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A Physiognomic Paradigm for the Social Sciences: From Simmel to Benjamin and Adorno

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the physiognomic paradigm as a distinctive cognitive style within the social sciences and argues that it represents a sociological counterpart to Carlo Ginzburg's indiciary paradigm. Drawing on the works of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno, the article shows how physiognomic reasoning privileges marginal details, involuntary expressions, and fragmentary phenomena as key sources of social knowledge. Through a comparative analysis, it highlights the abductive and conjectural logic underlying Simmel's sociological aesthetics, Benjamin's historical physiognomy of modern urban culture, and Adorno's critical physiognomics of mass culture and personality structures. Rather than proposing a codified method, the physiognomic paradigm is understood as a situated and interpretive practice that links epistemology to sensorial experience and expressive forms. The article argues that this approach offers contemporary sociology a valuable framework for interpreting empirical materials — such as interviews, cultural artifacts, and everyday practices — while remaining attentive to power asymmetries, historical residues, and the critical potential of fragments.

Keywords: Carlo Ginzburg; Indiciary paradigm; Physiognomic; Georg Simmel; Walter Benjamin; Theodor W. Adorno.

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1 Introduction: Physiognomy or the "Morelli Method"

Historically, physiognomy was the para-scientific discipline that had the ambition to identify the psychological and moral characters of people by inferring them from their physical appearance. The main criticism levelled at physiognomy is that it is a deterministic and ahistorical form of knowledge that neglects the importance of cultural and social factors. In this sense, physiognomy can be associated with racism and stereotypical thinking. However, important authors such as Johann W. Goethe, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Ernst Cassirer have — in different ways — considered physiognomy part of a complex, anti-reductionist cultural theory focusing on expressive and symbolic dimensions that escape strictly rational codification (Gurisatti, 2006; Dodd, 2008).

As we will see below, there has been a non-positivist and non-deterministic physiognomic strand in European culture, according to which the central issue is not so much to identify people's character by inferring it from the morphological characteristics of their skulls (as was the case in Cesare Lombroso's famous studies), but rather to read nature and history in their expressive unity. The main characteristic of physiognomy as a theory of culture is that it focuses on the meaningful aspects of human events that go beyond a rigid dichotomy between history and nature, logos and myth. While traditional historical and sociological approaches focus on the rational aspects of culture, considering language exclusively as a "means", physiognomy considers it as an "expression" of a meaning to be deciphered, in the belief that mental faculties are reflected in the physical nature of human beings. For this reason, physiognomic practice generally focuses on the analysis of myths, dream states, and involuntary body movements — cultural aspects that are not produced by the conscious, logical mind but are involuntary, hidden, or repressed. Physiognomy presents itself as a form of practical knowledge that seeks to understand everything that escapes the control mechanisms of conscious thought, everything that is not logic, structure, or metaphysics, but instead expression, memory, and writing. As Carlo Ginzburg has shown, physiognomy is in fact a fundamental part of the "indiciary paradigm" (Ginzburg, 1979), whose roots date back to man's earliest hunting activities and which, in the late 19th century (in the decade between 1870 and 1880), spread to various disciplines in the human sciences (art history, medicine, and psychoanalysis in Sigmund Freud). Art historian Giovanni Morelli, who initially published his works under the pseudonym Ivan Lermolieff, sparked heated debate with his proposal of what would later go down in history as the "Morellian method" (Zerner, 1997). Morelli was convinced that the attribution of a painting to its true author should not depend on the analysis of its most obvious characteristics, which are the easiest to imitate (such as Perugino's eyes turned towards the sky, Leonardo's smile, and so on). Rather, the more trivial details, which are much less influenced by the mannerisms of the artist's school, should be analyzed. It is precisely for this reason, therefore, that Morelli's books contain numerous representations of fingernails, earlobes, fingers, and toes. Using this method, the historian identified and faithfully cataloged the shape of the ears in figures painted by Botticelli, Cosmé Tura, and others — characteristics present in the original works but not in the copies. Morelli thus proposed new attributions for many works exhibited in major European museums, some of which were sensational (such as works erroneously attributed to Giorgione or Titian). Despite these successes, his method was harshly criticized as arrogant, mechanical, and crudely positivist.

