
THE PARADIGM OF TRACES

METHODOLOGY OR PROBLEMATIC FIELD?

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Abstract

This article looks at the well-known article ‘Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm’ by Carlo Ginzburg - in the first place, the concept of ‘trace’ it contains as a source of historical, or, from a broader point of view, humanitarian knowledge, as well as the image of a scientist as a ‘hunter’ matching the type of a historical object suggested by Ginzburg. This review includes both responses to Ginzburg’s article where researchers focused on possible source of Ginzburg’s ideas and their relationship to other similar methodologies (M. Foucault, M. Bakhtin, R. Collingwood and others) and the philosophical tradition of reflection upon the issue of traces, which was not mentioned in Ginzburg’s article, but was considered by Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur and Sartre. Taking into account all controversial arguments suggested by this tradition, a conclusion is drawn that the methodology suggested by Ginzburg is not so much a paradigm in the sense intended by T. Kuhn but a problematic field where interests of different sciences overlap: History, Theology, Philosophy and Social psychology.

Keywords: other, microhistory, dominant, subdominant, cultures

1. Introduction

In this article, we will explore the epistemological meaning of the concept of ‘trace’ - whether it provides a new perspective on historiographical and broader humanitarian problematics or its terminological vagueness rather makes itself a problem, perhaps even a philosophical problem in the first place and only then a historical one. Such problem statement is implicitly suggested in the well-known article ‘Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario’ (Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm) by Carlo Ginzburg [1], which mentioned “the silent emergence” [2] of a new humanitarian paradigm at the end of the 19th century - a research methodology oriented towards studying individual cases, presumptive in terms of conclusions drawn, based on deciphering signs or clues.

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Ginzburg's article did not remain unnoticed. What stood out was at least the unusual thematic variety of the used material: exotic methods of attribution of paintings by J. Mancini and G. Morelli, methods of deduction used by Sherlock Holmes, psychoanalysis developed by S. Freud, methods of identifying people created by F. Galton, A. Bertillon and J. Purkinje, the Hippocratic school of medicine, an oriental tale about three brothers solving riddles, Mesopotamian divination, Arab physiognomy and many other things kept in the 'background'. According to Ginzburg, all these examples should illustrate that long before becoming a method of humanitarian knowledge, the 'evidential paradigm' was used in various branches of human activities. Moreover, it had a common 'ancestor': "behind this presumptive or divinatory paradigm we perceive what may be the oldest act in the intellectual history of humanity: the hunter squatting on the ground, studying the tracks of his quarry" [2, p. 105]. In other words, the couple 'hunter - trace' is characterized in the article not only as the initial form of the evidential paradigm but also as a kind of a common denominator of all its multiple manifestations. It also sheds light on why the paradigm suggested by Ginzburg was discussed in subsequent works as the 'paradigm of traces', although the word 'trace' was not mentioned either in the name of the paradigm or in the title of the article.

However, illustrations of the evidential paradigm in the humanitarian filed as such are surprisingly scarce in Ginzburg's article: the works by A. Warburg on Renaissance painting [3], the article by J. Le Goff about wonder-working kings [4] and the book by M. Bakhtin about Rabelais [5] were just mentioned without careful consideration. On the whole, the article by Ginzburg looks at an introduction to a new promising research area. Nevertheless, there was no follow-up thereafter: in a much later book 'Threads and Traces: True False Fictive' Ginzburg considers traces in a narrower sense as text elements that make up a narrative structure without even mentioning the evidential paradigm [6].

2. Possible sources and the context of the evidential paradigm

Does it mean that after all Ginzburg acknowledged the fact that further research into the evidential paradigm would not produce any significant results? Even if it is true, it does not mean that such research has become obsolete. Commenting on the article by Ginzburg, P. Ricoeur wrote, "The field opened by the evidential paradigm is immense" [7]. Answering his own question as to what is common between the variety of practices mentioned by Ginzburg, he added, "several features: the singularity of the thing deciphered, the indirect aspect of the deciphering, its conjectural character (where the term comes from divination)" [7]. To this positive evaluation Ricoeur added a critical remark, "By encompassing historical knowledge within the evidential paradigm, Ginzburg weakens his concept of a clue, which gains in being opposed to that of written testimony" [7].

