

Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)



“Let the “heretics” rise again, as they did in the past, to denounce, courageously, the ravages of ancient and modern-day slaveries”

October 15th, 2015

Marta Scaglioni interviews Giulio Cipollone¹

Marta Scaglioni: *Could you please recount, in brief, how you became an historian? What were the sources of your intellectual inspiration?*

Giulio Cipollone: Since my early school days, I opted for Cicero’s philosophy on the value of history as *magistra vitae*: history, in other words, must be true and simple, exemplary and useful, and told in such a way as to leave no room for distorting or concealing the truth. Moreover, the very recognition, in fact, that history was, and is, generally recorded and written (i.e. manipulated) by the victors and the rich and powerful members of the establishment further strengthened in me as an historian the moral commitment to the discipline. The existence of a plurality of histories and historiographies offered me room for a twofold exercise: one was to compile a shared historical truth through the reading of primary sources from both sides of the fence, with the additional goal of re-reading and re-writing these stories in conjunction with the lives of the protagonists. And I have applied this approach to the story of women and men; Whites and Blacks; masters and slaves; captors and prisoners; Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians; Sunnis and Shiites; or even to single nations with their interpretative variability at the change of every government or regime. Furthermore, I believe it is imperative to delve into the history of the lower classes, of those men and women, that is, who did not

¹ Giulio Cipollone (born in 1946) joined the Order of the Most Holy Trinity for the Redemption of Captives (established in 1198) as a young scholar, which is nowadays committed to humanitarian and solidarity services. For over twenty years he researched in the major archives in Europe on captivity and slavery. He devoted the last twenty years to research, collaboration with various universities and research centres, as well as teaching; he currently teaches Medieval History at Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.



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have the capacity or the means to write their own history: these people merely left behind a “mirrored mark”; it was only in rare instances that they had the opportunity to impress upon history a bright mark, particularly when solidarity and humanitarian sentiment were at stake. As regards history, I undertook an additional two-pronged endeavor: on the one hand, I set out to explore in greater depth the “history of margins” between cultures: a particularly fruitful standpoint from which to observe humanity’s progress; and document, on the other, the “history of persistence”: by persistence I intend especially the resort to violence and war when animosities and hostilities reach the boiling point. The pretexts for and the ensuing pantomime toward aggression, both of which arise along the cultural divide of “being inside or outside the group” (an either/or), punctuate the retrograde steps of humanity on the path of cultural backwardness. This approach to history is best exemplified by the vicissitudes of the Mediterranean seaboard, which has been the stage for myriads of stories of both coexistence and war, stories of slavery and emancipation, and chronicles of captivity and liberation of war victims: most of these were the effect of crusades and *jihad*, and of piracy and buccaneering.

Marta Scaglioni: *Your research focuses mainly on the period of the crusades. First, why did you decide to specialize on this issue? Second, do you think that studying this particular period can shed light on today’s historical dynamics of the encounter/clash between Christianity and Islam?*

Giulio Cipollone: The Order of the Most Holy Trinity for the Redemption of the Captives was established at the end of the 12th century, between the third and the fourth crusade, with the aim of freeing “holy wars” prisoners, both Christians and Muslims. I am a member of the Historical Institute of this order since its inception. The institute arose in response to the need, expressed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), of a return to the original spirit and mission of the Church and of the ancient holy orders: hence the ongoing effort to produce specialized academic research on the history of the Trinitarians by exhuming and studying original documents. The study of the crusades and of *jihad* is of pivotal importance for a solid understanding of today’s dynamics between the “Western” world, with its firm, preponderant Christian roots, and the “Islamic” one. Indeed, one may extract from the original documents two phenomena that are of the highest significance for modern-day scholars: first, all centers of power, even theocratic ones, employ a “religious vocabulary” in support of war and subjugation of the enemies that is virtually identical; second, within the realms of Christendom and Islam, acts of tolerance were far fewer than acts of intolerance, both of which were dispensed in a similar fashion. In the final analysis, the similarity between the language of Popes and the language of Sultans when it came to “holy war,” and these potentates’ higher interest for the political economy of war rather than for the human fate the victims, are part of a heavy legacy that should prompt contemporary scholarship to redirect dramatically their approach to the study of international relations.



