


## Forms of Knowledge and Regimes of Truth: The Case of the Vajont Disaster

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### Abstract

This article builds on Carlo Ginzburg’s reflections on truth and the philological method to examine three distinct forms of knowledge — judicial, historical, and narrative — and their corresponding conceptions of truth. Judicial truth is defined as the outcome of a legal process, while historical truth derives from inquiry grounded in the methods of the historical and social sciences. The paper introduces a third form, narrative truth, understood as the result of communicative processes that often operate independently of, or in contrast with, the other two. The analysis highlights the epistemic tension between judicial truth, focused on causal responsibility, and historical truth, concerned with meaning and context. It further explores how narrative truth functions as a discursive regime driven by emotion and belief rather than empirical evidence, often amplified by the media acting as echo chambers. This mode of knowledge privileges rhetoric over proof, turning possibility into persuasion and contributing to the spread of conspiratorial or mythic explanations. These dynamics are illustrated through the case of the Vajont disaster (Italy, 1963). A philological examination of the sources reveals how a narrative truth — centered on the false “race to testing” myth — has become dominant over time. This myth attributes the tragedy to the alleged haste of SADE in testing and selling the dam to ENEL, despite the lack of any factual or economic basis for such claims.

**Keywords:** Indiciary paradigm; Disasters; Forms of Knowledge; Organizations; Narrative truth.

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## 1 Introduction

Carlo Ginzburg's work offers several areas of particular interest for the social sciences, such as the indiciary paradigm, the philological approach, the construction of falsity and imitation, and the necessity of evidence.

Building on Ginzburg's contribution to the themes of truth and the philological method as a means of distinguishing the complex relationship between the true, the false, and the fictitious, this article examines three different forms of knowledge and their corresponding types of truth. Alongside the well-known distinction between *judicial truth* — understood as the outcome of a trial — and *historical (or social) truth* — understood as the result of an inquiry grounded in the methods of historical and social disciplines — this paper introduces and analyzes a third form of truth, here defined as *narrative truth*. This latter form is conceived as the outcome of a communicative process that operates independently of, and at times in contrast with, the first two. It is important to clarify that narrative truths are not necessarily false. Narratives play an important role in shaping collective interpretation of events. In the case of the Vajont disaster, however, a specific narrative framework generated simplified causal explanations that gradually displaced more evidence-based explanations.

On one side, the paper explores certain problematic aspects of the relationship between historical truth — which addresses the meaning of events (the motivational dimension) — and judicial truth — which concerns the attribution of individual responsibility (the causal dimension). It examines both the ways historians employ judicial sources and the contribution historical research can offer to judicial truth.

On the other side, in parallel to this debate between historical and judicial truth, attention is given to an emerging (or perhaps already established) form of *narrative truth*. This refers to a discursive regime strongly appealing to emotion, one that rests on widely shared beliefs rather than empirically verified facts, and which tends to be accepted as truthful while shaping public opinion. In this context, the media often act as echo chambers, sometimes serving manipulative purposes. Unlike the other two forms of knowledge — based respectively on historical method and on judicial rules, and therefore *falsifiable by definition* — this kind of knowledge appears to depend more on the skills of those who produce it and on the medium through which it circulates than on the *evidence* that supports its claims. It may thus give rise to conspiratorial narratives grounded in rhetoric rather than proof, disseminated through various media channels more for reasons of audience interest than for deliberate bad faith. In this process, media discourse transforms mere possibility into rhetorical assertion, substituting persuasion for evidence.

These different forms of truth will be examined through the analysis of a disaster case: the Vajont landslide (Italy, 1963). Through a philological and evidential inquiry, the paper will show how, over time, a form of narrative truth has emerged and become dominant — one built on false, entirely fabricated myths, detached from any empirical proof. Chief among them is the *myth of the race to testing*: the supposed urgency of the private company *Società Adriatica di Elettricità* (SADE) to complete the testing of the Vajont dam at all costs and as quickly as possible, in order to sell it at the highest possible price to the newly established public company *Ente Nazionale per l'Energia Elettrica* (ENEL), following the law on the nationalization of the electric power industry. According to this narrative truth, such a “race to testing” allegedly led managers and engineers to actions that caused the disaster, the collapse of Mount Toc's landslide, and the deaths of around two thousand people, along with the destruction of entire communities.

## 2 The Judge and the Historian

The analogy between the historian and the judge, first formulated by Lucian of Samosata in *How to Write History* (120 CE), was later developed by the Jesuit Henri Griffet (2018), who compared the historian to the judge in assessing the reliability of witnesses. In modern times, Piero Calamandrei, in his essay *Il giudice e lo storico* (1939), deepened the epistemic affinities and differences between the two figures — a relationship later distinguished by Marc Bloch (1964), who assigned to the historian the task of *understanding* and to the magistrate that of *judging*.

According to Calamandrei, reconstructions of the past take concrete form in both judicial verdicts and historical essays, united by a similar process of interpreting evidence. Both, he observed, rely on documents and testimonies, applying an analogous method of “evaluating evidentiary material” or “criticism of sources”, aimed at discerning trustworthy information from falsifications.

