

A Discussion on History

On Carlo Ginzburg's Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm

By

Subcomandante Marcos

and

Adolfo Gilly

Introduced and Translated By

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historical materialism

dossiers

PUBLICATION DETAILS

<i>Series</i>	Historical Materialism Dossiers
<i>Title</i>	A Discussion on History
<i>Subtitle</i>	On Carlo Ginzburg's Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm
<i>Author(s)</i>	Subcomandante Marcos and Adolfo Gilly
<i>Introduced and Translated</i>	Juan Grigera
<i>Series</i>	historical materialism dossiers
<i>Series Number</i>	4
<i>Version</i>	1.0 - 20260626
<i>Publisher</i>	Historical Materialism
<i>Place of publication</i>	London
<i>Contact</i>	info@historicalmaterialism.org
<i>Original URLs</i>	Part 1 Part 2
<i>DOI</i>	xxx
<i>Licence</i>	Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial 4.0

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Adolfo Gilly

1 Introduction

Juan Grigera

In memory of Carlo Ginzburg, *Historical Materialism* returns to this remarkable reception of his work and, in particular, his ‘evidential paradigm’. These letters, exchanged between Subcomandante Marcos and Adolfo Gilly, originally published in the Mexican journal *Viento del Sur*¹ and translated here into English for the first time, shows how Ginzburg’s work resonated well beyond microhistory and historiography, inspiring wider debates on Marxism, knowledge ‘from below’, revolution, class struggle, and armed struggle.

Carlo Ginzburg (1939–2026) was born in Turin into a family marked by anti-fascist commitment and literary brilliance. He is widely known for his contributions to the craft of history, showing how small traces, marginal lives, and fragmentary archives could open onto vast questions of power, belief, persecution, and popular culture. His best-known works, including *The Night Battles*, *The Cheese and the Worms*, *Ecstasies*, and “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”, were often read under the (postmodern) umbrella of ‘subaltern histories’ and microhistory. For Ginzburg, the historian was not only a scholar of documents but a reader of clues: someone who could reconstruct hidden worlds from the smallest signs. His work remains a model of intellectual rigour, moral imagination, and fidelity to the oppressed.

The exchange between Subcomandante Marcos and Adolfo Gilly that follows is unusual in several respects. First, Gilly’s reading is not a postmodern subalternist appropriation of Ginzburg. Rather, he sees in the evidential method a way of thinking about the knowledge, experience, and political agency of the oppressed, while recognising that these enter class struggle, armed struggle, and revolutionary practice in uneven and complex ways. Second, Marcos’s reply is marked by a more classical revolutionary Marxism than the one which neo-Zapatism would later become associated with.

The correspondence that follows drew on Gilly’s longstanding relationship with the Zapatistas. In May 1994, during the electoral campaign, he was part of the delegation accompanying Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to Chiapas and, in June, returned with a smaller group. One participant later recalled the latter encounter between Gilly and Marcos as one “between people who understood the practices and forms of armed struggle”.² Gilly said that:

1 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, ‘Carta a Adolfo Gilly’, *Viento del Sur*, no.4 (summer 1995) pp. 21-25 and Adolfo Gilly “Huellas, Presagios, Historias, Carta al Subcomandante”, *Viento del Sur*, no 4 (summer 1995), pp. 26-49.

2 Hernández Navarro 2025, p. 52

On 29 October 1994, in Aguascalientes, Chiapas, three visitors had a long conversation with Marcos, Tacho, and Moisés [...] In those hours we spoke of the political situation, of the elections, of revolutions, of democracy, of armed and unarmed men and women, of life itself, amid much laughter which, in their case, masked as they were, could be seen in their eyes, and in ours, I suppose, across our whole faces.³

Following this encounter, Adolfo Gilly sent Marcos Ginzburg's essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm",⁴ as a way of continuing a conversation they had begun in person. He wanted to speak with Marcos about the art of making revolution and about the need revolutionaries have to know human beings. As Ávila notes,⁵ for Gilly, such knowledge could not be reduced to doctrine, programme, or abstract theory. It was formed through experience, attention to concrete human beings, and the ability to read indirect or concealed signs. Ginzburg's evidential method mattered because it offered a way to think the traces left by subaltern classes: traces of experience, reason, culture, and struggle that dominant knowledges often ignore, devalue, or appropriate.

Marcos's reply was a scathing critique, not exempt from sarcasm. Here lies a second peculiarity of the exchange: his reading of Ginzburg is marked by the language and references of a more classical, explicitly Leninist, or Third International Marxism. He dismisses the "evidential" paradigm as a form of bourgeois idealism — whether rationalist or irrationalist — because, in his view, it overlooks the centrality of class position to all knowledge. At the same time, he speaks from practice, against theoreticism, and against those who had renounced struggle. For many enthusiasts of neo-Zapatism, the letter came as a surprise. It appeared as a rigid, even dogmatic, Marxist intervention, revealing an intellectual and political formation quite different from the Marcos they expected: the writer who had become famous for his poetic prose, statements of horizontalism and heterodox style.

Gilly carefully crafted "because it was delayed, a long response". This is both a defence of Ginzburg, a selective introduction to his *oeuvre*, and a defence of a specifically humanist Marxism. What is at stake is not simply a methodological quarrel. The debate asks how revolutionaries know what they know; what they learn from theory, from experience, from defeat, and from those from below; and how Marxism might remain open to the unexpected without surrendering its critical force. What Gilly sees in Ginzburg are the rudiments of a method for thinking about the knowledge of the oppressed and about the difficult art of making revolution.

This is perhaps why, beyond Ginzburg, Gilly — "formed in the school of 'Marxism-as-critique' [...] and not in that of 'Marxism-as-science'" — places James C. Scott, Michel Foucault, Marc Bloch, and E. P. Thompson in the same constellation. His aim is the opposite of allowing

3 Gilly 1995, Introduction

4 Ginzburg 1986

5 Ávila 2025

them to be absorbed into a postmodern subalternism. Rather, he seeks to recover what their work offers to revolutionary practice: to the Zapatistas, above all, but also to any politics concerned with recovering the voices, knowledges, desires, and forms of rationality of those who rarely have a public voice, and who appear in official archives only through the marks left by domination.

For Gilly, Ginzburg's text touched a sensitive fibre in Marcos. It pressed on the point where Marcos's previous intellectual formation met — and was dented by — the lived reality of Indigenous Chiapas. That was the point at which the old “square-headed conception” of revolution was transformed by experience, giving rise to something new: neo-Zapatism.

Gilly's closeness to Zapatism continued over the following years. He visited the communities, took part in their encounters, accompanied *La Otra Campaña* in 2005, 2006, and 2007, and wrote a powerful book on the roots and reasons of the movement: *Chiapas: la razón ardiente*.⁶ That relationship can be traced at least as far as the rather unfortunate “Digna Rabia” campaign in 2009.

We hope that, in publishing this exchange, we can bring back into view a fresh, even if thirty-years old, reception of Ginzburg's work: one that reads the evidential paradigm not only as a contribution to historical method, but as a provocation to Marxism, revolutionary practice, and the recovery of suppressed knowledge. In returning to this exchange after Ginzburg's death, we also return to a question that remains alive: how to forge a method for understanding revolutionary practice that can rescue the traces, actions, and knowledges of those from below — “even the dead” — from the enemy who, as Benjamin warned, continues to win.

6 Gilly 2002

2 Letter to Adolfo Gilly

Subcomandante Marcos

22nd October 1994

To Adolfo Gilly

Mexico City

From Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN)

General Headquarters

Mountains of the Mexican Southeast, Chiapas

Mexico

To Güilly

From SupMarcos

I received the photocopies of Carlo Ginzburg's article, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" (apparently undated, though one senses it was written around 1978), together with an illegible dedication from you about something concerning the thinking of Old Antonio (and Heriberto as well),¹ likewise undated. Apologies for my repeated insistence on dates (and even times, if possible). The fact is that, upon coming down from the mountains, I encountered several surprises. One of them was discovering that the "theoreticians", revolutionaries of ten years ago, have now become melancholy apologists for neoliberalism. Well then, after my scolding (don't laugh; I know perfectly well that my reputation for being grumpy and rude continues to grow by the day), I shall turn to what occurred to me while reading the aforementioned article by this Ginzburg boy.

I remember reading T. S. Kuhn's book 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', I think in an edition from Fondo de Cultura Económica (the 'Breviarios' series?). Back then, there was that whole discussion about differences or similarities between the natural and social sciences, the whole 'epistemological break' business, the 'paradigms' and their 'rupture', and all the usual etceteras that, as always, had nothing to do with reality. Now I read that this fellow Carlo Ginzburg traces, through symptoms, in psychoanalysis, detective fiction, and late-19th-century aesthetics, the coincidences of a new paradigm: the evidential one. All of

¹ Old Antonio (*El Viejo Antonio*) is a legendary, wise Indigenous Mayan elder and a fictional character since the first communiqués of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN, or the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. These fragments were later reunited and published in 1998 in *Subcomandante Marcos Relatos del Viejo Antonio*, CIACH, Chiapas, Mexico. Heriberto, on the other hand, is a fictional child character also featured in Marcos tales from the Lacandon jungle. (All notes are from the translator)

that puts me to sleep. What would happen, for example, if ears, fingers, or fingernails (which so terrified late-19th-century aesthetic theorists, Giovanni Morelli *dixit*)² don't correspond to anyone—that is, they could belong to anyone?

I mean to say that this analysis, or “tracking” (“following the animal’s trail”, as Old Antonio used to say), requires a frame of reference, something against which to compare or contrast the clue that has been gathered. But what if there is nothing within that frame of reference against which the symptom can be contrasted? I mean, Old Antonio could tell the time and route of the *tepezcuintle*, the white-tailed deer, even the puma, because there existed a point of reference: a *tepezcuintle*, a deer, a lion. But what if not? What would Old Antonio have inferred had he come across the tyre tracks of one of those vehicles used by archbishops and drug traffickers?

In short, this so-called paradigm is tautological. Its underlying assumption is accepted as true (the frame of reference against which the “clues” are measured) and, therefore, the conclusion necessarily follows as true: the very method by which those “clues” are “gathered”.

The author seeks to escape “the fruitless opposition between ‘rationalism’ and ‘irrationalism’”. But for whose benefit? I mean, the supposed struggle between “rationalism” and “irrationalism” is merely a variant of an idealist position: the subject, the individual, as the foundation of knowledge. The dispute concerns only whether the subject is rational or irrational in the process of knowing. In reality, the problem in the sciences lies in the struggle between materialism and idealism. (Ah, the now-reviled Lenin! Ah, the forgotten *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*! Ah, Mach and Avenarius reborn! Ah, stubborn Vladimir Ilyich!) Just look at how the historical referent of this scientific “paradigm” is pushed into a corner in the final part of the text, merely to “complete” the analysis of the discovery of fingerprints and their use for police control. If I remember correctly, by the end of the nineteenth century the dominant social sciences found themselves rather disconcerted by a new theory laying claim to scientific status: the science of history. It had emerged through a critique of idealism (and through a political practice), as well as of the system of domination that sustained and provided the “foundations” for bourgeois science. A counteroffensive was necessary. The social classes had to be stripped of the historical agency that the irreverent theory of that equally irreverent German Jew had bestowed upon them, and that agency had to be returned to the guarantor of the system: the individual and the idea that moved him (whether rationally or irrationally). Is this not Morelli’s objective in seeking a method that would allow a work of art to be attributed to its individual creator? The search for details serves, ultimately, to reconstruct the individual who produced them. Pure science, isn’t it?

The resemblance to detective methods (find the criminal, single him out, detach him from

² Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891) was an Italian art historian whose method of attributing paintings through minute, often overlooked details (such as ears, hands, or fingernails) is extensively referenced in Ginzburg’s “evidential paradigm” piece. He argues that Morelli influenced thinkers such as Sigmund Freud.

the social context that makes him possible, and, above all, conceal behind his brilliant crime the “other” crime, that of exploitation) leads to the same outcome: the hunt for, and eventual discovery of, the “special” individual, the one who produces either a work of art or a criminal act. (*By the way, why don't you use this method to identify the “special” individual who engineered that criminal “work of art” known as the 21 August electoral process?*)³

Well, Ginzburg is difficult to follow. I imagine the intellectual fashion these days is this sort of *everythingology*: mixing all kinds of social “sciences” so as to make reality explicable within an incomplete theoretical framework which, in order to complete itself, must resort to other theoretical frameworks, even contradictory ones. This continual leap from “common-sense” knowledge to scientific knowledge to aesthetic products is one of the ways in which the dominant ideology exercises its domination within the sciences. Since “common sense” is allowed to leap into scientific knowledge, one might ask: what is the frame of reference of “common sense”? Is it not that of the dominant ideology? At times the author reaches the sublime: he refers to law and medicine as two “sciences”. Armed with such forceful arguments, he conveniently “forgets” the central problem: how are the clues read, and from what class position? If one can leap from hunters’ anecdotes to the science of history, then what are the “historical readings” of the clues that have been gathered? Should we not also question the method by which those clues are collected? Is there not a class position involved in selecting certain clues and not others? Is there not a relation between the reading of those clues and a political position? Is not this criterion for selecting and interpreting clues, ultimately, a class criterion?

