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The Imperceptibility of Memory

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> "Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places."[1]

The starting point for the following reflections is everyday life in an encounter in Germany in the early 21st century. – This is where a reference appeared to someone who died long ago, who is unburied up to the present, on the one hand, and who, on the other hand, was abducted, tortured and cruelly executed by "the white man" / "the German" in the late 19th century in the course of the colonial project in what is today Cameroon. Picking up the traces of this story, which is not especially spectacular and presumably not at all unique, means asking: What happened? – At the same time, this question requires negotiating the place, from where it is raised, and the place, to which it is directed. To find out something about the violent death of Bisselé Akaba, it is therefore not only helpful to consult archives and talk with "experts", but also to iterate the encounter that led Moise Merlin Mabouna and me to this story.[2] The relationship to the colonial fact here is of a fragmentary and latent kind, no closed history, but rather a story, perhaps partly still living, which marks and forms the present. This

explicit contingency requires a situated knowledge that works through past occurrences, taking into account not only the subject matter, but also the production of colonial sources and the role these sources play in historiographical operations or in processes of remembrance. This is the path that this essay sets out on. Bisselé Akaba, *chef supérieur du canton* Elip, is Moise Merlin Mabouna's great-grandfather. How does the story of this dead man concern "me" at all, and what is at stake here?

Michel de Certeau has described the endeavor of "history" as a redistribution in space, as an act of changing something into something else.[3] The occurrence of space, then, is "the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities"; "it is actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it."[4] The historian is not someone who makes the history, not the subject of the action, but rather the one who is concerned with the making of history.[5]

> "Several people ran away, several fell by the way and four or five were murdered by the natives." (Hans Ramsay, 1892)

First Movement: Depletion and Increase

In the spring of 1892, the German Officer Hans Ramsay led an expedition, commissioned by the Department of Colonial Affairs, into the so-called outback of Cameroon. The expedition lasted eighty-four days, and its objective was the repression of intermediate trade and territorial expansion. Like every "leader" of an expedition, Ramsay was instructed to write a travel report with observations of political, scientific, military and economic relevance and to submit it as a report to the "Imperial Governor". Ramsay's

report, written by hand on 28 May 1892 in “Kamerun”[6], was delivered as a copy to the Colonial Department of the Office of Foreign Affairs in Berlin, addressed to the Imperial Chancellor at the time and Prussian Minister President Georg Leo Graf von Caprivi, and is found in this version as a file with the code R1001/3286 in the German Federal Archive Berlin-Lichterfelde and in the original version in the National Archive in Yaoundé.

An expedition is, first of all, a movement through space. One of the requirements associated with this relates to mastering the components of time and personnel. The report gives an account of this. It is possible to follow the relevant “mathematization” underlying its structure, but surprising deviations appear between the calculations, the process of quantifying knowledge and its result. If we look at this flickering of the account, it assumes a social form. The discrepancy of the facts produced and passed on calls for a story. It is the story of the people. “People” is what the report calls those, to whom its surveilling and categorizing attention is directed and yet whose trace vanishes again and again.

If one calculates the depletion and increase, striking and obviously difficult to control, of the various and apparently not always unambiguously classifiable “people”, doubts may arise about the orderly advance that inheres not only to the image of colonial conquest in popular memory, but also some scholarly works. As a construction, however, this image was already contemporary at that time. It is implicit to the inventorizing gesture of expedition reports and is found in the conventions of representing marching columns suggesting an overview, as depicted by early photographs. [7]

In the perspective of subsequent enumeration, however, different contours emerge: “the white man”[8] appears neither as necessarily