What the art historian Giovanni Morelli practiced was a detailed type of physiognomy of the figurative arts; an operation that was so successful that it attracted the interest of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (Ginzburg, 1979, p. 98). Morelli's method shared with psy-

choanalysis a similar process of interpreting marginal details and removed information, which are instead decisive in deciphering the real character of a phenomenon, be it the personality of the artist or the neurosis of a patient. For Morelli as well as for Freud, seemingly insignificant details reveal a deeper reality since they represent instances that emerge when the control of subjectivity is lost, and more typically, individual traits can emerge; small, unnoticed everyday acts reveal our character far more authentically than any rational or formal attitude can. The Morelli method can be related not only to psychoanalysis, but also to the approach ascribed almost in the same historical period to Sherlock Holmes by his creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. Indeed, the art historian who succeeds in identifying the true author of the painting resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator from evidence that is undetectable to most people. In all three cases (Morelli, Holmes, and Freud), marginal traces allow access to a deeper, otherwise unreachable reality: traces, or, more precisely, *symptoms* (in Freud's case), *clues* (for Sherlock Holmes), and pictorial *signs* (Morelli).

Ginzburg's intervention is set in the context of a debate on the "crisis of reason" (Gargani, 1979), with the intention, however, of going beyond the paralyzing dichotomy between an outdated rationalism and the easy temptation to indulge in a too "weak" model of rationality, which resolves the question of truth in the relativistic game of interpretations. In fact, Ginzburg has always strongly opposed the historiographical anti-positivism that emerged in the English-speaking world in the last decades of the twentieth century, and which is usually defined as rhetorical, deconstructionist, or postmodern. This approach (represented, for example, by Hayden White; see Pisani, 2007) is based on radical skepticism towards the objectivity of historical knowledge and insists on its rhetorical and narrative dimensions, not distinguishing it in principle from literary and fictional narratives. Ginzburg's contribution goes beyond historiography and aims to bring to light a possible cognitive model for the human sciences by rescuing — albeit within a weak statute, with a low rate of "rigor" and thus of codified methodology — the idea not only of "truth" but also of criticism. The indiciary paradigm, already outlined by Ginzburg in his famous essay *Clues* (Ginzburg, 1979; 1989) and applied in his most famous works like *I Benandanti* e *Storia notturna* (Ginzburg, 1983; 1992), is also referred to and explored in depth in *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Ginzburg, 1999). In the book, the indiciary paradigm is included within a broader reflection on power, representation, and perspective. Ginzburg shows that clues are not simply "data": they are historical products, generated by interactions between subjects with very different powers. Examples include testimonies from inquisitorial trials, artistic images commissioned for a client, and archival documents created for administrative purposes. This program is articulated in the very different essays that make up the volume: the first focuses on Nietzsche and Aristotle, followed by others dedicated to a reinterpretation of Lorenzo Valla's famous text on the Donation of Constantine, considered the prototype of source criticism; a French text from the 1700s on an indigenous revolt in the Mariana Islands; the poetics of "white spaces" in Flaubert's work; Picasso's relationship with African art. What these very different writings have in common is the way they question sources, according to a logic of conjecture and refutation, fueled by often surprising and fascinating comparisons. The *indiciary paradigm* formulated in *Clues* provides the method: reconstructing hidden realities from minute traces. *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* provides the theoretical-political framework: every trace is the product of asymmetrical relationships between people and institutions. The very act of interpretation is a way of questioning those power relations. The historian thus becomes a critical interpreter, dismantling imposed truths and recovering subordinate voices.

In this article, I propose a systematic reconstruction of the *physiognomic paradigm* as a cog-

nitive style within the social sciences, arguing that it constitutes a sociological counterpart to Carlo Ginzburg's indiciary paradigm. This model, often neglected, was probably first referred to in a historical debate within the discipline by Theodor W. Adorno in his famous 1961 *Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* with Karl Popper. Adorno (1976) refers to it several times in the *Introduction* to the volume, stating in an icastic way, "social knowledge that does not begin with the physiognomic gaze impoverishes to an unbearable degree" (p. 44).

Following Adorno's suggestions, my goal is twofold: 1) to show that a coherent physiognomic methodology emerges in Simmel, Benjamin, and Adorno himself through their shared attention to marginal details, symptomatic expressions, and fragmentary phenomena; 2) to demonstrate its relevance for contemporary sociology, especially for qualitative and interpretive methodologies oriented toward the sensorial, the situated, and the fragmentary. I therefore begin with a working definition of the physiognomic paradigm, understood as a cognitive practice characterized by:

- a focus on marginal, involuntary, or residual details;
- the use of abductive reasoning rather than deductive logic;
- the link to the senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch) and experience;
- the recognition that knowledge is situated, embodied, and perspectival;
- attention to power asymmetries involved in the production of traces.