For example, the author states that “relations between doctor and patient [...] have not changed much since the time of Hippocrates”.⁴ The relationship between doctor and patient? No! What is involved is something far more complex: the relationship between the medical institution and the body, together with all those “scientific” concepts such as “normality”. Examples? AIDS. Was it not regarded as little more than a curiosity so long as it affected only homosexuals? Did not the real “scientific” concern with AIDS begin when it started affecting heterosexuals? And did not interest increase further when it began to “strike” prominent and distinguished figures?

But one cannot sit down and argue with this Ginzburg fellow: he keeps jumping from science to aesthetics, to history, to medicine, to literature, to psychoanalysis. It is amusing, mind you. In the early years of the guerrilla we had the three laws of dialectics. The first was: “everything has to do with everything”, The second was: “one thing is one thing, and another thing is don't fuck with me”, The third was: “there is no problem big enough that it cannot be

3 21 August 1994 is a reference to Mexican general elections in which Ernesto Zedillo (PRI) was elected president, despite opposition groups, including the EZLN, questioned their legitimacy, showing that the broader political conditions under which they were conducted, including media bias, state patronage, and unequal access to political resources, precluded genuinely democratic competition.

4 Ginzburg 1986, p. 106

turned on its head". And the fourth (yes, I know I said there were three, but since they are dialectical laws one should not expect too much formality from them) was: "fuck the world and matter." (You have no idea how much it amuses me to imagine how 'conflicted' you will be when deciding whether to publish this part of the letter.) In short, this Ginzburg fellow is perfectly traceable to an individual... by his obscurantism.

Since we are speaking of "scientific" paradigms, consider the current one. Within what paradigm does the theory that underpins and justifies the dominant system fit? (For a long time now, the role of dominant social theories has been to "justify"—that is, to *render just*—the dominant system, i.e. the brutal process of dispossession of wealth, consciousness, and history that is beginning anew as the century draws to a close). For that is what neoliberalism is: the *novissima* theory of a new partition of the world ... and of its corners as well. You need not go as far as Italy and the neo-rise of the Right. Just look around here. Take the pearls that Salinas, Aspe, and Serra Puche hand out to us free of charge.⁵ Here the paradigm consists in this: if reality does not correspond to what the theory dictates and prescribes, then a new "reality" must be invented, the reality of mass media. Consider, for example, the myth of the country's "industrialisation" through NAFTA, and contrast it with the actual growth of micro-enterprises and Mexico's real place within the international division of labour: countries that produce raw materials—and cheap labour—and countries that are industrialised. The nineteenth century? Not at all, brother. The eve of the twenty-first!

There are at least two Mexicos (I say there are four, but let's not quarrel over one or two more; let's call it three, to split the difference). One is the Mexico of presidential reports, official speeches, major news broadcasts, commercial advertisements, and tourist promotions. The other is the Mexico that actually exists, the one that makes possible the unfortunate "confusion" of vehicles in Jalisco in May, the January uprising in Chiapas, the March of Colosio, the September of Ruiz Massieu, the October of ... who is next? The Mexico of 4 per cent, of 50%–26%–16%...⁶ Did you already know this? You did? Fine. But then why is it that the more celebratory the official discourse becomes, the more violent reality grows? No, I am not going to answer that. That is work for theorists, not for warriors. And the third Mexico? Well, it is the one that struggles ... I think.

One more thing. Here we encounter a serious problem for Morelli–Doyle⁷–Freud–Ginzburg–Güilly. Let us try to apply the "evidential" paradigm to Neo-Zapatism. To remain consistent with this "science," we must search for the individual who is the "author" of the plans, the leadership, the conception, and so forth. Let us suppose it is that long-nosed fellow beneath the ski mask ("and rather full of himself," say the macho types) who calls himself

5 Salinas, Aspe, and Serra Puche refer respectively to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Finance Minister Pedro Aspe Armella, and Trade Minister Jaime Serra Puche, the principal architects of Mexico's neoliberal reforms and the implementation of NAFTA in the early 1990s.

6 *The March of Colosio* and *the September of Ruiz Massieu* refer to the assassinations of PRI politician Luis Donaldo Colosio (March 1994) and PRI secretary-general José Francisco Ruiz Massieu (September 1994).

7 This is short for Arthur Conan Doyle, referenced in Ginzburg 1986.

“Marcos”. Let us gather clues from him: the obvious nose, the debatable eye colour, the crow’s feet, his clumsy way of walking and writing (believe me, they are one and the same), the lies or truths he tells, or that are told, about his past, and, of course, his fingernails (it is harder to draw conclusions from his ears).



P.S. This is out of place and does not belong here, but it is relevant, since it has to do with fingernails and so on:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARRYING ON

Standing before any mirror, become aware that you are the best of yourself.

Even so, something can always be saved:

a fingernail, for example...



Let us suppose that one succeeds in assembling a more or less complete image of the man behind the long-nosed ski mask (“and full of himself,” the macho types insist). Then comes the moment of comparing him against a frame of reference. Let me hazard a guess, on the basis of the clues, as to what happens in each case: In the Ministry of the Interior, they comb through the files of sympathisers of liberation theology, the yearbooks of the Ibero, ITAM, and UNAM, and, naturally, the reserve squad of the Monterrey football team. In the PRI, they sift through the address books of resentful, sidelined, or politically resurrected party members. In the CIA and FBI, they consult their lists of Cubans, Nicaraguans, Libyans, fedayeen, ETA members, and so on. On the Left, they search their memories. In intellectual circles, their grudges. In Mexican households, they look in the mirror. The result? “Marcos” can be anyone, or no one at all. He can be everybody and nobody. He does not exist; he is an unfinished invention, a model kit that each person assembles to his or her own taste. A man without a face is not necessarily a man whose face is covered. Above all, he is a man with an ordinary face, a face that tells us nothing, that leads nowhere. A useless face, merely the skeleton upon which to give shape to the long-nosed ski mask (“and full of himself,” the macho types reaffirm).

The same goes for the ski mask. I no longer know how many different—and contradictory—arguments I have offered for wearing it. Let me see: the cold, security, *anti-caudillismo*

(paradoxically enough), a tribute to Old Antonio's black god, aesthetic distinction, embarrassment at being ugly. Probably none of those arguments is true. The fact is that, now, the ski mask has become a symbol of rebellion. Only yesterday it was a symbol of criminality or terrorism. Why? Certainly not because we intended it to be.

(It is now 14:00 hours [according to your clocks]. I have just been informed of yet another incursion by a federal army patrol, this time on the side of the ruins of Toniná, in Ocosingo. We are no longer going to issue a denunciation. We are tired of it and, besides, we are going to end up like the shepherd crying, "Wolf! Wolf!" and eventually no one will believe us anymore...)

Now let us turn to a paradigm that has fallen out of use. We shall have to go to the wastepaper basket, retrieve that old and crumpled sheet called "The Science of History," Historical Materialism, and smooth it out once again. Why was it thrown away? Was it the moral hangover that followed the collapse of the socialist camp? A "tactical" retreat in the face of the overwhelming advance of the *Marine boys* and neoliberalism? The "end of history"? Did it go out of fashion along with the desire to struggle? Why is a revolution today so quickly relegated to the realm of utopias? What happened to them Güilly? Did they get tired? Bored? Did they sell out? Did they surrender? Was it not worth it? Is it no longer worth it? Or was it that this theory led them into a blind alley (at least for theorists) where you had to be consistent in practice? What happened to them, Güilly? It seems to me that cynicism is now the banner of the Left. "Realism," a columnist will correct me. "Realpolitik," another will add. Perhaps it turns out that the most elaborate theories were never more than convoluted reworkings of the old manuals. In the end, why am I telling you all this? All I meant to do was write that damned article I rashly promised you one wrong afternoon for the irregular *Vientos del Sur*,⁸ and then you go and put this article by this Ginzburg fellow (whose surname already carries its own penance) in my way. Then again, perhaps it was not you who sent it, but some other "Güilly." In any case, the aforementioned article is going to take a while, so don't wait up for it. In exchange, and in the meantime, I am sending you this charming letter, which you may use as filler for the absent section "Readers Erupt", a regrettable omission in the irreverent pages of *Vientos del Sur*.

All right, Güilly. Stay well find yourself an easier name to write, because at our checkpoints I have heard six different versions of it.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast,

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

Mexico, October 1994.

P.S. YES AFTER ALL. Very well, I shall begin to explain. We did not set out to do it. In reality, the only thing we have set out to do is change the world; everything else we have been

8 The journal Marcos refers to is *Viento del Sur*, published in Mexico between 1991 and 1997.

improvising as we went along. Our square-headed conception of the world and of revolution was left badly dented by its confrontation with the reality of Indigenous Chiapas. Out of those blows came something new — which does not mean “good” — what is now known as “Neo-Zapatism”.

P.S. NO AFTER ALL. Better wait a bit longer. The plane is coming again. Smile. It is 20:46, “south-eastern time”, as Tacho says.

3 Traces, omens, histories. Letter to the Subcomandante

Adolfo Gilly

Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City, 16 April 1995 (Easter Sunday)

To Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos,
Zapatista Army of National Liberation,
Mountains of the Mexican Southeast,
Chiapas, Mexico.

Comrade strategist,

The content of what follows — and the accidents of life and history, which are the same thing though they go by different names — will explain to you, in part at least, why this reply to your letter of 22 October has taken so long.

Since it has been delayed, it will be long.

It is therefore better to divide it into parts.

I

For reasons of exposition, I prefer to begin where your letter ends. You say at the end:

P.S. YES AFTER ALL. Very well, I shall begin to explain. We did not set out to do it. In reality, the only thing we have set out to do is change the world; everything else we have been improvising as we went along. Our square-headed conception of the world and of revolution was left badly dented by its confrontation with the reality of Indigenous Chiapas. Out of those blows came something new — which does not mean “good” — what is now known as “Neo-Zapatism”.

P.S. NO AFTER ALL. Better wait a bit longer. The plane is coming again. Smile. It is 20:46, “south-eastern time”, as Tacho says.

And how would your historical explanation have continued had the plane not arrived? We shall never know. As so many times before, history itself (life, experience, struggle, call it what you will), in the form of an aeroplane, came to interrupt your history: your account of the history of the EZLN. It did, however, leave you enough time to write seven densely packed pages beforehand. And here too, as so many times before, the plane – that is, their history —

was unable to cut short this other history that is our dialogue, the dialogue of those of us on this side of the famous line, often invisible but never erased, that divides the classes.

My trade (among others that are not relevant here) is that of historian, not sociologist or philosopher. It is with the working tools of that trade that I shall try to enter into the question. That is why I was interested in beginning with your postscript: it points to one of the crossroads where history is made, the place where ideas encounter experience and are tested by it, modified through it, and consolidated within it.

E.P. Thompson presents this term, human experience, as the indispensable link in the genesis of historical materialism as both a hypothesis and a method of inquiry:

Men and women also return as subjects, within this term- not as autonomous subjects, “free individuals”, but as persons experiencing their determinate productive situations and relationships, as needs and interests and as antagonisms, and then “handling” this experience within their consciousness and their culture (two other terms excluded by theoretical practice) in the most complex (yes, “relatively autonomous”) ways, and then (often but not always through the ensuing structures of class) acting upon their determinate situation in their turn.¹

In other words, what Thompson is telling us is that the historian works not only with the general categories of sociology or economics, but above all and before all else, with concrete human beings, whose unique and unrepeatable existences, whether as individuals or as human communities, give real life to those categories: modes of production, classes, structures, and so forth – without ever being reducible to them. If, in the name of those general categories, historians remove from history its true and only subject, *human beings* and their *lived experience*, they end up declaring history itself (that history in which our “square-headed conceptions” are cheerfully and mercilessly dented by the real human beings who make up communities and classes) to be a *process without a subject*.

