Eric V. Snow HST 863 Review of The Cheese and the Worms May 27, 1992 Dr. Chojnacki

A major problem for historians in reconstructing the past is the problem of figuring out what may have existed with little or no documentation. For the nature of a historian's task is to reason and draw conclusions from written evidence, not from no documentation. Hence, when Carlo Ginzburg maintains in The Cheese and the Worms[1] that an independent peasant culture existed orally in Europe that produced few, if any documents, he faces an almost insufferable problem in trying to prove such a culture's existence. While Ginzburg is quite ingenious in recreating the mindset of Menocchio, the primary subject of his study, to extrapolate without documentation from one man the mindset of millions of people over centuries is a tenuous business indeed, and this view should be approached with the utmost caution.

Ginzburg was able to reconstruct the beliefs of one Domenico Scandella, known normally as Menocchio, due to the Counter-Reformation Inquisition's desire to detect and destroy heresy. Menocchio, who worked primarily as a miller (although he had also worked as a sawyer, primary teacher, and innkeeper --p. 103), was brought before the Inquisition in 1584 and 1599, and suffered burning at the stake in 1600 for his heresies.

Now--just what were his heresies? Menocchio was fundamentally a materialistic pantheist who maintained matter had always existed, and that matter was the same as God ultimately. Out of the primordial chaos, God became conscious and gave reason to angels and men (p. 53, 64), much as by spontaneous generation cheese could produce worms (p. 57). He denied the sacraments' efficacy (with a partial exception for confession), the need for the intermission of the saints, the immortality of the soul, the value of graven images in worship, the need to pray for the dead in purgatory, and the value of using Latin as opposed to the vernacular. He denied the Deity of Jesus, His Virgin Birth, and His death on the cross. The Holy Spirit wasn't God either. He was very critical of the

[1]Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

Church for its pomp and luxuries, and for oppressing the uneducated peasantry, since only the educated elite (primarily made up of churchmen) had the ability to know through reading books and could pass knowledge down by writing. Although he recanted his heresies in 1586 as a condition of leaving prison, he never really totally repudiated them in his heart, and once again the Holy Office renewed its interest in him in 1598 (p. 99). After explaining his heresies in great detail once again to the Inquisition while on trial in 1599, he was executed in 1600 due to being judgedan incorrigible heretic by the Church.

Now--what were the sources of Menocchio's heresies? Although clearly Menocchio came in contact with various strands of Protestant and even Islamic thought, nonetheless, the seemingly original aspect of the Friulian miller's beliefs cause Ginzburg to maintain that an independent oral culture of the pesantry was behind Menocchio's interpretations of the books he read. The miller's unusual interpretations of what he had read implied something else was going on than just misreading (p. 61). Ginzburg maintains this peasant oral culture that was influencing Menocchio's creative readings was religiously tolerant, opposed to dogma, was materialistic and pantheistic in basic form, and was egalitarian in its view of the ideal human society, not hierarchical (p. xix, xxiii, xxvi). Hence, when Menocchio heard of the belief in conditional immortality ("soul sleep"--the doctrine that the dead don't go to heaven or hell at death, but are unconscious until the resurrection as per Ecclesiastes 9:5,6, 10; 3:19-21; etc.), which such early Protestant reformers as Tyndale and (inconsistently) Luther held, the miller of Friuli would bend it towards a total denial of immortality (p. 72-74). Menocchio aggressively extracted the idea of religious toleration from Mandeville's Travels (p. 49, 51), which was inkeeping with the supposed tolerance of medieval oral peasant culture.

The basic hazard Ginzburg faces is how typical were the beliefs of this sixteenth-century miller? Can we legitimately extrapolate from one man in one locality in one century to that of millions all over Europe for centuries?