Physiognomy — which is one of the main forms of knowledge in the indiciary paradigm for Ginzburg — is more a practice than a theory: it is bound to the concrete. Its rules are difficult to formalize or enumerate. It is often figurative, illustrating truth through examples and the collection of phenomena, reorganized into meaningful constellations, so that their mutual relationships illuminate previously unknown areas of reality (as in Holmes' method). Physiognomy is one of those "forms of knowledge that tend to be silent", in the sense that "their rules do not lend themselves to being formalized or even spoken. No one learns the craft of the connoisseur or diagnostician by merely putting pre-existing rules into practice" (Ginzburg 1979, p. 92). The search for highly formalized rules of deductive logic may be of little or no interest to those involved in "forms of knowledge more closely linked to everyday experience — or more precisely, to all situations in which the uniqueness and irreplaceability of data is, in the eyes of those involved, decisive" (Ginzburg 1979, p. 92).

The physiognomic paradigm has found expression — albeit in different ways — in Georg Simmel's sociological aesthetics, Walter Benjamin's urban physiognomy, and Theodor Adorno's physiognomy of mass culture. The following sections reconstruct physiognomic reasoning in Simmel, Benjamin, and Adorno, before highlighting their convergences and their implications for sociological research.

2 Simmel's Social Physiognomy

The fragmentary style, the conscious essayism, the construction of "reciprocal relations" between the objects observed rather than the development of a rigorous deductive system characterizes Simmel's sociological production and not only that. This cognitive approach has often been identified by critics as "aestheticism," placing Simmel outside the pantheon of founding fathers drawn by Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937). Even a

scholar such as David Frisby (1986), who has contributed significantly to the revival of Simmel, describes this approach as "sociological impressionism", with a pessimistic view of its cognitive potential vis-à-vis social reality: "this intuitionism, as a basis for grounding knowledge, can hardly be the firmest foundation for the development of a sociology of modernity" (p. 75). It can be understood from this statement how Frisby — in the wake of Adorno himself, as we shall see — refers to the need for a "foundation" of socio-historical knowledge, proper to unmasking "strong thinking". Conversely, if we consider Simmel's "aestheticism" in the light of what we observed about Ginzburg's "indiciary paradigm", we can regard Simmel not as an irrationalist but as one of the precursors of Morelli's method in sociology.

Simmel's (1909) fundamental sociological program is clearly announced in his famous essay — translated into multiple languages — "Das Problem der Soziologie". Here, Simmel renounces the ontological perspective of establishing what the object of sociology is, but — following an epistemological style reminiscent of Popper's *The Logic of the Social Sciences* (Popper, 1976) — seeks to establish what its problem is in contrast to other related disciplines, such as history, psychology, and economics. Simmel believes that sociology can establish itself as a specific science if it renounces having a new object that is not already dealt with by one of the many existing human sciences, and if it develops a new point of view that draws a "new line through historical facts" such that some specific determinations stand out within them that are not taken into account by other sciences. This point of view consists, in a nutshell, in identifying the moment of "mutual interaction" and "association" (*Vergesellschaftung*) among individuals and in describing their changing historical forms as they are enacted in the most diverse fields, from the most serious (economics, politics) to the seemingly more ephemeral (parlor discussion, fashion). Dominance and subordination, competition and cooperation, imitation, division of labor, and party formation are just some of the infinite forms that mutual action among human beings can take as it meets and consolidates into a unity. However, if Simmel had merely placed the problem of "association" as such at the center of his research, he would probably not have written the essays that have made him famous, such as those on Fashion, Sociability, Flirt, Gratitude, Shame, Sociology of the Meal, to mention but a few. Indeed, it is true that these essays undoubtedly represent a coherent unfolding of his conception of sociology as an analysis of forms of mutual association. However, why devote himself to the analysis of "association" in coquetry, fashion, and sociability (to which Simmel even devoted his inaugural lecture at the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*) instead of to the study of religious, state, or political party association? Apparently, in fact, *Wechselwirkung* in these social contexts would seem to play a more important role among those that make up society as a whole. The answer lies precisely in the peculiar form of physiognomic thought that Simmel describes in his important 1896 essay *Sociological Aesthetics*: "For us, the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation (*Anschauungsweise*) lies in the fact that the typical must be discovered in what is unique, what follows a law in what is accidental, the essence and meaning of things in the superficial and the transitory" (Simmel, 2020, p. 180, mod. trans.).

