

Book Symposium Article

Cultural Sociology's Vistas: A Response to Thorpe's Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations

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ABSTRACT

Cultural sociology rarely takes the long view, often being content with the comforts of presentist empirical cases. Thorpe's wide-ranging scan of British representations of Italy from the 15th Century is a noble exception. In this review, I engage with some of Thorpe's arguments and explain why they are important for cultural sociology. I identify three key contributions, in particular. First, the search for historical patterns and patterning; second, the conceptual gains made by bringing together Bourdieu and the strong programme of cultural sociology; and third, the critique of what Thorpe calls the "Saidian paradigm" of cultural representation. In each case, Thorpe opens up new cultural sociological vistas in imaginative ways, bringing into sharp focus the necessity of an historical cultural sociology. In the second half of the review, I offer some more critical notes, including the relative lack of attention to representational futures, and what this tells us about a Britain whose gaze is perpetually averted backwards.

Keywords: Italy, Bourdieu, representation, history, strong programme

INTRODUCTION

Depending on your habitus, Thorpe's book is either a fine Italian wine or an exquisite through-ball by Italian footballer Andrea Pirlo. As with these, the quality and payoff are significant.

Thorpe lifts up, coaxing the reader to consider wide vistas of history from which patterns of cultural representation can be discerned. Reading the book is like being elevated out of the thickets of everyday culture. The ordinary cultures of existence that have become *de rigueur* in ethnography and the new materialisms are not his concern. Instead, Thorpe's is a cultural sociological depiction of the fuzzy patterns of culture that can be perceived only by an act of withdrawal, by panning out. This is already a feat requiring impressive discipline, skill and courage. That it manages also to be a serious theoretical intervention in applying what at first sight appear to be theoretical antagonists – Bourdieu and the "strong programme" of Yale cultural sociology – is testament to the author's plural knowledge sets and subtle handlings. This is no half-melted Cornetto.

Why Italy? Why not Spain or France or Britain's other European others? Because, as Thorpe shows, Italy dramatizes the most important movements and moments embedded in Britain's ruling cultural dispositions, its elite cultural modernity. Italian imaginaries directly inform class-refracted proclivities central to the formation of English and British dispositions: Roman classicism, humanism, romanticism, the gothic, naturalism. It's a roll call of bourgeois ideas and ideals. This is why the most impressive parts of the book are the five core chapters that

limn out the symbolic meanings attributed to Italy from the 15th century when “Italianate” ideas of classical civility and learning begin to take root in scholarly institutions like Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Thorpe shows that for the next five centuries or so, Italy undergoes serial reinventions. Around it gather thick connotations of romance and decadence, rebirth and ruin, vice and virtue. On the one hand, Italy is freighted with the desire for classical purity prevalent among the romantic poets and novelists, with their *prises des positions* towards the ineffable and unfettered, as well as the weight of aspiration for the picturesque idyll, materially evident in almost every country house garden sculpted in 18th century Britain. On the other hand, and through the discursive positionings of post-Reformation leaders, it is cast as a despoiled and decadent wretch, the “spiritually polluted...home to the devil incarnate in the figurehead of the Pope” (p. 58). Italy, a country fashioned with many masks worn in turn (simulated, mimicked and adapted) by Britain’s cultural guardians.

Sighting Italy through Britain is therefore also an act of siting Britain through Italy. Ways of seeing Italy (Bourdieu’s “vision and division”) open apertures on the preoccupations and antipathies of Britain’s culture-capital rich middle-class, including its ideological pivot against industrialisation for the perceived havoc it wreaks on country and civility.

One of the key strengths of the book (and there are many) is that it shows why cultural representation matters. It matters because culture provides the resources through which the middle and upper classes make themselves as they jostle for legitimacy. It matters because the educated habitus is sedimented by immersion in a culture of learning peppered with references to Italy’s humanist, republican and classical pasts. It matters because Italy is both a cultural barometer and well-spring for the concerns and preoccupations of Britain’s elite: its picture collections and reading material, its food habits and poetry, the way it thinks and speaks. That these allusions and illusions persist – most recently in the aristo-populist utterances of ex-British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson – shows how sticky the habitus is and how deep the relationship between class and classicism is in Britain.

In fora like this, it’s always worth asking what a book can do for us: what problems does it solve or shed light on, which wynds and closes does it wheedle us down, which new vocabularies does it unlock? For me, there are three generous offerings. The first, already mentioned, is that the book does an increasingly rare thing not just in cultural sociology, but in sociology in general, which is to look for cultural patterns across centuries. In this sense, it’s an exercise in what we might call historical cultural cosmology – one that directs the gaze upwards and across historical constellations to identify prevalent ways of thinking and seeing. Reading it I was reminded of Walter Benjamin’s (1999) description of Paul Klee’s print *Angelus Novus* (the angel of history), where an image flashes up in moments of crisis and rupture, piling up meaning at the feet of the protagonist. Thorpe reveals with splendid precision how Italy “comes to mean” at crucial moments in British history, flashing up its many sides to those who would see themselves as taking up the cudgels for (and against) civility and civilisation, progress and modernity, Popism and Puritanism.

