produce inevitably speculative. All the same, you suggest that they are also scientific. Could you develop this apparently contradictory idea?

The problem is that the process of knowledge is very complex, does not follow a straight line, but progresses by making moves in opposite directions. That's the reason why debates and even fights are so important. So it's true that I made a move in the direction of insights; but then, because this might have become a sort of slogan, I decided to try to complicate it again and focused on the question of proof, of evidence (I must add that I felt compelled to do this as soon as I became aware of the moral and political implications of the sceptical attitude towards history). This was a way of correcting a false image, and also of stressing the role of the constraints of the outside world. I'm still very much interested in the reason why some insights can be either proved or disproved, while others are more or less resistant to verification. That's certainly the reason why Adriano Prosperi and I tried to describe the false trails in a research experience in *Giochi di pazienza*, discussing why certain strategies, approaches or guesses don't work and are abandoned.

The idea of proof, which was very fashionable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has become extremely unfashionable in the last twenty years, when historians have become more and more seduced by the idea of blurring the distinction between fiction and history and stopped concerning themselves with proving anything. And that was a very bad thing. I think that the idea of proof is becoming relevant again, and I certainly try to contribute to the growth of this interest as much as I can. But if this sceptical attitude has been harmful, the challenge it represents has been important because it shows that there was a real question behind a somewhat superficial answer. In other words, it shows that there is a sceptical question that historians should take very seriously. I would like to describe my attitude in the following way: on the one hand, I would like to keep the distinction between fiction and history as clear-cut as possible, and to show that, in spite of the fact that historians are situated people and knowledge is also situated, there is an objective side of things which can be proved and accepted by people working on different assumptions. After all, I'm committed to science and there is a sort of impersonal quality in my writings; they are not fiction, they have a lot of footnotes. This commitment to science as an ideal has some personal implications – or associations. My maternal grandfather, Giuseppe Levi – readers of my mother's book *The Things We Used to Say* will recall him – had a great impact on me during my childhood. He was a great biologist, who was considered for the Nobel Prize and never got it, but three of his pupils got the Nobel Prize – something which is very unusual. He was a man of strong personality and very powerful intellectually, and I think that I have a sort of nineteenth-century model of science which is related to him; and so when I wrote about Morelli I was thinking a bit about my grandfather.

That knowledge is provable, and that everybody who is ready to accept the rules of the game must accept even the truths that are unpleasant is a lesson that I learned from Freud. One has to face what is unpleasant, even what is painful.

Your study of Menocchio, together with Le Roy Ladurie's Montaillou *and Natalie Davis's* The Return of Martin Guerre, *has been praised for belonging to the postmodernist tradition in historiography. Do you agree with this view?*

Not at all. I think Ankersmit and others have completely misread all these works. I've realized, especially in the United States, that people who read my *Cheese and Worms* and my essay on 'clues' regard me as a postmodernist historian, which sounds bizarre to me. My ambition would be to be attacked by both positivists and postmodernists, to be regarded as a postmodernist by the positivists, and also the other way around, as a positivist by the postmodernists. Not because I am in the middle. In fact, I think it is impossible to be in the middle: the truth is not in the middle and the solution to the problem does not consist in putting in a bottle 50 per cent of positivism and 50 per cent of scepticism. At least at an earlier stage, a compromise should not be sought; on the contrary, the contradiction should be pushed as much as possible so that its full potential can emerge and the arguments on both sides be evaluated. Such a debate entails many problems, such as, for instance, that of knowing to what extent a piece of evidence is related to social reality and how can this be assessed. This relation is not so obvious and clear as many positivists would argue. As I wrote somewhere, I think that evidence should neither be regarded as a sort of window open onto social reality, nor an enclosed wall that prevents us from seeing anything beyond the evidence itself, as the postmodernists would say. It's more like a distorting glass, and the problem is to see which way the glass is distorting, since this is the only way to have

access to reality. Another bigger problem implicit in the debate is related to the issue of 'situated knowledge' (to use an expression of Donna Haraway's), because it involves a serious political danger: a society in which each group – Jews, blacks, gays, and so forth – speaks for itself and to itself, writing its own history from its particular set of assumptions, and not bothering to prove anything. 'Situated knowledge' is undeniable, but one should take it as a starting point, not as the last word, in order to make communication and understanding possible.