Yet, it is at the level of experience that human beings live, and in living, without knowing it, make their own history. Historians working within the Marxist tradition, Thompson adds, with the concept of “experience”:

were led on to re-examine all those dense, complex and elaborated systems by which familial and social life is structured and social consciousness finds realisation and expression (systems which the very rigour of the discipline in Ricardo or in the Marx of *Capital* is designed to exclude): kinship, custom, the invisible and visible rules of social regulation, hegemony and deference, symbolic forms of domination and of resistance, religious faith and millenarian impulses, manners, law, institutions and ideologies-all – which, in their sum, comprise the “genetics” of the whole historical process, all of them

¹ Thompson 1978, p. 164

joined, at a certain point, in common human experience, which itself (as distinctive class experiences) exerts its pressure on the sum.²

And if those terms disappear from the horizon of our historical knowledge and inquiry, leaving behind only classes, modes of production, apparatuses, structures, and superstructures, then what vanishes from our sight, Thompson rightly argues is,

Not only substantive knowledge, but also the very vocabularies of the human project – compassion, greed, love, pride, self-sacrifice, loyalty, treason, calumny [...] I am sorry to disappoint those practitioners who suppose that all that it is necessary to know about history can be constructed from a conceptual Meccano set.³

Unlike the natural sciences and certain “social sciences” or forms of social knowledge (sociology, politics, economics), historical knowledge, “the craft of history”, as Luis González would have called it, possesses its own methodological rigour and its own “discourse of proof”. Once, again, I turn to Thompson, not as an appeal to authority, but because I would be incapable of expressing better what has been my own practice in this craft:

The disciplined historical discourse of the proof consists in a dialogue between concept and evidence, a dialogue conducted by successive hypotheses, on the one hand, and empirical research on the other. The interrogator is historical logic; the interrogative a hypothesis (for example, as to the way in which different phenomena acted upon each other); the respondent is the evidence, with its determinate properties. [...] But it is to say that this logic does not disclose itself involuntarily; that the discipline requires arduous preparation; and that three thousand years of practice have taught us something. And it is to say that it is this logic which constitutes the discipline’s ultimate court of appeal: *not*, please note, “the evidence”, by itself, but the evidence interrogated thus.⁴

Everything I have said thus far bears on, and is connected to, a passage from the August 1982 preface to *The Interrupted Revolution*⁵ (written before I had read the Thompson I mentioned above), which you chose to include in a brief letter you sent me on 10 June 1994:

The horizon is cloudy, my dear Güily. But hope leaps, like hares, imagination, and the Zapatistas, where one least expects it. As someone once said: “Historical imagination is a loyal and indispensable servant of truth that has nothing in common with fantasy or caprice. It must be acquired in disciplines that allow us to grasp human beings, the subjects of history, as individuals, classes, and societies. These disciplines are none

2 Thompson 1978, p. 170-1

3 Thompson 1978, p. 167.

4 Thompson 1978, p. 39

5 Gilly 1982, Prologue to new edition

other than *rigor* of method and research, *love* of life, and practical *experience* of the social struggles in which the cloth of history is continually being woven and torn. (Mind you, it was not Krauze who said that.)⁶

If we can take this as our common point of departure, then we may proceed to consider Carlo Ginzburg and his evidential paradigm as a methodological proposal.

II

You ask me who Ginzburg is. One of the problems with living up in the mountains is that one becomes disconnected from certain things. One becomes connected, it is true, to other things that are sometimes more significant, from which one acquires forms of knowledge and skills that academia will never value, yet which serve to understand far better worlds about which that same academia has not the slightest idea, even though it never ceases discoursing about them. You know what I mean, and so do Tacho and Moisés.⁷ What follows draws on something I wrote about Ginzburg years ago.⁸

Carlo Ginzburg is an Italian historian, born in Turin in 1939. His father, a Jew of Russian origin, lost his university chair after refusing to swear loyalty to fascism. He took part in the Resistance and was murdered by the Nazis in prison in 1944. Ginzburg has taught at the University of Bologna and at the University of California, Los Angeles. His now classic book is *The Cheese and the Worms*,⁹ translated into many languages, Spanish among them.

In this work, through a study of the records of an Inquisition trial, Ginzburg reconstructs the worldview of a miller from Friuli, Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio. Born in 1532, Menocchio was first tried at the age of fifty-two and, after a second trial, was burned at the stake as a heretic sometime between 1600 and 1601.

In his defence before the inquisitors, the miller gives a lengthy account of his beliefs, what he considers the correct interpretation of Christian teachings on the creation of the world, on body and soul, and on many other matters. What emerges, as Ginzburg gradually demonstrates, is an active combination of religious dogmas inherited from Christianity and ancient peasant myths that were both egalitarian and naively materialist: a thorough reworking of the religious beliefs transmitted by learned culture and transformed into a popular cosmology imbued with agrarian naturalism.

By studying and comparing the two heresy trials conducted against Menocchio fifteen years apart, Ginzburg traces “his thoughts and feelings, his fantasies and aspirations,” as they appear reflected in his lengthy statements before the judges. In this way he seeks to overcome, or get

6 Subcomandante Marcos to Gilly, 1994. Marcos refers here to the Mexican liberal historian Enrique Krauze.

7 Tacho and Moisés are other EZLN commanders.

8 Gilly 1981.

9 Ginzburg 1976

round, the obstacle (I assume by applying your third law of dialectics, “there is no problem big enough that it cannot be turned on its head”) posed, in the study and understanding of the thoughts and behaviour of the dominated classes of the past, by the well-known fact that they leave no written testimony of their culture and beliefs. Ginzburg attempts to provide an answer to:

the relationship between the culture of the subordinate classes and that of the dominant classes. To what degree is the first, in fact, subordinate to the second? And, in what measure does lower class culture express a partially independent content? Is it possible to speak of reciprocal movement between the two levels of culture?

Historians have approached questions such as these only recently and with a certain diffidence. Undoubtedly, this is due in part to the widespread persistence of an aristocratic conception of culture. Too often, original ideas or beliefs have been considered by definition to be a product of the upper classes, and their diffusion among the subordinate classes a mechanical fact of little or no interest. At best, what is noted is the “decay” and the “distortion” experienced by those ideas or beliefs in the course of their transmission. But the diffidence of historians has another, more understandable, reason of a methodological rather than an ideological order. In contrast to anthropologists and students of popular traditions, historians obviously begin at a great disadvantage. Even today the culture of the subordinate class is largely oral, and it was even more so in centuries past. Since historians are unable to converse with the peasants of the sixteenth century (and, in any case, there is no guarantee that they would understand them), they must depend almost entirely on written sources (and possibly archaeological evidence). These are doubly indirect for they are *written*, and written in general by individuals who were more or less openly attached to the dominant culture. This means that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries. At the very outset this is enough to discourage attempts at such research.¹⁰

And yet, as Ginzburg is concerned to show immediately afterwards, the situation is not altogether hopeless. Taking his cue from Bakhtin’s study of the relations between Rabelais and the popular culture of his time, Ginzburg argues that, alongside a cultural dichotomy, there must also have existed “a circular, reciprocal influence between the cultures of subordinate and ruling classes that was especially intense in the first half of the sixteenth century”.

It is from this hypothesis that his analysis of Menocchio’s confessions begins: a fascinating journey through the words and dreams of the Friulian miller, the few books he read, the many discussions he had with his village and regional neighbours — for people came

¹⁰ Ginzburg 1976, Preface

from everywhere to the mills to grind their wheat, and the mills thus became centres for the exchange of popular ideas — all of this reflected in his meticulous arguments and in the statements made by witnesses before the astonished ecclesiastical judges, who found themselves forced to argue with a miller who, without knowing it, was calling into question the immortality of the soul and the eternity of God.

Do not tell me that, with your own lived experience in between, the scene does not strike you as at once imaginable, familiar, and amusing. The evidential paradigm, which I hope finally to reach in this letter, is nothing more than a method for arriving, as a historian, at this material reality that does not reveal itself by itself.

The method itself, as Ginzburg seeks to show in the essay I sent you, comes from the knowledges of the subaltern classes, so often dismissed by those who accept as knowledge only those forms of knowledge and those methods that have been formalised and sanctioned by the academic community or by the dominant classes. But, as Kuhn argues in the book you mention, scientific revolutions occur through ruptures with accepted paradigms and the formulation of new ones, not through the simple accumulation of knowledge within an old paradigm. It is in this way that knowledge expands into new territories and along new paths (and so do other revolutions, an old voice inside me tells me, though I silence it for now).

III

In a relatively recent short book, *The Judge and the Historian*,¹¹ Carlo Ginzburg once again turns to his methods of inquiry in order to dismantle the case brought by the Italian courts against Adriano Sofri, former leader of the now-defunct revolutionary organisation *Lotta Continua*. Sofri was accused in 1988, sixteen years after the event, of having been the mastermind behind the murder of police commissioner Luigi Calabresi, committed on 17 May 1972.

Calabresi had led the interrogation of the anarchist railway worker Pino Pinelli, who had been arrested on 14 December 1969, at the height of a season of major Italian strikes. Three days later, Pinelli was found dead, lying in the courtyard of the police station, where he had supposedly fallen “accidentally” from the window of Calabresi’s office, the place where the interrogations were conducted.

Adriano Sofri was sentenced in the first instance in May 1990 to twenty-two years in prison. As he had announced when proceedings were first brought against him, he refused to appeal, reiterating that the trial was a farce. Carlo Ginzburg, who did not share Sofri’s decision, explains in the preface to his book:

There were those who considered his decision to be an unjustified form of pressure

¹¹ Ginzburg 1991

on the judges presiding over the lower-court trial. Those who know Sofri well, on the other hand, saw in this decision a distinct personality trait: an elevated self-image, the certainty of his own innocence, and an intolerance of compromise. By deciding to renounce his right to appeal, he has lost the right to defend his innocence in the trial about to be held in a higher court. I am writing on the eve of the second trial, prompted by the pain caused by an unjust conviction weighing on my friend, and by my wish to persuade others of his innocence.¹²

The appellate court upheld the sentence in July 1991. After various vicissitudes, in October 1992 the Court of Cassation, in a procedure similar to what in Mexico would be a *juicio de amparo*, annulled that ruling, citing, among other reasons, a “set of violations of procedural law and deficiencies and flaws in the grounds of the judgement”.¹³ The historian’s effort to dismantle the first judgement piece by piece, and to show its inconsistency and its perversions of method and reasoning, had not been in vain.

Have I strayed too far from our subject? I think not, if one takes into account the proceedings opened against those accused of belonging to the EZLN, alongside which the Italian frame-up would look like a model of legal logic and judicial probity. With this recent case, I also wanted to answer some of your other questions about Ginzburg.

In this same book, Ginzburg refers back to earlier essays — among them, the one that prompted this exchange — and says that he has always been intrigued by the “intricate and ambiguous relations between the judge and the historian”. This led him to inquire into “the implications – both methodological and (in a broader sense) political – of a series of features common to both professions: evidence, proof and testimony”.¹⁴ And, at this point he returns to the notion of “proof”, where his reflections intersect with Thompson’s:

For many historians, the notion of proof is out of fashion: like that of truth, to which it is bound by a very solid historical (and therefore unnecessary) link. We know perfectly well that every representation is constructed in accordance with a predetermined code – to gain direct access to historical reality (or reality itself, for that matter) is impossible, by definition. To infer from this fact, however, that reality is unknowable is to fall into a lazily radical form of scepticism, at once unsustainable in existential terms and inconsistent in logical terms — as we know full well, the fundamental decision of the sceptic is not subjected to the methodological doubt he claims to profess.

¹² Ginzburg 1991, p. 4

¹³ The conviction was upheld on appeal in 1991, annulled by the Court of Cassation in 1992 (as mentioned by Gilly). This was later followed by an acquittal in 1993, a renewed conviction in 1995, and final confirmation by the Court of Cassation in 1997. A further retrial attempt failed in 2000, and in 2003 the European Court of Human Rights declared Sofri’s appeal inadmissible. Sofri, who always denied guilt and became the focus of a wide campaign for clemency, served the latter part of his sentence under house arrest for medical reasons; the sentence expired in January 2012.

¹⁴ Guinzburg 1991, p.4

For me, and for many others, the notions of ‘proof’ and ‘truth’ are, rather, integral parts of the historian’s profession.¹⁵

But truth — always relative and provisional — and the system of proofs by which it is sustained do not reveal themselves directly. “A historian does not roam about at random through the past, like a ragman in search of bric-a-brac; rather he sets out with a specific plan in mind, a problem to solve, a working hypothesis to test. [...] A daunting task, in truth. Because to describe what one sees is one thing; but to see that which must be described, that is the hard part” Lucien Febvre maintains, in a passage quoted by Ginzburg. But, Ginzburg adds, the question is not only to have a precise plan, a hypothesis to verify:

The point is quite different: the quality of the hypotheses developed. These hypotheses must (a) be endowed with considerable explanatory power; and should they be contradicted by the known facts, they must (b) be modified or even abandoned entirely. If this last clause is ignored, the risk of slipping into error (juridical or historical) is unavoidable.¹⁶

Of course, this latter procedure is not the exclusive preserve of the historian or the scientist, but belongs to any rational and intelligent thought. It is what one does, for example, when Indigenous Chiapas reality — or another reality just as forceful, lived through experience — “dents” the working hypotheses with which one had set out to approach it. But for this to happen, what is required is the vital decision to confront those hypotheses with the reality to which they refer, and the intellectual capacity, all the more arduous because it is one of the forms of will, to modify them accordingly.