The second contribution is the deft articulation of two sets of theoretical traditions which are rarely used together: Bourdieusian genetic structuralism and the “strong programme” of cultural sociology. This is carried through in the operationalisation of two master concepts – cultural trauma and field – which furnish clear analytical gains. Chief among these is the identification of how the historical ruptures rendered by accelerated social change - what Thorpe calls “tears in the social fabric” (p. 29) such as the beheading of Charles I or rapid industrialisation - had to be worked through culturally as much as economically or politically. Here, trauma is a collective experience of disorientation that is felt in and through processes of meaning making. The second move Thorpe makes, however, is to show *how* that trauma becomes meaningful, how it is sublimated and given shape is a matter of identifying the structures that constrain what factions of the middle and upper-middle classes can say, where and with what impact. The structure of the restrained literary field is itself a major character in the story because of the force it exerts on writers, poets and commentators like Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, John Ruskin and D H Lawrence. If the literary field is the structure of possibles, then the “isms” are its content. Indeed, in one Marx-inflected sentence Thorpe beautifully captures these constraints: “Actors make choices about how to act but they do not choose the culture structures which make their actions meaningful” (p. 144).

I confess that, for me, this act of conceptual diplomacy – if not a theoretical *entente cordiale* between Yale and Paris, then at least an assignation - is offset by some unease at bringing two different ontologies of culture to bear upon the same problematic. One (Yale) sees culture, substantively, as an independent variable, the other (Bourdieu) sees independence as an historically provisional *state* profoundly dependent on prevalent field structures. An uncharitable reading would be that Thorpe is having his Panettone and eating it. Are webs of meaning internally generated or determined by what Alexander (2003) would dismiss as the “reified model” of the field? Is social class an idea, an emotion structure or a materially generated position? What happens when two grand but opposing theories are used with and alongside each other? What are the gains and losses, the tensions and friction points?

Instead of the somewhat psychologistic idea of trauma, I found myself wondering whether there could have been fruitful lines of explanation based on Bourdieu’s (2000) concept of hysteresis, a somewhat neglected concept in Bourdieusian scholarship compared to habitus, field and capital, but which gets at the temporary disjunctures

between a class habitus and broader field structures when the latter are subject to rapid processes of social change. Bourdieu is not known for his refined handling of social change, of course, but hysteresis encourages us to ask what happens to categories of vision and division in those out-of-kilter moments, when change is so transformative that it requires adjustments to ways of seeing and making. This misgiving misses the point about Thorpe's theoretical contribution, however, which is not to integrate these two traditions, but to put their best bits to work in order to move beyond established approaches to cultural representation. On this account, it remains both provocative and productive.

The third offering, then, is the break with what Thorpe calls the "Saidian paradigm" of cultural representation – the theoretical framework which identifies discourse as the predominant means by which groups are centred and othered, become dominant or subjugated. Quite rightly, Thorpe identifies why this mode of thought short circuits sociological analyses because – hamstrung as it is by binaries of "the West" and "the rest" – it is unable to grasp how others can be represented as culturally superior to the powerful subjects doing the representing. This is the case for much of the time period here, of Italy from Britain when the former is framed as the pinnacle of taste and high culture. The implication is that theories of representation should venture beyond the Saidian paradigm and its origins in ideology critique. This is a refreshing and much needed move that opens up cultural sociological approaches to the complex dynamics of representation as a perpetually open set of symbolic accomplishments. That the book doesn't then fall back into a rudimentary semiology of Italy – myth and second-order signification as in Barthes' (1972) famous unpacking of the Panzani Pasta advert – is a further strength. It enables Thorpe to do what too few cultural sociologists do, which is a deep-lens scan of the symbolic as it refracts social change.

Does it matter that working class conceptions of Italy are relatively inconspicuous in the book? Not in itself given the focus is squarely on the kinds of middle- and upper-class imaginaries that disproportionately shaped Britain's legitimate cultures. Presumably, a more "bottom up" history could provide supplementary materials on how all this looks from, well, the bottom. It's no accident that competing versions of Italy, as Thorpe shows, began to proliferate from the late 20th century at the same time as classed processes like low-cost travel and budget food lines, the ubiquity of shopping mall designer outlets and SkySports. Hence, one of the intriguing questions Thorpe poses is: what and where is Italy now? Chapter 7 explores the commodification of Italy as a process of de-autonomisation of the restricted parts of the sub-field in which intellectuals, poets and writers hatched their classical and romantic visions. Thorpe shows us that by the late 1980s Italy circulated as a global commodity in an over-heated market with the kinds of outcomes well known to Frankfurt School scholars: a nation compressed into a series of homogeneous consumer signs, notably in lifestyle, food and travel magazines.