Similar points of view have been expressed by other authors as well. For instance, J. Ahlskog believed that the evidential paradigm implied “the use of non-intentional sources”, i.e. came down do “new kinds of material from the past” [8, p. 113] without engaging in a dialog with it. As for the first Ricoeur’s comment, in fact, Ginzburg, as he himself noted, included the effect the examined text had on himself into the subject of his research by considering his own hesitations, doubts, etc. as a ‘trace’ left by the document on himself [9]. A new question arises here: if Ginzburg does not talk much of the evidential paradigm as a theorist, could it be that his research in the sphere of microhistory should be regarded as ‘model application’ of the paradigm? However, interpretation of some works by Ginzburg, such as ‘The Cheese and the Worms’ from this perspective is more likely to demonstrate the opposite. Criticizing the concept of microhistory developed by Ginzburg, Ankersmit writes that the story of a freethinking miller who lived in the 16th century and was burnt by the Inquisition, which is described in the book ‘The Cheese and the Worms’, is just a historical circumstantiality that does not tell us anything about that epoch as a whole [10]. On the other hand, Ginzburg apparently tries to put this particular story in the context of the fight between the ‘official’ and ‘people’ cultures (which is the main topic of his large works), which leads to another question: does the author switch from the particular to the universal too easily and does he make the particular comply with the universal?

The idea of a clash between cultures also determines the structure and conclusions of Ginzburg’s article about the evidential paradigm, being one of the reasons why it is so widely discussed, on the one hand, and the cause of inconsistencies it contains, on the other hand. Could this very idea be the key to understanding the article? Ginzburg’s approach is often referred to (and he also confirmed it several times) as a presentation of history from a victim’s perspective [11-13]. Yet, in the above-mentioned later work Ginzburg writes that his position as a researcher is “emotional identification with the victims, intellectual contiguity with inquisitors” [6, p. 99]. Such view on history is associated with such authors as M. Foucault and M. Bakhtin, which was noticed by some researchers. However, they remarked that with his paradigm of clues Ginzburg argues against Foucault’s statement that culture of suppressed classes is not immediately available and that it can be studied only through repressive practices used by the dominant culture. According to C. Rojas, evidential paradigm, precisely as a result of this effort to discover the paths that may allow him to reconstruct the subaltern cultures, seen from the “point of view of the victims” [14, p. 194]. Ginzburg also moves beyond Bakhtin by claiming that “victims’ history” can be written from their own perspective [14, p. 197].

Some authors find different origins of Ginzburg’s evidential paradigm by identifying its link with C. Peirce’s semiotics. The similarity between these two theories lies in the fact that methodologically Ginzburg uses metonymy instead of a metaphor as a basis for his paradigm [15], which represents an implicit reference to Peirce’s semiotics (indeed, Ginzburg writes, “the rhetorical figures on which the language of venatic deduction still rests today - the part in relation

to the whole, the effect in relation to the cause - are traceable to the narrative axis of metonymy, with the rigorous exclusion of metaphor”) [2, p. 103]. Besides, ‘clues’ or ‘traces’ in Ginzburg’s article can be interpreted as analogous to the index type of signs in Peirce’s classification [16]. The same author wonders why Ginzburg always explains the individual through index signs (instead of theoretical descriptions, mathematical formulas, etc.) [16]. The answer may lie in the fact that by opposing the evidential paradigm to formalized knowledge of the ‘Galilean science’, Ginzburg describes the former as “individual knowledge about the individual possessed by an individual” [6], thereby absolutizing differences between these two approaches.

Apart from that, considering the paradigm suggested by Ginzburg primarily as a paradigm of traces, the same author (Pape) indicates that there is a difference between a trace and an index, “The trace, a fragment of a causal sequence that is existentially connected with the object, lies at the end of a purposive search process” [16, p. 16]. He provides a few main features that, in his opinion, characterize a trace: 1) each trace is connected with interest in something; 2) a trace is something one finds when they pursue an epistemic goal; 3) a trace is an index sign if it is interpreted in the context of certain expectations and goals; 4) a trace exists only within a chain, i.e. it is incorporated into the network of corresponding relations [16].

Therefore, there is a causal relationship between a trace and its object; besides, a trace is connected with the ‘explorer’, since it should be recognized by the explorer as a trace - thus, it is an intentional connection. Finally, a trace should be connected with other traces, it does not exist on its own - this relationship can be called a structural connection. It appears that there is no significant difference between a trace and a sign, which is also a participant of the same relationships. Indeed, H. Pape equalizes traces and signs saying that “traces and indices allow us to focus successfully on individuals because they are what is directly present in all our represented cognitive life” [16, p. 16].