Although Ginzburg attempts to bolster his case by using the additional cases of the miller Pighino (p. 118-123) and the Lucchese mystic Scolio (p. 112-117), an almost incredible extrapolation is still being performed, which he justifies by the fact that the necessary evidence to prove his hypothesis cannot exist. Thomas Kuehn, in a review of another work of microhistory, Gene Brucker's Giovanni and Lusanna, pointed out this potential hazard of writing microhistory: "The difficulty for the historian lies in his or her tendency to assume the typicality of the event under consideration, especially as it is contained in court records (not known for being a repository of the typical)."[2] Of course, Ginzberg admits Menocchio was not a routine sort of peasant: "He cannot be considered a 'typical' peasant (in the sense of 'average' or 'in the statistical majority') of his age: this is clear from his relative isolation in the town" (p. xx). Millers in general were socially isolated by a peasantry suspicious of the former ripping them off, yet ironically the miller's place of business was a center of village social intercourse and gossip (p. 119-120). "The real question then is not whether Ginzburg describes Menocchio accurately, but whether there were truly thousands of Menocchios on the land."[3] The religious fervor of the thousands of peasants lead by Peter the Hermit during the first Crusade (his host was annihilated soon after crossing the Bosphorus in Asia Minor by the Turks) casts doubts on the idea of the peasantry being naturally un-Christian and religiously tolerant.

Many times Menocchio denies that others believe as he does. "'I have never associated with anyone who was a heretic,' he said . . ." (p. 12). "'Sir, I have never met anyone who holds these opinions; my opinions came out of my own head'" (p. 21). "'No sir, but I read about that in the Fioretto della Bibia; the other things I have said about this chaos I made up in my own head'" (p. 46). "Apparently, Menocchio hadn't wanted to confide even in his wife and children: 'God forbid that they should have had such

[2]Thomas Kuehn, "Reading Microhistory: The Example of Giovanni and Lusanna," Journal of Modern History, September 1989, p. 516.
[3]H.C. Eric Midelfort, Catholic Historical Review, July 1982, p. 513.

opinions.' Despite all his ties to the village, he must have felt very much alone" (p. 81). The inquisitors had never encountered a similar case of what I will call "peasant pantheism:" "Unquestionably, these inquisitors had held innumerable trials in the Friuli involving Lutherans, witches, benandanti, blasphemers, even Anabaptists,without ever encountering anything like this" (p. 92). Under torture, when asked about his accomplices in belief, he mentioned only one person he had talked to (p. 111).[4]

Of course, the above selection of quotes ignores how Menocchio, as the "village atheist" of Montereale, would share his heresies with many in his village (although without converts, save one--p. 81), and had been influenced by others with heterodox ideas in turn (p. 21, 73). Also, the desire to protect others from the Inquisition could have made him dissemble about how many people he had talked to, which would be an intrinsic problem involved in using his testimony due to the circumstances it was taken in.

What should also be considered is how else Menocchio may have devised his heresies before positing the existence of millions of medieval peasant pantheists: "In view of the fact that Menocchio read a lot and traveled to Venice, however, I am inclined to believe that his cosmogony is his own original synthesis of elements of various origin, among which one probably put the distant echo of the statements mentioned by Zambelli (an Italian reviewer of The Cheese and the Worms)."[5] It could be Menocchio may have created his ideas defiantly through "reverse psychology" by inverting and twisting the ideas of the exploiting, dominant culture. Leonard Peikoff once described this process as follows:

> Nonintellectual rebels cannot challenge the fundamental ideas they have been taught. All they can do by way of rebellion is to accept a series of false alternatives urged by their teachers, and then defiantly choose what they regard as the anti-establishment side.

Thus the proliferation of groups that uphold anti-intellectuality as

[4]"It is a claim that Menocchio himself was careful to deny, even under torture," Midelfort, Ibid.

[5]Varlerio Valeri, Journal of Modern History, March 1982, p. 142.

the only alternative to today's intellectuals; mindless activism as the alternative to vacillating 'moderation'; Christian faith as the alternative to nihilism; female inferiority as the alternative to Women's Lib; racism as the alternative to egalitarianism; . . . and goverment controls for the sake of the middle class, as the alternative to government controls for the sake of the rich or the poor."[6]

Thus, the miller's ideas may not be an alternative to the dominant culture, as a reaction against it.

