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Disciplines, Serendipity, Case Studies

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In this article I will share some reflections on my own experience as a historian. However, I will refrain from proposing my own case as a model. I dislike preaching; moreover, I regard ego-centred preaching as a ridiculous posture. So please: note what I will say, and then follow a completely different path.

As a student in Pisa, back in 1959, I made a sudden, triple, decision: to become a historian, to work on witchcraft trials in early modern Europe, and to focus on the attitudes, beliefs and voices of the women and men accused of witchcraft. The latter decision (unusual for a historian at that time) had some biographical implications I did not became aware of for many years: my memories as a Jewish child during the Second World War (Ginzburg 1993, 75–85). I was fully aware, on the contrary, of my intellectual debt towards Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1975), written in prison, under the Fascist regime. I had been particularly impressed by Gramsci's remarks on 'the culture of subaltern classes' (*cultura delle classi subalterne*). But my naive project to approach witchcraft trials as a crude form of class struggle was also a deliberate updating of Jules Michelet's romantic vision of the 'Witch' as a symbol of social revolt.

A document, dated 1519, I found in the Inquisition files preserved in the State Archive of Modena seemed to provide support for my initial hypothesis: a trial against a peasant, Chiara Signorini, accused of having cast a spell against her landlady, who had evicted Chiara. The discovery of that document left me with a feeling of disappointment: if my hypothesis could be so easily proved, there should be something wrong with it. In the essay (the first I ever published) dedicated to that trial, I ultimately pointed at a broader issue, i.e. the cultural clash between the inquisitor and the peasant woman (Ginzburg 2013a [1961], especially p. 15). (Michelet had disappeared, but Gramsci was still there.) I was still fully committed to my topic, but I felt that I had no longer a research programme to rely on. I spent one year (1963) wandering across Central and Northern Italy, searching for fragments of Inquisition archives and reading as many witchcraft trials as I could. Then chance, as a deliberate strategy, entered. At that time, if my recollection is correct, scholars doing research in the State Archive of Venice were allowed to check four items a day. Starting from a very helpful, but tantalizingly vague, nineteenth-century handwritten inventory of the Inquisition documents preserved in the Archive (more than 150

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thick volumes) I decided to play a game that I labelled, retrospectively, 'Venetian roulette'. Every morning I applied for four volumes (each of them including many trials) chosen at random: let's say, 4, 37, 49, 84. One day I came across a testimony given in 1591 by Menichino, a young cow-herder from Latisana, a little town in Friuli. He said that, since he was born in a caul (that is, wrapped in the amniotic sac) he was a *benandante* (literally, somebody who goes for the good); therefore, he was compelled to dream, three times a year, to go 'like in a smoke' in the field of Josaphat, where he fought with fennel stalks against the witches, 'to preserve the faith'. Then he added: 'when the *benandanti* won it was a sign of a good harvest' (Ginzburg 1966; [1983], 74–77).

That document I had found by chance triggered archival research which, some years later, in 1966, became a book, *I benandanti*, translated into English in 1983 as *The Night Battles. Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. It was 'found by chance', i.e. by serendipity, one could say, using the word coined by Horace Walpole in 1754, on the basis of his recollection of a sixteenth-century story ascribed to one Cristoforo Armeno, *Pilgrimage of the Three Young Sons of the King of Serendippo* (today's Sri Lanka) (Merton and Barber 2004, 2–3). In my case, however, serendipity was the result of a deliberate strategy that I had begun to use when the web did not exist. Later, I relied more systematically on it in order to exploit the web's often ignored potentialities Ginzburg (2011). To put it simply: everybody (including myself) uses Google in order to find answers to our questions; but one should also learn to use Google in order to find unexpected questions, which may trigger a chain of research that would send us to libraries and/or archives. A few examples will illustrate my point.

