

Introduction: The Indiciary Paradigm in Sociology

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Abstract

This Symposium engages Carlo Ginzburg's indiciary paradigm as a resource for sociological analysis. The indiciary paradigm — a mode of knowledge that proceeds from marginal details, unintended traces, and anomalous signs toward the reconstruction of otherwise inaccessible social realities — has long circulated in sociology as a tacit practice rather than an explicit methodological framework. The central aim of this issue is to make that implicit reliance explicit, and to advance the paradigm as a distinctive cognitive posture for sociological inference. The Symposium makes three original contributions. Conceptually, it refines the indiciary paradigm as a structured mode of inference with identifiable epistemic properties and limits. Empirically, it shows how indiciary reasoning operates across historical sociology, ethnography, organizational analysis, and digital sociology, each time confronting distinct problems of evidence and explanation. Methodologically, it addresses the transformation of indiciary conditions under computational research, where sociologists increasingly work with digital footprints, algorithmic outputs, synthetic data, and simulations — materials that require the paradigm to be stretched and recalibrated rather than simply applied. The seven contributions taken together argue that the indiciary paradigm is not a relic of pre-quantitative social science but a vital stance for a world increasingly governed by indirect evidence, mediated traces, and contested truths.

Keywords: Indiciary paradigm; Abduction; Sociological inference; Traces; Carlo Ginzburg.

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Carlo Ginzburg's work occupies a singular position in the intellectual landscape of the social sciences. Trained as a historian, Ginzburg has nevertheless produced a body of work whose methodological and epistemological implications extend well beyond historiography, influencing anthropology, cultural studies, legal scholarship, and — albeit often implicitly — even sociology. From *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Ginzburg, 2013) to *Wooden Eyes* (Ginzburg, 2001) and *Threads and Traces* (Ginzburg, 2012) his reflections on evidence, inference, and explanation articulate what he famously termed the *indiciary* paradigm: a mode of knowledge that proceeds from marginal details, unintended traces, and anomalous signs toward the reconstruction of otherwise inaccessible social realities. Although this paradigm has become a canonical reference point across disciplines, its reception within sociology has remained fragmented, indirect, and largely untheorized.

This Symposium starts exactly from this last consideration. On the one hand, many sociological practices — especially qualitative, case-oriented, historical, ethnographic, and interpretive ones — operate in ways that are recognizably “indiciary”. Sociologists routinely infer latent structures, cultural grammars, power relations, and forms of knowledge from fragments, residues, inconsistencies, and unforeseen data. On the other hand, sociology has rarely engaged the indiciary paradigm as an explicit framework. References to Ginzburg are often limited to exemplary case studies or to microhistory as a *genre*, while the broader implications of his reasoning for sociological inference remain undertheorized. As a result, the paradigm circulates in sociology more as a “tacit practice” than as a clarified object of methodological reflection.

The aim of this Symposium is to make this implicit reliance explicit. Rather than importing the indiciary paradigm wholesale from historiography, the contributions collected here interrogate how it has been appropriated, transformed, and sometimes misunderstood within sociology. Taken together, the contributions assembled in this Symposium do not simply apply Ginzburg's insights to new empirical domains. They collectively argue that the indiciary paradigm names a distinctive mode of sociological reasoning, one that deserves to be treated as a core epistemological resource rather than as a marginal or auxiliary practice. Accordingly, the Symposium seeks to foreground conjectural, trace-based inference as a distinctive and analytically consequential mode of sociological reasoning, and to clarify its role within contemporary methodological and theoretical debates.

A further clarification is needed with respect to the methodological positioning of this Symposium. The aim is not limited to documenting or systematizing analytical practices that are *already* widespread in sociological research, though it certainly does so. Rather, the Symposium also advances a more reflexive and programmatic claim: that the indiciary paradigm should be treated as a framework whose underlying assumptions, inferential logics, and epistemic constraints deserve explicit articulation and further development. Many sociological inquiries already operate according to an indiciary logic, often tacitly and pragmatically, when they reason from fragments, traces, anomalies, and unintended disclosures. What is at stake here is not merely recognizing this diffuse practice *ex post*, but making its epistemological commitments visible and discussable. By foregrounding the indiciary paradigm as an object of methodological reflection, the Symposium seeks to move from implicit usage to conscious elaboration, thereby enabling comparison, critique, and cumulative learning across different fields, methods, and empirical domains. In this sense, the Symposium positions the indiciary paradigm simultaneously as an already operative mode of sociological reasoning and as a framework that can be more deliberately refined, extended, and contested within contemporary methodological debates. Accordingly, the guiding assumption is that the indiciary paradigm is not a method in the narrow sense, nor a substitute for formal modelling or causal explanation, but a cogni-

tive posture oriented toward retrospective inference, attention to detail, and the disciplined interpretation of traces produced under conditions of asymmetry, low control, or unintended disclosure.

