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Pathways and Chance

Alix Rule [a] Lorenzo Sabetta [b] Peter Bearman* [a]

[a] Incite, Columbia University (United States)
[b] Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza-University of Rome (Italy)

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Abstract

The role chance plays in understanding another person is considered in this essay, which uses Carlo Ginzburg's amazing book, *The Cheese and the Worms*, as an example. For Ginzburg, the chance selection of data allows the researcher to shift standpoints, freeing himself of prior assumptions. What makes this possible? We postulate structure, as the ground of individual standpoints, and the basis for understanding action at a historic remove. To experience the world as driven by chance is to treat it as outside of explanation. Postulating structure entails that what actors experience as chance events reflects natural features of the pathways that they are on, pathways captured with minimal abstraction in their narratives. We exploit these ideas to see if we can identify how peasant culture is revealed as structure in *The Cheese and the Worms*.

Keywords: Chance; Social structure; Carlo Ginzburg; Pathways; The Cheese and the Worms.

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* psbearman@gmail.com

1 Introduction

Often, the path forward appears as neither willed nor chosen. And when that happens, we chalk it up to chance, as something that doesn't have an explanation. The experience of chance is just a part of life. By the same token, what we work on sometimes also seems to be the work of chance. The English edition of *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg, 1980), for example, opens by Carlo Ginzburg recounting his accidental discovery, while searching the inquisitorial archives at Udine, of the trial of the miller Domenico Scandella (Menocchio) destined to become the subject of his book: "As frequently happens, this research, too, came about by chance" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. xi). Chance is all around us. But it's not there by accident — it is structured into pathways by grammars largely invisible to actors as they stumble forward, propelled by the ductile nature of social structure. We explore the implications of this idea, using *The Cheese and the Worms*, to suggest that following chance advances our understanding of the social world(s) in which actors are embedded.

One way in which chance is seen as a powerful tool, capable of breaking the vicious cycle of theory and self-confirming evidence, is Ginzburg's. In a book with Adriano Prosperi that appeared in 1975, a year before *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg wrote about the unscheduled arrival of data as a feature of the research process to be exploited: erudition disciplines, systematizes chance; and chance, in turn, delivers us from ideology — that is, from "the perpetual inadequacy of our own analytical categories" (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 155). Forty-odd years later, in a lecture at the University of Milan, Ginzburg returned to the theme. In a world of digital archives "tools for producing chance" are different, "but the goal is the same": "To counter the weight of prior assumptions (and possibly of prejudices); to confront the researcher with the uncharted, the unexpected; to bring out the cognitive potential of estrangement" and, also, "to resist the influence that researchers may exert on the outcomes of their inquiry. In other words, to avoid the risk of simply confirming what one set out to find, and nothing more" (Ginzburg, 2019). Ginzburg sees that we get something from chance, specifically, freedom from our priors. In this regard, data encountered by chance is a vehicle for zapping into a new standpoint. We completely agree with this idea.

Like Ginzburg, the protagonist of *The Cheese and the Worms*, Domenico Scandella (Menocchio) arrives at a new standpoint thanks to the chance arrival of data — a book here, a thought there, an encounter of some sort. For Menocchio, these things just happen. A book appears. He is not concerned with explaining why. The heretical convictions he develops stand outside of explanation; they come out of his head, and they are true. His path to them seems as particular — as specific and as irrelevant — as the experiences we have by chance. Paradoxically, when Ginzburg says that something like his inquisition records came to his attention by chance, he adopts the outlook of Menocchio. He doesn't try to explain that either.[1] It is likely that the inquisition records came to Ginzburg for the same reason that "the book you need [which is unknown to you and therefore why you need it] is next to the book you want". That happens because an abstract classification system (a grammar of sorts) operating outside of your standpoint co-locates both books. We are aware that there is a grammar which undergirds the placement of books on shelves; in fact, we know what that grammar is. Because we know that, the "unscheduled arrival of data" is not quite as unscheduled as it seems to those unfamiliar with or unconcerned about the grammar and

1. Maybe that is because he really does experience it as chance, or maybe it is because the explanation for his encountering the archive does not need explanation, since it is, in general, obvious.

concerned instead with their own experience, their own search. For them, the arrival of unexpected data feels like chance, and therefore standing outside of explanation.

We proceed from the premise that there has to be a grammar: actors' journeys through life are not random, but organized by networks, institutions and ideas (among other things) that structure their interactions with others, channeling them along unique but overlapping paths.[2] And as that is the case, foreign grammars may be revealed indirectly, we argue, through the experience of chance. An actor's standpoint reflects paths traveled, known directly and indirectly: a particular trajectory produces some grammars as familiar, and makes some set of explanations available. Confronted with new events, new data, it makes some things understandable and puts others beyond reach. This poses hazards for researchers at a historical remove — recognized by Ginzburg, when he sees the need to free himself from his own standpoint — namely, of imposing foreign grammars on the distant actors we seek to understand. Postulating a structure allows us to use actors' own experiences of ignorance or indifference — of chance — to mitigate that risk. Narratives of chance events reveal actors' pathways with minimal abstraction, and from these we can learn the organizing grammar of the social worlds in which actors are embedded.