Simmel, the "Freud of the study of society" (Hughes, 1955, p. 9), believes that the most important meanings for understanding human interaction are found not so much in "serious" and conscious forms of association, but in those where individuals loosen the shackles of the self and engage in social games devoid of direct relation to reality. Just like dreams for Freud or the pictorial signs collected by Morelli, Simmel's sociology had the merit of placing from the margins to the center of attention those *forms of association* that have no purpose other than themselves, and tend to become *symbols*, pure forms to be deciphered in the gaze of the

social physiognomist.[1] On closer inspection, Simmel's focus on the "accidental, superficial and transitory" is strictly connected with the conscious diagnosis of modernity as developed in *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2011), which takes into account "the lengthening of the teleological chain between means and ends" and therefore the necessary self-referentiality of social phenomena. It is modern culture that tends to create social forms divorced from content (such as money, sociability, or fashion), and the sociologist must practice an "aesthetic observation and interpretation" of symptoms, clues, and signs as theorized by Ginzburg in the "indiciary paradigm".

It is in this perspective that one can interpret Simmel's interest in the superficial phenomena of modernity, such as sociability, fashion, coquetry, and — above all — money (which is epiphenomenal to the more "solid" reality of material production). Indeed, if the modern world tends to present itself as centerless, superficial, and fragmentary, Simmel does not turn his back on it but — in this, akin to Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes, and Freud — seeks, from superficial details, to trace back a deeper and enduring meaning. This is the whole idea behind the sociology of "third spaces" —places that do not belong to traditional social structures, like family and work, where seemingly superficial "playful" relationships develop but are actually extremely important in the processes of individualization and socialization. Discos, soccer fan clubs, hairdressers, and betting shops can be ascribed to this category, about which Alessandro Dal Lago (1990; 2022) has written important reflections from the perspective of ethnography and qualitative research.[2]

One may ask — as Frisby did — whether the physiognomy practiced by Simmel is sufficient for a possible foundation of a sociology of modernity, or it represents just an eclectic view of a curious philosopher in a still unexplored field. Adorno, while praising Simmel's style against the fear of a fetishism of method in sociology in his debate with Popper, never spared him criticism. In a well-known portrait devoted to a comparison between Simmel and Ernest Bloch (*The Handle, The Pot, and The First Experience*), Adorno (1992) accused in the former the incapacity of "losing oneself in the thing", that is, depriving oneself of the protections with which traditional thought equips the subject in its cognitive journey in order to go to meet the "thing in itself" (p. 213). According to the author of the Negative Dialectic, it is precisely from the "dissonance" between thought and thing that dialectics draws its critical and negative force; it succeeds in identifying the absolute as that which is radically other, the insoluble around which the concrete grows and stratifies. Dialectic thought, of which Adorno declares himself to be the bearer, believes in a recovery, so to speak, *in extremis of* a critical tension in things that

1. As stated by M.S. Davis (1973), "Simmel's conception of society is not based on all sensory modalities in the different aesthetic genres, but only on an art that is essentially visual" (p. 320). Simmel's "aesthetic perspective" thus has a particular affinity with the figurative arts. It offers not only a "sociology of the senses" (from the title of the excursus found in the 1908 *Sociology*), but a "sociology from the senses," which takes its starting point from the "sensible image" of things (Simmel, 2009, p. 550). We report an opposing view to that of Davis, 1973 and Perucchi, 1985. Paola Giacomoni (1995) argues that "the statements on the basis of which many have spoken of a 'visual thought' in Simmel's case by asserting the importance of the study of the visible and not of what would be 'behind' it, actually constitute a program that in our opinion Simmel never carries out" (p. 51).

