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Beyond the "Dangers of Geertzism." Giovanni Levi in Conversation with Giovanni Zampieri*

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Abstract

In this interview with Giovanni Zampieri, historian Giovanni Levi reflects on his intellectual career, focusing particularly on the relationship between history, sociology, and interpretive anthropology as practiced by Clifford Geertz. In the interview, Levi elaborates on debates at the intersection of these disciplines concerning comparison and generalization and the relationship between knowledge and language. These themes open new avenues for reflection at the porous borders of history and the social sciences, in continuity with the insights offered by the other contributors to "The Interpretation of Cultures at Fifty".

Keywords: Microhistory; historical sociology; Geertzism; interdisciplinarity.

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A miller is on trial for believing that the origins of life resemble those of worms born from rotten cheese. After being missing from his village for eight years, a peasant returns to his family but is later found to be an imposter and put to trial as such. A wayward priest is investigated by his bishop after performing more than five hundred exorcisms and healings to people and animals alike in less than two months.

What makes these cases — and these lives — interesting? Before the advent of microhistory, the chronicles of people such as Domenico Scandella, better known as Menocchio (Ginzburg, 1976), Martin Guerre (Zemon Davis, 1984), and Giovan Battista Chiesa (Levi, 1985a) were often relegated to the margins of both their historical time and historiography. Emerged in Italy during the 1970s and then disseminated and translated into different countries and styles, the microhistorical approach sought to transfigure the way in which the historical discipline was practiced.

Through the creative use of sources and methods, the proponents of this approach excavated the biographies of individuals and communities whose histories had hitherto been ignored. They did so with the aim of unearthing connections between social and cultural systems that would have remained otherwise undetected, trying "to offer a new conceptualization of the connection between social action and cultural beliefs" that could represent a viable alternative to "Marxism, functionalism, and interpretative anthropology" (Trivellato, 2011, p. 14). Doing microhistory did not mean studying minute things per se. Rather, it signified probing whether the theoretical models that explained *longue durée* processes and epochal shifts at the macro-level held when peeking into the day-to-day hurried business of millers, peasants, and merchants.

Together with Carlo Ginzburg, Edoardo Grendi, and Carlo Poni, Giovanni Levi has been one of the pioneers of microhistory, an approach that has captivated — and still captivates — practitioners of social and cultural history, and neighboring paradigms, such as symbolic anthropology and interpretive social science, with whom a (sometimes confrontational) dialogue was established since the very beginning of the enterprise.[1]

Weaving together biographical episodes with intellectual insights, in this interview Levi offers some thoughts on the relationship between history and the social sciences, assessing (and questioning) the possibilities of generalization, examining the problems posed by the linguistic turn, and discussing the notion of truth with which historians and social scientists work. The conversation also represents a unique opportunity to consider how these debates bear the long-lasting mark of Clifford Geertz's ways of thinking and doing social science.

Giovanni Zampieri (GZ): I would like to start from the very beginning. Would you tell me about your training as a historian in postwar Italy?

Giovanni Levi (GL): Alright. First of all, I didn't start as a historian. For a while, I was an economist — not a theoretical economist, but an applied economist. I studied in Turin with two economists, Lombardini and Forte. And yet, I graduated with Garosci, in fact, as a historian.[2] In those years, the University of Turin was excellent in all disciplines. I was studying history and philosophy. There weren't any great sociologists, Filippo Barbano was there, but

1. For example, historian Natalie Zemon Davis (2008) wrote that Geertz's essays provided her with "a whole way of looking at symbolic behaviour" (p. 189). The first Italian translation of Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984) was edited in the "Microstorie" series, which Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg directed from 1981 to 1991 for the publisher Einaudi.

2. Siro Lombardini and Francesco Forte were Italian economists and politicians (see Faucci, 2014, p. 230). Aldo Garosci was an Italian historian and activist-politician.

