

REVIEWS

HENNING TRÜPER

Topography of a method. François-Louis Ganshof and the writing of history

Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck (Historische Wissenschaften 2), 2014, VIII-437 pp. ill., isbn 978-3-16-153177-4

Henning Trüper's book, drawn from his PhD obtained in 2008 at the European University Institute at Florence, is much more than a mere study in historiography. It offers a profound and intriguing study of the work and influence of the historian and mediaevalist François-Louis Ganshof (1895-1980) of Ghent University. As successor to Henri Pirenne, the man taught influential students who in turn became professors in their own right : R. C. Van Caenegem, A. Verhulst, Jan Dhondt, to name but the best-known. Ganshof's central position in Belgian academia, together with the fact that he walked in the footsteps of Pirenne which also bestowed considerable influence in academic circles in (Western) Europe, was reinforced by the permanent and personal links his family had with the Belgian administrative and judicial establishment. His younger brother, Walter Ganshof Vander Meersch, (who had changed his name including their mother's family name) was a top civil servant, foremost in judicial affairs, occupying, among other functions, the very sensible role of head of the State Security in the years following the Second World War. Both brothers visited Weimar and the Nazi camp of Buchenwald very shortly after its liberation in April 1945. The report Ganshof wrote, and the pictures he took, offer Trüper (pages 195 a.f., with many reproductions) a most welcome case to discuss Ganshof's position in the role of observer and producer of historical testimony. This is a solid basis, allowing elaboration on the way Ganshof used to handle historical testimony in the course

of his personal research. This was primarily focused on the working of the institutions during the Carolingian period, on early Flemish history and on agriculture in the early Middle Ages. The period in which had lived Ganshof and the subject of his research were condemned, however, to meet and influence each other or, as Trüper put it (p. 142), it was a necessary 'to remove Charlemagne from the toolkit of nationalist discourse by turning him into a failure' in the decades following the Second World War.

Trüper's book is above all a rare and very welcome study of the way a historian writes and constructs history. He therefore not only uses what is common in historiography (the final published works) but looks at all possible sources, stretching from letters of complaint (to the national railway authorities or taxi companies!), exam reports and grades to lecture notes, obituaries, reviews, picture postcards. Everything that the prolific writer (and *collectionneur* of his own writings) Ganshof undoubtedly was, has been put to use in a most impressive and convincing way, along with recorded seminars and radio lectures. This provides an original approach to penetrate into the strategies a scholar used in order to impress and influence his audience and to construct, not only a certain vision of history, but even his own persona! This very abundant material has allowed Trüper to conduct a very close reading or thick description that has few equivalents. Some of Ganshof's students are still alive and oral testimony has also proved to be very useful.

Following an introduction with the standard biographical details on Ganshof, four parts develop.

Henning Trüper

Topography
of a Method



*Historische
Wissensforschung 2*

Mohr Siebeck

It starts, of course, with the methodology and values which influenced his writing, mainly inspired by the classic handbook on historical methodology by Langlois and Seignobos (first edition : 1898) and tempered by Ganshof's own professional ethical code as emerges from obituaries and methodological notes. Part two is mainly influenced by Ganshof's scholarly publications, but also by his (historically-inspired) juvenilia and other peripheral texts. It allows Trüper to push his analysis into the influence of historical time and questions how the climate in which a scholarly work is produced links with historical time. It also creates a portrait of Ganshof the historian as witness of his own present time and the historicisation of his own period. Part three examines the social interactions in the life of Ganshof the scholar : both active and present in person and thus can be retrieved through typical forms of writings (letters, reports etc.) in faculty life or are physically absent (in the context of the international field of the discipline, but which permeate through other forms of writing in an almost virtual way. In part four, the writing practice is considered: how did Ganshof proceed to produce the final results of his scholarly interests? We can follow this process via the analysis of his extremely structured way of taking notes (inculcated in his own students, and becoming as such an influential model of research), ending with the elaboration of a piece of research ready for publication. This section also considers the way in which Ganshof wrote, within his private study in his home in Brussels, as an important piece of the argument. A picture from 1959, illustrating the book's cover, summarises the '*huis clos*' this working habit finally became. Upon entering the study, private life was suspended and the scholar

entered into a world of his own, governed by specific relations to ethical codes and methodology.