Given the programmatic intent of this Introduction, it is also important to clarify the conceptual status of the notion of *posture*, which is framed here as an alternative to *method*. In the context of the indicinary paradigm, *posture* refers neither to a loose intellectual attitude nor to a fully formalized technique or method, but to a structured epistemological orientation that shapes how evidence is sought, selected, interpreted, and evaluated. It designates *a way* of positioning the researcher vis-à-vis sources, traces, and asymmetries of knowledge: an orientation characterized by attentiveness to marginal details, suspicion toward intentional testimony, sensitivity to unintended disclosures, and a disciplined tolerance for uncertainty and conjecture. Unlike a method, a posture does not prescribe standardized procedures or techniques; rather, it organizes inference by defining what counts as epistemically salient, how distance and mediation are handled, and how claims to truth are justified under conditions of partial access. Anticipating this clarification here helps to underscore that the indicinary paradigm functions less as a toolkit than as a mode of epistemic vigilance, one that cuts across methods while imposing specific cognitive and ethical constraints on sociological reasoning.

Clarifying this posture is particularly urgent in contemporary sociology. Increasingly, sociologists work with forms of evidence that are indirect, mediated, and opaque: judicial records, administrative data, digital footprints, algorithmically shaped traces, simulations, and metadata. In such contexts, the traditional epistemic backstops of intentional testimony, direct observation, and experimental control are weakened or absent altogether. The indicinary paradigm offers a way of conceptualizing inference under these conditions, foregrounding distance, partiality, and plausibility grounded in traces. At the same time, the indicinary paradigm raises unresolved tensions that sociology cannot afford to ignore. How can conjectural inference avoid slipping into arbitrariness? What distinguishes indicinary interpretation from mere storytelling? How should sociologists relate indicinary reasoning to abduction, explanation, and causality? And how can attention to marginal details coexist with demands for generalization and theoretical abstraction? These questions are often addressed piecemeal or implicitly but rarely confronted head-on as epistemological problems.

A related need for clarification concerns the notion of *abduction*, which recurs across several contributions and is closely associated with indicinary reasoning, yet risks remaining underspecified at the level of the Introduction. Within the framework advanced in this Symposium, abduction should not be understood merely as a purely logical operation. Rather, abduction names the inferential logic that animates the indicinary posture as just illustrated: a form of reasoning that starts from surprising, anomalous, or marginal facts and seeks to construct plausible explanations by situating these clues within broader configurations of meaning, power, and practice. In this sense, abduction is inseparable from the indicinary paradigm's attention to traces, asymmetries of power, and unintended disclosures. It does not operate on neutral data, but on materials whose relevance emerges retrospectively through interpretation. Clarifying this point helps distinguish what we could call as "indicinary abduction" from more formalized or model-driven versions of abductive reasoning, emphasizing its situated character instead. Across the contributions to this Symposium, abduction thus functions as a *shared inferential grammar* rather than as a unified technique: it provides a common way of moving from clues to claims while remaining explicitly open to refutation, revision, and alternative readings. Making this coordination explicit allows the reader to see how different empirical domains mobilize abduction in distinct ways, without dissolving the coherence of the overall theoretical position-

ing. In this connection, this Symposium underlines once more that the indicial paradigm should not be conflated with “narrative approaches” *tout court*, nor reduced to abduction as a purely logical operation. In this sense, the paradigm defines a specific “economy of evidence”, one that constrains interpretation while acknowledging uncertainty and partiality as constitutive conditions of knowledge.