The point of departure, however, is decisive: without the guidance of a grounded, fertile, solid, and at the same time open hypothesis, one gets nowhere:

In other words, every historical research supposes that the inquiry has a direction at the very first step. In the beginning, there must be the guiding spirit. [...] Even when he has settled his itinerary, the explorer is well aware that he will not follow it exactly. Without it, however, he would risk wandering perpetually at random.¹⁷

Hypotheses that lead nowhere are useless, or lead only to a painful discursive wandering (in a word, to charlatany). So too are hypotheses that regard themselves as proven in advance and cut the evidence to fit their preconceptions; or hypotheses that refuse to measure themselves against empirical evidence as part of their discourse of proof, and confront themselves only, in a play of shadows, with other opposing hypotheses constructed in the same way. These variants are common in the discourse and practices of academic bureaucracy, and in those

15 Guinzburg 1991, p. 16-17

16 Ginzburg 1991, p. 36

17 Bloch 1992, p. 54

of its unruly, ill-bred daughter: university politicking, whatever its political stripe. For both discourses and practices, some of us feel only contempt.

IV

From *The Cheese and the Worms* to *Myths, Emblems, Clues* — the book to which “Signs”, the essay I sent you, belongs — Ginzburg is concerned, as I said above, with finding the path, the method, the ways to unravel the thought of the subaltern classes, of the dominated, of the voiceless, of those from below. As we have seen, his proposal seeks to establish a mediation in the dialogue between hypotheses and evidence to which E.P. Thompson refers.

Those of us who, as historians or in other crafts of life, have been educated in the school of Marx have always been troubled by this problem. In the already cited preface to *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg notes:

It is significant that the very possibility of research of this kind has been ruled out *a priori* by those who, like François Furet, have maintained that the reintegration of the subordinate classes into general history can only be accomplished through “number and anonymity,” by means of demography and sociology, “the quantitative study of past societies.” Although the lower classes are no longer ignored by historians, they seem condemned, nevertheless, to remain “silent”.¹⁸

Philosophers set to discourse on history are drawn towards similar considerations when they fail to take into account the specificity of the methods and proofs proper to each discipline, and when they share the obsession with declaring history a “science” and assimilating it to the “social sciences”. Thus Carlos Pereyra tells us:

The progressive maturation of the social sciences and the integration of history into them accompany the abandonment of a certain tradition for which history counted as a literary genre.¹⁹

As a curious counterpoint from another school, whose Italian Marxist roots are quite different from those of Pereyra’s Marxism, Carlo Ginzburg remarks in passing in *The Judge and the Historian*:

The ties between history and law have always been close — they date back two thousand five hundred years, to the emergence in Greece of the literary genre that we call ‘history’.²⁰

18 Ginzburg 1976, p. 25

19 Pereyra 1980, p. 25

20 Ginzburg 1991, p. 12

I have no doubt as to which of the two criteria Old Antonio's opinion would incline, if we could ask him about this dispute. Having been formed in the school of "Marxism-as-critique" (whose roots are already present in the young Marx) and not in that of "Marxism-as-science" — which, in my view, leads to a discourse of power that conceives itself as Marxism — my opinion, born of study and experience, leads me, of course, to agree that without narration, and a narration that is truthful, one cannot speak of history.

I first read Ginzburg around 1980 in Milan. I was concerned then with these same problems: how to tell the history of the dominated, without which the known and recorded history of the dominators lacks substance. In his reflections I found the same resonances. That year, in Mexico, I had presented "History as Critique or as Discourse of Power", a text that appears in the aforementioned collection (*History: What For?*).²¹ Hidden behind that title was the idea of the two Marxisms, though, at the time, I did not know it. I ended that essay with the following paragraphs, and apologise for quoting them at such length:

No one will explain an epoch and a society, nor those who, by dominating within them, stamp them with the seal of their ideas and their acts, unless they first explain how these people dominate (and how they believe they do so), and how the dominated relate to one another, subordinate themselves, and, at the same time, resist. Here one reaches an apparently insurmountable difficulty, because in order to make the voice of the dominated heard, one has to listen to it. And they do not speak in history, but only among themselves, and that is not written down. And, even when they do come to speak, it is only their upper layer that speaks and writes for all: their leaders, their intellectuals. The historian, the chronicler himself, must then confront the insoluble task of transmitting the voice, the feelings, the inner communication of that vast, lower, subordinated layer from which he does not come, or from which he has separated himself — for otherwise he too would not have his voice as historian or chronicler.

The aporia is resolved by understanding action, because those from below, being labour power, speak through their acts and explain their scant words through their deeds and works, not the other way round. One must therefore read their collective and individual actions, and understand or intuit why a railway engine driver in Bologna, at the beginning of this century, hurled a runaway locomotive against a luxury train: "*forse una rabbia antica, generazioni senza nome che urlarono vendetta, gli accecarono il cuore...*"²² in order to touch the same underlying rationality, the same ancient force that raised and set in motion the armies of Spartacus, the Northern Division, or the Salvadoran insurrection.

It will thus be possible to interpret and closely reproduce, in the passion that moves

²¹ Gilly 1980

²² "perhaps an ancient rage, nameless generations crying out for vengeance, blinded his heart..." In Italian in the original, this is from *La locomotiva*, by Francesco Guccini.

what is written or narrated, the inner movement of the relations between human beings and their infinite variants and transformations. For the secret of history is not to be sought in the fixity of the works in which past labour is crystallised, but in the ceaseless movement in which living labour flows and exists.

You can understand why I was enthused by the work of someone who was walking along those same paths, and who showed that he knew Italian workers and Italian rebellions, just as I too believe I learned to know them in life before I knew them in books.

V

The handwritten dedication that you could not decipher on the photocopy of Carlo Ginzburg's essay that I sent you to read – almost word for word, since I am writing from memory: “With great affection, here is this theorisation of Old Antonio's thought (and Heriberto's) (and yours, at times...)” Indeed, the essay is from 1979. The photocopy you received is taken from Aldo Gargani's collection, *Crisis de la razón (Nuevos modelos entre la relación entre saber y actividad humana)*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico, 1983.

In “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm”,²³ through a complex construction, Ginzburg continues his tenacious effort to give value to the instruments of inquiry and knowledge built through the experience, thought, and practices of the subaltern classes, of “those from below”: instruments underestimated, devalued, ignored, or persecuted — except when appropriated, while their origins are denied — by the formalised knowledge of the dominant classes, that is, by the dominant forms of knowledge and knowing.

To illustrate the organised assault against those forms of knowledge, especially from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards, Carlo Ginzburg turns to what, in his view, is the oldest form of knowledge and method of inquiry:

Man has been a hunter for thousands of years. In the course of countless chases he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odours. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or in a prairie with its hidden dangers'.

This rich storehouse of knowledge has been passed down by hunters over the generations. In the absence of verbal documentation to supplement rock paintings and artifacts, we can turn to folklore, which transmits an echo, though dim and distorted, of the knowledge accumulated by those remote hunters. An oriental fable that circulated among Kirghiz, Tartars, Jews, Turks, and others relates the story of three brothers who

23 Ginzburg 1986

meet a man who has lost a camel or, in variant versions, a horse. They describe it for him without hesitation: it is white, blinded in one eye, and carries two goat-skins on its back, one full of wine, the other of oil. Then they have seen it? No, they have not. So they are accused of stealing and brought to trial. For the brothers, this is a moment of triumph: they demonstrate in a flash how, by means of myriad small clues, they could reconstruct the appearance of an animal on which they have never laid eyes.

Obviously, the three brothers are repositories of some sort of venatic lore, even if they are not necessarily hunters. This knowledge is characterized by the ability to 'construct from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly, so, the data is always arranged by the observer in such a way as to produce a narrative sequence, which could be expressed most simply as "someone passed this way." Perhaps the actual idea of narration (as distinct from charms, exorcisms, or invocation) may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks.²⁴

This is a model of knowledge born directly of experience, transmitted and acquired, which, for millennia (and still today, I would venture to say), has been the vast repository of the knowledges of the immense majority of humanity: those who "know nothing", yet are feared by those who "know everything". The expansion of capital and of its market (qualitatively different from ancient markets, even if heir to them) tends violently to tear apart those knowledges and to block access to their sources, which lie in that immeasurable common domain, undivided by fences or barbed wire, of human beings and nature. For official knowledge, for its function of classification, ordering, and domination, those knowledges become secret, hostile, subversive, and finally irrational.

Western Reason expels other, diverse and different reasons from the kingdom of reason; it expels the Other and declares both its religion and its reason to be superstition. The world is divided into "people of reason" and "natives": the former masters of power, knowledge, wealth, and pleasures; the latter subjected to obedience, ignorance, dispossession, and suffering. An immense and millennia-old reserve of knowledges and forms of understanding is destroyed and annihilated, together with the human beings who are their bearers, together with the nature that is their nourishing source.

More and more, the hunter's knowledge is relegated to the realm of marvels and curiosities, while infrared beams begin to compete with Old Antonio's eye in deciphering the secrets and pathways of the jungle. This is not a collaboration or an integration of knowledges; it becomes a real struggle of life and death.

You describe very well how Old Antonio knew how to "track the animal", and how he "could know the time and route of the *tepezcuintle*, the white-tailed deer, even the puma". True, he

²⁴ Ginzburg 1991, p. 102-3

had to have a referent, just like the three brothers in the Eastern tale. But every inquiry, every act of “tracking” or “trailing”, necessarily proceeds from the known to the unknown: not by reducing the unknown to the known, but, on the contrary, by investigating the new on the basis of what is already known.

I know that, in this sphere, Old Antonio’s ancient knowledge of the jungle was both reasonable and exact. “Had he found the tracks of one of those cars used by archbishops and drug traffickers”, as you say, his good sense would immediately have led him to deduce that neither a puma, nor a *tepezcuintle*, nor a tapir had passed that way. He would then have set about identifying the new animal, just as I am sure that in the Montes Azules the tracks of armoured vehicles have already been identified: the time of their passage, whether they are fresh or old, the amount of load they carry, and the unmistakable traces of the military patrols which, however much their commanders may tell them otherwise, leave behind cans of every kind and other rubbish. For the ancient art of “tracking”, lodged in that vast zone of knowledge situated between reflex and conscious thought, can be as adaptable to diverse ends as modern computers.

That art, used by the Vietnamese, the Zapatistas, and other fighting species, still lives on across the fields and jungles of the planet. How would the human beings of those lands live without it? In Argentina, during the wars of independence and the civil wars that followed, there was an indispensable figure in every army: not simply the guide, but the tracker, the one who knew how to “read the trail”, the one who, where no one else saw anything, discovered who had passed that way, and when. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento immortalised him in *Facundo*. In Guatemala, I knew that figure. He was the guide who led our patrol unerringly towards the distant camp of Las Orquídeas, through a dense thicket where almost no one knew how to read directions or signs, and where for days on end one could not glimpse even the tiniest patch of sky. His name was Tamagaz; perhaps, thirty years later, it still is. This is not a bad place to remember him.

To reduce the unknown to the known, by contrast, and to declare that a puma wearing giant *huaraches*²⁵ had passed that way — because the tracks of the *huaraches* reproduced the pattern of automobile tyres — is something Old Antonio would never have done, though certain brilliant academic researchers often do it in their respective disciplines. My friend Daniel Nugent, from Tucson, Arizona, reports in a mocking recent article a delightful disquisition on “the Zapatista presence on the Internet” and the “hundreds of screens of discussion about whether Marcos is or is not a priest”. Moreover, Nugent goes on to quote, “in Marcos’s prose one senses an expertise and familiarity with computer-based text, if not directly with e-mail”. I have no doubt that the Zapatista invasion of the Internet is a clue to their impact on the young people who debate in that space. But to leap from there to other conclusions is a sin of arrogance into which Old Antonio would never have fallen.

25 A *huarache* is a traditional Indigenous Mexican sandal. In modern usage, its sole might be cut from discarded car tyres.

VI

Carlo Ginzburg seeks to recover those knowledges for history, removing them from the conceptual purgatory of “irrationalism” to which they have been consigned by formalised science. This recovery is at the same time a restoration of the figures, lives, and thought of their bearers: the forgotten, the denied, those who have always been expelled. His endeavour has materialist roots, if one wishes to call them that. In my view, it has little or nothing to do with the dispute between materialism and idealism; nor, as he says in the final paragraph of his text, with a vindication of “the suprasensible intuition of the various nineteenth- and twentieth-century irrationalisms”.²⁶ On the contrary, it rises up against the attempt to confine among those irrationalisms forms of human reason that are neither limited nor reducible to those of Western rationality. It is an old endeavour, nourished by a rebellious, open rationality, among whose ancestors are William Blake and Walter Benjamin. This thought can be boxed in as “idealism”. But, then, the discussion ends there, and classification occupies its place.