The historian and the judge thus share the necessity of investigating past events, verifying their reality and sequence without resorting to imaginative intuition or ideological bias. However, from an ideal-typical perspective, while the historian enjoys substantial autonomy in the choice of both the object of study and the methodological approach, the judge operates within a framework shaped by questions formulated by others and is required to reach a decision within clearly circumscribed boundaries. This constraint is reflected in two limitations: judicial investigation is restricted to facts relevant to the charge and must rely solely on legally admissible evidence. *Judicial truth*, therefore, cannot be based on direct knowledge or on elements external to the adversarial process, which constitutes an essential guarantee of the legitimacy of judgment.

The historian, by contrast, enjoys full heuristic autonomy, being unconstrained by judicial norms. Whereas the judge must nonetheless reach a decision, even in the absence of definitive proof, the historian may suspend judgment. The magistrate’s activity rests on the intersection between an abstract rule and an established fact — a scheme reminiscent of the method of the art historian or the philologist, both engaged in recognizing signs and traces in order to reconstruct truth. Hence, the affinity, identified by Calamandrei, between judicial inquiry and the interpretive sciences.

The decisive distinction lies in the nature of the final act. Calamandrei (1939, p. 119) observed that “the judge’s sentence [...] is not a theoretical act but a practical one”, since it seeks to intervene in reality by commanding or sanctioning. Judicial activity, therefore, does not end with knowledge; it also possesses a volitional and performative dimension. Unlike the historian, the judge, by applying the law to the concrete case, contributes to shaping the future conduct of the community.

### 2.1 Forms of Knowledge and of Judicial and Socio-Historical Truth

Judges and historians, Ginzburg observes (2002), share the same concern: to ascertain facts in the broadest sense of the term, encompassing everything inscribed in reality. Both seek evidence, yet they diverge on two essential points: judges issue verdicts, historians do not; the former focus on events involving individual responsibility, while the latter are not subject to this limitation.

For the judge, evidence serves to justify a decision, and the individuals who emerge from the judicial records are described solely in relation to the logical and legal coherence of the verdict. The historian, by contrast, must restore depth to persons and contexts in order to render their

reconstruction intelligible and communicable. As Ginzburg (2002) further notes, the paths of the judge and the historian coincide only for a short distance before diverging: to reduce history to judgment impoverishes knowledge, while assimilating the judge to the historian distorts justice.

The historian's evaluation of evidence also entails an awareness that every perspective is conditioned by the power relations governing access to sources. These sources are neither "open windows" nor "fences obstructing vision", but "distorting mirrors" (Ginzburg, 1999, p. 25), whose analysis already constitutes a constructive act: knowledge, including historical knowledge, remains possible only through the interplay between desire and the principle of reality. Without evidence, as De Luna (2004, p. 99) notes, the historian would risk drowning in rhetoric and relativism.

However, the rules governing the use of evidence differ profoundly between the two domains. In judicial proceedings, strict norms regulate the admissibility, usability, and evaluation of evidence, whereas the historian enjoys greater interpretive freedom and may draw on indirect testimony or extrajudicial materials. A public prosecutor, for instance, may order searches or wiretaps only within the limits of the law, while the historian can rely solely on what has already been documented.

In the legal domain, the trial represents a cognitive and prescriptive activity oriented toward establishing the truth of facts (Taruffo, 2009, p. 135). This truth is necessarily relative: it does not coincide with absolute truth but rather with a *probabilistic approximation* of reality, determined by the degree of correspondence between judicial narratives and the events that actually occurred. Evidence thus functions as an essential epistemic instrument — a source of information upon which the judge grounds reasoning according to criteria of *logical probability*, that is, the rational justification of conclusions in relation to premises (Taruffo, 2009).

From this perspective, Toulmin's inferential model (2003) helps elucidate the logical structure of judicial decision-making as a connection between evidence, rules, and factual conclusions. The criminal trial, understood as a pursuit of truth according to the law, aims to establish guilt *beyond reasonable doubt*, while respecting judicial safeguards.

The historian, by contrast, neither imposes sanctions nor formulates judgments of guilt. Their freedom of inquiry allows them to reconstruct events and responsibilities beyond judicial constraints — at times restoring meaning to elements that, in legal terms, would remain irrelevant or inadmissible.

The Judges must base their analytical and decision-making activity on the careful examination of each defendant, reconstructing with precision their actions, roles, and individual responsibilities. This requirement does not apply to the historian, who operates on a different level of interpretive generality. As Ginzburg (2002) observes, a historian reduced to a judge simplifies and impoverishes historiographical knowledge, whereas a judge reduced to a historian irreparably undermines the exercise of justice.

Regarding the relationship between judicial truth and historical truth, Ferrajoli (1982) highlights the distortive effects of a politico-historiographical conception of the criminal trial, which is incompatible with judicial logic. The latter demands that prosecutorial hypotheses refer to specific acts corresponding to precise charges, and that they be subject to inductive verification and empirical falsification by the defense.

