



*Carlo Ginzburg, Trygve Riiser Gundersen*

## **On the dark side of history**

### **Carlo Ginzburg talks to Trygve Riiser Gundersen**

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The historian Carlo Ginzburg talks about his publications and his historical method of microhistory, which he pioneered. Ginzburg dismisses the prevailing relativism of historical truth as intellectually, politically, and morally lazy, and argues against equating history with "mankind's collective memory". Instead, history must serve a sense of historical justice, whereby the past -- however selective our memory may be -- is acknowledged and truth is finally served.

It sounds like something from a cheap historical novel: In the spring of 1321, in Easter Week, rumour is rife in the south of France that a conspiracy is on foot to kill all Christians and that wells have been poisoned all over the country. The rumour soon spreads throughout the whole of France and, in time, across its borders to what are now Switzerland and Spain. In some of the chronicles that have come down to us, the plot is said to be the work of lepers.

Elsewhere, the poisoning of wells was ascribed to Jews working together with the lepers. In some places blame was laid at the door of Muslim rulers in Granada or Tunis, or of the Sultan of Babylon, who were said to have paid Jews and lepers to kill Christians. The rumours resulted in persecutions and massacres all over France, and before long they were being substantiated by confessions and other evidence. Long and detailed explanations appeared to show how the poison had been introduced into the wells. The conspirators' accomplices were denounced, and contemporary letters and



documents tell of the Jews' association with the Saracens and of plans for setting up a government composed of Jews, lepers, and Muslims to take over Europe in the aftermath of the calamity.

As a consequence of these happenings in the spring of 1321, all over France lepers were interned. The object was to sever the connection between the infected and society at large, and to prevent them from having children. This is the first recorded instance in European history of such large-scale isolation measures, and it was to provide the pattern for similar measures for centuries to come. For the Jews, the events of 1321 resulted in pogroms and death at the stake, confiscation of property, exclusion from trade and other commercial activities, and, in 1323, the issuance of a royal edict providing for their expulsion from the realm of France. As early as the summer of 1321, the King had officially confirmed that the accusations levelled at Jews and lepers were well-founded and should be taken seriously.

## **The belief in a Witches' Sabbath**

This story opens the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg's book *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del Sabba* (1989), which was recently published in English under the title *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. Ginzburg retraces the course of events in 1321 in minute detail, describing how rumour spread from village to village and town to town, and how the charges became increasingly substantiated. In the author's opinion, the conspiracy theories that took root in these months constitute one of the principal prerequisites of a phenomenon which, in the centuries that followed, was destined to leave a lasting mark on European history: the belief in a Witches' Sabbath.

Ginzburg's account of these happenings gives us some idea of what has made him one of today's foremost historians: his talents as a storyteller, his interest in popular beliefs and their relationship to power and authority, and his gift for winking out the small details capable of challenging our established views of history. All this coupled with an ability to detect the large in the small, to combine an understanding of the abstract driving forces in history with the analysis of seemingly chance and insignificant incidents.

## **The great conspiracy**



**Carlo Ginzburg:** What we witness in the spring of 1321 is the idea of the great conspiracy, the notion that external enemies can ally themselves with persons in our midst in order to undermine the entire social structure. This idea had an overwhelming impact in the period under review. In 1348, for example, Jews all over southern France were massacred after being accused of spreading the Black Death. Early in the fifteenth century, this conspiracy model re-emerged, though in a different guise. This time it was the practitioners of the Black Arts who were supposed to be behind the veiled attack on Christianity. They were no longer in league with the Muslims, but with the Devil. Conspiracy had thus become omnipresent. It could no longer be linked to a specific section of the population; and it was no longer rooted in human conflicts, but on the contrary in the absolute struggle between God and the Devil. With this, a mainstay of the belief in the existence of a Witches' Sabbath was firmly in place. The effects of that belief were to make themselves felt throughout the whole of Europe for more than two centuries afterwards.

**Trygve Riiser Gundersen:** Even so, you think that the events of 1321 were unique?

**CG:** The rumours spread so rapidly and systematically that spring that it could not possibly have been by chance. Some central authority must have taken steps to spread the charges. The idea of a conspiracy was thus in itself a conspiracy. From the sources available to us it is reasonable to conclude that it was persons at the centre of power in France who were behind it all. The accusations may, of course, have originated at a local level, but their dissemination was encouraged and directed from a central source. That distinguishes the unrest of 1321 from the events of 1348 and those around 1400, which were more spontaneous in nature.