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Marta Scaglioni: *What is the relevance of certain terminologies in the study of slavery and freedom? Why do scholars need to exert much caution in employing terms in different geographical and historical contexts according to different etymologies, semantic nuances and variable uses?*

Giulio Cipollone: When comparing high-level Christian epistolary sources with their Islamic counterparts, one cannot but notice the existence of a nearly-identical vocabulary of religious propaganda inciting the masses to holy war. For example, letters drafted by the Chancellor of Pope Innocent III and by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsūf himself present striking linguistic similarities. In sum, the language of the pope and of the sultan, which was molded according to the circumstances, required a particular kind of philological sophistication in order to exhort, advise, and steer the coreligionists in such a way as not to compromise the outcome of a military enterprise allegedly supported by a wide consensus. The divine call to war towered over everything: God wishes it, *Deus vult*, and *fi sabīl Allāh*.

Marta Scaglioni: *What is the difference between the Islamic notions of asir or ‘abd and the Christian acceptance of captivus, war prisoner, or slave?*

Giulio Cipollone: A symmetry interlinks the two words in their corresponding worlds: prisoner (*captivus/asīr*) and slave (*servus/‘abd*); based on a different anthropological and theological perspective, this symmetry is experienced with a different sensibility. *‘Abd/slave*: every Muslim is *‘abd Allāh*, slave and subjected to Allah. Slave is the one who is owned by a master and is subjugated by him; different stages of subjugation shape different kinds of slavery, along with a variety of conceivable abuses. *Captivus/asīr* means being owned by a victorious enemy; and for Christians and Muslims alike, it means being owned by the worst sort of enemy: the infidel. The prisoners of the crusades and jihads were enslaved and subjugated, often humiliated, for the glory of one’s own God. They became important instruments for the sake of ransom, exchange, benefit, and service as slaves. During a 20-year-long research in the maritime archives of Portugal, Spain, France, and Italy, I retrieved countless stories of prisoners, which told of ordinary people that have been sold and bought again several times without ever being freed. On the other hand, the stories of Christians held captive in the hands of other Christians and of Muslims enslaved by their own denote the existence of captivity among coreligionists, and it is altogether a different sort of narrative.

Marta Scaglioni: *Captivity in the hands of Muslims acquired a dreadful reputation in the Christian narratives of the time, and reports of mutilations, cruelties, and frequent killings subsequently spread among the population. Could you give us a few examples of this sort of brutality?*



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Giulio Cipollone: Epistolary collections, as well as notarial and narrative documentation all bear numerous testimonies of a variety of violent acts, some of them of an extreme kind, inflicted on enemy captives and infidels. From the 16th century onwards, the suffering of and the cruelties perpetrated against Christian captives by infidel enemies gave life to a rich literature. Among the most horrifying deeds one can mention a report by Pope Innocence III himself (1198-1216) which told of a Christian captive who, condemned by the Saracens to die of starvation, went so far as killing wife and daughter, both held captives with him, and eating his own daughter's flesh.

Marta Scaglioni: *On the other hand, what did Christians do with their captivi?*

Giulio Cipollone: Christians reacted symmetrically to the cruelties committed by their Muslim counterpart; mercenary interest often prevailed over religious commitment. Records of the time show that princes and members of the Cavalry detained their Muslim captives rather than exchange them with Christian captives in the hands of Saracens, who, in turn, were plainly amenable to exchange their prisoners and would have been willing to be captured by Christian princes.

Marta Scaglioni: *As an historian of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity for the Redemption of the Captives, could you please tell us about the origin and the mission of this holy order? What other medieval congregations pursued the same mission of freeing prisoners-of-war?*