This set of ideas gives us a basis for reading Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*. It underwrites an interpretation of Ginzburg's method distinct from those he has offered, but which we think casts the book's contributions in a new light: to reveal the peasant culture that is the object of his interest, Ginzburg must develop an approach to culture that does not reduce it to a set of artifacts. Postulating a grammar that organizes the paths actors follow illuminates the nature of this theoretical accomplishment. It also connects several threads in Ginzburg's own methodological writing, providing a distinct way of understanding his method of reading historical documents "against the grain" of the purposes for which they were produced. Narratives of chance captured in inquisition records, witchcraft trials, and case notes reflect actors' refusal to play their analysts' games of explanation and thus reveal their own pathways with minimal abstraction. In this light, the proposition associated with the "conjectural paradigm" — that the individual actor as "cause" is revealed most clearly "where personal effort is weakest" (Ginzburg, 1979, p. 98) — obtains new significance: it is where explanatory control is the weakest that chance figures in personal narratives, and that the actor's idiosyncratic pathway appears most clearly.

2 Roadmap

The Cheese and the Worms is not just a research exercise, but a narrative. In Ginzburg's retelling of the story of Menocchio's trials, a failed investigation becomes the basis of a successful one. We re-tell the story of Ginzburg's investigation, advancing a new idea about the basis of its success. We first introduce Ginzburg's project and identify the explanatory framework. We then consider chance as an explanation and a research tool — the basis of the approach implicit in *The Cheese and the Worms*, which we seek to bring out. We re-narrate Ginzburg's approach to Menocchio's trial records. We draw attention to parts of the analysis that he does not emphasize, specifically Ginzburg's following forward Menocchio's stories of his chance encounters. It is through such stories that Ginzburg identifies the grammar of a subordinated peasant culture — revealed at its "points of contact" with its dominant counterpart.

2. On seeing social structure as ductile, and on ductus in general, cf. Bearman (2025).

3 Reading Over the Shoulders of Others

As a research exercise, *The Cheese and the Worms* is inevitably concerned with the relationship between the analyst and the subject. At stake is how we can understand another person — an understanding that here requires bridging a seemingly impossible distance, to the vanished world of sixteenth-century Friuli. For the subordinate classes of preindustrial Europe, whose voices have left little trace on the written record, the subjectivities — ideas, perceptions, beliefs — that bound the world together are profoundly obscure. Is it possible to know what or how a sixteenth-century peasant could have thought? For previous scholars, the very possibility hinged on the status of a few "popular" texts as a basis for generalization to the minds of their audiences. Ginzburg rejects such an approach.[3] He proposes to read trial records against the grain, to infer "a substratum of peasants' beliefs" (Ginzburg, 1980, pp. 20–21), passed through oral tradition. Here, we suggest that focusing on narratives (of chance) to reveal a hidden structure helps illuminate the nature of Ginzburg's contribution, a conception of culture not just as a set of objects/artifacts, but as relevant bases of action.

Over the course of the book, Menocchio's case unfolds narratively — from the miller's first appearance before the Inquisition in 1584, through a trial extending over three months that ends with his imprisonment, his subsequent commutation, and finally a second trial and ultimate sentence in 1599. During this extended encounter, Menocchio and his Inquisitors are mutually engaged. But the relationship is asymmetrical. Menocchio, who has long fantasized about sharing his ideas on matters of the faith with "the pope, or a king, or a prince" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 9), wants the Inquisitors to understand him. The Inquisitors, on the other hand, do not want to understand Menocchio. On the surface, they want to identify the source of his beliefs; they want to come up with an explanation for them. Below that, they want to understand themselves. Menocchio — and other heretics — provide a lever for that latter understanding.

Along with the Inquisitors, social scientists often think that identifying the source of others' beliefs provides an understanding of those beliefs. For example, we often explain the beliefs of our research subjects as derived from and consonant with their social backgrounds, therefore tracing their belief back to their source. But the "understanding" that is provided arises from the analyst who has to bridge the gap between belief and socio-economic position through the imputation of motive (in this instance, interest). This is different from what Menocchio desires from his inquisitors. He really wants them to *understand* him and his beliefs — not explain them. The distinction might be clearer if you imagined how frustrated you would be if you wanted your partner to understand your belief and their response was "I do understand that belief, it is consistent with a certain form of consciousness common to individuals sharing your socio-economic condition", or, "I do understand your beliefs, they came from such and such a source and you adopted them".

One cannot read *The Cheese and the Worms* without being tempted to think that the analyt-

3. Ginzburg's Introduction to the Italian edition of *The Cheese and the Worms* recapitulates the state of the historiographical debate regarding the thought of the subordinate classes. On one side, is the position identified with Foucault, author of *Pierre Rivière* (already chastened by Derrida's objections to *Histoire de la Folie*), namely that since knowledge operates through exclusion, the thoughts of the excluded are by definition unknowable. On the other side, sit historians who have relied on the scant written materials — pamphlets, almanacs, popular bibles — known to have circulated among the subordinate classes for insight into their thought (Ginzburg, 1980, pp. xiv–xix). But "the state of the documentation reflects the power relations between the classes" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 155). Writing was the medium of the dominant classes, and the medium of their culture — generalizing from written sources, even those produced for the lower classes, can only reveal the thought of the latter as a weak echo of the former.

ical perspective Ginzburg adopts precisely coincides with that of the inquisitors. Driven by the theory that uncovering the provenance of Menocchio's ideas will allow them to master his case, the agents of the Inquisition are relentlessly systematic. They try to rule things out. During the various detours that Ginzburg takes to hunt down and read the sources that Menocchio reports drawing from — although always in an elliptical manner, "I read it somewhere in a book" — one imagines the inquisitors scouring their dusty libraries for just that volume. (Though, in fact, that is what they do not do). As the judges proceed in their investigations, demanding that Menocchio explain himself, it becomes clear that their relentless pursuit of the source of his beliefs plays a part in producing them. Here, the parallel would seem to suggest that, in trying to discover her object, the researcher takes part in creating it.

