

The Challenges of a Conversation Cutting Across Social Boundaries, and Their Paradigms: Remembering Carlo Ginzburg (1939-2026)

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Writing Histories As We Speak

In an influential TED talk entitled *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns her audiences (both individuals present at the talk, and potential online viewers)¹ that the problematic outcome of having a “single story” in mind is not the “true or false” aspect of the narrative, but the lack of alternatives.

The “single story” is often about someone else – as shown by everyday behaviors and conversations – and by politicians, who draw on everyday language especially when campaigning. However, it always leads to an over-generalized assumption through the unfounded claim of being the “definitive” story (or the “Truth” with a capital T).

Adichie calls out the stereotype of so-called Third World countries, a label that continues to be applied to the individuals who live there or who are categorized as being from there. Such labels, as research in psychology and in the social sciences has demonstrated over and over again – and at times forgotten – are bound to affect the self-image of those being described in those terms. To some extent, at least, they force stereotyped individuals and groups to engage in a struggle to defend their own human dignity against the assumptions imposed upon them. Hence the self-reflective character of Adichie’s talk, which points out how anyone may find themselves on either side of the stereotype, as either the perpetrator or the victim. Perpetrators, however, may also be considered as victims of their own single stories, at least insofar as they may come to feel ashamed when they realize that the single story they had taken for granted was actually blinding them to other – and perhaps even more relevant – stories about the same people.

¹ Ngozi Adichie, C. *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED Talks, October 7, 2009 (www.youtube.com).

At the end of her self-reflection, Adichie finds a solution in rejecting the “single story” (to be sure, and in particular, its claim to be the definitive story about someone – usually, but not always, someone else). In her view, the “single story” should be replaced with “many stories”, and ultimately by a balance of these many stories. Drawing on an old African proverb – “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunters” – her analysis stops short, on this occasion at least, of exploring whether “lions and hunters” might ever come to terms in devising a shared account of the history of the hunt.

Carlo Ginzburg’s intellectual journey tackled the very problem Adichie raises: dealing with history from the point of view of the “hunted lions” – the “oppressed”, or the “subaltern”. One of Ginzburg’s most well-known works² is about Domenico Scandella, nicknamed Menocchio, a miller from Montereale Valcellina who was burnt at the stake in 1599 and quickly forgotten by the powers that be. One of the charges against Scandella was that he read prohibited books.

Research Methods and Results

One of the most recent outcomes of Ginzburg’s research is the book he co-authored with another world-renowned historian, Bruce Lincoln. In this book the two authors offer their different interpretations of the same primary sources, thereby engaging in a debate on the methodology of historians as well as commenting on the specific set of resulting narratives.³

In order to properly address their disagreement, Ginzburg and Lincoln decided to deal with it openly, by publishing a shared assessment of the primary sources. Bruce Lincoln’s is the first English translation of the still existing court documents relative to an already well-known werewolf trial of 1691, which both authors analyzed. After making the 1691 source available to the public, the two historians tried to persuade each other that their own method was the most satisfactory way to reconstruct the thought processes of the accused. They did not succeed in reaching a shared, definitive interpretation (or “single story” in Adichie’s terms). However, they also agreed on not considering this a

² Ginzburg, C. *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del 500*. Torino: Einaudi, 1976.

³ Ginzburg, C. – Lincoln, B. *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020.

complete failure. Instead, they published their debate because they believed that the process of arguing over their different interpretations had itself produced greater clarity and awareness, on both sides.

Being honest with oneself and others is key here. It entails learning to agree to disagree. From a third-party perspective, such an honest assessment of reciprocal disagreement can be considered just as important as finding an agreement on how to interpret any specific set of facts, since “agreeing to disagree” requires sharing the criteria being used to determine such conclusion.

Ginzburg and Lincoln also make clear their shared disagreement with the 1934 interpretations of this “classic” case, supporting their argument with reference to the actual written source of 1691, which they make available to others so that further inquiry may ensue. This reflects the methodological criteria on which Ginzburg and Lincoln agree: that the original source should be respected and made available for further study, a criterion which was not followed in 1934.

Ginzburg’s method can be compared with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s critique of the “single story”. Given the circumstances in which Carlo Ginzburg grew up, his decision to become a professional historian, and his commitment to reconstructing a “version” of the “historical facts” rather than producing “fiction”, his method may appear both similar and different from hers. How this comparison is understood, however, depends on how the two authors and their relative approaches are framed and analyzed.

Carlo Ginzburg

While Adichie was born in a country which had recently gained independence from British colonization, Ginzburg experienced antisemitism during World War II as a child, narrowly escaping being sent to a Nazi concentration camp. He realized what it meant to be categorized as a Jew at that time as he was at risk of being captured by the Nazi-Fascist police. He was instructed to use his maternal grandmother’s last name, and introduce himself as Carlo Tanzi (because, as he learned on that occasion, she was the only non-Jewish member of his family).