Classification is necessary as an instrument for thinking reality. But it can also become an instrument for locating and dominating human beings. In his essay, Ginzburg cites a classic case: the Western recovery of the classificatory knowledge of the Bengalis by the British colonisers for policing purposes. Examples could be multiplied. All of them form part of a dispute over knowledge which is, in the final instance, a struggle between the dominated and the dominators.

Ginzburg recalls that the constitution of the modern bourgeois state was accompanied, in the field of knowledge, by a systematic struggle against the various forms of evidential knowledge. Medicine, anatomical knowledge, but also knowledge through symptoms, that is, through clues, was socially recognised. The connoisseur of works of art occupied an intermediate position. But other forms:

more closely tied to daily life, actually remained outside. The ability to identify a defective horse by the condition of his hocks, an impending storm by sudden changes in the wind, a hostile intention in a sudden change of expression, was certainly not to be learned from a farrier’s manual or meteorological or psychological treatises. Knowledge of this sort in each instance was richer than any written codification; it was learned not from books but from the living voice, from gestures and glances; it was based on subtleties impossible to formalize, which often could not even be translated into words; it constituted the patrimony, partly unitary, partly diversified, of men and women from all social classes. These insights were bound by a subtle relationship: they had all originated in concrete experience. *The force behind this knowledge resided in this concreteness, but so did its limitation - the inability to make use of the powerful and terrible weapon of abstraction.*²⁷

26 Ginzburg 1986, p. 125

27 Ginzburg 1986, p. 114-5, emphasis added by AG

(Do you remember the aphorism from Aguascalientes: “Only the Zapatistas know whether or not it is going to rain in this jungle”? It was, do not doubt it, a legitimate dispute over knowledges and powers. The *Weather Report* is the formalised version of that knowledge. But, on south-eastern time, it is better to trust Old Antonio’s knowledges. That is why the people from Televisa do not like him.)

Immediately afterwards, Ginzburg continues:

Written culture had for a considerable period of time attempted to give a precise verbal formulation for this body of local knowledge that was without origin, memory, or history. By and large, the results were dull and impoverished. Just think of the abyss separating the schematic rigidity of the physiognomy treatises from the flexible and rigorous insight of a lover or a horse trader or a card shark. Only in the case of medicine, perhaps, had the written codification of conjectural knowledge resulted in real enrichment (although the history of the relationship between learned and popular medicine remains to be written).

In the course of the eighteenth century the situation changed. An out-and-out cultural offensive by the bourgeoisie appropriated for itself much of the knowledge, conjectural and nonconjectural alike, of artisans and peasants, codifying it and thereby intensifying a gigantic process of acculturation begun earlier (obviously in a different guise) by the Counter-Reformation. The *Encyclopédie*, naturally, is the symbol and chief instrument in this offensive.²⁸

In these considerations, Ginzburg refers explicitly to Michel Foucault’s *Microphysics of Power*. The struggle over knowledges is a struggle over domination. Not long ago, reading another author — it was not Krauze either — I came across the following quotation from Foucault’s *The Order of Discourse*:

discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle.²⁹

The same is true of knowledges and of knowledge. The offensive has not ended; rather, it is at its height. In industry, for example, Taylorism was — and remains — an enterprise for expropriating the knowledges of the artisan and the skilled worker, in order to codify and regulate labour in times and motions, and to reduce “dead times” or the “pores in the productive process”: that is, the infinitesimal dispute over, and appropriation of, time by each worker. Microelectronics came to reinforce this offensive from multiple positions. Digitised machines began by expropriating, in their programs, the skills of specialised operators, imposing them as uniform program standards that any non-specialised worker, that is, one

28 Ginzburg 1986, p. 115

29 Foucault 1981, p. 52

without the expropriated knowledges, could operate.

It is true that other practical knowledges, not yet expropriated, arose in the interstices of labour and of experience with the new machines. But this is a law of life and of living labour which the dominant classes, owners of dead labour, will never be able either to evade or to expropriate. Human experience is infinite, multiform, and always alive. Rather than compare it with the image of *progress*, so dear to the bourgeoisie, to positivists, and to certain classificatory leftists, I prefer to liken it to *foliage* and the *climbing vine*. Neither metaphor is neutral: each directs inquiry towards different fields of search and different methods of investigation.

VII

I have never shared the contempt for formalised knowledge, nor the anti-intellectualism, of certain communist bureaucrats, some Marxist-Leninists, and particular revolutionary sects, although I have had to live with people who took refuge in those feelings, where they sheltered both their ignorance and their lazy refusal to learn. I never saw anti-intellectualism among real workers, though I did see it in those “proletarianised” or “proletarianising” specimens who for so long paraded their arrogance and their lack of culture through the Left, through its sects and parties, and even through the universities — many are still there, though they now practise better-dressed fashions, and not so badly paid ones.

I learned, instead, to recognise the investigative and explanatory capacity of non-formalised knowledges and forms of understanding among the workers with whom, for many years, I was able to share homes, days, books, labour, rest, and struggles — in other words, the good old fabric of everyday life. Forgive me for speaking about myself. I do so only sometimes, but, here, I want to speak of experience.

Argentine workers taught me the art of assessing when to go, or not to go, into a strike, a stoppage, or other collective actions – which does not mean that, in practising that art, one will not put one’s foot in it; when, how, and with whom to negotiate; what to say, and how, in an assembly or a meeting; or, in other words, what the codes are, what the words are, what the ways and tones are through which, in the real universe of labour, we understand one another, come together, or distance ourselves from one another. In a word, we organise ourselves: *we do*, not the laws and regulations of existing institutions.

That art, born of the experience of a solid and diverse class, is entirely different, even when many might not know it, from university politicking or from internal disputes within political parties integrated into state institutions: in Mexico, for example, the PRI, the PAN, the PRD, or the PMS. I confirmed this later, I believe, living with Bolivian miners, Chilean steelworkers, Peruvian textile workers, Cuban workers, Guatemalan peasants and rebel soldiers, Mexican prisoners, electricians, and students. Living life with them, I said — not studying them as a

visitor, an anthropologist, or through fieldwork, tasks I do not disdain, but which were not mine.

On that long itinerary I learned to guide myself by clues, to listen to the knowledges born of experience of my own Old Antonios (old Juan, a metalworker from Buenos Aires whose real name is José Lungarzo, is one of them, though neither the only one nor the last) and to understand and value their language, just as they understood and valued mine.

(Around January 1960, I went to tell Paulino, the Bolivian miners' leader near whom I was living, that I had to leave for another country. "Don't go, brother," he kept saying to me as we drank chicha, the sacred drink of maize. "We need you here. Stay with us; we'll give you a house and food, you won't lack what you need to live." I can still see him. Paulino was a Trotskyist, but when Carnival approached, he would put on his devil's mask and, for several weeks, go off in the evenings to rehearse the Diablada dance for when the festival arrived.)

Although, from a very young age, university and literature had given me a formalised knowledge I never had reason to repudiate, that knowledge alone could not keep me from losing my way along those paths. For that, I had to acquire other knowledges from other teachers. These are the ones who gave me the human dimension of history. Believe me, it was from the combination of both forms of knowledge that there emerged the method with which I wrote *The Interrupted Revolution* in prison: that small book which irritates the academy because, besides using the formalised knowledge it transmits, it rests, without saying so, on an experience to which its conspicuous members deny any cognitive value whatsoever. That is what you detected in the preface, and for that I thank you. After this personal interlude — though not so personal — I return to my argument.

VII

If history speaks of human beings, it speaks of the singular and the unrepeatable; and it also speaks of correlations, tendencies, regularities — what some call "laws". Between these two orders stretches what Ginzburg calls "the vast territory of conjectural knowledge", in which, he tells us, the Greeks placed "doctors, historians, politicians, potters, carpenters, sailors, hunters, fishermen, women", and others. This knowledge, grounded in experience, does not deny quantification or classification. Rather, when it has them at its disposal, it possesses firmer bases from which to reach the singular, the individual, chance as a constant ingredient of history.

Ginzburg's endeavour is akin to Thompson's in seeking to show the specificity of historical knowledge and of its methods. He speaks to us of the transformations undergone, since the Greeks and over the course of the centuries, by the notions of "rigour" and "science", and continues:

Obviously, the decisive point is constituted by the appearance of a scientific paradigm

based on Galilean physics, but one which turned out to be more durable than it. Even if modern physics cannot call itself “Galilean” (although it has not rejected Galileo), his epistemological and even symbolic significance for science in general has remained intact.

It should be clear by now that the group of disciplines which we have called evidential and conjectural (medicine included) are totally unrelated to the scientific criteria that can be claimed for the Galilean paradigm. In fact, they are highly qualitative disciplines, in which the object is the study of individual cases, situations, and documents, precisely because they are individual, and for this reason get results that have an unsuppressible speculative margin: just think of the importance of conjecture (the term itself originates in divination) in medicine or in philology, and in divining. Galilean science, which could have taken as its own the Scholastic motto *individuum est ineffabile* (“We cannot speak about what is individual”), is endowed with totally different characteristics. Mathematics and the empirical method implied, respectively, quantification and the repetition of phenomena, while the individualizing perspective by definition excluded the latter and admitted the former only as mere instrument. All this explains why history never became a Galilean science. It was during the seventeenth century, in fact, that the grafting of antiquarian methods to historiography indirectly revealed the remote conjectural origins of the latter, hidden for centuries.

This original feature has not changed despite the ever-closer links between history and the social sciences. History has stayed a social science *sui generis*, forever tied to the concrete. Even if the historian is sometimes obliged to refer back, explicitly or implicitly, to a sequence of comparable phenomena, the cognitive strategy, as well as the codes by which he expresses himself, remain intrinsically individualizing (although the individual case may be a social group or an entire society). In this respect the historian is like the physician who uses nosographical tables to analyze the specific sickness in a patient. As with the physician’s, historical knowledge is indirect, presumptive, conjectural.³⁰

At this point, our author refers us to several pages of Marc Bloch. I take from him just a few paragraphs:

The nomenclature of the science of man will always have its peculiar characteristics. That of the science of the physical world excludes teleological doctrine. There the words “success” or “failure,” “incompetence” or “ability” could, at best, play the role only of fictions, forever laden with dangers. On the other hand, they belong to the normal vocabulary of history. For history has to do with beings who are, by nature, capable of pursuing conscious ends.³¹

30 Ginzburg 1986, p. 106-7

31 Bloch 1992, p. 117-8

But also:

To neglect to organize rationally what comes to us as raw material is in the long run only to deny time - hence, history itself. For can we understand this or that period of Latin if we detach it from the earlier development of the language? This form of ownership, or those beliefs were not, of course, absolute beginnings. Inasmuch as their development proceeds from the most ancient to the most recent times, human phenomena are governed primarily by chains of similar phenomena. To classify them according to kind is to lay bare the principal effective lines of force.

But, some will object, the distinctions which you establish in this way by cutting across life itself exist only in your mind; they do not exist in reality, where everything is intermingled. Moreover, you are making use of "abstraction." Granted. But why be afraid of words? No science could dispense with "abstractions" any more than it could dispense with imagination. Be it said in passing, it is significant that the same thinkers who would banish the former generally display an equal ill humour towards the latter. It is the same badly understood positivism in both cases.³²

I believe that the movement of those who practise the craft of history takes place between these two attitudes. This craft, inevitably, calls for knowing and therefore understanding human beings. "One word dominates and illuminates our studies: to understand," writes Marc Bloch. But, he adds, "to understand is not a passive attitude." I am not saying that every historian achieves this at every moment. I am saying that this is what the historian must set out to do, before judging and long before condemning or absolving — tasks that belong to other professions. To understand is not to be neutral, nor to abandon the passion or inclination one carries within oneself. It is simply to submit them, and to submit oneself, to the rigour of the proofs of truth proper to the specific discipline.

The other difference between historical knowledge and the social sciences, on the one hand, and the natural sciences, on the other, is also well known: the different affective distance between the subject and the object of study. The historian or anthropologist does not stand at the same distance from his object as the astronomer or the entomologist. There are, nevertheless, those who believe they can practise the former crafts as if they were the latter — which proves nothing other than a false consciousness about themselves, or great ignorance about their object of study: human beings.

A singular example of this latter attitude is provided by the statements of the Mexican government negotiators who went to San Miguel, Ocosingo, on 9 April 1995 to hold talks with the EZLN, and returned, one of them saying, that he had "never imagined the cultural distance" that existed between the two sides; and the others, that there was no need for you to attend the next meeting, because they had been surprised by "the capacity, preparation,

32 Bloch 1992, p. 121-2

and intelligence” of Tacho and the other delegates of the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee). Racism and class distance shape the naïve judgements of these figures. And it is with such ignorance that one must negotiate.