But over the course of *The Cheese and the Worms*, the sense that the historian and inquisitors are on parallel tracks slowly dissipates, and eventually disappears. The reader comes to realize that the project of the Inquisition and the methods brought to bear to enforce it are at odds with the project that Ginzburg has, and thus also the methods he brings to bear. It is true that everything depends on the Inquisition records, but all the action is where the silence is. The striking "gap between the image underlying the interrogations of the judges and the actual testimony of the accused" (Ginzburg, 1983, p. xviii) testifies to the elusive nature of the case: Menocchio and the inquisitors don't share a standpoint on the sources of his beliefs; his attempt to be understood is a refusal of their explanations. The only narrative the inquisitors can get out of him is one in which those beliefs developed by chance. Ironically, this becomes the basis on which his case proves useful to us — providing an un-abstracted picture of his pathway. Menocchio's failure to offer an explanation reveals three things. First, that for decades no one ever pressured him to construct one, secondly, that he is a true believer, and thus not interested in an explanation, so much as his own path to the truth, and finally that the pathway Menocchio is on is so natural as to defy a need to construct an explanation.

The judges are committed to their modern research tools, tools for explanation (of provenance) rather than understanding. Their commitment to explanation is the reason the Inquisition concludes, quite preposterously even to their own eyes, that Menocchio is a heresiarch. They know that is not actually the case, but they don't know what else to do. The Inquisitors fail to understand Menocchio, but that does not mean that the Inquisition failed. After all, through the interrogations, the Church learns more about their beliefs (and at the end of the day, that is sufficient for them, since building their orthodoxy is their ultimate project). Ginzburg, for his part, contra the Inquisition, is alive to the risk of simply confirming what one set out to find, *and nothing more*. To get to understanding (and, hence, a deeper and perhaps more satisfying explanation), he leans into chance.

4 Following Chance Forward

Just as we distinguished explanation from understanding, here we need to distinguish between chance as an explanation and chance as a research method. Chance as an explanation is both too simple and too unsatisfying at the same time. On the one hand, saying that something happened by chance doesn't help us understand why that chance event happened. This is not trivial, for some kinds of chance events are more likely to occur than others, even if they are both just that, chance events.[4] It is also unsatisfying because saying something occurs by chance

4. At one time or another, most of us have told a variant of a story in which a series of seemingly unlikely occurrences led us to narrowly avert tragedy. For example: "I was shopping for strawberries and just as I was

and leaving it at that fails to account for the structures that make such events possible and meaningful: such explanations ignore the organizing grammar that chance stands to reveal.

We tend to think of chance as something that intervenes before an event. That is true, of course, but what turns out to matter more for its significance is not what happens before, but what comes after (Danto, 1985). What those concerned with understanding a chance event really want to know is why it had legs, that is, was able to generate an outcome. For events to produce their impacts, they must be tied into sequences of other events, institutions, opportunities, and so on (see Bearman et al., 1999). One way to appreciate this is to consider that chance events happen all the time; chance in that sense is totally overwhelming. But only some chance events lead to others — not every butterfly's flight starts a tornado. Rather than ask why some events are more likely than others to occur (and yet still by chance), thinking deeply about chance directs our attention to why events that do occur are linked to outcomes. How, that is, are events of a specific kind tied into subsequent streams of action? Instead of looking into the past of an event, we need to look into the future.[5] If the orientation is exotic for social researchers, it is familiar to actors propelled forward by unsought occurrences.

Listen closely when other people explain events, as in a life story, and you may have been struck by a curiosity: chance is often deployed to indicate the presence of destiny. "If I hadn't been out sick that day, I would never have met my soulmate". "It's because I had to wait to buy those strawberries that I'm alive today." But as with many paradoxes, there is a deep insight hidden in the tight coupling of chance and fate. Path dependency links these otherwise contradictory ideas, and behind path dependency, of course, is real structure. Some event takes place and acts as a switchman, driving a subsequent train of events along a different trajectory. But for chance events to drive outcomes down a new track, there has to *be* a track. The tracks that structure events, experiences, and life-courses (in short) are laid down by people, as their lives unfold. Because of this, they are also congealed into social structure and culture. In narratives of fate, experiences of chance are rendered as somehow already programmed to occur. Freed of teleology — we may simply observe that linkages between experiences reflect cultural ideas about what makes sense, as much as they do with the sheer facts on the ground — this points to an important tautological truth: for outcomes to be driven in the wake of an event, they need to be tied. The structure that connects them (whether social or cognitive) is what the researcher is interested in.

Following chance becomes a strategy for prying open the logic of an unfamiliar social context when its organizing principles are inaccessible. And in this way, chance can be pursued as a research method — which, without declaring it, is what Ginzburg does. Structure and culture generate linkages between events that appear to actors as chance or, on reflection, as

reaching to get the last little pint container someone swooped in and grabbed it. I had to wait a minute for the clerk to bring more strawberries (they were better anyway) and so my departure from the store was slightly delayed. That was so lucky as minutes ahead of me on the highway there was a terrible accident that I was sure to have been involved in had I gotten the first pint". It is true that the chance encounter with the greedy strawberry picker saved my life, but chance is not really a very good explanation for my not being in an accident. The better explanation is that the probability of being in an accident is determined by structures and institutions (driving conventions, speed limit enforcers, rules about who can drive, road engineering) that have nothing to do with chance. In short, chance is often experienced and so narrated as why things happen (or not), but it is not a good explanation for why things happen. What chance provides is a strategy for observing the linkages between institutions, structures, practices and everyday activities and outcomes.