In 2013, I was asked by Johns Hopkins University Press, the publisher of *The Night Battles*, to write a new preface to my first book. I took that invitation as an opportunity to have a retrospective look at the trajectory that had led me to work on witchcraft trials. As I said, my first essay had focused on an early sixteenth-century trial against a peasant living near Modena, Chiara Signorini, who had been accused of being a witch. At the end of my essay I wrote: 'the case of Chiara Signorini, notwithstanding its irreducible individual peculiarities, can have a somewhat paradigmatic meaning.'[1]

In 2013, I commented:

> Paradigmatic here stands for 'exemplary'. (Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, focusing on the notion of 'paradigm', would not be published until one year later, in 1962). To present that chance discovery as exemplary was a hypothesis, or, better yet, a wager. But what had moved me to transform a trial into a case? I do not have the answer. I can only say that I have continued to this day to work and reflect on cases and their implications. (Ginzburg 2013a, pp. X–XI)[2]

1. See Ginzburg (1983 [1966], pp. 3–28, especially p. 21): 'il caso di Chiara Signorini, pur nei suoi aspetti irriducibilmente individuali, può assumere un significato in qualche modo paradigmatico' (see also Ginzburg 2013a, pp. 1–16; the translation has been modified).
2. The translation has been modified. I should have mentioned that J. Forrester (2017) argues that Kuhn's most important concept is the exemplar.

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Today, I would like to answer that question, trying to explain, first of all to myself, the roots of that early obsession with cases.

In the late 1950s, when I started to work on witchcraft trials, the word 'cases' was associated in my mind with two names: Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud. I had read, in translation, Conan Doyle's collected stories, as well as Freud's case studies. The idea that a case, if analysed in depth, may say something which a general approach would miss, deeply impressed me. This fascination with the revealing detail had been reinforced by my encounter with the work of two great romance philologists, Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach.

Fiction, psychoanalysis, literary criticism: my approach to history was nourished by a variety of genres and cognitive approaches; in all of them the case played a special role. But the case itself is a very special genre, which, being placed at the intersection of different traditions – medical, legal, theological – can easily overcome the boundaries between disciplines (Pomata 2014). Working on a case, as I slowly realized, implies a search for clues. Much later, in 1979, I inscribed the search for clues in a long historical trajectory, in an essay entitled 'Clues, roots of an evidential paradigm' ('Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario'). I started from three characters, two real and one fictional: Giovanni Morelli, Sigmund Freud, Sherlock Holmes (Ginzburg 2013b). In a footnote to his own essay (first published anonymously) on Michelangelo's *Moses*, Freud had declared his intellectual debt to the work of Giovanni Morelli, the Italian art *connoisseur*. According to Morelli, the identity of a painter was revealed by marginal, unconsciously drawn details, such as earlobes and nails. But was Conan Doyle also indebted to Morelli? In a footnote to my essay on clues I raised that possibility, suggesting that Henry Doyle, director of the Dublin Art Museum, who knew Morelli personally, may have introduced the latter's work to his nephew, Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes (Ginzburg 2013b, 202 note 10). Today, besides 'The Adventure of the Cardboard Box', that I had analysed following the suggestion of Enrico Castelnuovo, I would focus on another short-tale, 'A Case of Identity' (1891). Here the reader is confronted with Sherlock Holmes's compressed presentation of his own method: 'It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important'. As usual, Watson is astonished by his friend's perceptiveness: 'You appeared to read a good deal upon her [Mary Sutherland, the young lady who is at the centre of the case] which was quite invisible to me'. Sherlock answers:

> Not invisible but unnoticed, Watson. You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that was important. I can never bring you to realise the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a boot-lace. [...] Never trust to general impressions, my boy, but concentrate yourself upon details. My first glance is always at a woman's sleeve. In a man it is perhaps better first to take the knee of the trouser. As you observe, this woman had plush upon her sleeves, which is a most useful material for showing traces.