If not "everything, everywhere all at once" then Italy is certainly a diffusely circulating product, a function of how it travels through global networks of culture. In a "paths not trodden" way, this might have opened further lines of inquiry, including how digital mediations of Italy are part of complex processes of accumulation, indigenisation and cultural acceleration that make it increasingly difficult to discern any referent at all. Would it be too much to say that Italy is not just "illusory" in the way that Thorpe so eloquently describes it, but that it long ago moved from illusion to simulacra? Would this constitute a change in the logic of the symbolic order, or a distillation of it? As an exercise I just popped "Italy" and "Italian culture" into an AI image generator and the first ten images were all sepia-tinged paintings of "Italian-style" architecture and streets, with vaguely robed figures shopping in open air markets. Images that don't, in a Baudrillardian (1981) sense, refer only to other "Italian" images, but which are endlessly produced as part of a generative universe of the algorithm. In an era of information superabundance and unprecedented content generation, where being "Instagrammable" is a precursor value to the image being conceived or experienced, to what extent is Italy part of a generalised crisis of the over-production of all things: tourism and AirBnB, Pisa selfies and pasta memes, Deliveroo food and Starbucks lattes, the collapse of Italy's past into its present, a Venice sinking under the weight of its own popularity and digital plenitude?

Then again, this all sounds flat and quaintly postmodern. Indeed, Thorpe gives us cause for hesitation. There are clearly residual class distinctions at play even within this diffuse field of representations, notably in how a "restricted vision of Italy" (p. 198) plays out in designations of the country – often in travel writing – as a paradox or riddle to be solved. This is important because it shows how culture-capital rich writers are still locked into Bourdieusian logics of distinction in the structured setting of the field, using the codes of intellectualisation against mass or overly commodified visions. That hybrid versions of Italy have recently appeared – typically, TV programmes that repackage restricted versions of the country for a more mainstream audience – is a development that Thorpe adroitly describes as part not of a blurring of restricted and commodified visions of Italy, but of "the patterned strategies by which agents accumulate specific amounts and types of capital, which they subsequently transfer across to and deploy within more commercially oriented fields in the name of accruing economic and symbolic forms of gain". This all speaks to what he calls "the acuity of Field Theory for capturing and explaining them" (p. 203).

Another line of thinking that spins out from this and that is inspired by Thorpe's book is to think not just about Italy's past and present but the apparent lack of representational futures – not images *in* the future as the conclusion

begins to tease out, but images of the future as an indicator of current cultural sensibilities and states. According to Mark Fisher (2014), integral to Britain's sense of itself in recent decades has been a loss for promised futures. Britain is haunted by what never came in the post-war settlement and this is expressed in a popular culture that appears increasingly unable to innovate or express the urgencies of the present, instead inclined to recycle the past and enter into "nostalgia mode" (Jameson, 1992). But perhaps it was always thus. In which case Italy's representational prominence in Britain might partly be due to a gaze that is constantly averted backwards – a face tilted even more to the past in a post-Empire, post-Brexit context. If you compare British representations of Italy to, say, Japan, what does this tell us? How are nations made through their future imaginaries as much as their past and present imaginaries? A book of this length and scope is ambitious enough, but the next move might be to undertake something like a comparative history of cultural representation, including those that imagine (or don't) future social, cultural and technological possibilities. The cultural and political inertia experienced by "Old Europe" is one possible manifestation of what Berardi calls the "slow cancellation of the future" (Berardi, 2009) and might explain the struggles faced by countries like Scotland that have (to a limited extent) tried to reinvent themselves as modern, forward-looking, and yearning for a "break".

And what of the book's contribution to cultural sociology itself? By now part of an academic culture industry with its own journals, university courses and position takings, cultural sociology faces the prospect of ossification – a fate that has befallen other sub-disciplines as conventions and positions harden, and institutional capital is accrued by "following the leaders". So, how does cultural sociology keep its edges sharp and its scholarship heterodox? One clue is given by Thorpe's powerful summoning of history, the evocation to look for what he calls throughout the book "patterns" and "patterning". It's a refreshing antidote to "presentism" and the comforts of single empirical cases framed by the latest theoretical trends from France – a different kind of representational superiority! If Cultural Sociology is about anything then it's about what culture does in and to society, how it symbolises and activates individuals, groups and formations; how it takes root and grows, fizzles and flows, shapes and is shaped across time. Culture not as an expression of pre-given identities or experiences, but the very content of those identities and experiences. In this, the distinction between a sociology of culture and cultural sociology has perhaps always been unclear. But it's especially so in a context where even the most unreconstructed Bourdieusian recognises that cultural objects are not inert and where, as Thorpe notes, cultural sociology always had one foot in the humanities.

What I appreciated most about the book beyond the fact that it is written with such scholarly control and discernment, is that it manages to be both (in its topic and span) classic and (in its adventure and ambition) contemporary, pushing against a trend in so much scholarship for texture, fine-grained empirical detail and "nuance". To quote one polemic "fuck nuance" (Healy, 2017) if the opposite is something like this: a text that actively seeks out and identifies long-term patterns and century-long processes; one that doesn't shy away from raising the bigger questions of historical drift and rupture, break and continuity, and which asks what happens when we are bold and wide with our analytical lens. What the book lacks in empirical granularity it more than makes up for in perspective. For that reason, it is a book that deserves to be read widely and in its entirety by those interested not just in Italy and the sociology of cultural representation but in what new scholarship can do for us and to us.

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