In the years prior to 1321, there was a strong desire in political circles both to destroy the Jews' economic position and to assume control of the considerable sums then accruing to charitable organizations set up to help lepers. Shortly afterwards both these aims were fulfilled.

The appearance of such a large-scale, coordinated campaign can only be explained by the concurrent rise of the nation-state. The conspiracy appears as a distorted image of the new political system, a kind of grotesque caricature of the nation-state's new functions - but with that grain of truth in it that is a feature of all caricatures.

But this picture emerges only when the occurrences of 1321 are viewed as a whole and studied chronologically – when the many diverse incidents are pieced together and analyzed day by day, if not hour by hour. Only then does the link between them become clear. I'm convinced that chronology, pure and simple, is one of the historian's most powerful weapons. It may be treated with suspicion in modern historiography, but its critical efficacy is greater than many people realize.

**TRG:** When you talk about the medieval fear of conspiracy, it's hard not to be reminded of certain aspects of the general mood after the events of 11 September 2001.

**CG:** I wasn't thinking along those lines when I wrote that, of course, but yes, today the comparison *is* striking. It's one of those things that can happen when you work as an historian - those sudden flashes of *contemporaneity*. The last couple of years has, at least, clearly demonstrated that the fear of conspiracy still is a powerful force today. It belongs to those central historical ideas that help to determine our view of reality. I see it as part of my challenge as an historian to draw attention to such historical accretions – to dispel the belief that our own lives are separated from the past. In truth, anything that can rid us of our illusion of historical autonomy pleases me.

## [1]

“I am a Jew who was born and grew up in a Catholic country; I never had a religious education; my Jewish identity is in large measure the result of persecution”, Carlo Ginzburg writes in the preface to one of his recent books. Ginzburg was born in Turin in 1939. His father, Leone Ginzburg, taught Russian literature at the university there until, in 1934, he lost his position, having refused to swear an oath of allegiance imposed by the Fascist regime. He died in 1944, in a section of the Roman prison controlled by the Germans. Carlo Ginzburg was therefore brought up by his mother, Natalia Ginzburg (1916-1991), one of the leading Italian writers of the twentieth century.

As an historian, Ginzburg has been labelled both a *microhistorian* and a *detective*. On several occasions, he has argued that the work of the historian cannot be directly compared with other scientific pursuits, but rather belongs to a paradigm of *sign-reading*, the interpreting of clues, work more in keeping with that of the hunter or investigator than that of a scientist. The



reference to “microhistory” comes from his association with a circle of Italian historians who, in the 1970s and 1980s, asserted that historical changes can only be fully understood when analyzed at the micro-level, where the consequences of major social structures always make themselves felt.

Both characteristics are illustrated to the full in Ginzburg’s best-known book, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (The Cheese and the Worms), published in 1976. It tells the story of a miller from northern Italy who was burnt at the stake in 1599. Ginzburg came across the documents relating to the case against Domenico Scandella - known as Menocchio - in the archives of the Inquisition related to the region of Friuli, and in the book presents a picture of a layman and artisan who, in the course of his life in the mountain village of Montereale, formed a singular view of the world (the book’s title stems from Menocchio’s conviction that the world arose from chaos, “just as cheese is made out of milk, and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels”, as he explained to the judges), and who in addition displayed remarkable courage and self-assurance in the face of the Inquisitors. The Cheese and the Worms is written as an intellectual biography of the long-forgotten heretic: a retracing of his story, an account of the intellectual currents that influenced him, and, not least, a meticulous study of the books Menocchio claimed to have read and his interpretation of them. The book became an international bestseller. Since the publication of the English translation in 1980, the story of Menocchio has been translated into German, French, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Japanese, Portuguese, Serbo-Croat, Polish, Hungarian, Greek, and Turkish, in that order. The book revolutionized Ginzburg’s career - and it added to the miller’s own life story a new and unforeseen chapter, almost four centuries after his death.

## **The opportunities of subjectivity**

**CG:** Some people have pointed out that there must be a connection between my own background and identity as a Jew, and my historical interest in characters like Menocchio. And they are probably right. But I don’t consider that a problem. We keep trying to “expose<sup>2</sup> the different subjective motives behind the work of historians. But isn’t that rather pointless? It is obvious that our own experiences will govern our interests as researchers. And there is no reason why such subjective elements should have to impose *limitations* on an historian’s work, instead of presenting opportunities. In my own case, the fact that I wasn’t conscious of this linkage was crucial. It allowed me to focus my attentions without being constrained by the awareness of my own



autobiographical connection to the material.