Table 1. Comparative Forms of Truth

Aspect	Judicial Truth	Historical–Social Truth
Logic and purpose of inquiry	To determine possible individual responsibility	To understand and explain events and social processes
Central question	<i>Who is to blame?</i>	<i>How and why did the event occur?</i>
Role of context	Secondary or background element; accidental; does not exclude individual responsibility ( <i>historia inferior</i> )	Structuring element of action and meaning ( <i>historia maior</i> )
Role of evidence	Essential (or should be); required to justify the verdict	Essential (or should be); required to substantiate interpretation
Reliability of sources	Evaluation of evidentiary material according to judicial rules	Critical assessment of sources and their historical context
Investigative procedure	Governed by legal norms and judicial constraints	Based on research design, methodological pluralism, and interpretive analysis
Conception of causation	<i>Conditio sine qua non</i> ; individualized causal models	Interconnected causal networks and structural determinants
Temporal dimension	Limited by judicial rules, deadlines, and the need for a definitive decision (sentence)	Open-ended; not subject to external deadlines or final determinations
Possibility of revision	Limited and ultimately closed once judgment is rendered	Always possible; the very engine of epistemic progress

Historiographical inquiry, by contrast, tends to construct overarching narratives about movements or political formations, often overlooking the individual roles of actors. As a result, historical truth — even when coherent on an interpretive level — remains a *general* truth, whereas judicial truth — at least in properly conducted trials — concerns the *personal responsibility* of each defendant and requires empirical proof of the acts attributed to them. These two forms of truth operate according to different epistemic logics and should be understood as complementary rather than being hierarchically ordered.

The attempt to transpose a historiographical logic into the trial, as Ferrajoli (1982) points out, leads to an improper overlap between two incompatible levels of truth: the former, oriented toward understanding collective dynamics, and the latter, bound to the rigorous determination of individual conduct.

## 2.2 The Judge and the Historian: Reflections on the Sofri Trial

Carlo Ginzburg's *The Judge and the Historian* (2002) operates on two tightly interwoven levels. On the one hand, it provides a rigorous reconstruction of the trial of Adriano Sofri; on the other, it offers a far-reaching methodological and historiographical reflection that moves beyond the specific judicial case to interrogate the epistemological foundations of the relationship between truth, evidence, and responsibility.

The complex case that, between 1988 and 1997, involved Sofri, Giorgio Pietrostefani, and Ovidio Bompressi is situated within the turbulent context of Italy's Years of Lead, marked by events that profoundly shaped public memory — from the Piazza Fontana bombing and the death of Giuseppe Pinelli to the 1972 assassination of police commissioner Luigi Calabresi, following a violent campaign of denigration led by Lotta Continua.

Sixteen years later, the confession of Leonardo Marino — former Fiat worker and ex-member of the movement — reopened the case. Marino turned himself in, declaring his participation in the murder and naming his former comrades as accomplices. His testimony initiated a long and controversial trial, whose outcome — the definitive conviction of Sofri — sparked enduring doubts and polemics.

In this context, Ginzburg, a scholar deeply attentive to the cognitive and moral dimensions of justice, applies to the Sofri case the same investigative method that characterizes his research on inquisitorial trials from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, from *The Night Battles* (2013a) to *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (2004).

With the same critical acumen and philological precision that characterize his archival research, Ginzburg examines the judicial records of the Sofri case, systematically comparing testimonies, narratives, and contexts. He discerns striking parallels between the dynamics of inquisitorial trials and those of the Milan proceedings: once again, a self-confessed perpetrator — Marino — implicates others, while the judges, disregarding contradictions and the absence of corroborating evidence, construct a seemingly coherent narrative from fragile, inconsistent material.

The historian acknowledges his own initial hesitation, shaped by personal involvement, but transforms this proximity into an opportunity to reflect on the enduringly problematic relationship between judicial truth and historical truth. As in his previous studies, Ginzburg focuses on the role of the clue and the evidence — the central axis of his microhistorical method since his essay *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (2013b) — to demonstrate how every form of knowledge, whether historical or legal, is grounded in an unstable balance between empirical evidence and interpretive construction (Ginzburg, 2012).

The Milanese judges, by accepting Marino's statements without external verification, act, Ginzburg notes, like "imprudent historians", conflating the plane of inference with that of demonstration. This seemingly technical error reveals a deeper divergence between the cognitive responsibility of the historian — aware of the conjectural nature of their knowledge — and that of the magistrate, whose decisions produce concrete, irreversible consequences.

Beyond shedding light on one of the most controversial judicial cases of the Italian Republic, *The Judge and the Historian* thus stands as a meditation on the ethical and cognitive role of the historian, constantly called upon to distinguish between truth, plausibility, and justice. In this way, the work represents one of the most mature expressions of Ginzburg's thought: an inquiry into the relations between knowledge and power, evidence and interpretation, history and responsibility.

### 3 The Vajont Disaster and the Different Forms of Truth

On the evening of 9 October 1963, at 10:39 p.m. local time, one of the most severe environmental and infrastructural disasters in modern Italian history occurred. The northern slope of Mount Toc — located on the border between Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto (Italy) — suddenly collapsed into the artificial reservoir below, reaching an estimated velocity of around

100 km/h in less than 45 seconds, causing massive destruction and the deaths of 1,910 people. In 2008, the International Year of Planet Earth, UNESCO recognized the Vajont catastrophe as the most emblematic and tragic outcome, in recent times, of a chain of flawed human and scientific judgments.

The Vajont disaster unfolded within a geologically and geomorphologically complex setting, characterized by highly articulated and unstable tectonic structures (Ghirotti & Semenza, 2000). The landslide involved an area approximately 1.8 km wide and 1.5 km long, with an estimated volume of about 260 million cubic meters of material. The rock mass, with an average thickness of 250 meters, underwent a horizontal displacement of 300–400 meters at the end of a prolonged phase of slow plastic deformation (creep) that lasted between two and three years. The movement concluded with the ascent of the opposite slope of the Vajont Valley, where the mass eventually came to rest (Kilburn & Petley, 2003).