Along similar lines, it is useful to clarify the specific ways in which this Symposium contributes to ongoing debates around the indicial paradigm. First, at a conceptual level, the contributions collectively refine the indicial paradigm by treating it not merely as a loose metaphor or stylistic sensibility, but as a structured mode of inference with identifiable epistemic properties, limits, and tensions. Second, at the level of translation into sociological inquiry, the Symposium shows how indicial reasoning operates across different subfields — historical sociology, ethnography, organizational analysis, digital sociology — each time confronting distinct problems of evidence, agency, and explanation. Rather than assuming a direct transfer from historiography to sociology, the essays examine how the paradigm is reworked when applied to sociological objects characterized by ongoing interaction, reflexivity, and institutional complexity. Third, the Symposium engages with the transformation of indicial conditions in contemporary social research, marked by the proliferation of indirect, trace-based, and computational forms of data. By addressing digital footprints, algorithmic mediation, simulations, and synthetic data, the contributions explore how the indicial paradigm must be stretched, recalibrated, and in some cases reformulated in order to remain analytically productive under conditions of distance, opacity, and large-scale mediation. Taken together, these three dimensions delineate the scope and originality of the Symposium: not only revisiting a classic epistemological framework but actively testing its relevance and limits in present-day sociological research.

A final point of clarification concerns the directionality of the dialogue with Carlo Ginzburg’s work. While the Introduction has so far emphasized the relevance of the indicial paradigm for sociological inquiry, the interdisciplinary exchange is not unidirectional. On the one hand, Ginzburg offers sociology a refined epistemology of inference grounded in clues, traces, asymmetries of power, and unintended disclosures; an approach that resonates strongly with many sociological objects characterized by opacity, mediation, and indirect access. On the other hand, sociology contributes back to Ginzburg’s paradigm by extending it into domains that exceed its original historical formulation. Empirically, sociological research confronts the indicial paradigm with forms of evidence — administrative records, digital traces, algorithmic outputs, simulations — whose scale, mediation, and generative properties challenge assumptions about authorship, intentionality, and trace formation. Methodologically, sociology pushes the paradigm to engage explicitly with issues of generalization, comparison, and cumulative knowledge production across cases. In this sense, the Symposium does not merely apply Ginzburg’s insights to sociological materials; it uses sociological inquiry as a testing ground through which the indicial paradigm itself is re-specified, expanded, and, where necessary, problematized.

The contributions to this Symposium approach these topics from different angles — ranging from ethnography and historical sociology to digital methods and science and technology studies — yet they share a common concern: to specify what it means to reason sociologically from “clues”. Some essays reconstruct the intellectual genealogy of the indicial paradigm and its affinities with abductive reasoning, philology, and physiognomic interpretation. Others explore how traces function as data when agency, intentionality, or authorship are weak or distributed, as in digital environments. Still others examine the relationship be-

tween evidence, truth, and power, emphasizing how indicial reasoning allows sociologists to read sources “against the grain” without collapsing analysis into relativism or moralism.

Alix Rule, Lorenzo Sabetta, and Peter Bearman (2026) revisit and extend the indicial paradigm by placing chance at the core of sociological understanding. Rather than treating chance as the absence of explanation, the authors reinterpret it as an experiential marker of underlying structure. When actors narrate events as accidental or unsought, they reveal — precisely through their refusal or inability to explain — the pathways and grammars that organize their social worlds with minimal analytical abstraction. The essay advances a distinct sociological claim: chance does not suspend explanation but instead points to structured pathways shaped by institutions, networks, and cultural forms that remain largely invisible to actors themselves. Narratives of chance thus function as privileged clues through which structure can be inferred indirectly. Through a close rereading of *The Cheese and the Worms* (Ginzburg, 1980) the essay shows how Ginzburg’s success depends less on identifying the sources of Menocchio’s beliefs than on following forward the consequences of his chance encounters with books, ideas, and people. These encounters expose a peasant cultural grammar irreducible to texts or doctrines, but observable in practice, at points of contact between oral and written traditions. In this sense, the indicial paradigm is reframed as a pathway-oriented strategy: by tracing the linkages generated by chance events, the analyst reconstructs culture as a lived structure that shapes action without being fully articulated.