2. "Neither serious life nor work can accommodate the need (or impulse, or necessity) to appear, the need for shapes, colors, and sounds, which is also a foundation of human culture... The functional divisions of social life (and its primary categories, space and time) are modified in recreational realities. In the expansion of the night, the poker player, the compulsive dancer, even the night owl in search of urban adventures seek in their own way to escape the functional division of time, which would reduce their activities to mere margins, or vicarious moments of serious life" (Dal Lago, 1990, p. 178). Dal Lago conspicuous sociological production can be considered a rigorous development of Simmel's physiognomic gaze (see also Dal Lago, 2022).

derives from the irruption of what of them is the fruit of historical human praxis. From this perspective, Adorno dismisses Simmel as an innocuous collector of social facts as *objets d'art*, who remains tied to a conventional and contemplative conception of art. This judgment seems excessively ungenerous, especially considering a certain crisis in the model of critical theory represented by Adorno (Mele, 2022). In fact, as Rammstedt (2008) observed when comparing Simmel's perspective to Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledge* (Haraway, 1988), Simmel anticipates a modern epistemological critique: the idea that there is no such thing as a position "from nowhere" or — in Adorno's conception — from the point of view of "totality": objective knowledge is always situated in a bodily, social, and relational context. In this sense, Simmel's perspective offers a useful methodological clarification of the indiciary paradigm. Attention to minimal traces, in fact, not only implies a different hierarchy of sources but also presupposes the recognition that every clue is produced within a relational and perspectival horizon. As Simmel shows, the object is never given in a neutral way: it is always selected, interpreted, and signified from an embodied point of view. The clue thus becomes a meeting place between the asymmetries of the world and the interpreter's cognitive position. Far from undermining the validity of the research, this constitutive partiality reinforces its critical effectiveness, since it restores the reflective nature of the indiciary practice: understanding the fragment means recognizing the situation that produces it and the one that observes it.

3 Walter Benjamin's Historical Physiognomy

The affinity between Simmel and Benjamin runs through Goethe (Benjamin, 1999; Dodd, 2008; Mele, 2022). However, the conceptual, aesthetic, and political contexts in which the recovery of physiognomy takes place differ. Benjamin could no longer be content with the distance with which Simmel observes social objects, but, with the technique peculiar to avant-garde art, intended conversely to extract the object from the reified context in which it is found by interpreting it as "allegory", which literally means "speaking of something else" (Benjamin 1999, pp. 134–210). That is, to force a hidden meaning out of it, to hunt for a particular that can put it on the path of utopia. To achieve this path, Benjamin brings together Goethe's physiognomy and Marx's critique of reification. This conception was to serve as the central framework for the work on the *Paris Passages*, which, as is known, was never written but exists in the form of notes and preparatory materials. Especially in the central chapters of the *Passagen-Werk* are to be found the most significant fragments regarding the conception of physiognomy, albeit in the enigmatic form that characterizes all of Benjamin's work. In one fragment, Benjamin (2002) writes:

> A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility (*Anschaulichkeit*) of history? Or: in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened perceptibility to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage on this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history (p. 461, mod. trans.).

The term *Anschaulichkeit* reveals Benjamin's reference to Goethe's physiognomic conception and relates him directly not only to some aspects of the "Morelli method" but to another great historical physiognomist: Aby Warburg. Benjamin probably conceived of his book on the *Passages* — analogous to the project of the figurative atlas, *Mnemosyne*, on which Aby

Warburg worked between 1924 and 1929 — as consisting of a series of images in which photographic reproductions, works of art, caricatures, quotations from manuscripts, newspaper clippings, advertising labels, and obsolete objects were juxtaposed without any apparent causal or chronological connection. "Assuming the principle of montage in-history" meant, in other words, trying to accomplish for the urban history of nineteenth-century Paris what Aby Warburg had accomplished for world history and Morelli had accomplished for art history: where it is impossible, for objective or subjective reasons, to obtain positive and factual knowledge of the sources, "involuntary testimony" and, in particular, literary and artistic testimony may take on a representative character. For Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, as in Warburg's *Mnemosyne*, a very complex historical physiognomy is at work, based on the centrality of the image as an artifact of the social history of culture. The image becomes, for Warburg, as for Benjamin, in itself a document capable of releasing meaning and initiating a real form of historicity. Benjamin will call "dialectical image" the keystone of his theory of historical knowledge (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 519, 513ff.). As George Didi-Huberman (2007, p. 35) has pointed out, Walter Benjamin's view of history is based on the concept of the image as a synthesis of different temporal modes, that is, the coexistence of different temporalities in the same historical moment. The perspective of what Didi-Huberman calls the "thought of anachronism" is linked to the artistic and historiographical practice of *montage*, which expresses a layering of different temporalities that are configured as *symptoms*, that is, revealing elements capable of dismantling the different dimensions of temporality. Thus, in every historical moment, there are unactual potentials, real unexpressed utopias that can be saved in the image and reused by the historian to blow up temporal continuity.

