

## Editorial

# On *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations*: A Symposium Poised Between History and Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

This paper acts as a prelude to, and putative enticement for readers to read, an interdisciplinary symposium. The symposium assesses Christopher Thorpe's (2024) book *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. The book is scrutinised from various perspectives, including history, art history, and sociology. The main intellectual contours of the symposium are set out, covering matters of conceptualising cultural representations, using sociological concepts from varied traditions to understand certain sorts of cultural phenomena, and the status of sociological claims about long-term trends in the eyes of historians. Some more unorthodox ideas are also floated.

**Keywords:** cultural, sociology, representations, theory, history

## INTRODUCTION

Does anyone really believe what is written on publishers' websites? Does anyone take the descriptive blurbs of books listed in such places as accurate or meaningful descriptions of the wares on offer?

After all, these descriptions of books' contents are meant to entice buyers to part with their money for what is ultimately a commodity, a chunk of writing being sold on a particular sort of market. In this case, it is a rather peculiar market, an intellectual one where some non-intellectual intermediaries seek to make money out of the products of a species of intellectual producers, 'content providers' who incidentally may make a little bit of money out of sales, but in most cases only a pittance (the advance payment, if there was one, having been gobbled up by the costs imposed upon producers by intermediaries of the creation of an index).

A 'book' produced under such conditions and sold on such a market these days is probably going to take one of two forms. It may very possibly be a rather limp physical product, with a cheap cover design which the publisher has used for hundreds of other such commodities; or it might come in the guise of an electronic file, a pdf or some such, which resides in a computerised device, and a strange sort of entity, real in one way and virtual in another, which cannot grace the academic bookcase as the paper book once did.

The publisher's blurb for Christopher Thorpe's (2024) book, entitled *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, reads thus:

This book provides a historical cultural sociological analysis of cultural representations of Italy in England and later Britain, from the period of the Italian Renaissance to the present day. Rooted in a critical account of orthodox social scientific approaches to thinking and theorising cultural representation, the study combines analytical frames and conceptual apparatus from Bourdieu's Field theory and Yale School cultural sociology. Drawing from a wide range of empirical data and studies, the book demonstrates the significance of representations of the Italian peninsula and its people for exploring a range of cultural sociological phenomena, from the 'classing' and 'commodification' of Italy to the role of Italian symbolism for negotiating cultural trauma, identity formation, and expressions of cultural edification, veneration, and emulation. As such, it will be of interest to scholars of (cultural) sociology, history, anthropology, Italian studies as well as scholars in international studies interested in intercultural exchange and representations of other nations, national cultures, and otherness.

As advertising goes, this description somewhat lacks the pith and pizzazz of statements like 'Drink Coke' and 'Buy Wizzo'; but an academic book is not quite a commodity like sugary soda or soap powder (at least not yet). But, as such descriptions of academic books go, it is more accurate than many, not as pretentious as some, and less deathly dull than most.

If honesty in advertising was at more of a premium in the selling of academic monographic wares, the blurb might have started by stating that this is two books in one, for Thorpe's opus is indeed that, giving the reader genuinely double bang for their buck. Conversely, it is a book that may fully please neither of its two putative audiences. That may in fact be its greatest strength.

On the one hand, it is a generalising, theoretically oriented survey and account of how cultural representations have been and can be thought about, both outside of sociology and within it. On the other hand, it is a history of how the English (and to some extent the British, and then the Americans) have thought about Italy and the Italians over some 500 years.

Each of these dimensions of the book, seemingly so different, in fact have a central theme that unites them both: rival factions of persons say different sorts of stuff about the same sorts of things, and they generally loathe each other while they do so. Thorpe implies as much in his own account of such matters, but he probably is too polite, indeed 'too English', to have spelled it out in such a direct and uncouth manner. Aggressiveness in the middle- and upper-class forms of habitus in England generally take more passive and roundabout expressions, which may be another implicit message of Thorpe's book.

Symposia like the one which follows, where respondents assess a book, can degenerate into mere love-ins between the author and their putative critics. Genuine intellectual appraisal can be replaced by unmitigated and unmediated praise, which is heaped on the book and its progenitor. This is perhaps for fear of offending the latter, especially if they hold power in the relevant academic field, or perhaps in the hope that some of the praise rubs off on the appraisers themselves, aggrandisement segueing into self-aggrandisement. Grandiloquent statements may be made in the responses to the book, as if it were the new Bible or *Ulysses* or even *La Distinction*. Claims may be made along the lines of 'this is the best book in its field since the war' (thereby raising various questions: Which war? The Boer one?).