I took classes in Latin, Greek, literature, and history, and there were great historians: Venturi, Lellia Cracco Ruggini and Tabacco.[3] But I had come to Turin for two reasons. The first was that I had fallen in love with a girl from Turin, whom I later married. The second reason was that when I moved to Turin in 1958, strikes had resumed at FIAT after a long period of warfare against leftist trade unions by factory owners and the Christian Democrat government. I was interested in politics and wanted to be a professor because I thought professors had their afternoons free to wage the revolution. That was my background. However, I attended lectures by some great historians. Great philosophers, too. There were Abbagnano, Bobbio, Viano, and Rossi; then, there were great Latinists, and Augusto Rostagni — a genius.[4] So, I had an excellent education. It was a very elite university, so after a while, students would form small groups of people they would work with and exchange ideas.

I got my degree on the economics of the early fascist government, on Alberto de' Stefani. Gaetano Salvemini had written a fundamental article on that period (1951; see also Puzzo, 1959), and I studied this monstrous character who was, at one point in the 1930s, Chiang Kai-shek's economic adviser. He was a dreadful character. The Treccani encyclopedia called him the man who freed the port of Genoa from "red power." He was a hard-hitter; he was two meters tall. And he was a frightening character, I must say. I had to spend some time with him at his house in Rome, but he never let me see his papers. He would say, "I'll give you the ones I think you'd be interested in." So, let's say my training as a historian was intense; it was with Garosci and Venturi. But just last week, presenting Carlo Ginzburg's book,[5] I pointed out that our birth as historians came about basically because we were disgruntled with our teachers, who were, in any case, important masters — Venturi for me, Delio Cantimori for him [6] — but who studied the history of ideas as something that was above society, separate from it, without any social context. Yes, they had a context, but it was a context made up entirely of heretics or entirely of Enlightenment thinkers. I was interested in people and in understanding how society worked. And so, both Ginzburg, who had started to study the *benandanti* (Ginzburg, 1983), and I, who had started to study the peasantry, were somewhat, even unconsciously, looking to break away from a history of ideas that was interesting, and important, but a bit like the history of the Action Party (*Partito d'Azione*).

GZ: In what sense?

GL: The Action Party had been very important in anti-fascism during the Resistance, but after the war was over, it had no social rank-and-file; its constituency was a hundred or so intellectuals, including my father — not Ginzburg's father Leone because, unfortunately, he was killed in 1944. And in any case, they had an idea of the party that was very connected to the intellectual *élite*. I started being a historian by doing politics. I was the secretary of a section of the Socialist Party. I got out of it when Nenni decided to return with the Social Democrats, with Saragat, in 1964, and then I resigned. All these were great experiences: we had extraordinary professors and a city that was the most politically interesting in Italy then. People like Raniero Panzieri, the work of *Quaderni Rossi*, and the activists from the Communist Party and

3. Filippo Barbano was an Italian sociologist. On the institutionalization of sociology at the University of Turin (see Cossu & Bortolini, 2017, p. 17). Franco Venturi, Lellia Cracco Ruggini, and Giovanni Tabacco were Italian historians. On the configuration of the historiographical field in postwar Italy (see Woolf, 2011).

4. Nicola Abbagnano, Norberto Bobbio, Carlo Augusto Viano, and Pietro Rossi were Italian philosophers (see Benso & Schroeder, 2007). Augusto Rostagni was an Italian philologist.

5. A new Italian edition of *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Ginzburg, 2023).

6. Delio Cantimori was an Italian historian of ideas.

the Socialist Party.[7] You learned a lot; those were wonderful years. After university, I became an economist, working for a research company of economists and sociologists. I worked on the master plan of six municipalities around Savona, including Savona. And there, I understood how to work in socioeconomic research.

GZ: We mentioned microhistory. Carlo Ginzburg (1993) wrote that he first heard this term from you in 1977 or 1978. I would like to understand how this approach came about — you told me that you found yourselves dissatisfied, almost simultaneously, with your teachers' approach. I also wanted to ask about the needs, including the political ones, that motivated you to take this approach. It seems that politics, at least in your trajectory, played a prominent role. Is there really a link between politics and microhistory?