5. To continue with the strawberry story, the lost pint of strawberries (definitely a "soft fact", see Hoffman & Rosenkrantz, 1984) is only meaningful in so far as it is connected to a chain of future events, a chain made possible by the linkage of stores and homes by highways, and so on. The historian can make use of structures revealed through chance to see new things.

fate. A strategy that relies on chance to generate cases — observations, ideas, texts, experiences, and so on — and which follows the connections between those objects is able, as *The Cheese and the Worms* shows, to identify the grammar that organizes their relationships: the culture or structure unknown to the researcher.

Twenty-first-century social scientists may grasp the approach by analogy: imagine the world of the 16th-century Friulian peasant, or any other unreachable social context, as a network. In it, events are connected by principles unknown. To reveal the structure, we need to use an old network analysis strategy: to sample nodes and follow their edges as they link to other nodes. Narratives of chance, those least abstracted by "common knowledge" unknown to the researcher, will provide the most leverage. By repeatedly departing from different nodes selected at random, the analyst ensures that the view of the world he obtains is not biased by the anachronistic rules of our culture — which would direct focus to one or another type of node, or event, leaving others hidden. This is why Ginzburg argues that we need to zap across standpoints when unexpected chance data or observations come our way. Of course, if we can generate events (cases) by pursuing chance, we still have to interpret the edges that connect them. The Inquisition is convinced that the answer to that question is to explain the nature (and source) of Menocchio's belief. It is the first problem they confront. Ginzburg follows along, narratively. We can, it turns out, also make progress by thinking about what Menocchio believes in terms of pathways, those of others that he crisscrosses, and the pathway on which he is led.

5 What does Menocchio Believe, or Where Does his Pathway Lead?

But what does Domenico Scandella believe? Where has his pathway led? The testimonies of his fellow villagers that reach the Holy Office reveal that Menocchio holds that, " 'Everything we see is God, we are all gods'; 'the sky, earth, sea, air, abyss and hell is all God' "; that he denies that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin ("it might very well have been this, that he was a good man, or the son of a good man") (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 4). And then, of course, there is the account of the creation of the universe: "I have said that, in my opinion", Menocchio himself explains to his inquisitors, "that all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed — just as cheese is made out of milk — and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. [...] There was also God, he too having been created out of the mass at the same time" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 6). The astonished reactions that Menocchio's beliefs elicit at his trial underline how extraordinary they appeared, by the contemporary standards of his "superiors". His fellow villagers, appearing through their testimonies, claim to find his ideas shocking and objectionable, too. But as the trial advances, it becomes evident that Menocchio has been professing his "fantastic notions" around their little village of Montereale Valcellina for nearly three decades before anyone (likely the village priest) considered them a matter of actionable concern.

Having sketched Menocchio's set of beliefs together, the Inquisition and Ginzburg set about addressing the challenges they pose to various explanations — and, ultimately, to the explanatory model. First: Is Menocchio simply crazy? The inquisitors soon satisfy themselves that he is not. In fact, as he responds to the queries of his learned interrogators, it becomes clear that this miller's "moral and intellectual strength" must have been "nothing less than extraordinary" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 27). The second question is whether Menocchio's ideas are inherited from someone, and if so, by whom? This is the central issue for the Inquisition, and Ginzburg will argue that Menocchio's beliefs don't reflect contact with heretical groups. Nei-

ther justification by faith nor predestination turns out to mean anything to him (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 20). The more the miller talks, the clearer it becomes to the judges that his "opinions" are unfamiliar to them. It appears plausible that they are, as he repeatedly claims, his own creation. But note that neither the fact that Menocchio's ideas are new to the inquisitors, nor the possibility that they emerged from his "artful mind", implies they are completely new in the world.

Of only minor interest to the church, but centrally important to our understanding of Menocchio, is the possibility that his heresies are expressions of a peasant social radicalism, clothed in the language of religious belief. This is an idea that comes from Menocchio's future, from an analytical tradition making sense of (explaining) the appeal of heterodox belief on the basis of interest. It is not relevant to the Inquisition, but it is relevant for Ginzburg, whose work is inevitably in dialogue with this community of scholars, even if that consists in showing that his case is not an instance of their case.

Menocchio's statements reveal that he saw the social world as divided into ranks of the rich and poor. With this background in mind, Ginzburg (1980, pp. 9–10) recognizes that assertions like "everything belongs to the church and the priests, and they oppress the poor", that the sacraments are nothing but "merchandise" or "instruments of exploitation", etc., could easily be read as articulations of class antagonism. But Ginzburg (1980, p. 16), suggesting that Menocchio had little knowledge of the "tangle of political, social and economic contradictions [...] conditioning his existence", believes that this explanation, too, is inadequate. Ginzburg does not make a strong case *against* the social radicalism in Menocchio's beliefs, but he is convinced that the beliefs are no shallow pretext for the radicalism. "What led Menocchio to denounce the existing hierarchies so impetuously in his speeches wasn't only his perception of the oppression, but also a religiosity that affirmed the presence in every man of a 'spirit' that he sometimes called 'Holy Spirit', sometimes 'spirit of God' " (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 17). Menocchio's statements — speaking from 400-year-old trial documents — reveal authentic *belief*. It is belief for its own sake, not belief deployed as a mask for social critique. But how do we know this?