As a young man, Ginzburg decided to become a professional historian after reading Marc Bloch's *Les Rois thaumaturges*⁴ (translated into Italian and English well after Ginzburg had read it in French), which was an early example of the methodological "turn" towards the social sciences by the French historians who gave rise to the Annales School of historiography, thereby acknowledging the necessity of an interdisciplinary perspective.

Like Carlo's father, Leone Ginzburg, Bloch was a key organizer of the Resistance, and both were captured, tortured, and executed in 1944 by the Gestapo. Ginzburg was inspired, in part, to uncover popular beliefs previously neglected by historians by his reading of Antonio Gramsci's reflections on the beliefs of what Gramsci called "le classi subalterne" (translated as the "subordinate classes", and, later on, "the subalterns")⁵. Rather than focusing on the mainstream aspect of culture analyzed by Bloch, Ginzburg engaged in archival research on Inquisition trials which had previously been largely neglected. His decision to pursue this research, already unconventional for an Italian student at the time – notwithstanding the well-known trials against Giordano Bruno, and Galileo Galilei – led to even more unconventional findings.

As he studied witchcraft hunts in Italy from the point of view of the victims of the Inquisition, Ginzburg read the surviving trial documents "against the grain", that is to say, from the point of view of the people defending themselves against the charges, rather than from the point of view of the prosecutors and judges. In doing so, he greatly enriched our understanding of history by adding "many stories" (as Adichie would say) to the pre-existing narratives, which often claimed to represent the "single story". He also encouraged further research in that direction, in a sense by popular demand, given the worldwide readership his books quickly attracted.

⁴ Bloch, M. *Les Rois thaumaturge. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*. Strasbourg-Paris: Librairie Istra, 1924.

⁵ «Nella prefazione a *Il formaggio e i vermi* rinviavo alle riflessioni di Antonio Gramsci sulle "classi subalterne"» ("In my preface to *The Cheese and the Worms* I was referring to Antonio Gramsci's reflections about the 'subaltern classes'"), Ginzburg explained in a recent interview. His use of the term at the time in Italy was a clear reference to Gramsci's work. For the interview, in Italian, see *Nuotare controcorrente. Intervista a Carlo Ginzburg* (www.pulplibri.it).

When Carlo Ginzburg was awarded the 2010 Balzan Prize for European History (1400-1700), the General Prize Committee stated that, through his numerous books, including *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg uncovered a whole world of deeply religious, intellectually sophisticated, and stimulating “popular culture”. In the book, he recovered and reconstructed the cosmology of Domenico Scandella, nicknamed Menocchio, based on how Scandella interpreted the works of Dante and Boccaccio, among others. Without Ginzburg’s studies, says the Balzan *laudatio* (written by such prominent academics as Quentin Skinner, Salvatore Veca, and Dominique Schnapper), this episode in history – and the widespread way of thinking it reveals – would have remained unknown.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In her TED talk of 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recalled that, according to her mother, she began reading children’s books when she was only two years old. But she added that it is more likely that it was a little later than that, even though she agreed that she was an early reader. She thus implies that her mother’s story is not accurate, based on our knowledge of how early a child can become interested in, and capable of, reading a book. By acknowledging this, Adichie makes it clear that, in her view, concern for the truth of a story should be maintained on the basis of our knowledge at the time of writing. In this case, we perform a “mental experiment”, as Ginzburg would say, which is something historians do all the time in order to distinguish what may or may not be true.

Adichie was given English and American books, featuring children with white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes who were shown eating apples, playing in the snow, and so on. By the age of seven, Adichie recalls, she would write similar books and give them to her mother (a teacher) to read. Only the discovery of African books saved her from having a single story about what books are, she explains, meaning that she could write a book in which settings and characters were not taken from England, but instead from her own country of Nigeria. Reflecting on this experience should make us aware of how vulnerable we are – especially as children – to the stories we are told, and especially to the implicitly totalitarian claim of the “single story”. She also recalls being surprised to find out that a girl like herself could also be in a book.

Later on in the talk,⁶ she points to the relationship between the way a story is told and the power relationships it is set up to justify: «Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story». Starting US history with the arrival of the British is an implicit argument in support of the British taking over the land of the Native Americans, based on a circumscribed notion of “progress”. Likewise with African history, starting with the malfunctioning of the African States as opposed to by the colonizers’ setting up African States, is a different narrative.