Maurizio Catino (2026) interrogates the relationship between evidence, truth, and power in contemporary societies. Drawing on Ginzburg’s reflections on philology, clues, and proof, the article situates the indicial paradigm as a form of knowledge attentive to minimal signs, traces, and discrepancies — elements that become especially decisive when truth is contested across different institutional and discursive regimes. The central theoretical contribution of the essay lies in its distinction among three forms of truth — judicial, historical-social, and narrative — and in its analysis of the tensions among them. Judicial truth is oriented toward attributing individual responsibility within legally constrained procedures; historical-social truth seeks to understand events and processes through contextualized interpretation; narrative truth, by contrast, emerges from communicative processes that privilege emotional resonance and plausibility over empirical verification. While the first two forms remain, in principle, falsifiable through evidence and method, narrative truth operates largely outside these controls yet exerts powerful influence over public opinion. Through a detailed case study of the Vajont disaster in Italy, the essay demonstrates how a dominant narrative truth can crystallize around selective readings of judicial sources, rhetorical amplification, and media circulation, eventually displacing both judicial findings and historical reconstruction. Against the proliferation of simplified explanations and emotionally persuasive narratives, it reaffirms a conception of truth as a *critical process* capable of resisting both positivist reductionism and relativist drift.

Mario Cardano (2026) explicitly reframes the figure of the ethnographer as a detective. Building on Ginzburg’s insight that opaque realities can be accessed through marginal signs, traces, and unwitting testimonies, the article situates sociological inquiry within a semiotic tradition attentive to what escapes actors’ control rather than to their declared intentions. The theoretical core of the essay lies in its articulation of the relationship between the indicial paradigm and abductive reasoning. Social life, the author argues, is structurally opaque: unlike the medical scene of diagnosis, research participants have no incentive to cooperate fully and actively engage in practices of dissimulation and simulation. In this context, ethnographic knowledge cannot rely primarily on explicit accounts, but must instead attend to “expressions given off”, minute details, and inconsistencies that function as clues to otherwise inaccessible

internal states, meanings, and orientations. Abduction is presented as the inferential logic that animates this indicinary reading. Starting from surprising or anomalous facts encountered in the field, the ethnographer formulates plausible hypotheses that render these facts intelligible, while remaining explicitly provisional and defeasible. By coupling indicinary attention to clues with abductive reasoning, it advances a model of qualitative knowledge grounded in plausibility, reflexivity, and epistemic responsibility — one that restores the centrality of inference, uncertainty, and interpretation to sociological analysis.

Fabrizio Martire (2026) revisits the indicinary paradigm to address a central methodological challenge in contemporary sociology: how to make sense of trace-based empirical materials, and especially of digital footprints. The paradigm is framed as an epistemological alternative to both the Galilean and the Lazarsfeldian models, distinguished by its retrospective logic that ascends from manifest effects to latent causes. Rather than privileging planned observations, standardized indicators, or experimental manipulation, it assigns cognitive value to marginal details, residues, absences, and by-products — elements that become meaningful only when interpreted as clues. The essay's core argument develops this paradigm in a distinctly sociological direction by formalizing the problem of zero-agency data. In the case of traces, meaning is not co-produced by respondents and researchers, but rests entirely on the latter: traces are produced unintentionally (or at least not primarily for research purposes), and their significance emerges only through an act of sense-making. Drawing on the framework of *ichnology* — the science of traces — the essay conceptualizes any trace as the outcome of an interaction between a *tracemaker* and a *depositional context*. Transposed to sociology, and especially to the digital realm, this means that traces cannot be interpreted without reconstructing the often mute and opaque contexts in which they are generated.

Vincenzo Mele (2026) reconstructs a physiognomic paradigm for the social sciences, presenting it as a sociological counterpart and extension of Carlo Ginzburg's indicinary. Moving beyond the discredited determinism of classical physiognomy, the article situates physiognomic reasoning within a non-positivist, anti-reductionist tradition that treats marginal, involuntary, and expressive details as privileged clues to otherwise inaccessible social realities. The essay's central argument is that physiognomy constitutes a cognitive style rather than a formal method: a way of seeing and interpreting that assigns epistemic value to fragments, residues, and symptoms produced outside conscious control. Like the indicinary paradigm, it operates abductively, reasoning from minor and often neglected details toward latent structures of meaning and power. Traces are not neutral data but historically situated products of asymmetrical social relations, and interpretation itself is understood as a critical practice that interrogates these relations. Through a comparative reconstruction of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno, the physiognomic paradigm converges with Ginzburg's indicinary model in its shared emphasis on conjecture, comparison, and refutation, as well as in its resistance to both positivist formalism and relativist scepticism. At the same time, the physiognomic tradition adds a distinctive focus on sensorial experience, embodiment, and expressive forms, highlighting how perception itself becomes a medium of knowledge.