primary actor nor as the one with uncontradicted authority or power of definition over what happens. In light of the fluctuation of the "people", he appears more to be accentuated in the minority and as a report-writer distracted, de-centered, perhaps confused or misled by the multitude of the actions, interests or desires surrounding him. The file R1001/3286 on the "South Cameroon Outback Expedition No. 10" thus deals less with the occurrences during an expedition – with the rise and fall of murmuring and the excitement of a crowd – than with the attempt to control their experiences. Johannes Fabian speaks in this case of a "reining in" as a form of knowledge production leading to an unforeseeable insight, and an insight inescapable in its consequences, into the history of colonial encounters.[9] His reflection implies that a critique of the historical knowledge about colonial expansion, which is based on forms of knowledge like the document R1001/3286, ultimately presupposes recognizing the success of these kinds of expansions. For this reason, historians have started to search for "resistance". This, however, changes little in the conceptual framework of the organization of colonial sources, which often specifically hinders even being able to conceive of and to recognize "resistance". In addition, the question arises as to what benefit there is in searching for traces showing that imperialism was weaker than the image it liked to convey of itself; that the way colonial expansion was carried out was "wilder", less organized, less rational and also less continuously and successfully territorizing than is suggested by conventional notions. What does an insight like this say? That the colonized survived, carried on? Fabian suggests: "Even if we point out deception, misrepresentation and perhaps blindness in these encounters of exploration, conquest and exploitation, this will probably not essentially shake the belief in the fundamental rationality and hence the necessity of western expansion. A truly radical critique must aim at the concept of

rationality itself, especially at the inherent tendency of this concept to present itself as being outside historical contexts and above them."[10] If we follow this train of thought, then we would have to take up the direction of the lines of deterritorialization within the re-territorializing movements, by means of which "the white man" realized the connections between desiring, imagining, observing and penetrating – and thus also "understanding". Hans Ramsay's signification practice is "erratic": he constantly miscalculates, irritated by the permanent rectification of his own inventory. Or differently: it is a matter of reading his report as an articulation in space and in terms of how that which apparently required rationalization and delimitation directed his movements, and where he was driven to by what was supposed to be told, reported, counted, named, mapped, registered and, most of all, carefully separated from one another.

In comparison, the historian Ann Laura Stoler warns against precipitously wanting to read particularly colonial archives merely in an extracting way or "backwards" without deciphering them in their course. Colonial archives are places of the lawful preservation of knowledge and official stores of political guidelines. Reports like R1001/3286 inscribe new spatial references and thus eminently make history. Stolar calls for looking at the archive using ethnographic methods as a "paper empire": "If a notion of colonial ethnography starts from the premise that archival production is itself both a process and a powerful technology of rule, then we need not only to brush against the archive's received categories. We need to read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake – *along* the archival grain. [...] Reading only against the grain of the colonial archive pypasses the power in the production of the archive itself."[11] Stolar argues for delving more

intensively into the conventions of the imperial archive, into the practices that make up its implicit order, into its classifications and principles of organization, and its spatial arrangements and references, which she also interprets as all being "a telling prototype of a postmodern [state], predicated on global domination of information".[12]

Second Movement: Progressing in Resentfulness

Afterward, using the archive as a corpus closed in time allows historiography to perceive three lines of colonial territorialization. Because we are already "elsewhere", their figures can be traced in retrospect as answers to the flight of "the people" as well as to forms of the evaporation of what can be archived, thus delineating the process of the formation of colonial statehood: 1. militarization of the territory in the direction of the interior (e.g. the institutionalization of a so-called colonial protection force, which supplements acquired colonial soldiers as needed)[13]; 2. ethnicization of the resident populations (e.g. monetarization / labor conditions). Achille Mbembe calls this conglomeration a "terror formation" that is linked with biopower, the state of emergency and the state of siege. "In sum, colonies are zones in which war and disorder (...) stand side by side or alternate with each other."[14] The colony is a zone, according to Mbembe, in which the violence of the state of emergency is regarded as deployment in the service of "civilization". He continues: "The colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness stems from the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native."[15] The interval that gapes between these two sentences, corresponds to the echoes that bias and the arbitrariness of colonization cast into the space, by which not only the colony "on site" is affected, but also the metropolises and consequently

especially the complex and productive interplay between colony and metropolis.