From a kinematic perspective, the landslide behaved largely as a coherent block, showing limited internal deformation except for a general rotational movement of the body. The sliding surface resembled an “inverted chair” morphology and partially coincided with detachment surfaces already identified in earlier geological surveys conducted before 1963 (Ghirotti & Semenza, 2000). This surface was predominantly located within clay-rich layers, varying in thickness from 0.5 to 18 cm, which extended continuously and uniformly across the detachment area (Hendron & Patton, 1985).

Significant signs of imminent instability had been observed several years prior to the event. Three years before the collapse, a tension crack shaped like an “M” — approximately one meter wide and 2.5 kilometers long — had been documented along the slope of Mount Toc, precisely delineating the area prone to failure. Nevertheless, the engineers responsible for dam safety underestimated the gravity of the situation, assuming that any movement of the slope would be slow and progressive, despite acknowledging its considerable extent.

Subsequent investigations revealed serious technical and managerial shortcomings. Among the main critical factors were: the raising of the reservoir level above 700 meters despite clear signs of slope instability; the failure to account for the worsening conditions due to heavy rainfall; and the overly reassuring and insufficiently cautious approach adopted by the engineers and dam managers, who failed to give due consideration to the warning signs. Furthermore, the particular lithological and structural features of Mount Toc — which made the slope inherently prone to collapse — were not adequately analyzed, thereby exacerbating the catastrophic consequences of the event.

A tragedy of this magnitude demands explanation. A disaster of such catastrophic proportions as the Vajont landslide compels a careful investigation into its causes and into the institutional and individual responsibilities involved. As is now widely acknowledged, this was not an unavoidable natural calamity or a mere accident. On the contrary, the Vajont disaster stands as one of the most emblematic and dramatic examples of a man-made natural disaster, produced by a chain of misjudgments in risk assessment and by inadequate decisions on the part of engineers, administrators, and organizations responsible for the design, management, and oversight of the dam system.

The currently dominant interpretation — here defined as a narrative truth — assigns responsibility for the disaster to the greed for power and profit of economic actors such as SADE, as well as to the passive or active complicity of public authorities, both local and national, which should have exercised oversight and preventive control. A decisive role is also attributed to the negligence of engineers and technicians, driven more by professional ambition and the project's success than by concern for collective safety.

Ultimately, it was an avoidable disaster, preceded by a long period of incubation during which numerous warning signs were ignored. This process rendered the tragic event almost inevitable: a “predictable surprise”, produced by the organizational blindness and deafness of decision-makers. The urgency to complete testing rapidly — so as to enable the transfer of the plant to ENEL — further accelerated this dynamic. The Vajont disaster thus appears to be the outcome of a perverse interplay between economic power, profit-driven logics, and the weakness of public governance, which obscured perceptions of risk and prevented the timely adoption of corrective measures. In the absence of these factors, the catastrophe would not have occurred.

But did events truly unfold in this way? Or, at least, did they unfold only in this way? Around the history of the Vajont disaster, mythical representations have taken shape that bear little relation to the actual sequence of events — some of them entirely fabricated in the absence of any supporting evidence. Without diminishing the importance of certain critical factors already mentioned — such as evident negligence and the failure to adopt adequate precautionary measures by those involved — nor denying the findings of judicial inquiries, this article proposes an interpretation of the Vajont disaster that significantly departs from the prevailing narrative (associated with figures such as Tina Merlin, Marco Paolini, and others). This analysis does not question the existence of organizational and institutional responsibilities, but rather challenges the specific causal explanation that has come to dominate public interpretations of the disaster.

The objective is to offer an alternative explanation to the narrative truth, grounded in a renewed and critical reading of the events. Within this framework, the analysis focuses on one central element: the construction of interpretive myths, most notably the entirely false myth of the so-called “race to testing”. Since 1963, this myth has been regarded as one of the main causes of the erroneous operational decisions made by engineers and executives responsible for the dam. Yet, it originated from a misreading — or a complete absence of reading — of primary sources, and it has persisted as an effective interpretive frame for explaining the behavior of SADE’s technicians and managers, as well as their errors in risk assessment and the intentional yet misguided actions that followed.

### 3.1 Judicial Truth

The criminal investigation initiated in the aftermath of the Vajont disaster revealed serious liabilities on the part of SADE, accused of having deliberately concealed technically relevant information from ministerial officials in order to avoid the risk of an interruption in dam construction. The inquiry also brought to light evidence suggesting systemic collusion and reciprocal favors between SADE executives and public officials. Investigations extended to the prefects of Udine and Belluno, as well as to the directors of the *Genio Civile* (Italian Civil Engineering Corps) offices of both provinces, who were deemed incapable of correctly interpreting the warning signs of the impending disaster, despite repeated alerts from local mayors and communities.

Further negligence was identified among ministerial officials, particularly engineers Francesco Penta, Francesco Sensidoni, and Curzio Batini, accused of failing to adequately review the technical reports submitted by government assistant engineer Bertolissi of the *Genio Civile* in Belluno. Although they were aware of the experimental tests carried out in Nove, they failed to request the results in a timely manner.