A seemingly devastating objection is that the records that we do have are drawn from the Inquisition: they are their records, not Menocchio's. Necessarily, the interests of the Inquisitors led their line of questioning, and the fact that social radicalism seems peripheral to Menocchio's belief might simply reflect the fact that the church was uninterested in it. In the same way, it is also clear enough from the unfolding logic of Menocchio's heresy that its coherence is in numerous ways induced by the Inquisition. If our only records are texts read over the shoulders of the Inquisitors, how do we escape their frame? The problem looks even more serious once we recognize these records have, in their nature, been shaped by more than one set of intentions: the interrogated subject, alive to his situation, has an incentive to shape his self-presentation in light of it, as generations of social methodologists remind us. This seems especially important insofar as the value of Menocchio's testimony (to Ginzburg) does not depend on the motives he avows, but on the absence of motives. After all, a detective "cannot expect that the murderer will leave his photograph with his name and address at the scene of the crime" (Freud, 1943, pp. 26–27).

There seems then to be no Archimedean point from which to escape this critique, a critique that Ginzburg (1980, p. xviii) describes as comparable to the "facile, nihilistic objections" that Derrida so influentially leveled against Foucault's project in *Madness and Civilization*. Ginzburg recognizes that there is a way to escape from the limitations of the standpoint. Recall that he writes that it is possible to read such materials "against the grain". Ginzburg depends

on the "gap" between Menocchio's standpoint and that of the inquisitors — and the brilliance of his undertaking depends on something about which he is not explicit: the deployment of chance. Unsought events do not activate Menocchio's social radicalism. They provoke the development of his opinions on matters of faith, revealing that an existing grammar organizes his experience around belief. It is in virtue of this grammar that "opinions" arise, apparently out of his own head, and begin to take on a life of their own.

Insofar as it tells of a successful investigation unfolding quietly in the background, on the basis, at least initially, of an "official" investigation that gets nowhere, *The Cheese and the Worms* reads like a classic Sherlock Holmes story. At his first trial, the Inquisitors search for the origins of Menocchio's belief. We begin with a crime scene already contaminated by their efforts; Ginzburg has no choice but to follow. Their investigations reveal a fuller set of beliefs than Menocchio's fellow villagers are able to recount, building them in the process. But if the inquisitors are the authors of heretical coherence, Menocchio, though he clearly understands the consequences of what he's doing, is only too happy to expand on his "opinions" himself. He reasons with his interrogators, arguing with them, trying to convince them that, after all, he is right. The inquisitors, of course, already know he is wrong, and yet, faced with an embarrassment of data, they are interested only in beliefs he does not express and confessions (explanations) he does not offer.

Menocchio, insisting that his insights are his own, continually tries to interest the judges in how he was led to one or another of them by some idea, some scrap of knowledge, that he chanced to encounter — in a book, lent to him by someone or other, whose title he often forgets. Dismissing these stories as specious or irrelevant, the Inquisitors continually try to bring him back to the point. But Ginzburg recognizes the value of a dog that doesn't bark (Conan Doyle, 1892). The trick is to take Menocchio's own unsatisfying perspective at face value — to follow these chance encounters. It is a strategy that builds on the "euphoria of ignorance": the more euphoric, the better it appears to work. By following a narrative of chance, Ginzburg is able to recover the pathways by which distant events are linked. These connections do not depend on a theory of action; they don't reflect the particular standpoint that directs attention to these or those, material or ideal forces. They belong to Menocchio's world, part of the grammar — however implicit — that organizes what happens within it.

6 Camera Obscura

As noted earlier, if it seems that chance solves the problem of a standpoint, it is also the case that chance does not provide the key for reading a foreign grammar. Events connected by chance reveal the edges — construed in terms of what Ginzburg (1979) elsewhere called "clues", *spie*. But that is all: connections exist, but it is not always clear what they mean. Menocchio's stories, however, present a starting point for interpretation. The dozen or so volumes that passed through his hands at one time or another — artifacts of a written culture connecting him to a vast world of kings, princes, and the pope — have passed successfully into our own textual universe. Ginzburg tracks each of them down and compares their contents with the way that Menocchio recalls, recounts, and interprets them to his inquisitors. Major discrepancies are revealed: Menocchio's memory appears oddly selective; the meanings he retains, when compared with the actual texts, are bewildering, often exactly the *opposite* of the intended ones. All these distortions are significant, Ginzburg argues. The way Menocchio skews the meanings of particular texts shows that he must have read them through the "screen" of some prior set of beliefs. The screen filtering Menocchio's readings is what Ginzburg will come to identify

as a peasant culture. It is revealed in the manner of a camera obscura: the oral culture is the light that illuminates the foreign object, appearing in inverted form. But this requires some decryption.