Also, Ginzburg's treatment of the dominant culture's content is rather stereotyped and misleading. The hegemonic culture is described as religiously intolerant, dogmatic, conservative, anti-egalitarian, nonrational (since anti-materialistic), and non-scientific (p. xvi, in contrast to the peasant oral culture's characteristics described on p. xix, xxvi, 112). While such a broadbrush description is generally justified, it distorts also. In particular, to say peasant culture's ideals of egalitarianism were independent of Christianity is unlikely, for Christianity had propagated the belief that all men were equal in the sight of God, and that riches were of no help spritually since its conception. The best example of this in the New Testament concerns Jesus' likening the richman's ability to enter the kingdom of God being like a camel's ability to pass through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:24). The life of St. Francis of Assisi and the orders of mendicant friars are a good example of this belief in action. (Of course, the Church did not always push this message clearly by any means). And to say peasant culture had "a naturalism tending toward the scientific" (p. xix) looks very shaky, judging from peasants' notorious superstitious tendencies to attribute all causes to God, the devil, or some other supernatural force as the immediate, direct cause of all problems and evils. In contrast, the avowedly Christian dominant culture in Italy and elsewhere in Christendom at this very time was creating the first true self-sustaining science, in the

[6]Leonard Peikoff, The Ominous Parallels The End of Freedom in America (New York: Stern and Day, 1982), p. 325.

persons of Galileo, Kepler, and others, building upon the work of such predecessors as Buridan and Oresme.[7] Since science was invented in such an avowedly Christian dominant culture, the two may not be intrinsically opposed as Ginzburg seems to believe. The acceptance of paternalism by the lower class also could serve to undermine Ginzburg's view that the peasantry was intrinsically egalitarian. For instance, one eighteenth century silkworker in England wrote this poem:

> "And may no treacherous, base designing men
> E'er make encrouchments on our rights again;
> May upright masters still augment their treasure,
> and journeymen pursue their work with pleasure,
> May arts and manufactories still increase,
> And Spitalfields be blest with prosperous peace."[8]

While it is hazardous for me to extrapolate from the eighteenth century English working class to the sixteenth century Italian peasantry, this is tame compared to the extrapolation Ginzburg is making. If the peasantry accepted paternalism and a hierarchically-ordered society, this would undermine another characteristic Ginzburg attributes to the medieval European peasant culture.

Ginzburg's primary mistake could well be to desire to read the present day secular, religiously tolerant, egalitarian-in-idealsculture into the past:

> "Only hindsight permits us to isolate those themes, already beginning 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 witin a fine, tortuous, but clearly distinguishable, line of development that can be folowed directly to the present. In a sense he is one of our forerunners" (p. xxvi).

This kind of subtle bias caused one reviewer to say: "One perceives at time in Ginzburg's works the echos of Bakhtin's crude equation: popular = materialist = progressive (both politically and intellectually). . . . It would seem that peasants (or shepherds), being instinctively materialist, are also instinctively scientific, whereas upper-class people presumably are

[7]Stanley Jaki, Science and Creation From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe (New York: Science History Publications, 1974).

[8]John Rule, The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850 (New York:

instinctively 'idealistic' and antiscientific."[9] Ginzburg has a perfectly valid point is saying the documentation to prove or disprove his hypothesis is of necessity virtually non-existent since mostly only the dominant culture produced and preserved written documents. This makes his hypothesis nearly unfalsifiable, which is why his bias becomes more of a matter for concern. I dislike the reasoning that since there is little documentation, we can believe in a pervasive widespread historical phemomena without it. An argument from silence is always a logical fallacy, even if Ginzburg argues very persuasively for making an exception to it for his book. It could well be Ginzburg has helped confirm Derrida's view texts have meanings the author(s) never intended, by extrapolating so much out of the Inquisition's records of (basically) one case (notice Ginzburg's mention of Derrida on p. xviii).

Ginzburg's attempt to reconstruct an entire culture of centuries primarily from the criminal records of one case is a very ingenious, but ultimately very tenuous extrapolation. It is much like trying to build a skyscraper upon some quicksand in the Everglades swamps: The documentation is much tooweak for historians to easily accept a speculation of such enormous import. Ginzburg admirably argues about the necessary lack of evidence for his hypothesis, but this constitutes an excellently-argued case of (ultimately) special pleading. While medieval European peasants were notoriously ignorant many times of the doctrines of the Catholic church (as many a churchman railed), it does not follow a vast, subterranean, competing, indeed totally "dominant" (among the peasants, that is) culture existed in medieval Europe. Peter the Hermit's vast host of peasant Crusaders casts doubt upon this. Although Ginzburg ingenously reconstructs the cosmology of a particular sixteenth century miller, it may remain just that: the cosmology of one sixteenth century miller.

[9]Valerio Valeri, p. 143.