**TRG:** Looking back on *The Cheese and the Worms* today, what do you feel?

**G:** It is striking how much time and energy I invested in simply *justifying* the project: writing a book about a totally unknown person who could lay no claim to traditional historical significance. That project would be more readily accepted today. I consider *The Cheese and the Worms* primarily as an attempt to expand the relevance of the notion of the individual in history - to transfer the portrayal of individuality from “elite culture<sup>2</sup> to what we generally refer to as “the masses”.

**TRG:** How do you consider this project today - the ambition to reawaken the forgotten individuals of history?

**CG:** We must not look at this too naively. The details of Menocchio’s life are known to us only through the writings of the men who persecuted him. The court records are all we have. To be fair, they are remarkably detailed, but that is only because the judges were so astounded by what Menocchio had to say. Strangely, in Inquisition documents it is only when communication breaks down that *real* dialogue emerges. Menocchio’s answers confused the judges. Or they were fascinated by them - it is not always easy to decide. Anyway, they suddenly began to ask *real* questions, questions which no longer presupposed standard answers. This allows us to glimpse a reality which, under different circumstances, would no longer be available to us. It is a strange situation for me as an historian - to understand that the Inquisitors’ questions are my own questions; that we share the same sense of amazement, the same sort of relation to the interlocutor.

It would probably be right to say that *The Cheese and the Worms* has had some influence in modern social history. I am not altogether sure that that is a good thing. The social history of the last few decades has at times resembled a parade of history’s proud losers. I am in two minds on this point. On the one hand, the aspects of history represented by people like Menocchio are obviously important. But we have little need for the creation of an historical counter-culture displaying a gallery of defeated heroes. That would turn history into ideology, and that is never a good thing. All in all, you could say I have an ambivalent relationship to *The Cheese and the Worms* - it is by far my most successful book, that is right, but I am not sure that it is my best.



**TRG:** But your book endows Menocchio with a voice of his own. Isn't that important in itself? It is hard not to be struck by the fact that he, who spent so much of his life trying to get a hearing, has at long last found an audience and won some sort recognition.

**CG:** I agree that we have an obligation to the dead. It is our duty to tell the truth about them. And you could perhaps say that Menocchio has found posterity thanks to my book. He became a local hero in Montereale, the village where he was born (a Menocchio Centre has been set up there). And many readers in various countries have identified with Menocchio, for different, often unpredictable reasons. But I am not sure if that necessarily means that Menocchio has now been "heard". It's a difficult process to evaluate, and I often feel that I am a peripheral figure in it. The book was published, it was a great success, and then it was taken over by its readers, who have used it for their own purposes. Strange though it may seem, I was wholly unprepared for that. It was particularly ironic, as the book is a study of precisely the same process - Menocchio's own adoption of others' writings, the reader's power over the text.

## [2]

Carlo Ginzburg published his first book, *I benandanti*, in 1966. It introduces a subject that was to set its seal on much of his career as an historian: the link between the witch trials and popular beliefs. Again the story takes place in Friuli, and this time, too, it was the astonishment shown by the Inquisitors that was the starting point for Ginzburg's research. When, in 1575, two men were under interrogation on suspicion of practising witchcraft, the judges were treated to stories of magic, wild nocturnal rides, and secret rites that seemed to fit perfectly with their belief in a horrible Witches' Sabbath. But there was one thing that didn't quite gel: the accused vehemently denied that they were witches. On the contrary, they said, they were *benandanti* - "those who do good" - good Christians who at night fought for Christ against the dreaded witches who were out to destroy the villagers' crops. In his book, Ginzburg reviews a series of trials of *benandanti* held in Friuli in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His theory is that the strange testimonies offered by the "good" witches afford us a glimpse of a popular fertility cult that must have been in existence before, but also in parallel with, the Christian era - a cult that eventually resurfaced in a perverted form in the Church's belief in a Witches' Sabbath. Not only did this theory run counter to accepted conceptions of witchcraft, it was also at odds with the

common view of popular religion in medieval and early modern Europe. The theory was to remain in the forefront of Carlo Ginzburg's interest for the next thirty years almost, and in 1989 his preoccupation with it resulted in the publication of his great work, *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del Sabba*. Ginzburg himself views this book as his *magnum opus*.