The universe is formed from chaos like the coagulation of a cheese, from which angels emerge "like worms": unlike many elements of Menocchio's beliefs, which develop during the process of the interrogation itself, this idea seems to have been with him for years — echoed back, with minor variations, in the second- and third-hand reports that reach the Inquisitors. Against the grain of Menocchio's own assertion that he read about this "chaos" in a popular Bible summary of the time, Ginzburg argues that it was not an image that he could possibly have found in his books. But this is not strictly true: Ginzburg later shows us a passage from the *Divine Comedy* featuring a similar image: "*worms / born to produce the angelic butterfly*" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 57). To Dante, this is a metaphor; to Menocchio, this image is an "explanatory analogy" — a "tendentiously scientific" one (*ibidem).* Ginzburg rejects the idea that such a fantastic cosmogony as Menocchio's could arise from such a humble source, out of his own head. But under the right light, the movement of fingers can project fantastic images on the screen. While rejecting the idea that Menocchio could have come up with this imagery from whole cloth, Ginzburg accepts that he may have come up with it unaided. Setting Dante aside, Ginzburg finds in an Indian myth recorded in the Vedas — a source which Menocchio could never possibly have read — a remarkable twin:

> "In the beginning the world was nothing, and... it was thrashed by the water of the sea like foam, and it curdled like a cheese, from which later great multitudes of worms were born, and these worms became men, of whom the most powerful and wisest was God": more or less, these had been Menocchio's words (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 58).

The temporal and spatial distances traversed make our effort to return to the 16th century seem trivial. The apparent connection is "disquieting, unless one is willing to go along with quite unacceptable theories, such as the collective unconscious, or simplistic ones, such as chance" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 58). Yet, ruling these out, "it can't be excluded", that the relationship between these images "may constitute one of the proofs, even though fragmentary and partly obliterated, of the existence of a millenarian cosmological tradition that, beyond the differences of language, combined myth with science" (*ibidem*). "In Menocchio's case it's impossible not to think of a direct transmission" through which this extraordinary but intuitive image would have been conveyed to both the shepherds of Altai and the Friulian miller (*ibidem*).

"It can't be excluded", "it's impossible not to think": by some set of paths, down some set of edges, the image of cheese chaos and worm beings in the Vedas makes its way to Menocchio. Having linked his imagery to an ancient text, can we learn more about the edges that connected them? Perhaps not, and Ginzburg, posing the question of whether we can do anything with such extraordinary coincidences, is certainly open to that possibility. But the treatment of Menocchio's case shows that, in fact, we can.

Let us turn the puzzle around, asking not how Menocchio came upon this metaphor, but instead, how it worked in the future of its first articulation. Following Menocchio's image forward reveals the cultural scaffolding that makes it "work". Of course, one possible support for Menocchio's theory might be a "simple" naturalism, rooted in his own observation. But the imagery is much richer than simply the translation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, or a maggot into a fly; a whole world of ideas must be present to carry this one. Crucially, if a denser web

of meaning did not suggest itself, we would have to infer it. For in its absence, any account of the universe would surely appear so impoverished as to convince *others* in Menocchio's life that he was crazy. Even if his neighbors' pious expressions of disapproval before the Inquisition are credible, it is clear that this thought never entered their minds.

What came to their minds was that the imagery made sense, or rather, all of the edges that are revealed after Menocchio first speaks these words point to the idea that the metaphor made sense. We learn that two years before his first trial, Menocchio has been sharing his opinions for decades and is the mayor of Montereale; years later, his prison sentence commuted, he is rapidly reinstated as a pillar of the community and made administrator of the church. These events certainly don't point to ostracism and rejection — outcomes we would imagine had Menocchio's ideas struck his neighbors as incoherent.

Ginzburg thus shows us, by following Menocchio's pathway filtered through the Inquisition records, the outlines of a richer world of ideas that provided the scaffold for his thoughts; a world that makes the specific transmission of a single metaphor intelligible to the peasants who heard it. That, for Ginzburg, has to be a peasant culture. If we can understand the grammar of this culture — the structure that organizes it — we will also know how to understand Menocchio and his fellow villagers. At this stage, we have been shown one interpretable component, or expression, of that grammar, but not enough to generalize it to see the whole picture. It is through a series of suggestive demonstrations of this kind that Ginzburg's investigation proceeds.

7 Points of Contact

For Ginzburg, Menocchio will turn out to be a case of the awkward meeting of the oral and written cultural traditions of Europe of his time.[6] In the mind of Domenico Scandella, high and low culture are actively reconciled, elaborated — each pointing to the other. It is this relationship — "subterranean convergences" — that we see in him, and the real subject of *The Cheese and the Worms*. The argument for such a meeting, of course, stands on the existence of a peasant culture — the very thing that generalizing from the historical record fails to disclose. How does Ginzburg demonstrate that it exists? After all, Menocchio's readings are just that, readings. How can we infer the existence of an otherwise unobservable oral culture? Ginzburg's strategy has three moments: The first is to take very seriously what Menocchio says about the development of his particular beliefs. The second is to follow their outcomes. The third is to situate these beliefs in dialogue with the beliefs of others, moving from his story to theirs.

Let us take each in turn. The series of comparisons that Ginzburg stages between Menocchio's sources and the conclusions he draws from them permits a fuller reconstruction of the "screen" filtering his thought. Its key features, alongside an explanatory materialism, include a worldly orientation favoring a simple morality and a crude but undeniable social utopianism. It is by following Menocchio and his new "opinions" forward that we begin to see the significance of this primordial filter; its failure to faze his neighbors, its capacity to baffle the Inquisitors, its

6. This is recurrent in Ginzburg's works. For example, "The High and the Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" (Ginzburg, 1989, pp. 60–76) shows all the characteristics highlighted here: to look into the future rather than in the past of an event, to appreciate how structure generates linkages between events and chance encounters, to sample a network of nodes and edges, as well as the awkward meeting of oral and written European traditions. In this other case, the meeting of Saint Jerome's vulgate "Noli altum sapere, sed time", Horace's Epistle to Lollius on "Sapere aude", and Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" is even more awkward.

powerful effect, as a basis for interpreting the knowledge of his day, on Menocchio's own future self. (Of one thing we can be sure, seeing him at trial: Menocchio is a true believer. Only believers refuse to apostatize.) By following his story, we begin to see the meaning of this screen of peasant belief "in action".