Based on the evidence gathered, on 20 February 1968, the investigating magistrate,

Dr. Mario Fabbri, issued the *sentenza istruttoria* (preliminary judgment), ordering the indictment of eleven individuals, including key figures from SADE, ENEL, and the state institutions involved: Alberico Biadene, Mario Pancini, Pietro Frosini, Francesco Sensidoni, Curzio Batini, Francesco Penta, Luigi Greco, Almo Violin, Dino Tonini, Roberto Marin, and Augusto Ghetti. During the proceedings, Greco and Penta died before trial, while Pancini took his own life the day before the opening of the hearings.

The *sentenza istruttoria* identified a clear economic motive for the SADE/ENEL leadership, even though the charges were framed as negligent offenses. Specifically, it was argued that the accused executives were driven by a strong urgency to complete the Vajont project in order to reach the testing phase as soon as possible, thereby securing both the state subsidy provided by law and the compensation for the expropriation of the company.

The first-instance trial, held at the Tribunale di L'Aquila — chosen to avoid emotional and social interference with the local judiciary — opened on 21 February 1968 and concluded on 17 December 1969 with a 333-page ruling. The prosecution sought severe sentences, up to 21 years, for the senior executives. However, the court acquitted all defendants of the charge of cooperation in the crime of landslide disaster, deeming the *objective element* unproven: the landslide did not constitute a concrete danger to public safety, as the area below had been previously evacuated. The court held that the offense under Article 426 of the Italian Penal Code should be interpreted as a crime of *concrete danger*.

At the end of the trial, Biadene, Batini, and Violin were each sentenced to six years' imprisonment for cooperation in multiple counts of involuntary manslaughter. They were also jointly ordered to pay damages to the civil parties and to cover the costs of the proceedings, with a provisional award and referral to the civil court for final quantification.

In the appeal trial, which began on 26 July 1970, the Court of Appeal overturned the lower court's interpretation regarding the nature of the danger required to establish criminal liability for the landslide. The Court held that the preventive measures adopted — including the prohibition of access below the 730-meter contour line and the establishment of roadblocks — did not guarantee with sufficient certainty the absence of people in the area. Consequently, *ex ante*, the landslide represented a concrete danger to the public. As a result, Biadene and Sensidoni were found guilty.

Finally, the Supreme Court of Cassation held its hearing from March 15 to 25, 1971, in expedited proceedings due to the impending statute of limitations. The Court confirmed the findings of the Court of Appeal, reiterating that, in the context of hazardous activities, the protection of public safety prevails over the collective interest in the completed work. Biadene was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and Sensidoni to three years and eight months, both benefiting from a three-year pardon.

### 3.2 Narrative Truth: The Disappearance of Evidence

In both public debate and the scholarly literature on the Vajont disaster, a reconstruction commonly referred to as the “political thesis” has gained wide circulation. According to this view, the catastrophe was the predictable outcome of consciously risky decisions motivated by economic interests and utilitarian calculations. This interpretation rests on the assumption that SADE's executives acted according to a logic of instrumental rationality, guided solely by the pursuit of profit, and that the tragedy thus represented the structural consequence of an organization devoted to maximizing returns at the expense of public safety.

Among the most prominent advocates of this interpretive framework are the lawyer Sandro Canestrini, who during the L'Aquila trial openly described the accused as “sadistic criminals sold out to inhuman interests”, and the journalist Mario Passi, author of *Vajont senza fine* (2003). Passi portrays SADE's conduct as systematically evasive and self-serving, interpreting every technical intervention — such as the construction of the bypass channel — as serving exclusively to protect the integrity of the hydroelectric facility. In reality, as technical sources demonstrate, these measures also responded to the need to protect the settlement of Erto in the event of basin obstruction.

Passi further overlooks key regulatory aspects — for instance, that the compensation due to SADE following nationalization was to be calculated based on the average stock value from 1959 to 1961, rendering any subsequent technical operations irrelevant to the company's financial outcome. Thus, the author constructs an argument that is internally coherent but circular, in which the initial premise — SADE–State collusion — is never subjected to empirical verification.

The most iconic figure in the Vajont narrative is undoubtedly Tina Merlin. A former partisan and journalist for *L'Unità* since 1951, she authored three articles on the Vajont dam between 1959 and 1961, prior to the disaster. In these, she reported the hardships faced by local residents and voiced concerns regarding the presence of the so-called paleo-landslide, but she never anticipated the actual dynamics of the event.

After 9 October 1963, Merlin returned to the subject with growing intensity, culminating twenty years later in the publication of *Sulla pelle viva* (1997), a work that reinterpreted the events through a strongly accusatory and activist lens. The book became the primary reference for subsequent theatrical and cinematic adaptations, establishing itself in the public sphere as the hegemonic version of the disaster. In it, Merlin attributed full awareness of the risk to SADE, denounced the alleged “race to testing”, and explicitly described the event as a “genocide”, claiming to have foreseen precisely what would occur.<sup>1</sup>

However, a careful documentary analysis contradicts this reconstruction. In her articles written before the disaster, Merlin hypothesized scenarios involving the rupture of the dam or the flooding of Erto, but she never mentioned the displacement wave effect that was ultimately responsible for the destruction of Longarone.

Numerous statements contained in Merlin's volume are factually inaccurate: the percentage of public funding she cites (60–80%) lacks any documentary basis, as does the claim that only a fully tested plant could qualify for compensation. Moreover, the press's silence between 1961 and 1963, precisely during the critical months of escalating risk, raises unresolved questions. Nevertheless, Merlin's image has gradually solidified over time into a “solitary voice of truth” through a process of mythopoiesis that has helped establish a powerful, though sometimes reductive, *narrative truth*.