GL: There is a very solid connection. The rather extreme left was workerist (*operaista*).[8] It was thinking about the working class's coming of age because of the first big strikes at FIAT after the war began in 1958. After I left the Socialist Party, I was part of a group called the Susa Valley Workers and Students — the ancestors of the current "No Tav" movement. We worked at the factory gates. I was an activist at Graziano, which was a plastic factory. Our leaflets described how piecework functioned at Graziano. And one day, a very friendly group of workers, whom we saw almost every day at the factory gates, told us, "Look, we don't give a damn about the factory. We are very impressed, and also grateful, that you explained to us how piecework works, but we unfortunately don't care at all, it's too complicated, it's a rip-off... for us life is what happens outside the factory. Inside the factory, we are part of a mechanism we have little to say about, there's hardly anything we can do about it, unfortunately." That might be where microhistory was born for me. Workerism was too trivial an image in the way the sociological description presented it. The real problem — so the Graziano workers had told us — was to understand what the overall life of a working-class group, which was very dynamic, was like outside the factory, in everyday life, in the family, in going to dances, even in their Party section. We should not have assumed that the factory was the center of their world. That was one of the origins of microhistory for me.

But one should never talk about origins. A month ago, together with Carlo Ginzburg, I held a public dialog at the Jewish community in Venice where we answered the question, "How and when did you realize you were Jewish?" We both answered via an origin story. When I was six years old, I was in second grade at a Jewish school; they took me to the cinema and showed us documentaries made by American, British, and Russian soldiers about Nazi concentration camps. And that gave me such a shock that I realized that I was Jewish. My family was absolutely secular, but my father wanted to show that there were still Jewish children. Carlo, on the other hand, has a different story to tell about his Jewishness. He once said that his grandmother, in 1944, told him, "Remember that if someone asks you what your name is, you must not say Ginzburg, you must say Tanzi," which was his grandmother's name. But on this latter occasion, he said, "I think I became a Jew when I first met Giovanni", meaning me. And he recalled that we met at the Valentino park in Turin when we were thirteen. We were playing soccer, and although we didn't know each other, there weren't enough kids to form two teams. So, we got together and formed teams, and he said, "There, when I met Giovanni, I realized I was Jewish." This, however, is not a real explanation. That is to say that my explanation of the Graziano

7. Raniero Panzieri was an Italian politician and Marxist intellectual (Guidali, 2021). On political commitment and historical research in post-war Italy see Woolf (2011, pp. 336–339).

8. On Italian workerism, see Roggero (2023).

workers coming out of the factory and saying, "We don't give a damn about what happens in the factory, it's what's outside that is life for us," is only partial. These are somewhat paradoxical explanations of origins. It is impossible to pick a moment, impossible to pinpoint it. I'm afraid I have to disagree with what Carlo says, which is that I invented the word microhistory. Did I use the word? Maybe, but in short, I don't think it's important. There was probably some discussion; we were chatting, and I used this term, which then stuck.

GZ: Regarding your personal and intellectual relationship with Carlo Ginzburg, you were editors of the "Microstorie" series (La Malfa, 2016) and on the editorial board of the journal *Quaderni storici*...

GL: *Quaderni storici* never had one editor, we always had a group of editors. Carlo was not there yet, but then we pulled him in. I was pulled in by Edoardo Grendi, the real inventor of microhistory — certainly more than me.

GZ: What was the role of these cultural projects in consolidating the microhistorical approach in the discipline's landscape in Italy?

GL: The person I learned most from was a very unusual man, Edoardo Grendi, but because we were both from Genoa, somehow — because I still consider myself to be from Genoa even now, even though I was only there in high school — Grendi was a character I spent a lot of time with. We shared an office when he moved to the University of Turin. I would say he is the real inventor of microhistory. We immediately put together a group of four people. Edoardo Grendi, Carlo Poni, Carlo Ginzburg, me, and then Simona Cerutti, a former student of mine who worked at Einaudi and thus had a lot of experience in publishing.[9] That was the core. "Microstorie" was a proposal Ginzburg brought forward with Einaudi — unlike me, he was a real Einaudi insider. And yet I wrote the manifesto — which nobody ever quoted or reprinted — in the Einaudi bulletin, introducing the series, and we published twenty books. Twenty, but rejecting many others. There was a long work of constant discussion. Then we resigned instantly when Silvio Berlusconi bought Einaudi — that is, when Mondadori bought Einaudi.[10] So, the series lasted for twenty books. We quickly ran away. It was good work, though, very confrontational. We argued bloody-mindedly about all things, once even about sociology. A historian, Banti,[11] had submitted a manuscript. In one sentence of this text, Banti said: "Historians do not know how to cope with these issues, we need to be rescued by sociology". And we saw Ginzburg's face turn red, and he said, "We need to be rescued by sociology?" And we rejected the book.