Among the 'clues' that led up to the case's solution, i.e. 'the identity of the disappearing bridegroom of Miss Mary Sutherland' we find those left by a typewriter: 'It is a curious thing,' remarked Holmes,

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> that a typewriter has really quite as much individuality as a man's handwriting. Unless they are quite new, no two of them write exactly alike. Some letters get more worn than others, and some wear only on one side. Now, you remark in this note of yours, Mr. Windibank, that in every case there is some little slurring over of the tail of the 'e', and a slight defect in the tail of the 'r'. There are fourteen other characteristics, but those are the more obvious. (Conan Doyle 1976, 55–75)

A comparison between the singularity of handwriting and the singularity of unconscious painterly habits has been recurrent in connoisseurship – from Giulio Mancini to Giovanni Morelli. Sherlock Holmes took the comparison and updated it.

In my essay on clues I did not focus on the case as genre, but rather on the cognitive practices that may lead to the construction of a case. This was, implicitly, a retrospective reflection focusing on my previous books, *The Night Battles* (Ginzburg 1966) and *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg 1976), that dealt with anomalous case studies focusing on, respectively, a group and an individual. (Anomaly is, from a cognitive point of view, richer than the norm because it necessarily includes it).[3] What was, a bit later, labelled as 'microhistory' is, I would say, an experimental approach to historical research (and to historical writing) based on the case and its potential. I say 'experimental' because the reader is not confronted with a straightforward narrative but with a narrative that includes an analysis of its own construction. The scaffolding is not dismantled when the building is over, but is displayed in it: a stylistic, cognitive and political choice inspired (as far as I am concerned) by twentieth-century literature, from Marcel Proust to Bertolt Brecht.

But the experiment could also lead to a revision of a case written by somebody else, as I tried to do with Sigmund Freud's famous case of the wolf-man (Ginzburg 1985). The patient, a Russian, told Freud that he was born in a caul, i.e. wrapped in the amniotic sack – a detail that Freud recorded without realizing its implications. In Russian folklore, children born in a caul are bound to become werewolves. Thinking of the Friulian *benandanti*, who said that, being born in a caul, they were compelled to fight in spirit four times a year against the witches, I argued that the childhood dream that Freud's patient regarded as the beginning of his neurosis – five wolves on a tree staring at him – was a sort of initiatory dream. 'Instead of turning into a werewolf,' I concluded 'he became a neurotic on the brink of psychosis' (Ginzburg 2013b, 148).

That short essay of mine may exemplify the intellectual porosity of the case as genre. The same case could be rewritten starting from a little detail ('God is in the detail', as Aby Warburg famously said) which, if properly interpreted, could generate a completely different configuration.

On the basis of these premises, a reflection on casuistry, the theological and legal tradition focusing on exceptions to moral and legal norms, would have been inevitable. In fact, in my case, it emerged after many years. I had to overcome, I guess, an

3. I made repeatedly this point before becoming aware (through Henrique Espada Lima) that I was unknowingly echoing C. Schmitt (1985, 15) who quoted a 'Protestant theologian' (i.e. Kierkegaard).

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unconscious resistance related to the moral implications of casuistry. Although I never had a religious education, I absorbed an approach to moral issues which could be regarded (to put it in simplistic terms) as a secularized version of Pascal's rejection of casuistry, and especially Jesuit casuistry.

I am able to date quite exactly the change in my attitude on this issue. When I taught at UCLA I used to give a graduate seminar that lasted two quarters at the beginning of each year. After 11 September 2001, I immediately decided that the topic of my next seminar, to start in a few months, would be Machiavelli's *Il Principe* – a text that would give the opportunity to reflect on secularization in a long-term perspective, as an unfinished phenomenon. Among the avenues I began to explore in order to prepare the seminar's syllabus there was casuistry – a choice possibly due to a force whose role in research is usually, and surprisingly, ignored: cryptomemory. I did not remember that the arguments advanced by fra Timoteo, one of the characters of Machiavelli's dark comedy *La Mandragola*, to convince Lucrezia, Nicia's virtuous wife, that adultery is not a sin, had been interpreted by an influential scholar as 'an anticipation of casuistry'. A tortuous trajectory through Google, looking for references to casuistry, led me to discover that fra Timoteo's arguments about the lawfulness of adultery rephrased an argument about the lawfulness of usury, in specific circumstances, advanced by Giovanni d'Andrea, a professor of canon law who died in Bologna in 1348. Machiavelli could have had access to Giovanni d'Andrea's book in the library of his father, Bernardo, who owned a copy of it. Pursuing this track, I suddenly realized that the central chapters of *Il Principe* – the section that Machiavelli himself regarded as the most original of his little treatise – invariably begin by enouncing a moral norm, as 'the prince should never lie', immediately followed by an exception: 'Nondimanco', nevertheless (Ginzburg 2003, 195–213; 2018).