If one searches in the archive for expedition reports, the subsequent practices of the numerously documented, so-called arrests are surrounded by a telling silence – probably not infrequently a line of flight of killing or "mowing down", in Hans Ramsay's words. Especially significant, in my view, is also the treatment of the colonial soldiers' women: nearly as strong in numbers as the male carriers / colonial soldiers / *mercenaires*, their function consisted of practices vital to the survival of the expedition, such as fanning out to make contact and to gather both information and food. In most of the reports, the rare passages that mention the colonial soldiers' women at all and the abilities of their social performance – trickery, translation, charm, theft, bargaining, quarreling and also not infrequently plundering – are censored in preparation for publication. This is also true of the preparation of Ramsay's manuscript for publication in the journal *Mitteilungen von Forschungsreisenden und Gelehrten aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten* ("Communiques from Researching Travelers and Scholars from the German Protectorates")[16] and applies there especially to the version of the events of 20 and 21 March 1892 that are relevant for us. Occurrences like those recorded and deleted for these days have been characterized up until recently as "insurrection", and sometimes this term is still used. Revisions of this kind have left their traces in colonial historiography: not merely that the discourse of the archive enhanced or was intended to enhance the legitimacy (or at least an intelligibility) of so-called "punitive expeditions"; "insurrections" presuppose the enforcement of domination that is rebelled against here. Entirely in keeping with the colonial founding idea, in this description "the people" are already colonized before they are colonized. In comparison, the

term *war* or *colonial war*[17] implies the equality – even though usually quite asymmetrically formed – of an adversary. The term colonial war can be used to address the practice of military operations as a means of colonial politics and to situate this in the context of the colonial dynamics of differentiation and terror formation. At the same time, colonial war is subject to no legal or institutional rules at all – and can therefore be completely exempted from a codified entry into the archive and consequently deleted entirely from western historiography.[18] A colonial war is associated with fantasies of savageness, death and unbounded barbarity of the others. Peace is not necessarily its result. Rather, the distinction between war and peace is irrelevant, as Mbembe stresses, because "peace" in the colony tends to "bear the face of a 'war without end".[19] This is why colonial war is a *sauvagerie*.

These observations are hardly amenable to simplifying our question about what happened. Even if we read R1001/3286 in a double perspective of the archive – both in its evolvement and counter to the direction of its production – the dynamic that is taken up, articulated and silenced here in the barbarousness of the others, casts its shadow, in the best case, on the subjectification of the narrator and its editors. The colonial war remains embedded in the episteme, according to which it is hardly surprising that the – irregular – execution of the leader of a military counter-defense does not appear. Or as V.Y. Mudimbe prosaically phrased it about the illusion – comparable with other histories, as he emphasizes – of an overall reconstitution of the deformed and disjointed knowledge about Africa: it is derived from the fact that the documents that provide us with answers, also dictate the questions.[20]

Third Movement: The Production of a Place as Palimpsest

However, the provenance of the question leading us on is not the colonial archive.

Therefore, it is also not a question that is provided for in the document R1001/3286 and about which it can give little information, but rather a question that led us into the colonial archive and disconcerted us there: Ramsay's report names the adversaries for his actions in Spring 1892 as the "Wintschoba people" and as allies the "Yambassa people"; the report contains neither the dead man we were searching for, nor the *Balamba*, who invoke this dead man and identify him by name, Bisselé Akaba. The "Wintschoba people" are not the Balamba, and yet these were not simply their neighbors, nor was it a matter of an error. The two are entangled. A possibility for newly phrasing the question about what happened – the event, the facts – is to query this significant difference.

Hans Ramsay prepared an itinerary that laid out the path of his expedition in detail.[21] It reveals imprints of his progress through the landscape and bears witness to the inherent violence of territorialization: the appropriation of space and equating it with a surface. Ramsay's entries are overwritings, which function not merely as symbolic acts of sovereign appropriation and control, because "discovery" only becomes "real", when the traveler comes "home" and draws his trophies onto maps and has them confirmed and fixed by the archive. Around 1913 the village name "Batscheba" appeared in the place of "Wintschoba" on the first map of Cameroon, the famous Moisel Map; the name of the chief there, "Bisĕle", is written next to it in brackets.[22] He was Moise Merlin Mabouna's grandfather; this page of the map is stored in the Prussian Cultural Possessions Foundation Unter den Linden in Berlin. This discursive process, leading from route sketches to maps, is ultimately tantamount to the material production of