Such persiflage and munificent adulation have been avoided, both by design and by happenstance, in the review symposium which follows. Respondents were chosen to give the book a thorough, fair, but tough intellectual workout. They were also chosen to bring very different points of view to the appraisal work.

As the book straddles – whether comfortably or not – the dividing line(s) between the disciplines of history and sociology, Freyja Cox Jensen, a historian of early modern Britain and Europe, was approached to be one of the respondents, so that the book might be subjected to the scrutiny of the professional historian, equipped with their characteristic conceptual and methodological modes of training, and with their strong focus on studying specific locations and historical periods. Jeremy Tanner was recruited because his expertise in classical and comparative art, deploying sociological thinking within the realm of art history, and thereby dealing with the production and qualities of cultural forms across large swathes of time and space, resonates with the long-term nature of Thorpe's analysis of Anglophone representations of Italy.

Fiona Greenland was asked to contribute because her own expertise straddles many areas in unusual manners, both Thorpe's core sub-discipline of cultural sociology, as well as interdisciplinary art and cultural heritage studies, including a focus on tomb raiding in Italy. Nick Prior was requested to assess the book from within its sub-disciplinary home of cultural sociology, both in terms of its methodological dispositions and its theoretical orientations. The book's uses of (cultural) sociological theory, and its conceptualising of history and historical change, fall into the intellectual bailiwick of David Inglis, as does its attempt to meld cultural and historical forms of sociology, outside of the confining parameters of the currently hegemonic reach of post-colonial concepts.

As might be expected, the assessors, beginning from sometimes very different starting points, reach variant conclusions as to the book's merits, limitations, and implications for future research, both in its substantive as well as general epistemological and methodological contours. A major theme running through the assessments is the

question of how well equipped anyone – be it sociologist, or historian, or any other type of scholar – is to be able to carry out effectively a very long-range study, which necessarily sacrifices details for the purpose of discerning generalities and the presence of patterns through long periods of time. This is an especially acute issue given that any study dealing with a *longue durée* perforce must be at least inter-disciplinary in orientation, if not indeed in intention more full-bloodedly trans-disciplinary, however that may be specifically defined and concretely operationalised.

With characteristic (good?) humour, Thorpe responds (or is it retaliates?) to his respondents in a manner which both synthesises the two parts of the book – ‘theoretical’ and ‘empirical’, ‘sociological’ and ‘historical’ – and differentiates them. For the more historically-oriented appraisers, and wider audiences, he admits the epistemic limits of the book, while defending its attempt to cover more periods of time than the archival historian feels comfortable with. For the more sociological critics, he admits the book’s indebtedness to currently dominant modes of conceptualisation, while reminding them that he regards the book ultimately as an attempt to widen the horizons of the scholarly study of representations, and that it should be read in that light.

As Thorpe must know well, how a book is read is very much out of the hands of any author, for once it exists out there in multiple readerly worlds, anything can happen to it and the most unexpected and unorthodox interpretations of it may commence. It will be fascinating to see how the book is read by many others outside of the charmed circle that was fleetingly assembled for the pragmatic purposes of this symposium.

Is it possible that, in another 500 years’ time, a future post-human sociologist-cum-historian-*manqué*, clad in a violently coloured anti-radiation suit and freshly arrived on a Ryanair rocket flight from a moon orbiting Jupiter, might unearth a charred copy of *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations* in the irradiated rubble that once was the magnificence of the University of Exeter’s main Library?<sup>1</sup> What will they make of the now cryptic words that lie within its tattered and frail pages? Beyond muttering gnomonic phrases like ‘Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair’, if those still exist in collective memory, will that post-cyborg, pan-erotic being, once it has deciphered the runes, be inspired to write the history of the fall of ‘England’? (‘Italy’, of course, will still persist.) Will this be a dim but poignant inter-planetary echo of how Edward Gibbon – a proper historian, but sardonic enough to be a sociologist – once was stirred, sitting reflectively among the ruins of a fallen civilization, to write the decline and fall of the Roman Empire?

Probably not. But it *should* happen, as a matter of cosmic justice. It is a sociological tragedy that Thorpe probably will not be there to see it. For no doubt he would wax (semi-)lyrical, theorising about it in ways that might infuriate and delight equally a mixed audience of the societally- and historically-minded of that 26<sup>th</sup> century future.

## REFERENCES

Thorpe, C. (2024). *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429019920>

<sup>1</sup> According to the prognostications of some seers, another equally battered copy will be found in the burnt-out shell of the library at the University of Aberdeen. Like the great library at Alexandria, repository of all the knowledge of western Eurasia, it too was put to the torch, in the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. But beyond the similar fates of those two bibliothetic edifices, there any similarities end.