GZ: What was your relationship with sociology?

GL: I had a very bad sociologist as a professor, Barbano, and I have many doubts about sociology. Once, I invited a great ethnohistorian, John Murra, to the University of Turin. And Murra said that all the social sciences are basically the same. There is ethnology, anthropology, history, and maybe literature. And I asked him, "What about sociology?" And he replied, "Los

9. In the 1950s and 1960s, Einaudi was one of the three largest publishers in Italy, together with Edizioni di Comunità and Il Mulino (Cossu & Bortolini, 2017, pp. 54–57). In the 1970s, Einaudi had "ambitious programmes of foreign historical studies", promoting the Italian edition of works by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, and English, German, and Polish historians (Woolf, 2011, p. 335).

10. The biggest publishing company in Italy at that time, Mondadori was acquired by Silvio Berlusconi's company Fininvest in 1991.

11. Alberto Mario Banti is an Italian historian.

sociologos? No somos ni amigos ni colegas". Now, this is partially true. *Colegas*, no, because in Italy, there were no great sociologists I had dealings with — and, therefore, no *amigos*. That's because the kind of sociology that was practiced then — now sociology has made great strides — but since it had been banned from the idealistic tradition of humanistic studies by, let's say, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, we had very few interesting examples of sociology.[12] At the time, sociology was touted as a science of generalization. That is, whatever it investigated, it was interested in generalization. And this also happens to historians, of course. I am very much an enemy, for example, of historians who have the gall to study three villages in Holland in the 1600s and say, "This explains the birth of capitalism and the industrial revolution" — I'm talking about Jan De Vries. The generalization is there, but of what? We will talk about that in a moment, but there is always a sense of having to close, of coming to conclusions: we talk about FIAT, but we generalize the condition of the working class or the workings of the Italian automotive industry. We published a collection of essays by E.P. Thompson precisely because he taught that you have to look inside the working class. The working class is not left-leaning. A splendid microhistory book by a student of mine, Maurizio Gribaudi, studies the transition of the working class in Turin from socialism to fascism before and after 1922 (Gribaudi, 1987). You needed to look inside with a microscope. As for *Quaderni storici*, it was a potpourri. For a while, that journal was — mainly thanks to Grendi, who had a lot to do with it, as did I — the journal of microhistory. Then it became an excellent social history journal, but much more France-inspired and now US-prompted than in the early period.

GZ: Let's try to put the relationship between history and the social sciences under the microscope, too. In one issue of *Quaderni storici*, you commented on Robert Darnton's book, *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), evoking Clifford Geertz in the title of the review, "The Dangers of Geertzism" (Levi, 1985b). I wanted to ask you what the dangers of Geertzism were then and what the difference between Geertz and Geertzism is — if there is one.

GL: Well. I am a great admirer of Geertz. He was a delightful man, by the way. Unfortunately, when I was at the Institute,[13] I only saw him for three months because he then left for Indonesia, so I didn't spend enough time with him. I always had a great admiration for him, though. But in the 1980s, there was an obsessive fashion for Geertz, a very American thing. Like today, when everyone has to say, "Global History", then everybody had to start with a reference to "Geertz". All books started with Geertz. And I had been particularly annoyed by Darnton's book, which is a foolish book — actually, Darnton is a genius, he's a great writer, but he should write about what he knows about. Starting from the massacre of three cats to explain the workers' revolt in the guilds was unconvincing. And yet the book begins with Geertz, he says "as Geertz taught me," something like that. I wrote that article not against Geertz but against Geertzism. However, there was another Geertzism, very dangerous and much more rampant — and also much more stupid, I must say. Darnton's was a game, in a way, but Geertz had a real problem, objectively, because he was studying situations. Even when he spoke in general, he always referred to localized inquiries. A form of local knowledge (Geertz, 2008) is as fundamental to him as it is to me. But then he derived from it a kind of undecidability.