The book may look at first sight to be imbued by a strong tendency to abstraction and abundantly uses philosophical and linguistic theory. Happily, the equally abundant testimonies of all sorts concerning Ganshof's actions both inside and outside academia do offer sufficient illustration to make Trüper's book a model for similar research. Of course, the figure of Ganshof himself (compared, for instance, with his teacher Pirenne) may not still have the same relevance at first glance as his figure and work was during his lifetime. It could thus be regarded as a mere illustration of a past, be it one situated in the world of academic history-writing. Indeed, when one compares the actual style of teaching and of research organisation, even in the context of Ghent University's mediaeval history department, with what was the norm in Ganshof's day (let's not forget he retired in 1961 and died in 1980), it becomes clear that Ganshof's time looks much more distant for us than the actual number of years would suggest. It nevertheless illustrates the intellectual boundaries of the methodology and ambitions of historians who, like Ganshof, still believed that absolute certainty (and objectivity) could be attained. The distance between the way history is dealt with today, as compared to the methods in vogue in this last phase of positivist belief in certainties, seems very striking. It may be the reason why Ganshof, and many of his generation, restricted their intellectual enterprise to "safe" subjects like the working of Carolingian institutions. With a narrower scope of research, one can more easily attain a level of self-reassuring certainty. One of the most interesting parts of the book (and there

are many) concerns a long, and very personal, letter sent by Ganshof to Pirenne in 1929 (p. 272 a.f.). In this letter Ganshof revealed to his 'master' not only his changing position on the ongoing struggle for the '*flamandisation*' of Ghent University on the great quarrel over the deanship within the faculty, but above all he formulates his personal doubts about whether his research was evolving in a direction that would make him a worthy successor to Pirenne. Trüper dissects this letter, referring to its almost religious undertones, as a confession of the limits of his undertakings in comparison to Pirenne's. Ganshof, despite all the reassurance which he 'normally' displayed, is portrayed here as a man, vulnerable and doubtful, going through a full intellectual crisis. It renders him not only more human, but it allows us to pose the question of the extent to which this insight influenced his ongoing struggle with history. This tendency that became clear in his later work; he argued that it was important to restrict oneself to research in a very specialist field, avoiding the writing of the big synthesis on Charlemagne and his epoch which the outside world expected him to write.

Apart from all this, the reader will find abundant material on Ganshof's role as a leading intellectual of his time dealing with the problems Belgian policy and society had to face during those turbulent decades. Ganshof was imbued with high principles of morality and ethics, his own choice to become an active member of the Protestant church, though raised a Catholic, being an important factor in this. Nevertheless one can follow many instances in this book where he struggled with the contingencies of his time and career when, for instance, he uses all of his influences to get Theo Luyckx a nomination

in Ghent University. In favouring Luyckx over other possible candidates, using moral instead of scientific standards to legitimize his preference he supported an historian targeted by the university's *epuration* commission after the war and who had been accused of sympathy, if not open collaboration, with the Flemish nationalist party, the VNV (p. 256 a.f.). Given his intellectual preferences (Carolingian history, the early Middle Ages) already in the 1930s and even more so after the war, Ganshof tried to establish a sort of intellectual understanding with German historians, going as far as to whitewash the career of the historian, Franz Petri, a prominent member in the occupation's administration, against the advice of the Belgian Minister of Education, Camille Huysmans (p. 305). In this respect, Ganshof's stand was exactly the opposite of the one taken by Pirenne after the First World War. His aversion for the *Annales* school (the aversion was mutual, considering the alleged comments by Braudel judging him '*bête*' p. 292), advocated strongly during the 1920s by Pirenne, is an aspect Trüper does not develop. Given the gap concerning their respective *Nachleben*, Ganshof could in this respect be considered, as Dhondt has argued indirectly in his study of Pirenne, as the man who 'suffocated' important elements of Pirenne's intellectual legacy for at least a generation. How this was done while demonstrating full respect and allegiance towards his master in the eyes of the outside world is one of the most intriguing aspects which this remarkable book offers.

Marc Boone
(Ghent University)