From medieval canon law, to (fictional) theology, to 'arte dello stato' (not exactly equivalent to what we call, in contemporary language, political science), the communicative power of casuistry (as well of its object, the case) is quite impressive.

In the last 15 years I have been working on casuistry, as well as on the powerful attack Pascal launched against it in his *Lettres Provinciales* (Ginzburg 2007, 29–48). But I also continued to work on cases, as in an essay entitled 'Latitude, slaves, and the Bible: an experiment in microhistory': once again, the outcome of a deliberate random search in the UCLA library catalogue (Ginzburg 2005). At the end of my search I was confronted with a previously unknown name – Jean-Pierre Purry – and the title of a book: *Mémoire sur le païs des Cafres, et de la Terre de Nuyts, par raport à l'utilité que la Compagnie des Indes Orientales en pourroit retirer pour son commerce* (Amsterdam 1718). The title seemed promising; the content of the book even more so (Purry 1718, 1744). I started to research, which lasted two years. Born in Neuchâtel in 1675, Jean-Pierre Purry, a Calvinist, had an adventurous life: his colonization projects, inspired by the Bible, led him to Cape Town, to Batavia, to the Netherlands, to South Carolina. There he died in 1736, in a town he had founded, bearing his name: Purrysburg. I once visited its remains: a half-destroyed graveyard in the middle of a forest.

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'Can an individual case, if explored in depth, be theoretically relevant?' I asked in my essay. I answered in the affirmative, starting from Purry's case to comment on Max Weber's and Karl Marx's approaches to colonization, and the missing elements in them (violence, in Weber's; religion, in Marx's). At the end of my essay I quoted a passage by Proust:

> People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of great social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further in the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realise that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena. (Ginzburg 2005, 683)

Did I succeed in meeting this challenge? I will leave the answer to the readers of my essay, which has been translated into several languages.[4] Undoubtedly, the case of Purry emerged by chance (in Italian, 'case' and 'chance' are covered by a single word). But in which sense can this kind of research strategy be helpful? I would say: in order to circumvent our biases (not to say prejudices); in order to be confronted with something unexpected, and unknown; in order to unfold the cognitive potential of distanciation. But I must admit that the weight of my own biases, and possibly prejudices, quickly emerged. As soon as I started to leaf through a photocopy of Purry's *Mémoire sur le païs des Cafres*, kept on the shelves of the UCLA research library, the name of Max Weber suddenly came to my mind. I did not know anything about Purry – but the amount of quotations from the Old Testament was already driving me, unknowingly, towards the archives of Neuchâtel and the remains of Purrysburg, lost in the middle of a forest in South Carolina.

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4. It has been published in the following languages: English, French, Turkish, Dutch, Russian, Hebrew, Catalan, Portuguese, Polish, Georgian, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese.

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About the Author

Carlo Ginzburg is one of Italy's most famous contemporary historians. In a long academic career he taught at the University of Bologna, the University of California in Los Angeles, and the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. He gained fame with *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980, Italian version 1976), often cited as a pioneering work in microhistory. He wrote mostly on Renaissance history, but also ventured into more general matters of culture and literature. In 2010 he was awarded the Balzan Prize for European History.

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