Certainly, these *licenciados* are no Galileans. But their prejudices help me to advance the argument: the relevance for history of individual traits, whether the individual in question is a person, a social group, a community, an ethnic group, or a class. Ginzburg maintains that in the past, in certain branches of knowledge,

the real obstacle to the application of the Galilean paradigm was the centrality (or the lack of it) of the individual element in the single disciplines. The more that individual traits were considered pertinent, the more the possibility of attaining exact scientific knowledge diminished. Of course, the preliminary decision to neglect individual features did not in itself guarantee that physico-mathematical methods could be applied, and without them there could be no talk of adopting the Galilean paradigm in a strict sense. But at least in that case it was excluded without more ado.

At this juncture two roads were open: either sacrifice knowledge of the individual element for generalizations (more or less scientific, more or less capable of being formulated in mathematical terms) or attempt to develop, even if tentatively, a different paradigm, founded on scientific knowledge of the individual ... but a body of knowledge yet to be defined. The first course was taken by the natural sciences, and only much later by the so-called humane sciences. The reason for this is clear. *The tendency to obliterate the individual traits of an object is directly proportional to the emotional distance of the observer.* In his *Trattato di Architettura* Filarete declared that it was impossible to create two perfectly identical buildings, just as Tartars’ “snouts are made alike, or indeed Ethiopians are all black, and yet if you examine them closely, have differences alongside the similarities.” He did admit, however, that “many animals do resemble one another, such as flies, ants, worms, frogs and many fish so that members of the species cannot be told apart one from the other.” In the eyes of a European architect, even the slight differences between two edifices (European) were significant, those between two Tartars or Ethiopians were negligible, and those between two worms or two ants, actually nonexistent. A Tartar architect, an Ethiopian ignorant of architecture, or an ant would have suggested different hierarchies. Individualizing knowledge is always anthropocentric, ethnocentric, and so on.³³

Hence Ginzburg’s conclusion: “The whole of the human sciences remains firmly anchored in the qualitative.”

³³ Ginzburg 1986, p. 111-2, emphasis added by A.G.

IX

I must tell you at this point, strategist, that you are neither alone nor in bad company in your criticisms of Ginzburg. In one passage of your letter you write:

The author seeks to escape “the fruitless opposition between ‘rationalism’ and ‘irrationalism.’” But for whose benefit? I mean, the supposed struggle between “rationalism” and “irrationalism” is merely a variant of an idealist position: the subject, the individual, as the foundation of knowledge. The dispute concerns only whether the subject is rational or irrational in the process of knowing. In reality, the problem in the sciences lies in the struggle between materialism and idealism.

In November 1990, Perry Anderson published a long study of one of Ginzburg’s most recent works, *Ecstasies*, an inquiry into witchcraft and the medieval witches’ sabbath. Anderson begins by saying that “Carlo Ginzburg has many claims to be considered the outstanding European historian of the generation which came of age in the late sixties. Certainly few have equalled him in originality, variety and audacity.”³⁴ He then, however, develops a meticulous critique of the methodological assumptions of that inquiry. At one point, the critique extends to “Clues”, the essay Anderson regards as a kind of “historical manifesto” for Ginzburg. At this point he notes:

Ginzburg tells us that his first and most enduring ambition was to supersede the alternatives of rationalism and irrationalism. Similar hopes are often expressed of the opposition between materialism and idealism, or Left and Right. It is rarely difficult to see which term of the two pays the cost of the operation.³⁵

As you can see, without having read one another, Perry Anderson and Subcomandante Marcos, in very similar words, put their finger on the same point. Were there no other clues — and there are — this coincidence alone would be enough to show that this is indeed a sensitive point in the current state of discussions around history and Marxism; or, in other terms, perhaps more urgent, around the ideas for reorganising the revolutionary project after the welcome collapse of the accursed Wall.

For my part, I do not believe that the method proposed by Ginzburg in “Clues” entails setting aside what you call “class position”. Rather, I believe that, through the lengthy quotations from the author, I have helped to show the opposite. You say that Ginzburg

“forgets” the central problem: how are the clues read, and from what class position? If one can leap from hunters’ anecdotes to the science of history, then what are the “historical readings” of the clues that have been gathered? Should we not also question

34 Anderson 1992, p. 207

35 Ginzburg 1992, p. 225-6

the method by which those clues are collected? Is there not a class position involved in selecting certain clues and not others? Is there not a relation between the reading of those clues and a political position? Is not this criterion for selecting and interpreting clues, ultimately, a class criterion?

I repeat: I do not believe that the idea of an “omission” can be sustained after a careful rereading of the essay, set against Carlo Ginzburg’s work, methods, and stated aims. The researcher’s point of view — among other factors, the class position he adopts — certainly influences the choice of object of study, the treatment of the subject, and the formulation of hypotheses. It cannot, or should not, by contrast, influence his search for truth, whatever that truth may be, nor the rigour of what Thompson calls “the discourse of proof”.

The evidential method, like any other, can be used for different and opposing ends or class interests. I cannot see in Ginzburg’s essay the slightest attempt to “strip social classes of the protagonism” Marx supposedly gave them and “return it to the guarantor of the system: the individual and the idea that moved him”, as you put it. In my view, our historian does not share the criterion that one must choose between classes and the individual. He simply refuses to make disappear, by subsuming them within structures, the concrete human beings of whom classes, social groups, ethnic groups, and human communities of every kind are composed.

His essay offers more than enough evidence of this attitude towards classes in society. He writes, for example, that the classification of its subjects by the new state of the bourgeoisie in the final decades of the last century was

[a] need [that] erupted from contemporary events connected with the struggle between the classes: the birth of an international association of workers, the repression of working-class movements after the Commune, changes in the perception of crime.

The emergence of new capitalist methods of production - in England from circa 1720 on, and in the rest of Europe almost a century later, with the advent of the Napoleonic code - spawned legislation, tied to a new bourgeois concept of property, which increased the number of punishable crimes and the gravity of the penalties. This criminalization of the class struggle was accompanied by the creation of a penal system based on long detention.³⁶

This worldwide tendency of capital manifested itself in Mexico in the Porfirian codes and laws — the Civil, Commercial, and Penal Codes, interdependent juridical constructions, and the vagrancy laws, for example — and in the construction of Lecumberri prison, built according to the most advanced models achieved in the world in that era of order and progress.

A singular case of the reversal of a classificatory system occurred in Mexico when Alejandra

³⁶ Ginzburg 1986, p. 119

Moreno Toscano, whom you may have met during the discussions in the cathedral of San Cristóbal, had the excellent idea in 1977 of transforming the Panopticon of Lecumberri — a type of classificatory construction for prisons, hospitals, factories, barracks, and so forth, devised by Jeremy Bentham — into the seat of the General Archive of the Nation, itself a classificatory institution of historical documents. On one occasion Alejandra explained to me in detail how the principle was the same, even though the ends were different. Being well acquainted with Lecumberri prison — my home and research centre between 1966 and 1972 — with its classificatory systems and its scarcely classifiable human and inhuman crevices, I had no difficulty understanding the explanation. The government, of course, had already built new prisons, more modern and, if possible, still more inhuman. But believe me, the penal establishments of the Soviet Union, Russia, and the United States are not better but worse.

After explaining the expropriation of the knowledges of the subaltern classes by the dominant classes for their own purposes of social control, Carlo Ginzburg proposes not the renunciation of this instrument of knowledge, but its recovery in order to unveil the secrets of the dominators:

But the same conjectural paradigm employed to develop ever more subtle and capillary forms of control can become a device to dissolve the ideological clouds which increasingly obscure such a complex social structure as fully developed capitalism. Though pretensions to systematic knowledge may appear more and more far-fetched, the idea of totality does not necessarily need to be abandoned. On the contrary, the existence of a deeply rooted relationship that explains superficial phenomena is confirmed the very moment it is stated that direct knowledge of such a connection is not possible. Though reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones – signs, clues – which allow us to penetrate it.

This idea, which is the crux of the conjectural or semiotic paradigm, has made progress in the most varied cognitive circles and has deeply influenced the humane sciences.³⁷

The same thing that happens with laws happens with weapons, according to the old saying of the gaucho Martín Fierro, himself also criminalised by the law of the Argentine landowners: “The law is like the knife: it does not wound the one who wields it.” From this it follows that good laws, good agreements, and good clues are not enough: everything depends, in the final instance, on who wields them, because upon the who will depend the how and the what for. And this, too, is, of course, a question of class interests and class fractions, and not merely of individuals in power.

Moreover, Ginzburg’s methodological proposal has a direct antecedent in reflections by Marc Bloch which Old Antonio would not have contradicted:

³⁷ Ginzburg 1986, p. 123

Its primary characteristic is the fact that knowledge of all human activities in the past, as well as of the greater part of those in the present, is, as François Simiand aptly phrased it, a knowledge of their *tracks*.³⁸

Hitherto-unknown techniques of investigation have also come to light. We know better than our predecessors how to interrogate languages about customs, and *tools about the worker*.³⁹

But, to whatever age of mankind the scholar turns, the methods of observation remain almost uniformly dependent upon “*tracks*”.⁴⁰

What Ginzburg in fact vindicates is the origin of the evidential method — of tracking, of trailing — in the wisdom and skill of the subaltern classes and in their long and arduous life experience, as against the formalised knowledge of the dominant classes which, while denying or devaluing those knowledges, expropriates the former for never-declared class purposes: domination, national oppression, and social repression, which are instead presented as the “national interest” or the “interest of society” — that ambiguous term beneath which so many things are hidden today.

With this method and the other instruments of his craft, he investigated Menocchio's history in order to show, among other things, “the very strong rational component — not necessarily identifiable with our own rationality — of his worldview”:

The gulf between the texts read by Menocchio and the way in which he understood them and reported them to the inquisitors indicates that his ideas cannot be reduced or traced back to any particular book. On the one hand, they are derived from a seemingly ancient oral tradition. On the other, they recall a series of motifs worked out by humanistically educated heretical groups: tolerance, tendential reduction of religion to morality, and so forth. This is a dichotomy in appearance only. In reality it reflects a unified culture within which it is impossible to make clear-cut distinctions. Even if Menocchio had been in more or less indirect contact with educated circles, his statements in favour of religious tolerance and his desire for a radical renewal of society have an original stamp to them and do not appear to be the results of passively received outside influences. The roots of his utterances and of his aspirations were sunk in an obscure, almost unfathomable, layer of remote peasant traditions.⁴¹

Does this Italian reflection from 1976 touch any part of your experience? I would say it does.

38 Bloch 1992, p. 45, emphasis added “by AG and old Antonio”

39 Ibid., p. 48, emphasis added “by AG and old Juan”. The translation has been changed to match the original meaning: “Nous savons mieux que nos prédécesseurs interroger les langues sur les mœurs, les outils sur l'ouvrier.” Translation by Peter Putnam read “We are more skillful than our predecessors in examining languages for the evidence of customs and tools for the evidence of techniques.”

40 ibid., p. 65, emphasis added “by AG and Martín Fierro”.

41 Ginzburg 1976, p. XXII

It touches, at least, some distant part of my own: when, in Oruro in 1958, I would speak with Constantino Morales, a miner at the San José mine, a lucid man consciously seeking justice and modernity for his people and his class. When Holy Week drew near, he would work a double shift — fourteen hours a day underground — so that he could be lavish in the festivities for which, that year, he had the pride of having been appointed *preste* — *mayordomo*, one would say in Mexico.

Forgive me one more quotation from Ginzburg, because it has something to do with our exchange of letters. His preface to the history of the Friulian miller ends with these lines:

We have said that it is impossible to make clear-cut distinctions within Menocchio's cultural world. Only hindsight permits us to isolate those themes, already beginning to coincide with motifs shared by a segment of the upper levels of sixteenth-century culture, which became the patrimony of the "progressive" circles of later centuries: aspirations for a radical reform of society, the eating away at religion from within, tolerance. Menocchio falls within a fine, tortuous, but clearly distinguishable, line of development that can be followed directly to the present. In a sense he is one of our forerunners. But Menocchio is also a dispersed fragment, reaching us by chance, of an obscure shadowy world that can be reconnected to our own history only by an arbitrary act. That culture has been destroyed. To respect its residue of unintelligibility that resists any attempt at analysis does not mean succumbing to a foolish fascination for the exotic and incomprehensible. It is simply taking note of a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims. "Nothing that has taken place should be lost to history," wrote Walter Benjamin. "But only to redeemed humanity does the past belong in its entirety." Redeemed and thus liberated.

I believe that the Englishman E.P. Thompson, the Italian Carlo Ginzburg, the American James C. Scott, and other historians and anthropologists have been following a trail that has to do with a necessary, human, and rigorous renewal — a rereading, if you like; a non-static vision, if you prefer — of Marxism, of its instruments of analysis, and of its history of struggles and ideas. They are not the only ones, nor do the themes and arguments of history in our time end with them. They are some of those to whom my old paths have led me, and whose reflections have to do, in my view, with the reasons for this exchange.