A decisive turning point in the construction of the public memory of Vajont occurred in 1993 with the premiere of *Il racconto del Vajont*, a theatrical monologue written and performed by Marco Paolini, directed by Gabriele Vacis. First broadcast on RAI 2 in 1997, the play became one of the first examples of *civil theatre* to appear in prime-time television and played a key role in disseminating the narrative of an avoidable disaster caused by the greed of SADE and the inaction of public institutions (Paolini & Vacis, 2014).

The script, heavily inspired by Merlin's work, reiterates the thesis of the “sale of the dam”, asserting that SADE accelerated the testing phase to secure the highest possible compensation

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1. Tina Merlin, *L'Unità*, Friday, 11 October 1963.

value. Yet Paolini, too, introduces verifiable inaccuracies: he disregards the fact that the 1962 nationalization law set compensation criteria independent of the plant's testing status, and he employs a distinctly dramaturgical language ("they must sell immediately, therefore they take risks") that heightens the emotional impact at the expense of historical accuracy. Nevertheless, *Il racconto del Vajont* has exerted a lasting influence on the formation of the collective imagination surrounding the disaster.

The film *Vajont – La diga del disonore* (2001) by Renzo Martinelli belongs to the same interpretive tradition, spectacularly reiterating the thesis of conscious omission by SADE. The character of engineer Alberico Biadene is burdened with total responsibility, producing a narrative that personalizes the disaster while obscuring systemic dynamics and technical uncertainty. The scene in which Biadene declares his intention to "sell the State a tested dam" is set in 1961 — before the approval of the nationalization law — an anachronistic reconstruction serving the dramatic intensification of the story. Although the film cites documents and judicial records, it selectively includes only those consistent with the accusatory thesis, thereby reinforcing the dominant narrative device: disaster = greed + omission.

Once again, emotional effectiveness prevails over documentary fidelity, strengthening a shared and resilient imaginary that resists revision.

The so-called "narrative truth" of the Vajont disaster — sustained by diverse actors including journalists, artists, historians, and activists — has produced a cohesive interpretive frame centered on a direct causal link between economic greed and catastrophe. This framing has turned Vajont into a paradigmatic symbol of irresponsible modernization, generating a deeply rooted *common sense* resistant to critical scrutiny. Yet, such a narrative simplifies complex dynamics, overlooks technical uncertainty, omits regulatory constraints, and diminishes the documented efforts at prevention.

To critically reassess these narratives does not mean denying responsibility, but rather moving beyond moralistic reductionism and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among technical expertise, political decision-making, and risk management. Only through this approach can the Vajont disaster be restored to its complex historical nature, beyond the confines of the *amoral calculator* paradigm.

#### 4 Another Truth, A Different History

The formation of mythical representations and false beliefs, often far removed from the actual course of events, has been a recurring feature in Italian history. Historians such as Belardelli, Cafagna, Galli della Loggia, and Sabbatucci (1998) have identified twenty-seven such myths, ranging from Mazzini's vision of the "Third Rome" to Togliatti's reformist myth, and including themes such as brigandage, irredentism, consensus toward Fascism, Christian Democratic hegemony, economic planning, the Constitution, the Resistance, and the Moro affair. These founding and refounding myths are not merely ideological residues; rather, they function as narrative devices that have provided meaning and cohesion to national events, helping to shape shared symbolic horizons.

In this line of inquiry lies the recent analysis by Salvatore Lupo (2023) concerning the myth of the mafia's role in the Allied landing in Sicily in 1943. Lupo challenges the notion of an agreement between the Anglo-Americans and the mafia to facilitate Operation "Husky", arguing that no documentary evidence supports this theory. While acknowledging a pragmatic attitude on the part of U.S. authorities, he minimizes the hypothesis of a "grand conspiracy", showing that Allied forces maintained occasional contacts with mafia circles for wartime expe-

diency. Drawing on archival sources, Lupo demystifies the legend, restoring a more balanced view of the relationships among war, power, and criminality. The “grand conspiracy”, he concludes, is not a fabrication but a myth which, while incorporating elements of reality, offered a narrative framework capable of explaining the abrupt turns of history.

#### 4.1 True, False, and Fictitious in the Vajont Disaster

It is necessary to distinguish between documentary falsification and historical falsification. The former consists in the intentional creation of a non-existent document presented as authentic — as in the case of the *Donation of Constantine*, fabricated to legitimize the temporal power of the popes and unmasked by Lorenzo Valla in the fifteenth century (Valla, 2007), or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an antisemitic forgery designed to promote the idea of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy (De Michelis, 2025). Historical falsification, by contrast, is more subtle: it does not invent sources, but rather selects and decontextualizes them, constructing a narrative which, though based on authentic materials, is misleading in its overall conclusions.

In the case of the Vajont disaster, the issue is not one of fabricated documents but of a partial and selective use of judicial sources. The *Fabbri ruling*, the closing arguments of public prosecutor Mandarino, and several distorted interpretations of technical reports have provided the foundation for an alternative narrative that — although legitimized by the language of civic denunciation — produces the same effects as historical falsification: a selective framework, lacking critical comparison among sources and oriented toward confirming a pre-established thesis of guilt.