However, this very text highlights a significant difference between these two concepts: being a result of a certain event or process in the past and, at the same time, the goal of a cognitive (and in a broader sense - research) process in the future, a trace turns out to be more closely connected with time than a sign; moreover, it may even be the essence of human temporality. It is appropriate to cite a question asked by one author about the evidential paradigm: “The most important question is not, however, whether all of the material at the historian’s disposal belongs to the category of trace, but what it means to relate to something as a trace” [8, p. 114].

The problem here resides in the fact that this binary attitude to time embracing the past and the future creates an irremovable epistemological gap in the concept of a trace, which prevents the development of an integral cognitive paradigm based on it. Perhaps, this gap is the most noticeable in the Humanities, the spread of the evidential paradigm in which is mentioned by Ginzburg. The reason is that in the Humanities the ‘object’ that leaves a trace is the Other in the broadest sense of this word. In the course of examination of a trace, one also

finds themselves caught in an antinomy. The Other that has left the trace like that not because they are 'numerically' different or because their nature is different, but rather because they are always located in a different time period as opposed to an animal that has left a trace and is located in the past that is accessible for us. One encounters the Other even they look at traces of their own activities carried out quite a long time ago - enough to have lost the connection of one's present selves with their then state.

3. Philosophical interpretation of the theme of traces

Nevertheless, one encounters traces in their givenness; then how should one treat them? Let us look at the issue of traces in the context of the tradition not referred to by Ginzburg in his article, namely the philosophical tradition. Using the example of antiquities exhibited in museums that have ceased to serve people, Heidegger draws a conclusion that these things belong to the finished, completed past, which should be distinguished from the immediate past that continues producing the present ('being there' in Heidegger's terms, or *Dasein*): "Dasein 'is' its past in the way of its own Being, which, to put it roughly, 'historizes' out of its future on each occasion" [17]. Museum pieces also used to have their own *Dasein*, but it became a thing of the past together with their world.

Thus, according to Heidegger, the past surely leaves traces, but, being the past, it is not located 'behind' its traces - these traces do not lead anywhere. However, if we come to this conclusion, aren't we prisoners of the present limited by our own subjectivism? In his reflections on the trace left by the past, Levinas emphasizes Heidegger's idea that a trace features the past that has taken place, i.e. separated from the present, and claims that a trace "disturbs the order of things in an irreparable fashion" [18, p. 37] and creates "a past that was never a present" [19]. Such a gap cannot be caused by any natural disaster (Levinas calls results of natural processes 'effects' rather 'traces'), but it is inevitably created not even by an action, by the existence of the Other as such. As noted by Edward Casey, for Levinas, a trace is "the trace of an Other who is perfectly present - present in an irreversible past" [20, p. 251]. The Other opens up in an endless perspective facing both the past and the future. The immediate form in which he opens up to us is a face. As Levinas writes, "What is this original trace, this primordial desolation? The nudity of the face facing us, expressing itself: it interrupts order." [21] However, such interpretation of a trace as a face implies that the trace dissolves in the Other in a way; as noted by one author, "It is the trace as the erasure of the trace which articulates the controversy at the center of Levinas' philosophy" [22, p. 238]. Like in Heidegger's vision, in Levinas's theory, a trace is in the end deprived of its 'exploratory', indicative sense, since the Other themselves addresses one through their traces.

According to Heidegger and Levinas, the inconsistency of a trace as a sign of the past lies in the following: one either focuses on the trace itself as an object, losing track of the Other's activity as its source, or, on the contrary, loses

the trace (object) and focuses on the Other. In the first case, history becomes uninteresting for one, while in the second case it loses the point of providing knowledge about the past because the Other's past is unreachable.

As it has been mentioned earlier, a trace is related to another trace. It is not just one of its features - according to J. Derrida, who explored the problematic field outlined by Heidegger and Levinas, it is the very essence of a trace since if there was only one trace, it would be equal to what had left it. It means that "the (pure) trace is difference." [23] However, it should not be understood as difference determined by the producer of the trace: it would mean that that source of the trace was given (which is, in Derrida's opinion, the main mistake made by the Western school of thought). With the help of this knowledge, one could characterize the trace itself. On the contrary, Derrida argues that "The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general." [23, p. 65] Therefore, a trace is present in Derrida's theory in a paradoxical sense of a trace as such, 'a trace of itself'.