The purpose of Benjamin's historical-sociological *flâneurie* was thus to set out on the trail of "utopia, which leaves its traces in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring constructions to ephemeral fashions" (Benjamin 2002, p. 8). Just as Freud believed that slips of the tongue reveal a deeper reality of a person's character because they represent instances that emerge when subjective control fails, similarly Benjamin was convinced that he found in the artifacts of urban culture deposited and intelligible images of the collective unconscious of the nineteenth century, daydreams where the present epoch imagines the next one under the sign of utopia. This is what Benjamin meant when he entrusted the *flâneur* with the deciphering of the "expressive character" (*Ausdruckscharakter*) of the first industrial products and constructions, the first machines, but also the first department stores, advertisements, and so on (Benjamin 2002, p. 514). The concept of "expression" refers to the mimetic faculty of perceiving and reproducing the similarities of the surrounding nature. Benjamin's approach can be better understood by referring to what he theorized about photography and the technique of film editing. Fundamental in this regard is the concept of the "optical unconscious", which Benjamin (2006) elaborated in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (p. 34) that *parallels* the concepts of "anachronism" and "symptom" elaborated by Didi-Huberman: it is in all cases a matter of expressing the existence of a residue, an excess of life that remains unexpressed and must be brought to light by the social-historical physiognomist. New technological apparatuses such as photography and the movie camera (thanks to slow motion) make it possible to capture in images what the naked eye is unable to perceive: the momentary suffering of a face, the infinite complexity of the simplest movements of the body, the enigma of the shapes of an apparently familiar object. In this way, the "psychopathologies of everyday life" are revealed through images to the lens eye in the same way as discursive "slips" to the psychoanalyst. The scope of Benjamin's historical/urban physiognomy — whether it addresses nineteenth-century Paris or Moscow, Naples, and Marseilles — moves into the realm of hidden details, searching

for the symptoms that appear as cracks in the edifice of historical and social order. The search for "anachronistic" images and symptoms is essential with the political task of unhinging the continuity of history, actualizing the latent and unexpressed potentialities of the lived moment. In this sense, a useful comparison can be made with the indiciary paradigm developed by Carlo Ginzburg. In *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (1999), Ginzburg shows how every historical trace is the product of power asymmetries and how the act of interpretation consists in reading these traces "against" the intentions of their producers. This attention to marginal detail, to unintentional clues, takes the form of an epistemic practice that undermines the narrative linearity of the victors and reopens access to the voices of the subalterns. This gesture has a surprising structural affinity with Benjamin's conception of history: for Benjamin, too, the involuntary trace is the place where the continuity of historical time cracks and a "messianic interruption" capable of redeeming the vanquished becomes possible. The indiciary investigation, although lacking messianic aims in the strict sense, thus shares a common orientation with Benjamin: to bring out, from the margins and from waste, a truth that eludes the logic of domination. In this perspective, the indiciary paradigm offers methodological support for Benjamin's reading of democracy as a practice of retrospective justice, grounded in the ability to recognize, in the residual traces of oppressed subjects, the possibility of another historical temporality.