In this sense, as Preto (2020) argues, historical falsification is a plausible construction that nonetheless betrays the principle of historiographical complexity. Hence, the necessity, emphasized by Ginzburg and Adriano Prospero (2026), of constant confrontation among ideology, case analysis, and philological control.

#### 4.2 The Myth of the “Race to Testing”

It is essential to examine the economic relations between the Italian State and SADE, with particular reference to the state subsidies granted for the construction of the Vajont dam and to the compensation owed to the company in the context of the nationalization of the electric power industry.

An analysis of the accounting and legal data shows that SADE had already received approximately 1.135 billion lire prior to the disaster, while only a residual amount — about 283 million lire — remained contingent on the facility’s successful testing. The compensation for nationalization, definitively set at 122.85 billion lire, was calculated on the basis of the average stock market value of SADE shares traded between January 1, 1959, and December 31, 1961, and was in no way dependent on the dam’s operational status or functionality.

In light of these facts, the thesis of a so-called “race to testing” appears unfounded: there were no economic pressures or incentives that could have induced SADE’s executives to accelerate the commissioning procedures of the plant.

Law No. 1643 of December 6, 1962 (Establishment of the National Electric Energy Agency and transfer to it of the enterprises operating in the electric power industry) formally created ENEL and defined the regulatory framework for nationalization. The law provided for the transfer to ENEL of all companies operating in the electricity sector, to be implemented through specific presidential decrees within one year of its entry into force.

Article 5 established that, for publicly listed companies such as SADE, compensation was to be determined on the basis of “the average value of the company’s capital as resulting from the settlement prices of its shares on the Milan Stock Exchange during the three-year period from January 1, 1959, to December 31, 1961” (Art. 5, para. 1, no. 1, Law 1643/1962). This provision ensured a balance between the public interest in nationalization and the private interests of expropriated enterprises, preventing the announcement of the state intervention from artificially altering share values.

Article 12 of the same law also required the legal representatives of the affected enterprises to maintain the functionality of their facilities and to continue managing company operations according to sound administrative principles until the formal transfer to ENEL.

The Presidential Decree of February 4, 1963, No. 36, introduced the implementing regulations for the transfer of electric power enterprises, while the subsequent Presidential Decree of March 14, 1963, No. 221 (published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on March 16, 1963) formally completed SADE’s transfer to ENEL. The company’s legal representatives thus became custodians of corporate assets, with legal responsibilities limited to acts of ordinary administration, whereas extraordinary management was entrusted to a temporary administrator appointed by ENEL.

The compensation for nationalization became the subject of a prolonged legal dispute. According to the criteria established by law, it had initially been calculated at approximately 167 billion lire (Mediobanca, 1964, p. 23). This amount was later reduced by ENEL to 122 billion lire following the identification of technical calculation errors — an adjustment subsequently confirmed by the *Commission for the Examination of Appeals against Compensation Settlements* in its Decision No. 140 of December 3, 1966.

Meanwhile, SADE had been incorporated into Montecatini (August 1964), which in turn merged with Edison to form the new company Montedison (July 1966). In 1968, ENEL ordered a further reduction of 12.42 billion lire, justified by the inoperability of the Vajont facilities and the Colomber power plant following the landslide. However, the Commission, in its Decision No. 268 of November 28, 1968, upheld Montedison’s appeal, annulling the reduction and reaffirming the final compensation amount of 122.85 billion lire.

In summary, the state subsidy for the Vajont dam served as infrastructural support and did not constitute an incentive for the plant’s commissioning: SADE had already received almost the entire sum due, while the residual 283 million lire, which was contingent on the completion of testing, would in any case have accrued to ENEL after nationalization. The compensation, moreover, concerned the entire SADE enterprise — which comprised approximately seventy facilities (sixty-eight hydroelectric and three thermoelectric) — and was determined independently of any single installation.

At the time of the landslide, the Vajont dam had already been ENEL’s property for more than seven months (the transfer having been formalized on March 16, 1963), and there were no suspensive or resolutive conditions making acquisition dependent on the dam’s testing. The facility was therefore transferred “as is”, that is, without testing, and its subsequent commissioning fell under the responsibility of the new state-owned entity. It follows that the key actors involved had neither an economic incentive nor a legal possibility to accelerate the testing process. The so-called “race to testing” is thus a reconstruction devoid of both factual and legal foundation.

## 5 Conclusions

The analysis of the Vajont disaster, conducted through a philological and indiciary approach to sources, has made it possible to deconstruct a “narrative truth” that over time became hegemonic, restoring the event to the complexity of its actual dynamics, which remain, in part, still to be clarified. The actors involved — engineers and executives — undoubtedly made errors, yet they did not act, as a reductive popular narrative long suggested, out of sheer economic self-interest. Rather, they faced a genuine technical and scientific enigma, marked by a high degree of epistemic uncertainty, in a context where available knowledge was insufficient to interpret the nature and behavior of the slope.

In this setting, geological opinions on the landslide were deeply divided, making it exceedingly difficult to take reliable operational decisions. Although the possibility of a landslide had been foreseen — albeit on a smaller scale than the one that actually occurred — evaluations of its nature and depth diverged sharply: experts debated whether it was a superficial slide, a deep-seated movement, a reactivated paleolandslide, or a recent formation.<sup>2</sup> None, however, had hypothesized the velocity of the movement, which proved decisive in determining both the genesis and the catastrophic outcome of the event. This analysis presents, in the author’s view, two elements of originality.