Trying to find a way out from the deadlock where the problem of traces was taken by existentialism and deconstructionism, Paul Ricoeur tries to return the literal, 'pre-philosophical' meaning to the concept of a trace to make it a suitable means of historical cognition. Ricoeur says that the concept of a trace combines two aspects - the dynamic (a trace indicates a certain past event or process and the time that has passed since then) and the static (a trace is a mark, a material - but not only material - sign): "...to have passed this way and to have made a mark are equivalent. 'Passage' is a better way of speaking about the dynamics of a trace, while 'mark' is a better way of indicating its static aspect." [24] Ricoeur reminds that this is just how an ordinary calendar works: there is both a simple counting sequence of dates and special highlighted dates-marks that set the dimension of calendar dates in the limiting case ('Anno Mundi', 'Anno Domini' or 'Anno Hegirae' chronology). Hence Ricoeur's seemingly paradoxical assumption: "The time of the trace, it seems to me, is homogeneous with calendar time" [24, p. 120]. Thus, the mystery of a trace, where, according to Ricoeur, the existential and the empirical aspects overlap, is homogenous with the mystery of time itself. This is how Ricoeur creates the image of a researcher-hunter who combines the art of following the trail and understanding of the paradoxical meaning of the expression 'to leave a trace': "Someone passed by here. The trace invites us to pursue it, to follow it back, if possible, to the person or animal who passed this way. We may lose the trail. It may even disappear or lead nowhere. The trace can be wiped out, for it is fragile and needs to be preserved intact; otherwise, the passage did occur but it did not leave a trace, it simply happened. We may know by other means that people or animals existed somewhere, but they will remain forever unknown if there is not some trace that leads to them. Hence the trace indicates 'here' (in space) and 'now' (in the present), the past passage of living beings. It orients the hunt, the quest, the search, the inquiry. But this is what history is. To say that it is knowledge by

traces is to appeal, in the final analysis, to the significance of a passed past that nevertheless remains preserved in its vestiges.” [24]

Criticizing Heidegger’s viewpoint, Ricoeur aims to restore the significance of the historical past for the present living through the legacy of the past. However, Ricoeur is also critical of Levinas’s theory: although the issue of the Other does not totally disappear from Ricoeur’s writings, it is much more diluted. Ricoeur justifiably assumes that the historical past reveals in its traces ‘the other way’ rather than the Other human being: for instance, a medieval Gothic cathedral expresses ‘the spirit of its age’ to a greater degree than the personality of its architect or the client who ordered its construction.

Ginzburg may have relied on Ricoeur’s ideas to a certain extent, since in an earlier article ‘Clues: Roots of a Scientific Paradigm’ [25], which was written before the third volume of ‘Time and Narrative’ [24] by Ricoeur was published and the content of which was virtually identical to that of the later article ‘Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm’ [1], the hunter-researcher was not mentioned. Comparing the two versions of the text, it is easy to understand that it is the image of the hunter-researcher that makes the text complete and conceptually integral.

4. The trace of the future

We see the trace of the past as an antonymic multiplicity of meanings. This problem is not at all confined to Philosophy since the past literally surrounds one everywhere and the question of how one should behave in relation to it is an everyday issue that shapes one’s present and is oriented towards the future. The problem of a trace is also a practical question that in one way or another indicates the future, being its prognostication. It is another temporal aspect of the issue of a trace that may even be more closely connected with the topic of the Other than the trace of the past.

The problem of ‘the future Other’ was brought up in a dramatic way by J.-P. Sartre in his treatise ‘Being and Nothingness’. According to Sartre, ‘the Other from the future’ manifests himself immediately in a stranger’s look turned at one. This is not the Other described by Levinas when behind the given sign/trace (face) there is an endless perspective to be explored. According to Sartre, one does not cognize anything, for a look cannot be seen, as opposed to an eye: it is one who is seen (‘observed’). “First, the Other’s look as the necessary condition of my objectivity is the destruction of all objectivity for me. The Other’s look touches me across the world and is not only a transformation of myself but a total metamorphosis of the world. I am looked at in a world which is looked at.” [26] One has to consider the attention focused on them as a sign of their future, but it is future estranged from them: one does not know what the Other wants and intends to do. “The fact of the Other is incontestable and touches me to the heart. I realize him through uneasiness; through him I am perpetually in danger in a world which is this world and which nevertheless I can only glimpse.” [26, p. 367]