12. On the effects of the idealist lock that Croce and Gentile had on historiographical writing, see Woolf (2011, p. 336).

13. The Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) at Princeton, where Levi was a temporary fellow from September 1983 to June 1984 in the School of Social Science (Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984, p. 66). In that year, the annual theme around which seminars were organized was "Toward a Broader Economics" (Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984, p. 62). For a sociological perspective on the IAS, see Padberg (2020).

Geertz had two fundamental flaws. The first was that I thought a fusion of the humanities was very important. I couldn't understand why I couldn't use anthropology or sociology, economics, mathematics, or physics if I needed them. Not because we were doing those disciplines but because it helped us understand how the practitioners of those disciplines thought about things. One of the saddest things about historiography is that it has fallen behind, folded in on itself, and is, among the humanities, the most backward in Italy — but also in general, unfortunately. It had to invent Global History to give itself some blood, but it quickly proved nonsense. Geertz's problem, on the other hand, was that you don't have to mix these things: we have to study the other sciences from an anthropological point of view. It is the scientists that interest us: "We can do an anthropology of the humanities, of the social scientists". But everybody should stay in his place: from Geertz's perspective, these disciplines are so different that it is precisely the differences that are remarkable and should be studied. It's not that I think and have ever thought about interdisciplinarity. In fact, I am more interested in learning about other human intellectual practices — as an amateur, in some way — to see what questions others are asking and whether we need them. I publish very often in psychoanalytic journals. I'm not a psychoanalyst, and I don't pretend to lay any of my characters on a couch and make them sing about their dreams. But Freud asks extraordinary questions — we have to see if we can give answers or use these questions to do something different. This was Geertz's first flaw. He was skeptical about the possibility of coming to a conclusion, as I am too, but he said, "There's no point in even trying," whatever conclusion we draw is not a conclusion. If we come to two conclusions, they are parallel, not one after the other. We don't move forward, we move horizontally. Although he mixed these disciplines towards the end of his life, he did so not only to understand what we had in common but especially to emphasize that we had to be different.

The other thing that annoyed me was his somewhat sentimental rhetoric about unknowability. That had fatal consequences. There were Geertzists — the worst of them all being Paul Rabinow — who said, "How can we know Moroccans if we can't even know our neighbor at home or our neighbor in the next office at our university"? There was this total relativism that was not Geertz's. Geertz wrote that famous article against anti-anti-relativism (1984), not to say that you had to be a relativist. But actually, he had a handful of followers, James Clifford, George Marcus, but especially Rabinow, who whined about the unknowable. Now, this is a danger of Geertzism because it is based on an inadmissible position: either we know everything, or we know nothing. But our sciences are characterized by the fact that we always see a fragment of truth and carry it forward. Not that there is nothing to be done and that it is all pointless. In this sense, Rabinow was perhaps an excess of Geertzism — which Geertz probably did not like. Anyway, certain aspects are too negative, especially in the late Geertz.

GZ: It seems to me that the dangers of Geertzism have less to do with Geertz's approach per se than with the fusion that has taken place between a specific approach to the problem of truth and how truth can be found in the social sciences, on which microhistory and microhistorians — I am thinking of the debate between Carlo Ginzburg and Hayden White — have taken a stance that is perhaps less relativistic.