First, alongside the traditionally recognized forms of truth — historical and judicial — a third type emerges, defined here as narrative truth, characterized by the absence of a clear boundary between fictional storytelling and historical narration, and by its capacity to construct horizons of meaning that, while lacking evidential grounding, are nonetheless accepted as plausible by public opinion.

Second, and in connection with Ginzburg’s philological method, it becomes clear that the act of “going against the author’s intentions” — understood as a methodological principle aimed at uncovering ideological assumptions and implicit power relations — does not necessarily lead to results favorable to subaltern groups. On the contrary, it may at times produce cognitive and political outcomes contrary to its original emancipatory aims.

In conclusion, Carlo Ginzburg’s contribution occupies a position of exceptional significance within the methodological and theoretical reflection of contemporary social sciences. His work remains an inexhaustible source of insight for rethinking the epistemological foundations of social inquiry. This study has shown how his proposal — centered on the indiciary paradigm, the philological approach, and an idea of truth as constructed yet verifiable — offers a model of knowledge capable of combining empirical rigor with interpretive sensitivity, challenging both empiricist reductionism and the relativist drifts of postmodernism. The indiciary paradigm, developed from disciplines seemingly distant from one another, such as medicine

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2. In reconstructing the Vajont disaster, the reports produced by the various geologists do not yield a unified interpretative framework; rather, they reveal a marked plurality of approaches and conclusions, particularly with regard to the nature and structure of the landslide. Some of SADE’s consultants, notably Giorgio Dal Piaz and Pietro Caloi, argued that the landslide had originated *in situ* and consisted predominantly of superficial fragmented material. By contrast, Edoardo Semenza identified the presence of a large pre-existing paleolandslide on the northern slope of Mount Toc, assigning it a decisive role in the dynamics of the event. Further divergences emerged concerning the configuration of the landslide body: according to Semenza, it displayed a substantially unitary structure, whereas Müller maintained that it was divided into two distinct sections. As for the landslide’s movement and degree of hazard, the assessments — though grounded in different assumptions — paradoxically converged on a similar conclusion: Müller believed the landslide to be largely controllable, while Francesco Penta and the other members of the Collaudo Commission observed the presence of superficial movements, yet nonetheless agreed that no immediate danger was imminent.

and art criticism, represents a form of knowledge grounded in attention to detail, traces, and minimal signs.<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, the particular is not subordinate to the system but is the very locus where relations of meaning connecting the individual to the social and symbolic context are condensed. Applied to sociological analysis, this paradigm calls for a profound renewal of research practices: it promotes a cognitive stance that never separates empirical observation from critical interpretation, and that recognizes in the fragment a privileged access point to the complexity of reality.

Likewise, the philological approach advocated by Ginzburg constitutes a decisive contribution to the social sciences. Philology — understood not only as a technique of textual restoration but as an ethic of precision and distance — becomes an instrument for interrogating texts and social discourses in their stratifications, omissions, and distortions. It entails a suspension of judgment, constant attention to the origin and function of the materials analyzed, and, above all, an awareness of the mediations that intervene between the observer and the object of study. In this sense, philology is transformed into a true epistemology of responsibility, capable of countering both the rhetoric of neutrality and the ideological simplifications that often accompany the production of knowledge.

Ginzburg's reflection on falsity, imitation, and the notion of evidence opens further avenues of investigation. It invites us to distinguish between error and deceit, between construction and manipulation, underscoring that every representation of reality is ultimately a product of interpretive choices and power relations. The resulting conception of truth is not that of a static correspondence between facts and narratives, but of a continuous process of verification, grounded in the tension between hypothesis and refutation, between the desire for knowledge and the principle of reality. In this view, truth is not an endpoint but a critical trajectory that demands rigor, prudence, and openness to doubt.

Finally, the recognition of documents and judicial acts as sources of sociological knowledge adds a further dimension to Ginzburg's thought. The trial, in its dual nature as a cognitive mechanism and normative institution, becomes a lens through which to examine the relationship among historical, judicial, and narrative truths. Analyzing the forms of rationality that structure it means investigating how societies construct, negotiate, and legitimize what they call "truth". From this perspective, justice and knowledge appear as twin practices: both founded on evidence, testimony, and interpretation; both prone to error, yet animated by an ethical tension toward truth.

Ginzburg's methodological legacy, therefore, extends well beyond the boundaries of historiography. It proposes a research model for the social sciences grounded in epistemic responsibility, the centrality of evidence, and an awareness of the moral dimension of knowledge. In an era marked by the proliferation of simplified narratives, alternative truths, and media-driven distortions that blur the line between reality and imagination, Ginzburg's approach powerfully reaffirms the need for a critical form of knowledge, founded on doubt, verification, and intellectual honesty. Only a form of knowledge that acknowledges its own fallibility and continually questions its assumptions can aspire to be both a practice of understanding and an exercise in epistemic justice.

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3. Lombardo and Sabetta (2024), as well as Comunello, Martire, and Sabetta (2022), argue that a number of other disciplines — such as psychoanalysis, hunting, symptomatology, diplomatics, and archaeology — also constitute forms of knowledge grounded in a close attention to detail, trace, and minimal sign.

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