**CG:** It all began by chance – like most of the other discoveries I have made in my career as an historian. I believe that at decisive junctures in the research process one must allow oneself to be stupid – simply to dwell in the *state of not understanding*. That leaves one open to those chance occurrences from which unexpected discoveries spring. I had actually finished my first book when I came across a reference to a man in Livonia [present-day Estonia and Latvia] who, in 1692, was accused of being a werewolf. He had told the judges that on some nights he was in the habit of changing into a wolf and fighting on God's side against the witches and devils who were stealing the people's crops. His statements tallied in surprising detail with those of the *benandanti*. Were these similarities only coincidental? Or could it be that such cases were rooted in common beliefs that had once been more widespread? I managed to rewrite parts of *I benandanti* at the last minute, but I knew by myself that I would really have to start all over again from the beginning.

## Distorted sources

**TRG:** In *Ecstasies*, you study rites and fertility-religious ideas from very different contexts – both historical and geographical – all of them in some ways similar to those you found in your study of the *benandanti* and the Baltic werewolf. You trace the links between them, and that leads you to describe a series of myths, rites, and convictions the roots of which extend far back into the prehistory of mankind and encompass large areas of the globe. Aren't you afraid of taking on too much?

**CG:** In writing *Ecstasies*, I found myself up against formidable methodological problems. It must be borne in mind that the beliefs in question belong to what might be called the dark side of history. We know little about them. We have very little source material. And when, very rarely, something does appear in written sources, it is invariably mediated, filtered through the views of another person – of a compiler of folktales, an anthropologist, or a member of the Inquisition, for instance. The original material is thus very difficult to access. What is more, these beliefs are by





their very nature complex and obscure phenomena for which no simple and unequivocal historical explanation can exist. But that doesn't mean that the beliefs have never existed or that they are irrelevant. We are dealing here with an aspect of historical reality that is fundamentally different from what historians are used to working with. But it goes without saying that that doesn't make it unimportant.

**TRG:** You have been accused of over-speculation in your book. How would you yourself describe the method you employed in *Ecstasies*?

**CG:** As historians, we have to adapt our methods to the sources available. Even just a few leads can convey a greater historical reality, provided we piece them together correctly. In this case, where source material was both scarce and widely dispersed, *comparison* became a crucial instrument. Take the *benandanti* and the Livonian werewolves. To start with there was nothing to link the two cases in a historical sense. But when I *compared* them, I was struck by the number of things they had in common. Comparison can bring out similarities where we would otherwise tend to focus on differences, and that was decisive in this project.?

There is, for example, a chapter in the book about limping. The werewolves in Livonia were led by a child with a limp. After a while I was struck by the number of myths and rites in which lameness plays a part. If one were to take as one's point of departure a traditional historical approach, one would never find oneself wondering whether there was a historical connection – as I try to demonstrate in my book – between Achilles' heel, Cinderella's lost slipper, and the Chinese *Yu* dance, in which the feet are dragged to produce a jaunty, bouncing walk. But when one becomes aware of the similarity, the existence of which it is hard to deny once one's attention has been drawn to it, one suddenly finds oneself up against a genuine historical problem, one that needs looking into. That is why comparison is such a unique resource for historians: it helps us to *pose questions*. In my own case, the web of mythological and ritual similarities that I discovered while engaged in writing *Ecstasies* evolved into a single major historical question, one of the most momentous I could envisage and one that I felt compelled to try to answer, even though it meant that I would need recourse to methods and approaches that might result in my losing face among “serious” historians.

## **An experiment in size**



**TRG:** But isn't there a contradiction here – between comparison and chronology, so to speak? *Ecstasies* starts with an account of the events of spring 1321. You go from describing, by way of introduction, a couple of months in a specific year to wanting to say in conclusion something fundamental about the whole of mankind's existence on earth. How do you reconcile these two concepts?

**CG:** I regard *Ecstasies* primarily as a kind of *experiment in size*. The idea of combining the very smallest and the very largest in one book – micro- and macrohistory at one and the same time, you might say – attracted me. There is, moreover, a polemical intention underlying the way the book is structured: it may be read as a criticism of what one might term “middle history”; the kind of history that uncritically accepts the explanatory levels we deem “natural” in a given context – a nation, an epoch, a period of time, and the like. I wanted to show, if I could, that the *scope* of study never can be taken for granted. The scale we employ always determines what answers it is possible to arrive at in each case, be it at the micro- or the macro-level.