Such an undertaking can be carried out only as part of the specific experience in which Marxism, as an open theory, lives and renews itself: the liberating struggles proper to each time and society. Those struggles too, unless they are destined to give birth to new hierarchies and apparatuses, have their methods and their requirements. The first of these is to begin from concrete human beings, an indispensable condition if one wishes to share the standpoint of the oppressed classes.

That, incidentally, is one of the fibres your letters have touched: when you write of Old

Antonio, Toñita, Heriberto, Eva, or Camilo, and their lives appear in the text, the reader can come to know them without having to pass forcibly through concepts. The happy reception that prose has received indicates that there already existed a sensibility ready to receive it, and one fed up — literally fed up — with the conceptual paraphernalia of academic fashions, or with the manual-derived jargon of bureaucratic greyness, which for decades they have tried to sell us as Marxism from the universities, the parties, and the little sects. Since I feel alien to both worlds, I have not the slightest interest in opening a polemic with them.

Of James C. Scott, author of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* and *Weapons of the Weak*, we shall speak again, “if time and authority permit”, and if we still have life and desire left in us. I shall give you something in advance, so that life may last and desire awaken.

In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*,⁴² Scott says that, in that study he proposes “to privilege questions of dignity and autonomy, which have typically been seen as secondary in relation to material exploitation”. In his preface he formulates the following hypothesis:

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination.⁴³

This research explains why, Scott continues:

it is that even close readings of historical and archival evidence tend to favor a hegemonic account of power relations. Short of actual rebellion, powerless groups have, I argue, a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances.⁴⁴

And later:

While the confrontation may originate in the exploitation of an onerous tenancy, the discourse is one of dignity and reputation. The practices of domination and exploitation typically generate the insults and slights to human dignity that in turn foster a hidden transcript of indignation. Perhaps one vital distinction to draw between forms of domination lies in the kinds of indignities the exercise of power routinely produces.⁴⁵

In normal times — that is, most of the time — the relation is otherwise: the dominated

42 Scott 1991

43 *ibid.*, p. xii

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*, p. 7.

conceal their resistance behind the appearance of deference, while the dominators conceal their power behind that of paternalism and concern. The farces of PRI governments form part of this infernal comedy, as does their quintessence: *Solidaridad*. Scott writes:

If the weak have obvious and compelling reasons to seek refuge behind a mask when in the presence of power, the powerful have their own compelling reasons for adopting a mask in the presence of subordinates.⁴⁶

An individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product. Whatever form it assumes – offstage parody, dreams of violent revenge, millennial visions of a world turned upside down – this collective hidden transcript is essential to any dynamic view of power relations.⁴⁷

Does this tell you something? Scott concludes the preface of this book with these lines:

Finally, I believe that the notion of a hidden transcript helps us understand those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.⁴⁸

I believe, brother, that destiny, your decisions, and your previous history have placed you and your comrades as protagonists of one of those moments in the history of us all. *Salud*.

I shall not weary you further with my authors. Scott's book opens with this quotation, which sums up the question:

When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.
(ETHIOPIAN PROVERB)

X

Allow me at this point to summarise how I see the fertility of the evidential method in three different but related fields — without this implying that I assume each and every one of Carlo Ginzburg's conclusions.

1) *In the field of history*, it proposes tracing marks inadvertently left by subjects (traces that may even speak of an absence) and not merely following visible and explicit road signs, in order to know who passed this way, where to go in search of them, and how to find them. Of course, like every method of inquiry, it requires a prior intentionality. One has to know

46 *ibid.*, p. 10

47 *ibid.*, p. 9

48 *ibid.*, p. xiii

what one is looking for and, on the basis of the data initially available, formulate hypotheses with explanatory capacity. This point of departure is the precondition for finding something previously unknown, even if, in the end, it may not be exactly what one had imagined.

Since I like seafaring images, I choose to quote here, among many other possibilities on this theme, Luis González and his notable work *The Craft of History*⁴⁹:

From the point of departure one can glimpse, with greater or lesser clarity, the point of arrival. A provisional answer is imposed to the question the researcher puts to the past. Whether one wishes it or not, one always begins from a conjecture or hypothesis; that is, from what we believe reality to be. Between the port of departure, which is the choice of a problem, and the raising of anchor, there stands the hypothesis, the conjecture, the ideal, the prefiguration of the port of arrival.⁵⁰

The navigator, then, is guided by nautical charts, instruments of navigation, and clues, including the smell of the winds and the creaking of the ship — all the more so when, rather than a routine voyage, he is undertaking one of exploration, that is, an inquiry into what is not yet known. But he can only raise anchor if he has, beforehand, a hypothesis, an idea of where he is heading, even if he cannot predict how much he will find along the way.

2) *In the field of knowledge*, it proposes conquering, in social practice — and in each individual — a method that includes the hidden, devalued, or denied knowledge of the subaltern classes, without this meaning that one ignores, belittles, or counterposes it to the formalised knowledge of the dominant classes. The question of the complex relations between learned culture and popular culture in each epoch and society thus remains a question always open to new explanatory discoveries.

3) *In the field of social (and revolutionary) struggle*, it proposes to rescue, in all their value, and to rationally use the knowledges accumulated by the subaltern classes, which are, at the same time *knowledges hidden* from the dominators and oppressors. Something of this was sought by various kinds of secret societies in the past: secret in order to protect themselves from persecution by established powers and to keep their knowledges from the state, just as the state conceals its own secrets — the nucleus of its power.

This has to do, moreover, with *forms of organisation*. It is not a question of morality or principles. It is a question of defining which knowledges, and which combination of human knowledges, structure an organisation; how to *avoid dispensing* with indispensable formalised knowledge — anti-intellectualism is always disastrous — and how to avoid *replacing*, with that knowledge, the ancient and ever-renewed knowledge that is nourished by and comes from below. The art of combining them is infinitely more difficult than this formulation

49 González 1988

50 *ibid.*, p. 83

itself; yet, in that art, always poised in unstable and dynamic equilibrium, lies one of the keys to the future. I do not think, moreover, that I am telling you anything new.

I remember well the image from a video in which Tacho shows a house where you often met, and explains and repeats: “This house keeps our secrets.” The lord sent the army to destroy it, together with Aguascalientes. But not even by smashing the rabid toy could the lord find its secret.

XI

At this point I see that the paragraphs and examples from “Clues” on which my interest is focused are not, in general, the same ones that drew your attention. At one point in your letter you say:

Let us try to apply the “evidential” paradigm to Neo-Zapatism. To remain consistent with this “science,” we must search for the individual who is the “author” of the plans, the leadership, the conception, and so forth.

And you then go off to the individual in the ski mask, big-nosed, with crow’s feet, who walks as he writes and writes as he walks, to “the lies or truths he tells, or they tell, about his past”, and to various other clues. You then imagine what they would do in the different milieus intrigued by the task of deciphering the enigma. It is interesting: to each of those milieus you attribute, with ironic precision and precise irony, an intentionality or objective in its search. And that intentionality determines, in your examples, which clues they will look for.

But most of the intentionalities you suggest are not those of scientific researchers, but of police officers or very simple minds, who believe that in order to decipher the “mystery” of neo-Zapatism one must discover an individual; and, worse still, they suppose that discovering an individual’s personality consists in knowing what he is called, where he lived, which house they are going to raid, and whom they are going to prosecute or kill on the day they decide to betray him.

Morelli, Conan Doyle, Freud, Ginzburg, and not even the Güilly boy (who thanks you for having included him in that lineage) would have concerned themselves with any of that. Besides, this is not the kind of mentality they manage to recruit in the Interior Ministry, the PRI, or the CIA-FBI, according to your list. What these honourable institutions and their “armed wings” – for they do indeed have them – do in order to investigate is not to rack their brains over evidential paradigms, as the investigation into the Colosio case shows well enough.⁵¹ Their method is much simpler: they arrest people, use torture and corruption on one side, denunciation and infiltration on the other. Since they have to rely on informers,

⁵¹ Gilly refers to assassination of Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in March 1994. After finding a confessed gunman, the case has been periodically reopened amid evidence of a second shooter and other wrongdoings in the case procedure.

denouncers, and other similar epidemics, their investigations turn out accordingly, as do the fabricated and incoherent trials they build upon them. What evidential paradigm, my dear Marcos!

Once again it is our old master Marc Bloch who gives us a good example of such methods. He writes:

On April 21, 1834, prior to the prosecution of the secret societies, Thiers wrote to the prefect of the lower Rhine: "I advise you to take the greatest care to furnish your share of documents for the great forthcoming investigations. The correspondence of all anarchists, the intimate connections between events in Paris, Lyons, Strassburg, and, in a word, the existence of a vast conspiracy embracing the whole of France - all this must be made entirely clear."

In my case, since I do not belong to any of the species you enumerate — not even to that Left you mention in your list — I have not had the slightest interest in knowing the name, surname, address, or usual haunts of any hooded figure, not even the one who answers to the name Marcos. Just imagine: I am still trying to discover the identity of that fellow Güilly! The ski mask, then, does not concern me. What interests me, note well, are ideas and their practices.

If you remember my three articles in *La Jornada* on "The Blue Mountains", after Cárdenas's visit to the Lacandon Jungle on 15 May 1994, what is set out there is a reasoning by clues, with some conclusions that may perhaps be daring, but which, as a whole, are not too far off the mark.

If I apply the same method to your letter, I will also find answers to certain questions about ideas — that which, by definition, is of not the slightest interest to the Interior Ministry, the PRI, the CIA-FBI, and, I dare say, to the other specimens on your list, among whom only Mexican homes seem respectable to me.

I am interested in your intellectual identity, that of your comrades, that of the EZLN, and that of the movement to which they have given rise and which has had such influence. Your letter contains clues, signs, absences, presences, which, with knowledge of the subject — referents? — and imagination, it is possible to join together, place in relation, and reconstruct as trajectory and style. Not when you mention Lenin or Kuhn, which is the most obvious, but in the moments when you let your thought run free: in the way you use examples, theoretical reasonings, chains of ideas, and, in certain words, even capital initials.

"Personality must be sought where personal effort is least intense", Morelli is reputed to have said, "in those particular clues [...] in which a given master tends to reveal himself by force of habit and almost unconsciously..." To which Ginzburg comments that

to Morelli, these marginal facts were revealing because they constituted the instances when the control of the artist, who was tied to a cultural tradition, relaxed and yielded to purely individual touches “which escaped without his being aware of it.”⁵²

Discussing this with some comrades who, like all of us, are drawn to the ideas of people who struggle, and not to their noses, ears, or fingerprints, we formulated some hypotheses on the basis of your letter — which I shall not detail here. Subsequent evidence confirmed those hypotheses and, as always, also dented and modified them. But it did not disprove them; on the contrary.

This is one of the reasons why this letter of mine begins backwards, with the final postscript of yours: that key moment where paths open up because experience is one of the names given to the confrontation of conception with reality, modified the conception, the hypothesis, if you like; and that conception, thanks to the practice of its bearers, who did not shut themselves away to confront concepts with concepts, was able to open itself to life: “Out of the blows came something new, what is now known as neo-Zapatism.”

At this point, my other question arises: why does Ginzburg provoke in you such irritation that you even go so far as to make jokes about his surname – Jewish, incidentally?

My conjecture is that the answer lies in the postscript.

For some reason that still escapes me, and which, in any case would take a long conversation, Carlo Ginzburg’s text touches, in my view, a sensitive joint — as all joints are sensitive: the point where “reality” dents the initial “square-headed conception”, and from the blow something new emerges, what is now known as “neo-Zapatism”. My conviction, ever since I sent it to you, is that the problematic of the essay (stylistic complexities aside) has a great deal to do with the experience of neo-Zapatistas up there, and particularly with yours. Hence my illegible dedication.

But, as also emerges from your letter, it does not have the same relation to your previous formation — I am not judging it, only saying that it rests on assumptions different from Ginzburg’s. When you draw on that intellectual formation, rather than on your experience, to discuss Ginzburg’s ideas, the point, zone, or line of joining — suture, scar, dent, call it what you will — between original conception and lived experience is stretched and becomes irritated. Could that be it?

Finally, I venture another fleeting conjecture about your anger-without-cause. I was in prison in the second half of the sixties together with Víctor Rico Galán⁵³ when he, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters and an intelligent and sensitive man, insisted that I should

52 Ginzburg 1986, p. 101

53 Víctor Rico Galán (1928-1974), Spanish-born Mexican journalist, socialist militant and Republican exile. He was imprisoned in the Lecumberri prison (1966–72) for his involvement with the Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo. There he shared a cellblock with Adolfo Gilly.

read Hegel, some of whose works were in his cell. Caught up in other troubles and absorbed by that invisible and motionless daily struggle which is the fabric of life in prison, one day I replied to him, irritated, with something like: "Why are you coming to me with your Hegel at a time like this!" Surely, to me, his insistence seemed an exquisite refinement when so many urgencies surrounded us. I shall not forget his wounded look and voice when he barely said to me: "But, Adolfo, how can you say that?" He added nothing more. I slept on it, that good counsellor. The next day I went to his cell and asked him for a volume of his Hegel. I still thank him for it. Do not misunderstand me, strategist: I am not saying that it is the same now. But when you tell me, "All that puts me to sleep", a faint shadow from the past seems to cross my path.