GL: I wrote an article that I believe in very strongly because I think that the fundamental problem, not only of microhistory but of our sciences, including sociology, is that of generalizing. Sure enough, there are things we must generalize, but they're the questions, not the answers. History is the science of general questions and local answers (Levi, 2018). Perhaps the anthropologist I have been closest to is Fredrik Barth (1981), a brilliant anthropologist who envisioned generative models. You have a question — you have a good general question, for

example, the Oedipus complex. But your Oedipus complex and mine are entirely different. A general question produces a vast range of local answers. And out of these local answers, you take one, and it leads to new general questions, which will produce a new range of local answers. So that was the generative model. But not for Geertz. He denied that we could generalize. We study situations that suggest mankind's infinite possible extension. However, this logic is not formalized in the logic of generalization. And this is the big problem of our sciences. Not only of microhistory or anthropology — neither Geertz nor I have anything to do with that. We are always asked questions about the relationship between the individual and the general. How do we resolve this contrast? The general takes everything away — even Braudel said, "What do I care about individuals? What is interesting is the masses, the great processes of transformation", so the individual is nonsense. We throw most of the babies out with the bathwater. But I think there is this continuous range: we generalize the question and get to local, singular answers. The Oedipus complex is a good example, but this logic also applies when you talk about fascism. What is fascism? You see how stressful it is when someone says, "Giorgia Meloni is not a fascist" or "Giorgia Meloni is a fascist." But fascism is a question, not an answer. We should ask general questions and give particular answers.

GZ: You mentioned that you went to other disciplines, even just to see how practitioners of those disciplines asked different questions than a historian might have asked. In fact, in the footnotes to *Inheriting Power* (1988), besides Geertz, you quote historical sociologists such as Charles Tilly and Barrington Moore Jr., and anthropologists like Victor Turner. In that intellectual landscape, I'd like to understand what reading in those disciplines and trying to build a dialog, even if only on paper, meant to you. From the perspective of a sociologist, reading a microhistory book and finding historical sociologists and interpretive anthropologists mentioned is intriguing.

GL: There was a period when sociologists started to find some use in history. Sociology started to flirt with history, pose this problem, and feed on history, which was good for it.[14] Before then, this was not common; old sociology didn't go beyond generalizing and was not interested in historical phenomena, even though it had Durkheim and Weber behind it. Sociology was a science of the present, horizontal and, at most, predictive. I read many of these somewhat hybrid characters, starting with Karl Polanyi. I read a lot of Albert Hirschman, Witold Kula, who spent long periods in Turin for two years, and Alexander Chajanov.[15] They were very important to me. I spent a lot of time with Tilly. I also had a discussion with him in Göttingen on the modern state (Gribaudi et al., 1998). The problem was identifying what history could teach us — and what it *couldn't* teach us, what we shouldn't think will repeat. I'll give you an example that I've written about. Before the interview, we were talking about Calvinism and the modern state. This is a topic, for instance, that historians love to grapple with. I'm very fascinated by counter-Calvinism: what idea did the Catholics, and the Protestants have of the state? The Lutherans decided that once they got rid of the Church and the Pope, it was God himself who created power. Luther says it clearly: after the massacre of peasants in 1524-25, he writes to the peasants[16] and says, "You deserve it because your masters are scoundrels, but you have rebelled, and it is not for you to rebel, it is for God because it is God who sent them to you to

14. On the transformations of historical sociology (with a focus on the United States), see Adams et al. (2005).

15. Along with practitioners of British social historiography such as E.P. Thompson, Polish historian Witold Kula and Russian economic historian Alexander Chajanov were influential in Italian historiography from the 1970 onwards (Woolf, 2011, p. 340).