borders and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property relations; the classification of peoples according to certain categories; the exploitation of resources; and finally the production of a substantial reservoir of cultural imaginaries, to which "Wintschoba", for instance, belongs. It is interesting that with "Wintschoba", Ramsay does not mark the transparent point of reference of a gesture indicating what he produced there marching through, namely a complete destruction by fire and uncounted dead, but rather a place that he characterizes as "located in a palm forest, heavily populated". In the local genealogy, this former village and the location of the war, which has remained undeveloped up to the present, are called *Mamba*. Mamba is located in the middle of today's Balamba, which comprises several villages and distinguished places, which hold memories of past events in the language of the Balamba. For instance, *Abenga-tschoba*, the place where no one hears the crying – a place where buried historiographies and processes of appropriation that have become minoritarian, hardly still known into the post-colony, seem to have been carried on. This thought was suggested to Moise and me in our research into numerous meaningless views of colonial maps by a sudden evidence: there is a tremendous similarity of sound between the village "Mdjiba / Mshiba", which Curt von Morgen passed through as the first white man on 30/31 December 1889 and entered in his itinerary in the place of Ramsay's "Wintschoba", and the expression *Ndjiba* in Balamba, which means roughly, "I'm not here, I'm not responsible". – Is it possible that this phrase, formed in the colonial archive into a proper name, preserves a history of "the people" carefully hidden? Could this be a history that tells of the struggle over geography and of movements that undermined or challenged the colonial conception of the space? In any case, Ndjiba is no visitation that ultimately reconciled itself to colonial dominance, but rather a

productive way of escaping, a trace that leads us to pursue the difference between dominance and hegemony, which more recent approaches of colonial and post-colonial historiography seek to capture with the term "colonial moment".[23]

"Wintschoba" / *Abenga-tschoba* / "Mdjiba /Mshiba" / *Balamba* / *Mamba* is a colonial palimpsest. It is not something placed next to or over something else, but rather layers sedimented into one another, which mutually animate one another, listen to, erase and together effect this "colonial moment" – and specifically in such a way that has become opaque, illegible, yet without entirely vanishing from today's practices and languages. When Ndjiba suddenly expresses itself from the colonial archive as a difference of names, then this is an actualization of the virtual that centrally breaks with the principle of identity. It is not what it was, but rather what had to come about, in order not to become legend or ideology. It is that which *means* and makes room for the future, offers the indeterminant its body – emergence.

Fourth Movement: *Connaissance*

Ndjiba can be taken as an indication of the distinctiveness of the palimpsest "Wintschoba" / *Abenga-tschoba* / "Mdjiba /Mshiba" / *Balamba* / *Mamba*, to the extent that it is an ambiguous articulation of a presence of something that would already be elsewhere; something that has opened up inside for its other. Ndjiba eludes what histories could hide, in order to escape history; it is stored in a layer, imperceptible in memory – "like grass [...] slipping between things and growing in the midst of things"[24] – and takes effect there as a recalling of what has been forgotten, which affects and transforms the ability of bodies to act or be acted upon. Following this call, we enter into a fourth movement, which

operates below the level of perception and suspends the opposition between a subject (that knows) and an object (that is known). There, in *co-naissance* (literally together-birth), knowledge is generated, which is bound to context like every knowledge, but which calculates with what is shared, what is commonplace and familiar, which precedes its generation and is engendered by it at the same time. What is imperceptible of memory does not mean memories that are not visible, but rather a zone of the familiar, which could be capable of achieving a new language, a new knowledge for a new social force that could be called postcoloniality.[25] This language lies beyond a language of reparations, to which the language of places and missing graves belongs. The imperceptibility of memory is derived specifically from the impossibility of encountering the past with politics of the past. It operates neither *here* nor *quelque part ailleurs*, but rather in the spatial experiment: here is not the opposite of there, here is not here, one is not one, one and one is not two, one is many. The effects of its actualization always also include separations and current confrontations, because experimenting with the imperceptibility of memory is neither innocent nor indeterminant, but is instead based on the analysis of representations, without disregarding the principle of truth.[26] It is not centers of trade and administration, but rather the "Kaff" / backwater town / *le bled* / *la brousse* that guide the actions of *connaissance* here, just like backwoods and transnational palimpsests.