Mental Experiments

Ginzburg’s reflections on writing history are clearly related to the problem of balancing different stories. See, for example, his discussion of the double-blind experiment, presented as his Balzan Distinguished Lecture in 2011.⁷ Double-blind experiments were introduced in medicine in order to neutralize the placebo effect: by telling neither doctors and nurses nor patients whether the “pills” being administered were effective or ineffective, objectivity in interpreting symptoms and results could be maintained. The historian, Ginzburg argues, conducts his “mental experiments” all the time, and learns from them, but is rarely in a position to know for sure whether the “pill” is effective or if it is just a placebo. However, any experiment – including those in the natural sciences – can be reopened on the basis of newly acquired knowledge. Having to deal with the language and thought of other people, all historians can do (like anyone else trying to communicate with others in everyday life) is to assess their own biases as explicitly as possible. The task of the historian is not to take sides with any individual or group being investigated. Based on the historian’s previous convictions, this will inevitably happen at the beginning of an inquiry, but as research continues, the historian will become ever more aware of how such conclusions are related to the paradigms being used. These paradigms may be modified at times, with the goal of reaching

⁶ Adichie, *Single Story*, from minute 10:31 to 10:49.

⁷ For a video of the lecture, in Italian see www.balzan.org.

an understanding of the “foreign country”⁸ of the past that the historian has decided to explore. For example, once a distinction is made between Gothic and Romanesque architecture, and once it is established that an image is supposed to be a copy of a particular cathedral, anyone can check whether the cathedral’s windows should be classified as Gothic or Romanesque, and whether the image is indeed a copy of the building in this respect. To offer another example, it is possible to distinguish between the ideas of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, but that does not imply sharing Spencer’s belief in “progress”, or his belief in “white supremacy”, or any of his beliefs. This example is probably not taken from Ginzburg’s own work, but it follows from principles he clearly states. The same point would also apply to Darwin: even if evidence were found that Darwin held racist beliefs – whether in his everyday thinking or in the written statements of his theory of evolution – recognizing and examining those beliefs would not imply sharing them. By the same token, one may agree or disagree with Chimamanda’s mother’s account of her as an unusually early reader, but such agreement or disagreement is to be considered “arbitrary” only if it is not based on an assessment – based on a paradigm – of how early a child is able to start reading.

Paradigms

Ginzburg used the term “paradigmatic” in one of his first publications.⁹ Retrospectively, he thought he had been influenced by Thomas Kuhn’s use of the term “paradigm”, like many other thinkers of his generation. However, by precisely considering the date of his own paper, in which he talks about the trial against Chiara Signorini as “paradigmatic”, he realized that it could not have been influenced by Kuhn’s book, which came out only the following year.¹⁰ This could be an example of how to differentiate a conjectural from an actual matter of fact – it would be quite unlikely for Ginzburg to have learned about Kuhn’s “paradigms”

⁸ See *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Paolo Rossi Monti’s (2009 Balzan Prize for the History of Science) speech at the Prizewinners International Forum in 2009: www.balzan.org.

⁹ Ginzburg, C. “Stregoneria e pietà popolare. Note a proposito di un processo di 1519 in Modena.” *Società* 17 (1961), pp. 269ff; Kuhn, K. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962.

¹⁰ Ginzburg, C. – Barbera, F. – Catino, M. “Carlo Ginzburg in Conversation with Filippo Barbera e Maurizio Catino: The Historical Method at the Crossroads of the Social and Human Sciences.” *Sociologica* 20, 1 (2026).

before 1961, as he would have had to have access to Kuhn's early thinking or drafts (and then he would have had to even forget all about it years later). It could also be an example of the difference between judging something as "true or false" versus "good or bad" (as Ginzburg himself, or others, could be either happy or unhappy about finding out that he came up with this term independently from Kuhn).

Uses of the term paradigm outside the world of grammar books (where Kuhn claimed to have found it) are not difficult to find: a very short list of authors who have used it in modern times and languages (after Plato, that is) includes Robert K. Merton and Vittorio Somenzi.¹¹ An essay by Jerome S. Bruner and Leo Postman, entitled "On the Perception of Incongruity: A Paradigm", was published in 1949 and is quoted by Kuhn himself. Of course, it is still probably true that Kuhn himself found the term paradigm – at some point in his life – in the world of grammar books, where it has always been prominent.¹²

In Conclusion: Menocchio and the Algorithm

Being able to reflect on our paradigms in order to make them crystal clear to ourselves and others, and to negotiate them in good faith with one another, as Adichie, Ginzburg, and Lincoln showed us, seems to be the only sound strategy. That is, assuming anyone wishes to turn the "history of the hunt" into a brighter future. A future in which the Menocchios are not taken care of by an algorithm.

¹¹ Merton, R.K. *Sociology of Knowledge*, in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, eds. Gurvitch, I. – Moore, W.E. New York: Philosophical Library, 1945, pp. 366-405. V. Somenzi, "An Exemplification of Operational Methodology." *Synthese* 9, 15-25 (1955).

¹² Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, p. 63.