16. Levi refers to the "Admonition to Peace Concerning the Twelve Articles of the Peasants" (1525).

punish you for your sins. You cannot rebel." The idea was that it is God who creates power. In the Catholic Church, there is no such idea. The Church said men are created social, they must create power; therefore, they must give themselves their rulers — but it is men who make them. Men are sinners, and so it is a weak power, but fortunately, there is the Church that slowly tries to bring people to the strait and narrow path. This is a theme that is very rarely dealt with, but it is fundamental. The modern Catholic state model is the opposite of the Lutheran model, especially, but also of the Calvinist one — Calvinists watered it down because God did not create the emperor but created the people as power. But it is always God who decides. In Catholicism, it is not like that. God does not have this responsibility; the Church has it — to save the Church. Only Louis XIV got around it, thinking he had a power assigned to him by God. The real problem is that there were two different models of the state in Europe. And so, it seems to me very interesting not to throw ourselves headlong into Calvinism and the modern state but to compare the modern Catholic and Protestant, even Anglican, states. I worked on that with Tilly and others, not least because I thought these generalizations that they invented were simplifications after the fact. But it was a study of the consequences of this contrast between modern states. As historians, we already know who the murderer is. So we can invent causal mechanisms. Microhistory tries precisely to avoid this — these overly mechanical, unexplained causal mechanisms. Barrington Moore's book is fascinating, though. Chayanov, Witold Kula, Giovanni Arrighi, and Albert Hirschman were very important to me.[17] I know that's an unfortunate answer, but that's what I think. Historical sociologists didn't influence me that much, but they suggested many things.

GZ: I found this quote from Franco Ferrarotti, who wondered what kind of history allowed collaboration with sociology and what kind of sociology could have a positive relationship with history (quoted in Carlotti, 1989).[18] And I was curious about the practical aspects of your coming into contact with sociology. How do you get a sense of sociology as a historian?

GL: To begin with, one reads Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. You don't read Bourdieu, I have to say — I've hardly ever read him, but I mean to say... But you often go to France, and you see how Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were stirred by sociology. Durkheim was essential for French historians, and we were often Frenchified. So, it seems simple to me, I mean, five percent of my reading is history books because I don't care much about historical factuality. I don't care about them, in the main. Nowadays, there is a great historian around, Sanjay Subrahmanyam.[19] Carlo Ginzburg is a great historian, and I read him. Not all of it, because he writes a lot, but I read him. I generally get five or six uninteresting books every week. Knowing why a prince such and such married a princess of Luxembourg doesn't interest me. It's not factual, the kind of history I do. Instead, I read many books from other sciences, including quantum mechanics...

GZ: In another interview, you said that historians should not be subordinate to social scientists but should "create social sciences" (Levi, 1990). In what sense can history be configured as a social science? What role can history play as a repertoire of practices and data that it can make available to sociology and the other human sciences?

GL: We have to create the sciences ourselves, in the sense that if we study the working class

17. Giovanni Arrighi was an Italian economist and world-system analyst; Albert Hirschman was a German economist.

18. Franco Ferrarotti was an Italian sociologist (see Cossu & Bortolini, 2017, p. 103).

19. Sanjay Subrahmanyam is an Indian historian and the proponent of the "connected history" approach (2022).

or the history of the working class, we have to look inside the working class without using simplified mechanisms like the concept of social mobility. I don't think it is good for the social sciences to retreat into themselves. I believe what needs to be done and what can be done should be done in any field by opening up to the economy — and vice versa. Take Thomas Piketty's work. If you think of Piketty's work, you find yourself disconcerted, because it's a great work, fantastic, in which he concludes that there is no solution. The only solution is to tax corporations dramatically. But corporations are stronger than we are, they are stronger than states. A great historian and anthropologist, Giovanni Arrighi (1994) proposed another model. Manufacturing made Florence, Genoa, and Venice rich in the 16th century. When these manufacturers realized that making cloth made less money than lending money to kings, they became financialized and stopped producing. That destroyed their economy. Then came Holland, which started with manufacturing and ended with financialization. Then came England, which did the same thing, then came the United States, and now China. So, he tried to explain the significance of the long run, the *longue durée*, in identifying the mechanisms of contemporaneity in a more understandable way than Piketty's, which is motionless, a snapshot. That's my idea: history teaches you things. It doesn't teach you things because they repeat themselves, which is impossible, but it teaches you what method to use to interpret things. And that is always useful. It is always helpful to have a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of a thing. There is no binding theme — what is binding is the method.

GZ: Picking up on another of the themes we touched upon earlier, another element of Geertz's legacy is a focus on language in relation to the linguistic turn. Does microhistory have a legacy in that sense? Did you leave a frame of reference that can be used?