So, the two levels you mentioned must be viewed together: to begin with I focus on the provenance of the belief in a Witches' Sabbath, in one specific area and over a limited period of time, through the medium of concrete and datable historical events. But where do such things come from? How can we explain that notions of nocturnal rides; ecstatic, esoteric rites; cult gatherings; and the like attach themselves to concrete ideas of conspiracy for which we are able to find lucid explanations? To answer that question, we have to move on to another level. Any happening, no matter how insignificant it may appear, can be understood only in the framework of a larger historical reality.

**TRG:** So, in principle, any incident could be made the object of interpretations just as far-reaching as those you have accorded the Witches' Sabbath in *Ecstasies*?

**CG:** In principle, yes, it could.

**TRG:** But wouldn't it then be easier to say that everything is connected to everything else, and be finished with it?

**CG:** Isn't it true, though, that everything *is* connected with everything else? I'm convinced that it is. That's not as ridiculous as you are trying to make

out. But we must remember not to formulate this idea as an *answer*. As an answer, it is totally trivial, a complete dead end. If we turn it into a *question*, on the other hand, then it's just a matter of getting started.

### [3]

Even though Carlo Ginzburg's childhood and upbringing were coloured by his parents' radical political activities, he has never been politically active himself. This notwithstanding, in the decade or so that has elapsed since the publication of *Ecstasies*, issues which in a broad sense may be termed political have occupied a central place in his authorship. This is most evident in his book *Il giudice e la storico* (1991), about the case brought against Ginzburg's close friend of many years' standing, the Italian writer and activist Adriano Sofri, who in 1988 was sentenced to twenty-two years' imprisonment for the murder of Police Commissioner Luigi Calabresi. In his book, Ginzburg presents a detailed review of the Sofri case and asks fundamental questions relevant not only to the statements of witnesses, on which the charge was based, but also to the more general workings of Italy's judicial system.

But the book is also a contribution to the recent debate on the nature of historical studies, reflecting on the respective roles of the historian and judge, and their relationship with truth and history. Ginzburg's exploration of narrative and his criticism of traditional historical writing have often led him to be associated with the postmodern wing in the history debate, something against which he has strongly protested. In a series of articles he has emerged as an ardent defender of the concept of historical truth and as a surprisingly fierce critic of the postmodern theory of history.

**CG:** I find that I am often grouped together with my "enemies"<sup>2</sup>. This shows just how simplified the whole discussion of postmodernism in history has been. The writing of history is, of course, *construction*: we put together bits and pieces of what has come down to us through the ages in order to create a convincing picture of the past. But that picture is likewise a *reconstruction*. It is this intrinsic tension - the unruly and often unpredictable interaction of these two principles - that gives the study of history its special character. On both sides of the debate, however, it seems to have been difficult to bear both these ideas in mind at the same time.

We should, in principle, never have embarked upon a debate about *truth* in



history in the first place. Instead, we should have had a debate on *proof*. On what basis can one argue, as an historian? What does it mean to say that something is historically proven? At what point can we say that an historical claim is refuted? It is remarkable how postmodernists, seemingly quite uncritically, have adopted positivism's naive idea of the indisputable and objective historical source, a source which is able, once and for all, to stand as a record of the ultimate truth. It is, to be sure, a concept that has long had its day, but the fact remains that it is still at the crux of the debate. Some people seem to think that if it can be shown that no wholly objective sources of historical knowledge exist, all historical knowledge is impossible. That is obviously nonsense. What we really need is a more subtle notion of historical proof - a notion of proof which, for instance, takes into account all the special problems that confront us when we try to investigate matters that fall outside the traditional domain of historical science. The positivist notion of proof was founded in the political, military, and legal history of the nineteenth century - social and cultural history, for instance, obviously depends upon a different authentication of sources and different types of proof today.

## Innumerable possible explanations

**TRG:** But has the postmodern critique not helped demonstrate that much of what we have always taken for granted in history is uncertain - that many of our most cherished historical "truths" are actually constructs?