Giulio Cipollone: The *ordo sanctae trinitaris et captivorum* was established in the last decade of the 12th century, between the third and the fourth crusade, immediately after Şalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsūf conquered Jerusalem in 1187. The defeat was a major shock to Christendom as a whole. Catastrophic news reports from the frontline relayed that hundreds of thousands captives were then in the hands of Muslims; and this was in addition to the older stories of captivity in the area, not to mention the more recent effects of the Christian routs in Acre, Jaffa, and Alarcos —all chapters of a never-ending state of warfare all over the Middle East. Twenty-thousand Christian prisoners, in total, were supposed to be in the hands of Muslims, detained in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Alexandria; other internment camps were scattered across the Maghreb regions and in Muslim Spain. On top of all this, the deafening outcry of thousands new captives was amplified by propaganda slogans and roaring calls to rearmament on an ever growing scale. Yet, faced with the calamities of the holy war, individual thinkers and whole movements came forth to object to the war publicly: they soon became suspect and were stigmatized as heretics. The founder of the Trinitarians was John of Matha, an Occitan Christian Saint who was educated in Paris. His was the novel intuition of proposing an alternative to the military service: he advocated humanitarian service, instead, within the organizational structure of a sort of *ante diem* International Red Cross. Notwithstanding



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the current regulations, which prohibited any contact with the Saracens, the Popes approved, protected, and promoted the activities of the Trinitarians, who could ransom Christian captives from the hands of Muslims and free Muslims from the hands of Christians, and finally exchange the ones for the others. A magnificent 1210 mosaic is still visible in Rome at an intersection between the Colosseum and the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran: Jesus Christ frees a (White) Christian and a (Black) Mohammedan captive, in what is *de facto* a sort of a manifesto of liberation for both Christians and Muslims. Nobel Prize Desmond Tutu was struck by the aesthetics and the message of it, once he admired it in Rome. Nonetheless, even if seeds of anti-militarism had thus been planted by institutions like the Trinitarians, the rearmament race did not stop: in the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1215) no word on the captives' fate was spoken. The military-religious orders, like the Templars, made prisoners on the one hand, and were bent on freeing their own captives, on the other; many abbeys, like Silos and other dioceses, directly interceded for the liberation of Christian captives, and the radius and scope of these interventions depended on the political finesse of the individual abbots and bishops involved. Even Christian princes dealt with the issue of freeing their own captives according to economic priorities and military interests. In connection with the interest of Christian princes in the fate of their own prisoners-of-war, of singular importance was the establishment of the religious order of the Mercedarians (*regalis ac militaris ordo*). This Order was founded as a commandery of the Aragonese King in 1218 and remained under strict dependency of the king of Spain throughout the following centuries.

Marta Scaglioni: *How many liberation strategies have you identified in your research and what is their nature?*

Giulio Cipollone: A vast set of interests and a wide commercial network developed around the captives on an international scale: this happened as the captive was frequently reduced to a mere material, commercial commodity. Beyond the common religious belonging and the *christiana pietas*, the nature of such interests was quite diverse: profit and business, exchange and trade, buying and selling, seasonal work, sexual services, and the multitudinous uses of slavery. From what we know, a captive could be redeemed and re-sold, without ever being *manumitted* (definitively emancipated). On the one hand, there was *redemption*, a word stemming from *re-(d)emere* (i.e. to repurchase), which implies repurchasing a captive from the hands of the victorious captor. This action, however, did not signify final liberation, but, customarily, the mere handing over of the commodity-slave to a new acquirer. Finally, there was manumission, which gives the prisoner full freedom, restituting him back to his family and community. Manumission occurred most commonly through the exchange of prisoners for a substantial sum of money. The activities surrounding the liberation of captives were numerous and various; they often involved a variety of actors and intermediaries in the course of a single mission. Popes used to collaborate with the Trinitarians in the redemption of captives at the time of crusades and *jihads* by providing them with international safe-conducts; successively, the princes took



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over this prerogative of issuing key documents owing to the considerable amounts of money that were made by swapping captives across national borders. According to their statute, the Trinitarians funded their ransoming activities by devoting a third of all their belongings, revenues, and donations to the special cause of wartime captivity and enslavement.

Marta Scaglioni: *How does the Order of the Most Holy Trinity relate to contemporary slavery? How did the concept and the practice of slavery change in the course of time?*

Giulio Cipollone: As it is for other century-old institutions, the Order of the Most Holy Trinity's *forte* is its ability to change, adapt, and modernize while "staying true to itself" even in the face of today's challenges and tomorrow's uncertainties. The order today is active at various cultural latitudes and embedded in various geo-political centers, including those small, local churches where it is active. The ability to understand today's challenges and opportunities is now under the purview of single districts and local branches of the holy order, which serve their communities by seeking to alleviate general human suffering, e.g., handicaps, incarceration, and all those ills that may be fought through the provision of assistance/relief in so-called Third World countries. The most advanced expression on the Muslim-Christian divide of this humanitarian effort —something which connects it all the back to the original liberation missions of the middle ages— is the presence of the Trinitarian Order in some Islamic countries: there, it is perennially engaged in fostering an understanding between the "West" and all humanitarian bodies in the Islamic communities.