But, "ultimately, why am I telling you all this", as your letter says. Perhaps I am sticking my nose where I should not — that is, into improper conjectures. In any case, it no longer matters very much now.

XII

And so I reach the end of your letter, when, half in earnest and half in jest, you become truly indignant and launch your scolding at the universe:

Now let us turn to a paradigm that has fallen out of use. We shall have to go to the wastepaper basket, retrieve that old and crumpled sheet called "The Science of History," Historical Materialism, and smooth it out once again. Why was it thrown away? Was it the moral hangover that followed the collapse of the socialist camp? A "tactical" retreat in the face of the overwhelming advance of the *Marine boys* and neoliberalism? The "end of history"? Did it go out of fashion along with the desire to struggle? Why is a revolution today so quickly relegated to the realm of utopias? What happened to them Güilly? Did they get tired? Bored? Did they sell out? Did they surrender? Was it not worth it? Is it no longer worth it? Or was it that this theory led them into a blind alley (at least for theorists) where you had to be consistent in practice? What happened to them, Güilly? It seems to me that cynicism is now the banner of the Left. "Realism," a columnist will correct me. "Realpolitik," another will add. Perhaps it turns out that the most elaborate theories were never more than convoluted reworkings of the old manuals.

No need to tell me, strategist. What have I to do with that Left, then or now? From 1929 to 1989 — that is, for at least sixty years — in what you call the "socialist camp", my comrades in ideas were systematically and scientifically distributed among firing squads, prisons, concentration camps, and cemeteries, all in the name of the "science of Marxism". And, in the rest of the world, that Left which travelled to the "socialist camp" as one goes home to see one's parents, and which, in exchange for its complicity, was pampered and subsidised from there, devoted

itself to slandering us as “CIA agents” or agents of anything else, and sometimes even to denouncing us or physically hunting us down. There are still people among them who make jokes about the ice axe, which sound to me like a joke about your comrades fallen in combat would sound to you. I remain silent, however, and try to control in my eyes the disgust those cynics arouse in me.

And these are not resentments or quarrels from the past, as those who wish to evade or erase their own past tend to say. Those methods long ago led revolutions to ruin. To combat them is to persist in the defence of the dignity and honour of socialism in the present and the future. Nothing good is raised upon resentment, but nothing solid is built upon forgetting.

Do you want examples of that old conduct of that Left? There are volumes of confirmed testimonies on the matter, never refuted. I could even tell you of recent personal experiences with some specimen of that race of frauds and slanderers whom you too have had the misfortune to deal with. But to what end?

One morning, around 1990, I crossed paths in the courtyard of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences with Mario Salazar Valiente, a Salvadoran, an old Stalinist, a fighter, and an honest man. We had not seen one another for some time. He embraced me, moved, and said: “I want to tell you that you were right. And to think how much we slandered you all!” I too was moved, and mumbled some triviality, something like “we all make mistakes”, because nothing better occurred to me. I return to that instant, so as not to lose my temper, every time I run into those others who have changed their jackets but not their methods.

The cynicism of today, my dear Marcos, that *Realpolitik* you speak of, was not born yesterday, nor did it begin with the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was prepared long ago, in the old cynicism of a certain Left that believed — and still believes — that the end justifies the means and that anything goes in political struggle. Today’s cynics, forgive me, are yesterday’s cynics. Nothing happened to them. They did not grow tired. They did not get bored. They remain on the same side they were on before. And, contrary to what you think, most of them are still struggling, but for causes other than yours: some for their political careers, others for their inflated egos, others for the microphone, others for their seats or those of their mates, some for their money, others still for their arrangements and deals, through which they always thought — I repeat, always — that the causes in which they believed would advance; and the simplest of them because they never learned to do anything else in life except that kind of politics, and do not want to swell the ranks of the unemployed.

Nor do we lack those who in the seventies struck us down with their materialist thunderbolts, when the fashion for Marxism favoured their academic careers, and who, in the nineties have put on ties, groomed themselves, and became neoliberals, postmoderns, and even post-Marxists. Fashions are the plague of the academy, and the ignorant are their preferred carriers.

Many of them had neither ideas nor principles; they had only beliefs and a thirst for power. When reality destroyed those beliefs, together with the Berlin Wall and other similar contraptions, they felt they had lost what they thought were their principles. All that remained was their thirst for power, whose naked expression is cynicism.

But moral indignation, however necessary, is not always a good counsellor. Your scolding seems to me excessively universal. Many people continue to struggle as they did before, as they do now, as they will tomorrow, with different ideas, with diverse intellectual knowledges and organisational experiences, with greater or lesser effort and dedication according to their possibilities, but struggling according to the best of their knowledge and understanding. Many of them may feel unjustly targeted by your reproaches. Tens upon tens of thousands took to the streets of Mexico once again in February 1995, when the government set its ambush for you. Thanks also to them — some more intelligent, others less, some more disciplined, others more unruly — the negotiations and the truce has been held, and the tendencies that believe it necessary to finish you, off militarily (and everyone else), have not prevailed, even though those tendencies have a strong social base in other sectors of the population, as you may well know or imagine.

We are also passing through difficult years. The offensive of capital against labour, of the rich against the poor, of the powerful against the weak, continues in every country. Forms of organisation once tested and effective have been dispersed or dismantled, and new ones have not yet appeared — or have not yet become consolidated in experience. On almost every terrain, including that of human reason and decency, we are on the defensive. Ordinary people, everyday people, resist as best they can; they resist even in cases where it seems they are not resisting. Resistance is strong; human beings do not surrender before the inhuman, otherwise the barbarism of computerised power would have subjected us long ago. I do not speak to you from a superficial optimism, but from the stubborn will to resist, whose symptoms can be recognised everywhere by those who know how to look. Otherwise, why your echo throughout the world against the oblivion that surrounds those who perhaps fought yesterday and today have adapted or subordinated themselves?

Those who resist and fight, strategist, are generous people. They are where they have always been. There they will remain, and they are legions. Will there be some convergence, some grouping, some broad, simple, and accessible form that allows them to organise themselves, men and women alike, without depending on the owners of the microphone? I have not given up hope of finding it, sooner or later, as has happened at other times in history. Such moments do not usually last, but their trace remains across the whole future.

Why did the rebellion from the south find such a response among young people? Many valid and convergent reasons can be given. I want to emphasise here, among them all, one. In 1993, in Mexico, there was a kind of unspoken expectation among broad layers of young men and women, something like a search, something like a restlessness that did not know its own

name or cause, and which was, without knowing it either, in search of a cause. Some of us saw this in the march of 2 October 1993, twenty-five years after the day of the great crime,⁵⁴ in that October of 1993 when nothing was yet known of you.

Since I have included so many quotations, forgive me if I add another. Fascinated by what I had seen the previous day, I proposed this hypothesis in *La Jornada* on 3 October:

Are we, in this strange country, once again, happily, going against the grain of the world of unhappy consciousness in which we live? In 1914, as Europe was sinking into war, the Mexican Revolution was here reaching its zenith. In 1938, as the two twin plagues — Nazism and Stalinism — were advancing across the world, Cárdenas was here nationalising oil and the peasants were conquering their lands. And now, when unemployment ravages Europe and racism grows, when civil war takes root in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, when in Somalia people are dying of hunger but detest the invaders from the West, when so many misfortunes traverse the countries of the world — does it occur to this Mexico once again to set itself in motion?

The students and the university would seem to announce that it does. But what they are asking, if one understands them rightly, is: towards where? Unlike that of so many politicians, their horizon does not end with elections. But their path, like that of the whole country, passes through 1994. They are not content, however, simply to cast a vote, win an election, and defend it. Those are means, but they are not their ends.

Those who marched by the tens of thousands on 2 October wanted and sought something more. They have made that 2 October into a youthful myth: the myth of a time when students and young people wanted to change this country and the world and, although they did not win, they put themselves on the line. And, looked at closely, the myth was true. They think that that generation, the one that moved through the cities of the world in 1968, found how to give meaning to its life and how to break through barriers and prohibitions.

What those of today seek and ask for is the same thing, but now, and in this Mexico. They want something more than a programme of demands or a petition. They are not asking, as some believe, for a “political offer”. The mercantile word makes me laugh uncontrollably, and I ask myself: what was Father Hidalgo’s political offer to his ragged followers? What offer was Juárez making in his wandering carriage? Was the Plan of Ayala not perhaps a good political offer, for it to sell so well among the Zapatista peasants? And did Morelos know what kind of offer he was launching onto the market with the *Sentimientos de la Nación*?⁵⁴ [*Sentimientos de la Nación* (“Feelings of the Nation”) was a document of twenty-three principles presented by José María Morelos y

⁵⁴ This refers to 2nd October 1968, the Tlatelolco massacre.

Pavón to the Congress of Anáhuac on 14 September 1813 during the Mexican War of Independence. It called, among other items, for independence from Spain, popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, the abolition of slavery and caste distinctions, and measures to reduce social inequality.

If I understood correctly, they are seeking something else, even though they have not yet found the way to say it. They want a commitment worth staking themselves on, a vital adventure in which, as in 1968, whether one wins or loses, nothing will ever be the same as before. *They want to give meaning to their lives, meaning to their place, meaning to their world*, on a planet where so many enterprises have lost their own meaning and identity.⁵⁵

Yes, Marcos, that is what they were seeking, at a time when so many want to convince us that everything lacks meaning, and when “it is cynicism that has become the most characteristic symptom of contemporary civilisation”, as Bolívar Echeverría rightly wrote in the first issue of *Viento del Sur*. That same thing is what they believed they had found from January 1994 onwards, when they responded with fervour to your proclamations.

They are still nourished by that fervour, against the grain of the universal cynicism of politicians of every stripe, even if they do not take to the streets every day and do not always find how to organise themselves, and even if, for long stretches, the scene appears occupied by the fierce battles of the platform and the microphone.

To give meaning to their lives, to their country, to their world: for me, the response in January was the *evidence* that those *clues* had not lied to us.

XIII

It is high time to bring this river-letter to an end. Its overflow will make you lose all desire to write to me again, should the future still provide the occasion. Let the length make up for the lateness of the reply.

On this terrain, of course, I play with an advantage. I have my books here; I strike you with my quotations; the aeroplane of your history does not come — for the moment. You, by contrast, are quite literally on the run. But, since this is an exchange of convergences and divergences, and not a dispute, that difference does not change things very much either.

Finally, I will tell you that the chance gesture of sending you an essay which seems to have caused you such surprise (“perhaps you did not send it and it was some other Güilly who did”) was not the product of pure chance either, as you will see from what follows.

A letter of 22 July 1994, which I never sent you, had something to do with these matters.

55 Gilly 1993

Nor will you receive it now, because it has already disappeared. (In truth, for the record of the authorities, archivists, and historians, I publicly declare on my word that, apart from a five-line note in June 1994, this is the first letter I have sent to Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, here denominated the Strategist according to a tale by Álvaro Mutis.) From that July letter, this paragraph survives, which you may also take as a clue for reconstructing where, at that date, the lost text was heading:

Revolution, like politics — which is not the same thing, although the two touch — is not a science but an art. The same is true of war and commerce, alternating exchanges. If we understand it properly, politics is nothing other than the continuation of war by other means — the reverse of the famous saying — because both deal with the same thing: power. Politicians and military men, both people of power, can afford not to know too much about human beings. Up to a point, they can make up for that ignorance with command and force, although the great Machiavelli does not advise them to do so.

A revolutionary, by contrast, since he does not hold power in his hands but struggles against the unjust established powers, needs to have, among the knowledges of his art, that of knowing human beings. Like so many other true knowledges, this has much to do with the senses and with experience — and with certain readings that illuminate it — and one never finishes learning it. It belongs to the ancient and great art of evidential knowledge, proper to hunters, mountain people, navigators, combatants, women, diviners, poets, and other similar species. (I learned to say it like this from the Italian Carlo Ginzburg, one of my many teachers younger than myself, who, by the law of life, grow more numerous each day.)

It was, rather, these questions, more than the craft of history, that I had wanted to talk about when the goblin told me to give the photocopy to the traveller. As you can see, something else came out — but when does it ever not? In any case, I believe it speaks of the same thing: history, human beings, ideas, and the paths of their struggles and ours. Only those who know nothing of life will be inclined to believe that this is an academic discussion.

If this letter reaches you, I hope we may continue the conversation in peace and freedom in a future that is not distant, even if justice is still delayed.

Health and social revolution, as the anarchists of the first third of this century used to say.

Adolfo Gilly

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