But the action is limited. Menocchio's life, "passed in obscurity" aside from his encounter with the Inquisition, is only one, a relatively uneventful one at that. So if the case of the miller of Montereale suggests the relevance of a way of thought — bound in the materiality of rural life, passed on generation to generation, and spanning continents — it is, in the description of a distinctive peasant culture, merely indicative of the larger problem at stake: what does the relationship between the high and the low, at their points of contact, look like?

We will leave Menocchio here. The judges convict him. Not just of being a heretic, but a heresiarch — quite an achievement for a small-town miller. Evidently, they are most unsettled by their failure to discover the source of this peasant's ideas, by their failure to understand his beliefs, and by the permeability of their own orthodoxy to distortion. In the sentence they deliver, they try to neutralize these threats by characterizing his ideas in terms of previous heresies: Menocchio has revived Origen's doctrine of apocatastasis, the Manichean heresy, and so on. But these relationships are invented, and the inquisitors know it. Ginzburg (1980, p. 92), standing in their shoes, can tell us with confidence that they are "falling back on their own theological and philosophical education". For the historian, the case has led somewhere more fruitful — away from what was already known.

8 Other Heretics

In the final pages of *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg introduces us to Pellegrino Baroni (called Pighino, "the fat"), another miller living several hundred miles from Montereale in the Modenese Apennines. Pighino, too, was called before the Inquisition for heresy, some fifteen years before Menocchio, but ultimately acquitted. We shouldn't be too surprised, Ginzburg tells us, that this Pighino is also a miller. Mills were fixtures of village life in the 16th century, centers of economic and social exchange; millers, stereotyped as worldly and conniving, were perhaps particularly prone to charges of heresy. Is Menocchio a case of millers? Or are millers just the likely brokers for the knotty relationship between the oral low culture and written high culture? By evoking Pighino, Ginzburg can point out that there were positions available to peasants in the 16th century that might have fostered contact with a wider swath of society. But Pighino's case appears, in other respects, unlike Menocchio's. Ginzburg shows in a brilliant bit of detective work that Pighino likely had contact with the famous heretic Paolo Ricci (also known as Camillo Renato, alias Lisia Fileno), having served in the same Venetian home in which Ricci/Renato/Fileno was a tutor. "*In so many different ways* we keep running into those delicate threads that in the period tie heretics of humanistic background to the world of the peasants" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 123, emphasis added).

The path through which high culture reached Pighino was not the same one that it took to Menocchio. That path *was* really the books that chanced to pass through his hands as they circulated amongst millers, innkeepers, women, and priests, among others in the peasant world able to read and share resources. But there's more: Ginzburg (1980, p. 123) is able to show that if Pighino's ideas are consistent with those of his probable humanist teachers, they are even "more radically materialistic". Pighino may have learned his ideas through direct involvement in heretical circles, but he too "was not just passively receiving motifs" then current within them (*ibidem*).

In the wake of the Reformation and the diffusion of printing, ideas traveled varied paths. Encounters with the high culture passed, from different angles, into the peasant world, providing a supple scaffold for an endogenous materialism. The low, material world was so rich that just a little theory went a long way in making it come alive — like the spring rains in the desert. New high culture resources (both tools and contents) mobilized an oral tradition stuck in the materiality of the peasant world and freed it. The phantasmagorical cosmology of Menocchio is but one instantiation. But it has to be the case that if there was a meeting of high and low culture during the 16th century, the influence did not only flow one way. Ginzburg (1980, p. 126) urges that the trace of this reciprocal influence can be seen clearly in the high culture of a slightly earlier moment, in the work of Rabelais and Brueghel. This, though, is the subject of another book. *The Cheese and the Worms* does not attempt to prove this "perhaps undemonstrable" (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 155) bidirectional influence. It suggests that Menocchio's story be seen in light of it: by the late sixteenth century, the dominant culture uses the encounter with the low culture world to buttress its boundaries, to increase distance, and perhaps ultimately become impermeable.

9 Back to Chance

The texts that are the raw material of Menocchio's encounter with high culture arrive in his, and our, world by chance. They visit him for a while and then are passed on. He does not remember their titles or authors; why should he? Provenance is the concern of researchers and the Inquisition. But restoring "the unpredictability of the future" (Bendix, 1984, p. 48) to men of the past, Ginzburg shows, provides a way to make their world comprehensible. We are not interested in why some books over others arrive in Menocchio's world, just as we are not interested in why one car over another was involved in an accident. The books and the cars are on the road. That the road the books were on went to millers, innkeepers, artisans, and perhaps others who provide foci for contact between high and low cultures tells us something about their role in peasant society. It tells us why someone like Menocchio had the chance to reconcile the worlds of high and low culture.