Anna Skarpelis' essay (2026) extends Carlo Ginzburg's indicinary paradigm into the domain of contemporary sociology, confronting it with computational methods, simulation, and generative artificial intelligence. By rereading "Clues" (Ginzburg, 1979) and *Wooden Eyes* (Ginzburg, 2001) as a theory of knowledge under conditions of distance, the article frames the indicinary paradigm as a crucial epistemological resource for understanding how sociological inference operates when direct access to social reality is structurally impossible or technologically mediated. At the core of the essay is the claim that distance is not an

epistemic deficit but a constitutive condition of knowledge. Ginzburg's insistence on documents, images, and traces provides a conceptual grammar for what the author terms *in silico perspectivism*: a mode of inquiry in which sociologists increasingly work with simulations, synthetic data, and AI-generated agents that function as epistemic proxies rather than as direct representations of social actors. In this context, the indicinary paradigm does not collapse, but is strained and reformulated, as clues no longer necessarily point backward to lived events but may instead point sideways to optimization functions, institutional assumptions, and regimes of plausibility embedded in computational systems. The essay develops this argument by drawing a parallel between historical archives and algorithmic infrastructures. Just as inquisitorial records are saturated with power yet remain productive by means of indicinary inference when read obliquely, AI-generated outputs and synthetic data must be treated not as transparent mirrors of reality nor as epistemically void fictions, but as artefacts whose distortions, biases, and anomalies reveal contemporary structures of knowledge and power. What is at stake is not the elimination of mediation or bias, but the disciplined interpretation of their forms. The indicinary paradigm thus shifts attention from the question of whether AI outputs are "true" to the question of what kinds of truth claims they can sustain, and at what cost.

Finally, Filippo Barbera and Maurizio Catino in their conversation with Carlo Ginzburg (2026) offer a reflective and programmatic restatement of the *indiciary paradigm* as a general epistemological posture shared by history and the social sciences. Across the dialogue, Ginzburg reiterates a core premise of his work: truth is not a given but a point of arrival, reached through a trajectory of conjectures, refutations, and the disciplined interpretation of traces, signs, and unintended revelations. The indicinary paradigm thus emerges not as a fixed method, but as a way of working with partial, asymmetrical, and often compromised sources, while preserving the possibility of truth against both positivist naïveté and postmodern scepticism. A central axis of the discussion concerns the relationship between truth, evidence, and perspective. Ginzburg emphasizes the dialogical movement between *etic* questions posed by the scholar and *emic* categories derived from historical actors, a movement that makes all historical and sociological inquiry inherently comparative. This perspective-sensitive approach allows scholars to confront the risks of anachronism without abandoning their contemporary standpoint. Distance — temporal, cultural, moral, or epistemic — is presented not as an obstacle but as a condition of understanding, enabling the reconstruction of alien or uncomfortable viewpoints without collapsing analysis into empathy or moral identification. The conversation further clarifies the overlap and distinction between historical and judicial reasoning. While judges and historians share a commitment to evidence, their aims diverge: judgment versus understanding. Through reflections on *The Judge and the Historian* (Ginzburg, 1991; 2006), Ginzburg argues that the historian's task requires a philological stance — a rigorous attention to wording, context, contradiction, and silence — capable of reading sources "against the grain" and beyond the intentions of their producers. Philology thus becomes both a cognitive and ethical discipline, grounding inference in involuntary traces rather than subjective conviction. Finally, the conversation gestures toward contemporary challenges, including artificial intelligence, digital archives, and fake news. Ginzburg cautiously suggests that new technologies may expand the possibilities of indicinary inquiry, provided they preserve the conditions for surprise and critical distance. Against the erosion of factuality associated with radical narrativism, the indicinary paradigm is reaffirmed as a defence of truth claims that are provisional, falsifiable, and grounded in proof rather than in pure storytelling.

Read together, the essays in this Symposium suggest that the indiciary paradigm is not a relic of pre-quantitative social science, but a vital epistemological stance for a world increasingly governed by indirect evidence, mediated traces, and contested truths. At stake is not the defence of a method, but the preservation of a disciplined form of inference capable of sustaining *truth claims* under conditions of distance, opacity, and power.

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