4 Adorno's Musical Physiognomy

Adorno formulates his sociological program within a framework that can be considered "a physiognomy of capitalist forms of life" (Honneth, 2005). To treat the sociological part of his work as a specialized component of an explanatory analysis of society is to ignore its internal connections with his philosophy and aesthetics. This approach would overlook the fact that Adorno also conceived his sociological analyses as part of the hermeneutics he presented as a theoretical goal in 1931, in his inaugural lecture at the Goethe University in Frankfurt (Adorno, 1977). Here, Adorno (1977) characterizes the task of philosophy in a "physiognomic" way, arguing that "the construction of the smallest elements, devoid of meaning and autonomous will, is one of the fundamental presuppositions of philosophical interpretation" (p. 127). Despite his harsh criticism, Adorno had always been attracted to Benjamin's method, and it is certainly no coincidence that he explicitly cited it many years later in his debate with Popper. Unlike Benjamin, he had sought to formulate his model of physiognomy by drawing inspiration not so much from figurative art, but from the field that was decidedly more congenial to him: musical composition. Adorno, a composer and musicologist, regarded his own experience as prototypical of cognitive experience in general. However, he remained firmly convinced that aesthetic models, whether related to music or artistic imagery, cannot replace rational practice in its entirety. Aesthetics can provide a corrective to positivism and pseudo-scientific rationalism (also criticized by Popper in the *Positivist Dispute*) that did violence to the individuality of objects forced into an abstract conceptual scheme. Philosophical interpretation, however, cannot go beyond the immediate appearance of reality without the theory and concepts developed by the sciences. For Adorno, science and art, concept and image, analysis and expression constitute the two complementary poles of rationality.

There are many places where Adorno puts his personal physiognomic approach to work. From a sociological point of view, fundamental are the researches on music such as *Mahler, a musical physiognomy* (Adorno, 1996), *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (Adorno, 1997), *On Jazz* (Adorno, 2002) — explicitly mentioned in the *Introduction* to the *Positivist Dispute* — as well as two of the most impressive studies of the American period: *Radio Physiognomics*

(Adorno, 2006) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1973). In both cases, Adorno was able to translate the philosophical influence of his debate with Benjamin into empirical research. Just as Benjamin had attempted to decipher the metropolitan culture of Paris to reveal its impact in subjective experience, so Adorno analyzed the *voice* of radio to understand its impact on listeners. Adorno (2006) described his method in these terms:

> A physiognomist tries to establish typical features and expressions of the face not for their own sake, but in order to use them as hints for hidden processes behind them, as well as for hints at future behavior to be expected on the basis of an analysis of the present expression. In precisely the same way radio physiognomics deals with the expression of the "radio voice" (p. 69).

The main feature of physiognomics consisted in critically interpreting phenomena as the expression of an unintended truth, rather than accepting the appearance of phenomena without further analysis:

> This means, on the one hand, to understand radio not only in its *What* (the what, the message), but also and above all in its *How* (the how, the structure of the *medium* itself), on the other hand to conceive of that medium-even in its physical characteristics as an object-as expressive of the "structures", that is, of the foundational mental categories of our society (Gurisatti, 2010, p. 186).

In what was to become one of his most important empirical researches — *The Authoritarian Personality* — instead, Adorno developed an innovative method consisting of a set of criteria by which to define the traits of this personality type and their detectable presence according to an "F scale" (where F stood for fascist). The method consisted of developing a questionnaire that, instead of treating responses as isolated data, recorded correlations among responses, thereby revealing the presence of each of the characteristic traits of this personality type. In other words, rather than starting from a schematic, pre-existing concept of "authoritarian personality", Adorno and his collaborators highlighted certain aspects of it that could manifest differently and unevenly. When the elements showed a correlation, they were interpreted as an expression of a latent structural pattern of a potentially fascist personality. The idea was that a group of characteristics that superficially appeared to be unrelated and irrational could be reorganized into different test combinations (the final F scale was the product of many such reorganizations), until these elements formed a configuration with an internal logic that could be interpreted as meaningful. The *Authoritarian Personality* can be seen, in effect, as a sociopsychological representation of the "idea" of fascism, while Benjamin attempted to write the *Passagenwerk* as a representation through constellations of concepts of the idea of commodity fetishism, and, before that, attempted to write the book on the *Trauerspiel* as a representation of the idea of the German baroque drama. At the same time, however, Adorno tried to avoid the outcome he had in fact criticized in Benjamin: the lack of theory. All the elements in *The Authoritarian Personality* were connected to a general theory of antisemitism, and their interpretation was, in each case, mediated by that theory.