**CG:** I fully support the anti-authoritarian stance of the postmodern position. I can even share their scepticism, to a certain extent. For instance, we can easily accept that new explanations of a given historical phenomenon are always possible, since all scientific statements are open to refutations, as Karl Popper pointed out, and therefore are, in a sense, provisional. All statements about history belong, as Marc Bloch pointed out, to the realm of probability, even in cases in which the probability of being refuted is close to zero. Neither Karl Popper nor Marc Bloch were, of course, post-modernists. To invoke their authority for arguing that all historical explanations are equivalent would be absurd. To take refuge in relativism is far too easy a way of facing up to the challenges that confront us - both in the study of history and in society at large. The relativist position is fundamentally wrong in my opinion - intellectually wrong, politically wrong, and morally wrong. It strikes me as a curious aspect of modern intellectual history that words such as "truth" and "reality" have acquired a kind of reactionary taint, while



words like “dream” and “desire” are considered radical. In consequence, the conservative cultural position has become the radical position, at the same time as the categories on which the critical tradition rests have been jettisoned. For the Left, this has been a fatal error. To choose desire against reality (including unpleasant reality) seems to me a dreamy, self-defeating move. On this point, I feel a great distance from the culture of '68 and its long-term impact.

Similarly, I find much of the debate surrounding postmodernism in historical studies basically misleading; it has been a sham debate that has helped to cloak the real epistemological and political difficulties currently facing the historical discipline.

**TRG:** Would it be correct to say that one of those challenges confronting history is its relationship with literature? You have often written of your interest in the modernist tradition. But literary modernism’s critique of the traditional representations of reality is frequently adduced as one of the chief examples of the impossibilities inherent in traditional historical projects.

**CG:** To me, that is yet another artificial contradiction. To regard history and literature as two wholly disparate fields is both mistaken and unhistorical. They have always existed in dialogue, more or less overlapping. The fact that historical writing sometimes devolves into fiction and that, furthermore, it often relies on literary models, should not surprise us. A much more challenging approach – to history and literature alike – is to start out from the fact that both disciplines share an obligation to the *truth*, and to see how this has been lived up to at different times. I consider literary modernism first of all as an attempt to discover new forms of *truthfulness*, not least on a formal plane. In that respect it is highly relevant to me as an historian.

Every literary device – be it in a fictional or historical text – makes reality visible in its own way, conveys its vision of reality. Specific linguistic forms are related to specific forms of truth, one might say. There is a kind of formal constraint at work here – every literary form forces us to discover one thing and ignore something else. The traditional narrative, for example, has its own innate limitations, it imposes a kind of sequential constraint: something has to come first, something else later. When I wrote *The Cheese and the Worms*, I dreamed of writing the whole book on one gigantic page, so that I could escape this straitjacket. It was, of course, a ridiculous idea. But the

literary *form* employed by the historian will always be one of the two central filters that separate the historical work from the reality it sets out to portray. The other filter is the *sources* themselves. Both these filters in reality imply an infinite number of potentially distorting factors. In that way, the idea of a simple historical narrative is as absurd as the idea of irrefutable historical proof.

## Our knowledge is fragmentary

**TRG:** Ever since you published your very first scientific treatise, you retained your own highly distinctive style of writing and composition. Your texts are structured in series of freestanding paragraphs or short chapters, which gives the writing a disjointed, essay-like character, even in a large work like *Ecstasies*. What induced you to adopt such a style ?

**CG:** I came across this way of setting out material when, as a young man, I read an essay by Luigi Einaudi, a distinguished economist and economic historian who eventually became president of Italy. He was the father of Giulio, the well-known publisher. The essay was constructed as a series of numbered paragraphs - a device which appealed to my own fascination with cinema and montage. Montage corresponds to what I consider to be the constructive element in historical studies: it makes it clear that our knowledge is fragmentary and that it derives from an open process. It has always been my ambition that the uncertainty of the research process should come through in what I write - I try to portray my own hesitation, so to speak, to enable the reader to make his own judgement. Historical writing should aspire to be *democratic*, by which I mean that it should be possible to check our statements from without, and that the reader be a party not only to the conclusions arrived at but also to the process that led to them.

**TRG:** In the years that have elapsed since *Ecstasies* was published, you have largely confined yourself to essays or collections of essays. The exception is your book about the case against Adriano Sofri. That stands out very clearly, wouldn't you say, from the remainder of your work?