In Autumn 2005 I set up our camera in Balamba and looked through the finder; Moise opened the discussion with a question he had brought back from Germany; the young people from the village were gathered around us, and Jean-Pierre Mabouna Bisselé, Moise's father, began his account of the colonial war of 1892, as it was conveyed to him by eye-witnesses, with the words:

“It was not – you can’t compare it with a matter of racism, no. Do you understand a little? It is very difficult to fight, when you want to fight against someone who has firearms, when all you have yourself are small arrows. Well, as soon as the German officer gave the order to fire, there were several dead at once on Bisselé’s side…”

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[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2002, 118.

[2] In the course of our first joint video work, Rien ne vaut que la vie, mais la vie même ne vaut rien, 25 min., DV color, 2002/03, which was both the occasion and the realization of our encounter and co-authorship, under the title *Choix d'un passé. traits d'union* we carry out documentary-experimental film research into colonial history, memory and continuity, which starts at the point of the death of Bisselé Akaba. We are less interested here in the reconstruction of a historical truth, but rather in the “strict objectivity” that understands what may be learned about this death as a contemporary production process, to which numerous actors contribute and which can be newly placed to disposition through space/time relations.
Choix d'un passé. traits d'union currently comprises the two videos À travers l'encoche d'un voyage dans la bibliothèque coloniale. Notes pittoresques, 25 min., DV color, 2009, and 2006-1892 = 114 ans/jahre, 7 min., DV color, loop, 2006 (all the videos are available for hire from arsenal experimental, Berlin), four maps on canvas, 101,09 x 176 cm each, 2009, on the “Southern Cameroon

Hinterland Expedition No. 10" from 1892 with the titles "LINIEN DER TERRITORIALISIERUNG I: RETERRITORIALISIERUNG / TERRITORIALISIERUNG, Daten des kolonialen Archivs: Es sind die Darstellungsformen, welche den von der 'Süd Kamerun Hinterland Expedition Nr. 10' durchquerten Raum erschließen"; "LINIEN DER DETERRITORIALISIERUNG I: Schwund und Zuwachs des Expeditionsbestandes: Rekonstruktion anhand des Berichts von Ramsay"; "LINIEN DER DETERRITORIALISIERUNG II: Gequälte Sprache (torture de langue) und verdrehte Landschaft"; "LINIEN DER TERRITORIALISIERUNG II: Die Einrichtung der kolonialen Station in Balinga", and the essays: Kuster (pending): "L'avenir est un long passé", in: Andrei Siclodi (Ed.), *Private Investigations: Forschung, Wissensaneignung und -verarbeitung in zeitgenössischen Kunstpraktiken*, Innsbruck: büchs'n'books - Art and Knowledge Production in Context; Kuster (2009) in conversation with Stefan Nowotny: "'J'y étais'. On Continuing the Speaking of Testimonies from the Year 1892": http://eipcp.net/transversal/0408/kuster/en, "Note d'intention zu 2006-1892=114 ans/jahre", in: *Beyond Culture: The Politics of Translation*, at: http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/kuster-strands01de.

[3] Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris: Édition Gallimard, 2007 (1975), 103.

[4] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op.cit., 117.

[5] Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 21, 49-50.

[6] "Kamerun" or "German Cameroon" at that time corresponded to Douala today.

[7] Technical reasons – long exposure times required and the associated posing and setting up of a tripod – must be taken into account in the production of this visual convention. Most of the preserved photographs, such as those in the picture archive of the German Colonial Society, were probably taken when setting off and are by no means snapshots taken along the way.

[8] Along with the "expedition leader" Hans Ramsay, there were at most four more German white men – a doctor and three officers.

[9] Johannes Fabian, *Tropenfieber. Wissenschaft und Wahn in der Erforschung Zentralafrikas,* Munich, 2001, 18.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ann Laura Stoler, „Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", in: *Archival Science 2*, 2002, 87-109, here 100-101.

[12] Ibid., 97.

[13] "Toward the exterior", the formation of colonial statehood is secured by border agreements with other European colonial powers.