Marta Scaglioni: *In 1990, while civil war was raging in Sudan, the direct acquisition of slaves from the hands of the slaveholders sparked a new debate on the theme of global slavery. Some observers objected to the practice lest it should paradoxically aggravate the systematic enslavement of victims during a war. What is your position on the controversy?*

Giulio Cipollone: An historian's mind is projected into the future even if the historian himself is sunk up to his neck into the contemporary problems of modern-day society. The phenomenon you mentioned is food for thought. At the beginning of the 1990s, the holy order established a number of relief centers in Egypt and in Sudan with a view to placing itself at the very heart of internationally significant events —events which, as we now know, eventually evolved into what is popularly known as the "Arab Spring." In the span of roughly eight centuries, it is estimated that the Trinitarians managed to free approximately 900,000 persons. The question whether the Trinitarians' effort to liberate captives unintentionally made slave-owners richer and further stimulated the greed and unscrupulousness of these traders is an old one. Even today, human traffickers make big money by ferrying across the seas human flesh, or "human waste" as the Pope said. After



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having gone through thousands of primary sources, I may indicate, as an historian, what could be a few successful avenues for tackling the problem of modern-day slavery, as well as the related issue of transnational and global migrations.

1. *Focus on confidence-inducing mainstays.* First of all, there is an urgent need for repositioning the *person* at the very center of everything and above everything, with his/her dignity and equality. This approach would eliminate the barbarous mindset that instinctively preys on the weak, that is, on persons who cannot manage on their own. Second, it is imperative that we learn to “grow up together,” culturally and religiously speaking; and to do so with the patience and sensibility that is required for such transformations. Third, one must eschew the hypocrisy that breeds between what is verbally proclaimed and what is effectively done: i.e., between the letter of charters, conventions, documents, declarations, etc. and what is produced concretely. Finally, we ought to reflect on a) what *really* “makes money” for the three most prosperous communities of the world; and b) the profound cultural difference amongst Muslims themselves coupled with the geopolitical interests affecting them all in the face of globalization, especially financially and economically. The foregoing directives may help us reorder the current state of “disorderly order.”

2. *Concrete actions.* We should strive to minimize the possibilities of fueling additional forms of political disorder and stalemate so as to break the never-ending and systemic rapport of dependency linking poor countries to rich ones. Humanitarian relief is the key, not armaments. And not only should we ban mechanical weapons, but also those sociological weapons that so efficiently undermine the dignity and mnemonic faculties of people, inducing them thereby to mortify and relegate human relationships to a role wholly subservient to that of merely producing and consuming. We should suppress the hunger for military expansion and dominion that drives both western and Islamic powers and the enormous arms trade that goes with it.

A hopeful note. Let the “heretics” rise again, as they did in the past, to denounce, courageously, the ravages of ancient and modern-day slaveries, along with the diffused hypocrisy of all those who do not show any coherence between the words they profess and the proclamations they undersign and what they practically carry out on a daily basis; let the heretics denounce injustice as they think ahead of the steps that need to be taken to propel humanity forward, overcoming the ongoing drive to mortify it with anti-human setbacks. And let us follow in the dissenting and anti-system footsteps of righteous men – all of them part of that eternal minority, incapable of violence, which has chosen a path other than that of war and violence: the path of humanitarian relief carried out with unarmed hands. These men have walked the earth at the most diverse cultural latitudes, and at different times. In the Mediterranean area, we may recall the testimonies of Peter Waldo, John of Martha, Francis of Assisi, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Walter Map, Isaac of Stella, Yehuda Ben Šmu’el Ha-Levi, Mosè Maimònide, Ġalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, and ‘Alī ibn Muhammad ibn al-‘Arabī.



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