Like Benjamin, who attempted to construct the "idea" of *Trauerspiel* from the "extremes" (that is, from those examples of the genre that were not fully developed), Adorno attempted to find a means of enriching the qualitative dimension of the research. Some subjects, and in particular those who had scored the highest and lowest points on the scale, were chosen for in-depth interviews, and the task of interpreting the meaning of the collected material was taken

on — not surprisingly — by Adorno (1973, pp. 262–508). Adorno conducted these interviews "physiognomically": he focused on the contradictions and logical leaps in the answers given by the interviewees. Moreover, the interpretation of the logical inconsistencies of the responses, as well as of the linguistic imagery and body language, was used to verify previous theoretical assumptions. The goal of the qualitative research in *The Authoritarian Personality* was to develop, through careful scrutiny of the interview material, a phenomenology that would give concreteness to and verify the theory of antisemitism and, at the same time, focus on seemingly insignificant textual details. Adorno's method of considering "unique" and "extreme" statements, rather than the most recurrent and typical ones, gave free rein to his interpretive imagination and, at the same time, the consistency of the theoretical framework ensured exactness, "a salvage against arbitrariness" (Adorno, 2006, p. 68). Through physiognomics and abductive practice, which we have seen to be the foundational feature of the "indiciary paradigm," Adorno does not want to establish a new foundation for sociology, but rather a cognitive style that significantly departs from the linear thinking of deductive logic. Abduction implies a "displacement", a movement from conventional to unconventional reality, grounding itself precisely in what is marginal and overlooked: "without something improper, something figurative, there is no knowledge that is anything more than mere rearrangement and repetition" (Adorno,1976, p. 48).

5 Concluding Remarks

Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno undoubtedly reveal strong family resemblances that relate them to what Carlo Ginzburg has defined as the *indiciary paradigm*, even though each of them articulates this cognitive style in a distinct way and within different theoretical and political horizons. This comparative chart can help to frame the three authors within the "indiciary/physiognomic paradigm" as we characterized it in the introduction, synthesizing the three authors' contributions in Table 1.

Table 1. The Indiciary Paradigm in Simmel, Benjamin, and Adorno: A Comparative Table

Author	Physiognomic Operation	Object of Inquiry	Epistemic Function of Detail
Simmel	Aesthetic Anschauung; interpretation of playful, marginal forms	Social forms of modernity	The superficial reveals structural patterns of interaction
Benjamin	Montage; dialectical image; optical unconscious	Urban artifacts, images, commodities	The anachronistic residue reveals utopian potentials and cracks in historical continuity
Adorno	Critical physiognomics; analysis of inconsistencies and symptoms	Cultural industries, personality structures	The symptomatic expression reveals hidden social domination

What unites them is not a shared doctrine or a common method in the strict sense, but a way of seeing and interpreting social reality that assigns epistemic privilege to marginal details, involuntary expressions, and fragmentary phenomena. The comparative reconstruction proposed in this article has shown how the physiognomic gaze operates as a form of conjectural and abductive knowledge: in Simmel, through the aesthetic interpretation of superficial

and playful social forms; in Benjamin, through the montage of images and the deciphering of anachronistic residues capable of interrupting historical continuity; in Adorno, through the critical interpretation of *symptoms* and inconsistencies in cultural artifacts and empirical materials. In all three cases, knowledge does not proceed by subsumption under general laws, but by the construction of meaningful constellations that allow hidden structures and power relations to emerge from what appears secondary or negligible. Read in this light, the physiognomic paradigm can be understood as a sociological extension of Ginzburg's indiciary model. Like the latter, it presupposes that traces are not neutral data, but historical products shaped by asymmetrical relations of power, and that interpretation itself is a critical practice oriented toward the recovery of suppressed or unintended meanings. At the same time, the physiognomic tradition emphasizes the role of *Anschaulichkeit*, sensorial experience, and expressive forms, thereby complementing the indiciary paradigm with an explicit reflection on perception, embodiment, and the mimetic dimensions of knowledge. Rather than representing an epistemologically "weak" alternative to more formalized approaches, the physiognomic paradigm points to a different idea of rigor — one grounded in attention, comparison, and interpretive discipline. Its relevance for contemporary sociology lies precisely in its capacity to address forms of social reality that escape standardized measurement: micro-expressions, cultural residues, visual artifacts, everyday practices, and the subtle symptoms through which domination, conflict, and unfulfilled possibilities inscribe themselves in social life. In this sense, recovering the physiognomic dimension of sociological inquiry does not mean abandoning critique or truth claims, but redefining them. It means reaffirming, in a Ginzburgian spirit, that social knowledge can remain both conjectural and critical, attentive to fragments yet oriented toward the understanding of broader historical constellations. The physiognomic gaze thus emerges not as a relic of a pre-scientific past, but as a valuable cognitive resource for a sociology that seeks to remain sensitive to experience, power, and the irreducible singularity of its objects.

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