[14] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", in: *Public Culture* 15(1) 2003, 11-40, 24.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Bericht des Leiters der Südkamerun-Hinterlandsexpedition H. Ramsay über seine Reise von den Ediäfällen nach dem Dibamba (Lungasi)", in: *Mitteilungen von Forschungsreisenden und Gelehrten aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten 6* (1893), 281-286. A shorter summary of the goals and results of the expedition was already

published under the title “Expedition in das südliche Hinterland“ in 1892 in the *Deutschen Kolonialblatt*.

[17] On terminology used in the context of the German colonial occupation of Cameroon, see for instance: Florian Hoffmann, *Okkupation und Militärverwaltung in Kamerun. Etablierung und Institutionalisierung des kolonialen Gewaltmonopols 1891-1914*. Vol. 1, Göttingen 2007, 9-14.

[18] A list of personal pronouns in Ramsay’s report shows: “they” – and that always means certain or indeterminate “people” – shoot twelve times; “he” fires a volley three times; “I” is never once actively present with a weapon.

[19] Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, 23. In this text, however, which discusses the boundaries of sovereignty and the conception of biopower, Mbembe does not use the term “colonial war” at all, but speaks instead of war in the colony.

[20] V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, *Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge,* 1988, 187.

[21] The itinerary can be found in the journal *Mitteilungen von Forschungsreisenden und Gelehrten aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten.*

[22] The so-called Moisel Map (1909/10) consists of a series of multiple pages presenting a comprehensive “Kamerun” in a scale of 1:300,000 for the first time. The map forms the basis of the cartography of the state of Cameroon up to the present.

[23] On this, see, for instance: Achille Mbembe, Jean-François Bayart and Comi Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, Paris: Karthala 2008; Jean-François Bayart, “Les études postcoloniales, une invention politique de la tradition?“, in: *Sociétés*

politiques comparées, Revue Européenne d'analyse des sociétés politiques, No. 14, April 2009. – Initially perceived as a provocation, the "colonial moment" was intended to take over for speaking about the "colonial situation" and (in analogy to *Subaltern Studies*) to undertake a de-totalization of colonialism as a closed social phenomenon. It is this de-totalization that first enables taking up the traces of the autonomy of autochtone fields of thinking and acting, which have outlasted the period of colonial occupation and cannot be reduced to a reactive pattern of (collaborative or conflictual) interaction between the colonized and the colonial project. What this involves is explicitly not what appears in western epistemology as "tradition". Instead, the understanding of the colonial moment presupposes "that the analysis takes into consideration, more than ever before, the different practices of negotiation, the different types of poaching – the entire logic of unexploded bombs, ambiguities or slip-sliding, which led to the colonial field being in reality a highly incoherent plurality." (Achille Mbembe, "Domaine de la Nuit et Autorité Onirique dans les Maquis du Sud-Cameroun 1955-1958", in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 32, Nr. 1, 1991, 97)

What seems to me to be important here for our question about what happened is not only that the coherency of the colonial archive does not emerge from itself, but rather that what can be explored as a geography of Balamba in local genealogies is more complex: it consists of relations that were covered up and silenced by the introduction of the colonial ordering of space, but did not remain unstriated by it. Much of that still has an effect up to the present under ground and also joined with the anti-colonial period, i.e. the time of independencies and their memory that was also buried, because it was criminalized for a long time.

[24] Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, London, 1987, 280

[25] On "imperceptible politics", see the extensive discussion in: Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the 21 Century*, London: Pluto Press 2008, especially 55-82.

[26] See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice*, trans. Antony Shugaar, Verso: London, New York 2002. "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. There are many reasons for this devaluation, and not all of them are intellectual in nature. One reason certainly has to do with the overblown importance acquired – on both shores of the Atlantic, in France and in the United States of America – by the term 'representation'. Because of the various uses to which it has been put, the term winds up creating an insurmountable wall around the historian. Historical sources tend to be examined exclusively as sources of themselves (of the way in which they were constructed), not as sources of the things they discuss. In other words, there is an analysis of the sources (written, visual and so on) as evidence of social 'representations': at the same time there is a general rejection of the possibility of analysing the relationships between the representations and the reality they depict or represent; this is dismissed as an unforgivable instance of naive positivism. Now, those relationships are never straightforward – to think they are simple mirrorings of reality would indeed be naive. 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, 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." (16-17)