Just as we do not care about the specific books, it is the same with Menocchio himself. Why he should be our subject and not another is not a question we can answer without invoking chance in an uninformative manner. Books flowing through networks touched millers and created the possibility for an active reconciliation of high and low culture. These structural and institutional facts define the problem of peasant culture and make the research strategy Ginzburg adopts so powerful. There are revealed in *The Cheese and the Worms* all sorts of circuits of possibility. That a person like Pighino "the fat" could have conversed "with a sophisticated humanist like Lisia Fileno", Ginzburg (1980, p. 122) states, is just "a conjecture, however fascinating". "What is certain, however", from a reading of his own *Apologia*, "is that in October 1540 Fileno was arrested 'in the Modenese countryside, where he was subverting the peasants' ". We also learn that in the region at that time, "there was another person named Fileno 'performing the same Lutheranizing office' ". He was, Ginzburg concludes, in a final euphoric crescendo, "in all probability, Giorgio Filaletto [...], author of that mysterious Italian translation of Servetus's *De Trinitatis erroribus*, which Menocchio may have seen at one time" (Ginzburg, 1980, pp. 122–123). Ginzburg wants us to see that by selecting Pighino as a node and following the edges that lead off from him to others, other events, other sources and experiences, we can learn more about our central problem, which is not in Pighino's story, but the relationship between high and low culture expressed by our leading character, Menoc-

chio. Along the way, we are also introduced to Scolio (Ginzburg, 1980, pp. 112ff.), a radical materialist poet (then unpublished) who drew from the same peasant culture through which Menocchio filtered his readings. Scolio becomes another node, another point of departure. Ginzburg sets out to explore the edges emanating from his story to events composing other narratives — providing further contrast and context for Menocchio. Each seemingly insane exercise of detective work that Ginzburg undertakes, tracking the movement from Menocchio's ideas through texts known or thought to be circulating — translations of dubious accuracy, testimonies on the part of others that they saw, around the same time, a book looking like the one identified by Menocchio — tells us something about peasant culture.

10 Conclusion

Where does a reading of Ginzburg guided by the assumption of a ductile structure get us? Ginzburg's contribution to the study of the culture of the subordinate classes involves a rejection of a passive approach to discovery that either (a) generalizes from the content of available textual sources, or (b) denies the possibility of knowledge tout court. What we have tried to show is that, through *The Cheese and the Worms*, we begin to see not just a peasant culture (as a set of "ideas" or cultural objects) but also how those ideas mattered in social practice, structuring and giving shape to the paths that individuals take through life. By following multiple paths, we can reconstruct the grammar by which they were organized — revealing in turn, how they may have interacted with the dominant, literary culture at their varied points of contact.

The subjective experience of chance events provides special insight. For Ginzburg, this is because chance encounters with data deliver the researcher from his own biases. We agree that chance in the selection of cases can deliver a researcher from the constraints of their own standpoint, but also try to show that chance generates a certain kind of narrative data characterized by minimal abstraction.

Narratives of chance are failures of "explanation" because chance events are those that individuals can't (or won't) explain otherwise: they reflect individuals' ignorance of the reasons and structures that govern their specific experiences. Ginzburg's rereading of Freud's famous case study rests, unacknowledged, on this same subjective ignorance. The Wolf Man's testimony provides Ginzburg the basis to discern what Freud overlooks, "a dream of an initiatory character, induced by the surrounding cultural setting" (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 148) transmitted to the patient in the form of folktales by his nanny. But it is only insofar as Freud's patient can't explain his symptoms, that chance events — being born in the caul, the peasant nanny — appear in his testimony at all. What separates Ginzburg's treatment of the Wolf Man's case from Menocchio's is not the erudition that allows the analyst to recognize the cultural "contexts" for such events. It is the tracing forward of their consequences, pursued so systematically in The Cheese and the Worms, that reveals the grammar organizing individual experience. A meaningful "context" — a "cultural setting" — finds different expressions, contingent on the grammar organizing actors' possible paths. And indeed, Ginzburg seems to acknowledge this when he writes, in an aside, that "subjected to opposing cultural pressures (the nurse, the English governess, his parents, and teachers), the wolf-man's fate differed from what it might have been two or three centuries earlier. Instead of turning into a werewolf, he became a neurotic on the brink of psychosis (ibidem)".

Chance events made their way into the Inquisition because they resisted explanation. Menocchio does not confess because his ideas come to him "by chance". But this is just

another way of saying that the paths individuals take are revealed (to researchers) most clearly when they are least narratively controlled by subjects.

Each of those stories could have been this one, just different in the same way that each fairy tale is different, because in one there is a ghoul blocking the path of our hero, and in another a troll. The thing is that ghouls and goblins and trolls are all in the same position on the same path. That is why we know they are fairy tales, after all. And so it is with these various circuits, all of which confirm that one can come closer to finding a standpoint for discovery of the unknown from the pursuit of linkages arising from elements departing one's field of work, seemingly by chance; but of course, because it was their fate to be discovered.

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Alix Rule – Incite, Columbia University (United States)
https://www.semanticscholar.org/author/Alix-Rule/5102147
Alix Rule received her PhD in Sociology from Columbia University in 2018. Her research has focused on the art world, the transformation of the US mental health system, and most recently climate change, the focus of her most recent project, Private Lives. She is the recipient of a Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Award and a Berggruen Fellowship.

Lorenzo Sabetta – Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza-University of Rome (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1116-6968
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lorenzo-Sabetta
Lorenzo Sabetta is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Sapienza-University of Rome. His work investigates the intersections of cognitive sociology, field theory, and the interaction order. He held research and teaching positions in Sweden, Poland, the UK, and the US. His contributions have appeared in journals including *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *MAUSS International*, among others.

Peter Bearman – Incite, Columbia University (United States)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3745-3164 | psbearman@gmail.com
https://incite.columbia.edu/team/peter-bearman
Peter Bearman is the Director of the Incite Institute at Columbia University (USA). He studies social structure across diverse historical and contemporary contexts.