**CG:** Yes, you're right, it does. I find it very difficult to talk about that book. It was the first book I had written that centred on an actual event. Moreover, it was written with a very clear purpose in mind: my aim was to obtain the release of Adriano Sofri and the other two men who were accused with him of the murder of Calabresi. The book was intended as an *action*. That, of



course, left its imprint on the writing. But my action was unsuccessful, and that troubles me. The book has had no effect, as far as I can judge. True, it drew attention to the case, but it didn't *achieve* anything. Adriano Sofri is still in prison, so in that sense it is still the least effective of my books, despite its being the most overtly pragmatic and political of them.

**TRG:** Does that mean that you consider it a failure? Would you have written it differently if you were writing it today?

**CG:** No, I'd have written just the same book, I'm sure. But that doesn't make matters any better.

**TRG:** You say that your books haven't been political in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, some places in your work you have made reference to a kind of liberation project, though it is, perhaps, more utopian than political. In the foreword to *The Cheese and the Worms*, you quote the German philosopher Walter Benjamin: "Nothing that has taken place should be lost to history. But only to redeemed humanity does the past belong in its entirety." Viewed in this light, the historian has something closely akin to a religious function - that of someone striving to recall what has been forgotten, and in so doing redeem mankind. Isn't that so?

**CG:** It's a very long time ago that I wrote that foreword... Let us only say that I probably wouldn't have used that quotation today. Walter Benjamin wrote it as a Jew and radical during the Second World War, in circumstances in which, although there was no longer a vestige of hope, *he had to go on hoping*. That makes its impact still more profound. The quotation refers to an idea that is deeply rooted in our tradition - the idea that in the end *everything* will be redeemed. As one of the Fathers of the Church writes, on the last day even the Devil will be redeemed. It is a beautiful thought, but I find it hard to believe in it. Everything - life, history, Nature - seems far too vulnerable today. Generally, I think it's difficult to perceive a meaning in history. I have never doubted that being an historian is meaningful, but I greatly doubt whether history itself has any meaning.

Nor is the act of remembrance without its problems. Consider everything "that has taken place", as Benjamin writes, and how little we have preserved of it. Hardly anything! What is more, we have no guarantee that what we do know is what was important. Take ourselves, for example: we don't even know whether we remember what is worth remembering in our own lives.



And whether what we do remember about ourselves is correct. Consider all the things of importance to us that we never think about, that we are never really fully aware of. The bulk of what is really important in the world will probably never be passed on, never be remembered.

## History, judgement, and justice

**TRG:** But you have written somewhere that we lost a vitally important means of relating to the past when we abandoned the idea that in the end someone will stand in *judgement* on history, and right and wrong will receive their just desserts. What does that mean?

**CG:** There is something problematical about the unequivocal linking of our concept of history with the idea of remembrance, of memory. We tend to talk of history as being mankind's collective memory - but collective memory has more often than not functioned on premises of forgetfulness. In the creation of the modern nationalism or the twentieth century's major ideological movements, collective memory has mainly been effective in virtue of all it has *left out*: history has been transformed into a succession of symbolical and abstract quantities all harking back to our Glorious Past: revolution, war, class struggle, Germania, Marianne, the Unknown Warrior, and so on and so forth. Even personal memory is by its very nature selective: we remember only what we have not forgotten. Remembrance is, so to speak, interwoven with forgetfulness. That is why the Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi has pointed out that the opposite of "forgetfulness" is not really "remembrance" but "justice". It was the concept of final historical *justice* that was at the root of the ancient idea of judgement, and I find it hard not to think that that is a more satisfactory model for genuine historical awareness than those we employ today.

But the idea of judgement must not be confused with that of retribution. That is crucial. My father died of torture in prison in 1944, and no one in the family saw him in the last months of his life. Many years after his death, I read the autobiography of Sandro Pertini, who, like my father, was an active Socialist during the war and was later to become president of Italy. I discovered that he had been incarcerated in the same prison as my father, and that he had actually met him there shortly before he died. My father had said one thing to Pertini: "Whatever happens, we must remember not to hate the Germans." History must never be made a source of guilt to be borne by the next generation.





Still, the concept of historical justice entails its own way of looking at history, a certain way of *acknowledging* the past. In my view, it is this final acknowledgement that is at the heart of the concept of judgement. It is difficult to express this in precise terms, but it struck me when I was living in Germany that I could see a big difference between those who had this sort of historical consciousness and those who had not. On that plane, you may say that I, as an historian, am participating in a political or ethical project. We cannot change history. But we *can* help to maintain our connection to it.