Is it right to call this sign a trace if it points at something that does not exist? It seems fair to say that it is the reverse side of a trace, its 'negative'. It becomes a trace if one looks at the situation from the Other's perspective using the theory of stigma presented in E. Goffman's work of the same name. According to Goffman, in a narrow sense, stigma is a distinction that a 'normal person' uses as the key to understanding its possessor and modelling its behaviour towards this possessor (in this context Goffman provides such examples of distinctions as disability, disfigurement, etc.). In a broader sense, stigma is everything that does not conform to the 'norm' - some common expectations or standards concerning the looks and/or behaviour of a particular group of people. Goffman goes on to say that, in their turn, knowing what kind of reaction they provoke, a 'stigmatized individual' develops a certain behaviour pattern. Goffman assumes that the indefinite nature of the norm results in the indefinite nature of stigma: in different social backgrounds disabled people, people of a different race, different social class, religion and/or culture can be 'stigmatized'. Apart from that, it means that one and the same person can take on both roles, even simultaneously. However, Goffman believes that in each specific situation these categories are strictly separated, 'formatting' one's expectations and future behaviour ("The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" [27]) and, being superimposed on the individual aspects and sometimes even replacing it, they make the surrounding world more understandable and predictable.

It is easy to notice that Sartre's philosophy of the Other is extremely close to Levinas's theory in structural respect. In both cases, the Other, embodied by the face in Levinas's philosophy and by a look in Sartre's doctrine, manifests themselves in the form of signs that predict endlessly diverse future. At the same time, evaluation of the impact of the Other and, correspondingly, of the future, is absolutely different. According to Levinas, an individual overcomes the egoism incidental to the 'naturalistic' solipsistic paradigm through the Other, while, according to Sartre, the Other deprives an individual of their subjectivity.

As for the concept of stigma, it neutralizes the destructive impact of the Other (as well as their creative influence) in a certain way, incorporating them into the previously accepted system of social categories. This framework can hardly become a productive alternative to the concept of 'the strong Other', since such classifying mind-set is inevitably dogmatic and sticks to the strategy of principal closedness in terms of the unexpectedness that may be brought about by communication with the Other - it 'knows for sure' what can be expected of them.

In their theory of social construction of reality, P. Berger and T. Luckmann suggest what can be called middle ground. Its essence lies in the constant movement of meanings, which is an integral part of any real human contact: "In the face-to-face situation the other is appresented to me in a vivid present shared by both of us. I know that in the same vivid present I am appresented to him. My and his 'here and now' continuously impinge on each other as long as the face-to-face situation continues. As a result, there is a

continuous interchange of my expressivity and his. I see him smile, then react to my frown by stopping the smile, then smiling again as I smile, and so on. Every expression of mine is oriented towards him, and vice versa, and this continuous reciprocity of expressive acts is simultaneously available to both of us.” [28] Apparently, in the course of such ‘exchange of signs’ none of the participants are either object of foreign influence or holder of a priori knowledge - what happens is rather ‘a dialog between traces’ and, at the same time, between researchers.

5. Conclusions

Surely, if we are talking about a trace as an element of ‘institutionalized knowledge’, the subject is mainly a trace of the past, or a historical trace. It should be noted though that different interpretations of it or, to be more precise, different understanding of the past it reveals, have their rather close alternatives in terms of various interpretations of the possible nearest future. In this sense, Ginzburg is right when he draws a parallel between hunting and divination practices, i.e. when he talks about the bidirectionality of a trace, its orientation towards both the past and the future. However, this bidirectionality of a trace is not so much a means of solving problems that can be successfully applied to different spheres but an indicator of the breadth of the problematic field where knowledge turns out to be in immediate proximity to solutions and the past - to the future.

Therefore, if a trace is viewed as a concept that creates a specific cognitive paradigm that deals only with the individual and is not subject to formalization (at least based on clearly defined rules and categories), apparently, it is necessary to take into account the relationship between a trace and time or, more precisely, a trace as a manifestation of time. As shown by Philosophy and Sociology, which explore this topic, the attitude to traces of the past and signs of the future can be unquestionably called the application of certain knowledge, this knowledge being not theoretical, but rather of worldview nature.

At the same time, such attitude is actually entering common usage and becoming its essential element. In this sense, just as Ginzburg thought, it really complements and, in some way, opposes the ‘academic scientific knowledge’. Still, the point at issue is not class or social contradictions, but different cognitive patterns. In one case (academic science), this refers to the activity aimed at creation of new knowledge, whereas in another instance (evidential paradigm), we are talking about knowledge aimed at specific practical action even if this action is of epistemological nature.

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