You have suggested that to demand from the study of the past the solution of our problems is a superficial approach to history. In what way, then, is the study of the past meaningful?

By contributing to the perception of different cultures, to the perception that people can be different, have been different and will be different, history can enlarge the boundaries of imagination and promote a less provincial attitude towards the past and present. This has often been said. But the impact of scholarly work is unpredictable.

Let me add another example to what I said before. At the beginning of this year [1998], I received a letter inviting me to a conference on the opening of the Inquisition archive in Rome. I replied that I couldn't go but received a phone call from an archivist in the Vatican saying that it would be a great pity for me not to go because, as he explained, I had contributed to that event with a letter. In fact, at the conference which I was unable to attend, Cardinal Ratzinger made a speech quoting a passage from a letter I had written to Pope John Paul II in 1979, sometime after his election. I had written more or less the following: 'I am a Jewish-born historian, I am an atheist, I have been working on the Inquisition for many years and I think that you should open this archive, because in this way you would demonstrate that the Church is not afraid to submit itself to the judgement of scholars, even in a case like the Inquisition.' A Jew asking for the opening of the Inquisition archives certainly contributed to the Pope's historic gesture.

Do you have any theory or philosophy of history yourself?

I'm sceptical about a philosophy of history as a way of recapitulating the history of humankind, but I've been thinking of writing a piece on this theme having as a motto this very short children's poem which says: 'Questa è la storia della vacca Vittoria; morta la vacca finita la storia' [This is the story of the cow Vittoria. The cow is dead and the story is finished]. In Italian *storia* means both 'story' and 'history'. This, I'd say, is my philosophy of history – humankind will perish, hopefully as late as possible, but it is definitely mortal. The fact that a collective suicide has

become possible, that the end of history is at hand, represents a real turning-point in human history. The retrospective impact that such a possibility has on our perception of history has yet to be dealt with by historians. So I'm thinking of using that 'storia della vacca Vittoria' as a sort of gloss to a poem by Raymond Queneau, 'Petite cosmogonie portative', in which he recapitulates human history in two lines, from the ape to the splitting of the atom.

You often refer to the work of Freud. Are these references an important clue to your approach to history?

Yes, he has been very influential on me, but less through his theories and much more through the case studies reported in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. The analytical Freud fascinates me enormously. Two of his ideas, in particular, have been especially important to me. First, that truth, no matter how painful, must be looked at. And second, that it is possible to combine positivism with openness to what is irrational. My approach to intellectual matters can be described, in fact, by an effort to confront the tension between what is rational and what is irrational and to analyse irrational behaviour or beliefs from a rational perspective. There is a tendency to take for granted that the right approach involves some mimicry, that is, that the approach has to fit the content and that therefore the irrational cannot be approached from a rational perspective. Well, I don't share this idea at all and I'd say that my aim, from my adolescence (even if this sounds a bit too emphatic), has been to disclose the rationality of the irrational. So not mimicry but distance is the key. Or, if you like, emotional involvement combined with distance.

Could you situate yourself in relation to Marxism?

I first read Marx in my student years and was immensely taken by his writings, which were so pervasive then. I never declared myself a Marxist for modesty, let's say, because I think it would have been pretentious to call myself a Marxist, as I was too ignorant of his work. In any case, I always resisted the idea of involving myself too deeply in Marxist debates. I don't regret this, since it seemed to me that it would be too easy to get bogged down in some not very interesting scholastic distinctions. Nevertheless, I wouldn't deny that I started my researches with some sort of crude Marxist hypotheses, which were part of the general atmosphere of the 1960s. What I retained from this afterwards was the importance of the conflict between the Inquisitors and the *benandanti*, contrary to the continuity of beliefs that many scholars who were studying the issue were stressing. I don't deny that those trials could be studied from different points of view, including the one that stresses the circulation of