

Traces, Inference, and Truth: Carlo Ginzburg (1939–2026)

In Memoriam of Carlo Ginzburg

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A few months ago, *Sociologica* published a Symposium devoted to the indiciary paradigm and its relevance for sociological inquiry. The project stemmed from a simple conviction: although Carlo Ginzburg's work has profoundly influenced the social sciences, sociology has often drawn upon it as an implicit practice rather than as an explicit object of methodological reflection. The Symposium sought to foster a dialogue between Ginzburg's thought, the indiciary paradigm, and several key issues in contemporary sociology: inference, abduction, digital traces, forms of evidence, and the production of truth.

For many sociologists, the indiciary paradigm has served as a methodological resource that is widely employed yet rarely examined in its own right. From organizational analysis to the study of institutions, from historical sociology to ethnography, the reconstruction of social processes through traces, clues, anomalies, and unintended revelations has become a common research practice. One of the Symposium's aims was precisely to show how deeply the dialogue between Ginzburg and sociology was already present, even when it remained largely implicit.

The news of his passing inevitably lends those pages a different meaning.

Carlo Ginzburg was one of the most original and influential scholars of the last several decades. Trained as a historian, he made a decisive contribution to redefining the relationship between evidence, interpretation, and historical knowledge. Through works such as *The Cheese and the Worms*, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, *Wooden Eyes*, *Threads and Traces*, and *The Judge and the Historian* — to mention only a few among his vast

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body of work — he showed how marginal details, involuntary traces, and seemingly insignificant anomalies can become gateways to otherwise invisible social, cultural, and political realities. The indiciary paradigm he developed stands as one of the most important epistemological innovations in the human and social sciences of the late twentieth century.

Yet Ginzburg's methodological lesson did not consist in a celebration of detail for its own sake. His attention to the individual case, the anomaly, and the clue was always directed toward illuminating broader questions: the relationship between popular and elite culture, between power and truth, and between individual experience and long-term historical processes. In this sense, microhistory was never, for Ginzburg, a narrowing of the scope of inquiry, but rather a way of addressing general problems through particular cases. It is precisely for this reason that his work continues to offer valuable insights for sociological research. Attention to the individual case did not imply a rejection of generalization; instead, it pointed toward a different conception of social knowledge, one grounded in the ability to move from the particular to broader configurations of relationships, institutions, and historical processes.

What was striking about Carlo Ginzburg, however, was not only the extraordinary breadth of his scholarship. It was also the intellectual curiosity that continued to animate him. When Filippo Barbera and I invited him to participate in the Symposium, he accepted immediately, with enthusiasm and generosity. Despite being one of the most distinguished scholars of his generation, he approached the project not as a celebratory occasion but as an opportunity for discussion. He read the proposal with great care and took part in the interview published in the issue with the same spirit of inquiry that characterized his entire scholarly career. A few minutes of conversation with him were enough to be swept away by the speed of his associations and the enthusiasm with which he embraced every new question. He was driven by what he had recently called the "euphoria of ignorance": the joy of discovery, of unexpected questions, and of the possibility of continuing to learn.

Rereading those pages today, what stands out is the vitality of his thought. They speak of philology, inquisitorial trials, evidence, and truth, but also of artificial intelligence, digital traces, and the epistemological challenges posed by new technologies. Above all, they reveal a conviction that runs through all of Ginzburg's work: scientific inquiry advances not only through the confirmation of hypotheses but also through the capacity to be surprised by what one was not looking for. Research, Ginzburg often reminded us, must be able to discover the unexpected; a line of inquiry that never encounters anomalies or surprises is probably heading in the wrong direction. The most important questions often emerged from the encounter with a minimal trace or an apparently marginal detail capable of casting new light on a larger whole. Not in order to turn the exception into a curiosity, but to address broader questions and, through the study of the past, gain a deeper understanding of the present.

From this stemmed his extraordinary ability to bring together seemingly distant phenomena, texts, and contexts, revealing unexpected connections and opening up new avenues of inquiry. For Ginzburg, there was no predetermined correspondence between problems and disciplines: questions, rather than academic boundaries, were what guided research. Likewise, temporal, cultural, and moral distance was not an obstacle to knowledge but one of its conditions. To understand meant resisting the immediacy of identification, looking at the world — and at oneself — from an oblique perspective capable of making what appears obvious and familiar problematic once again. This is also why he distrusted empathy as a cognitive shortcut and insisted on the importance of philology as an exercise in attentiveness, verification, and critical control over one's interpretive categories. At the heart of his work lay a rare combination of philological rigor and intellectual imagination: the ability to examine sources with meticulous

care without ever losing sight of the broader questions they made visible.

At a time when the distinction between facts and narratives appears increasingly fragile, Ginzburg firmly defended the idea that truth is not a possession but an always provisional achievement, grounded in evidence and open to refutation. This is a lesson that continues to challenge the social sciences far beyond the boundaries of historiography. At a moment when the social sciences are confronted with ever-growing quantities of data, digital traces, simulations, and algorithmically generated content, Ginzburg's insistence on the centrality of inference, evidence, and their critical interpretation retains remarkable relevance. For him, the speed of tools could never replace the slowness of reading. No amount of data, however vast, can substitute for the patient work of interpreting, evaluating, and debating evidence.

Central to his work was also a conception of philology not as a specialized technique but as an exercise in intellectual rigor and civic responsibility: a way of reading sources, documents, and words that remains, even today, an antidote to simplification, manipulation, and the many contemporary forms of falsifying reality. For Ginzburg, the question of evidence was not merely an epistemological one. It was also a civic and political issue: a defense of the very possibility of distinguishing between the true, the false, and the fictitious; between grounded reconstruction and interpretive arbitrariness; and of critically examining the procedures through which such distinctions are constructed and validated. Yet the issue also concerned the ways in which evidence is produced, selected, and interpreted, and thus the procedures through which historical knowledge is constructed.

Matching to this intellectual rigor was a particular concern for writing. Ginzburg distrusted obscurity as a sign of profundity and regarded clarity not as a concession to popularization but as a scholarly responsibility. The lucidity of his prose, admired far beyond the boundaries of historiography, was an integral part of his approach to research and of his engagement with readers.

We are especially grateful to have shared these reflections with him over the past few months. The Symposium we had the honor of organizing now stands not only as a tribute to his work, but also as a testimony to his remarkable openness to dialogue, his intellectual generosity, and his inexhaustible curiosity about new questions and new interlocutors.

For this reason, the conversation between Carlo Ginzburg's thought, the indicial paradigm, and sociology that we sought to foster in the special issue dedicated to him does not end with his passing. The questions he posed about the relationships among traces, inference, evidence, and truth continue to challenge contemporary sociological research. The dialogue he initiated with *Sociologica* remains a testament to the vitality of a mode of inquiry that, until the very end, combined intellectual rigor, curiosity, and a capacity for discovery.

To his family and to his many readers around the world, *Sociologica* extends its deepest sympathy and gratitude.

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