GL: On language. I think what some philosophers and social scientists do is not bind themselves to the idea that words always have multiple meanings. Others think they do. It's a long debate (Clark, 2004), but the "linguistic turn" is precisely this problem. What are we to make of it? There is no doubt that words hide meanings, have ambiguous meanings, or represent only a part of reality. But this implies an attention to partiality that the social sciences usually reject. Something is either false or true. But that is not correct. Truth is always partial. Or they say that truth is either general or particular. I disagree — it is always partial. We have to realize that everything can progress. This is true for all sciences, including physics. The wonderful thing about quantum physics is that you don't know what quanta are, but they are very useful. This is precisely our problem. We don't know what has caused the social phenomena we experience now, but our interpretations somehow work. We have to get used to the partial and the non-general. General as a question, and local as an answer. Now, two friends, Sabina Loriga and Jacques Revel, have written a book on the linguistic turn (2022), which is a somewhat sad book. There has indeed been a fad — about this linguistic turn — but it's based on an idea of Richard Rorty and others that, with words, we cannot reach reality, and so we can't say what it is. Whereas, in fact, we can say a good deal about much of it. Indeed, words can never express reality exactly, but that is the beauty of our craft. We get closer to reality. Why do historians write 50 books about Philip II every year? Not because 49 of them are wrong and the decisive one has yet to be written, but because we try in every way to get closer to the truth. It is also a religious fact. Why are my bigoted co-religionists trying to understand what God wants? They have been arguing for three thousand years about what every word in the Torah means. It is a never-ending work. At the Feast of Sukkot, Jews have to eat as many kinds of fruit as possible because we have not yet found out what fruit Eve ate. The day we find out what fruit Eve took, they would send us back to the garden of Eden. But for now, we haven't guessed yet. So, our

choices are like that, just like those who read the Bible, we say, "But what does this thing mean?" We try, and we have to try. Maybe we say little, but we are compelled to do so. Our craft is like the Talmud, it involves a constant search for something that we will never solve, as with Philip II. We know bits and pieces of it. We can find an interpretation that won't be total but is still different from others. We stop there, but in fact, we never stop. That's what we do. That's the beauty of being a scientist, not only in the human sciences but also in the natural ones: we keep discovering things in nature, as in history, as in society, and so on.

GZ: What are the dangers of Geertzism today, if there are any? And what are the challenges for those who want to work at the intersection of history and sociology?

GL: The main challenge is to accept non-generalizability. We have to be able to put a limit on generalization. There is nothing we can generalize except as a question. We can have general questions but not general answers. This is also the thesis of Sigfried Kracauer (1969). Kracauer is somebody to read. He says there is no communication between the individual and the general. They march on parallel tracks. Subrahmanyam also says that the local calls for synthesis, but two lines later, he says the local explains and challenges the general (Barbu, 2018). These aspects are connected, of course. They take place at the same time. But generalization throws out many things, and we must stop it at some point. The local, in turn, is in danger of constituting a mere focus on gossip, like the killing of cats. I may have killed some cats myself during my life. My brother Stefano Levi Della Torre killed a cat once: when he was three years old, he threw it off the balcony, and it eventually died. My brother, who writes a lot of books, regretted it so much that he dedicated one book to this cat that he killed as a child because he hadn't overcome his guilt yet, or so he said. It may create guilt for you if you kill cats, but not socialism — killing cats does not lead to socialism.

GZ: I would like to end this interview by asking you about an anecdote from the three months when Geertz was at Princeton.

GL: He was a permanent fellow at the social science section, where I was. Grendi was also there, in the history section — that year, there were three Italians: Marcello De Cecco, an economist, was there with us, too. There was a bulletin board; Geertz stuck a piece of paper on it that said, "For some time now, a horrendous cigar smell has been spreading in the institute. Please don't do that." I smoked cigars, so I went to his office, knocked, and said, "Clifford, I'm sorry, are you mad at me?" and he said, "No, absolutely not, it's that Indian who smokes terrible cigars." Because there was also an Indian fellow, a psychoanalyst, who smoked lousy cigars, while *toscani*, as is well known, smell good. You see, Geertz didn't generalize, too: cigars are a general question, but Tuscan and Indian cigars are two particular — and rather different — answers.

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