

**Book Symposium Article**

**An Early Modern Historian's Thoughts on Christopher Thorpe's *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day***

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**ABSTRACT**

A reflection on this work of cultural sociology, by an early modern historian.

**Keywords:** cultural sociology, Italy, reception, cultural representations

**INTRODUCTION**

It's amazing, what you realise you don't know... And it's always salutary to be reminded of how dramatically academic disciplines can differ from one another. As an historian, I've come to this book with a fair degree of ignorance about sociology, although I am, in my way, extremely well-qualified to comment on some of its contents.

Chris and I have long had offices on the same corridor. We have passed each other many times on the way to the stairs, the sink, or the fridge; we used to acknowledge one another with a half-smile in the vague, slightly embarrassed manner of colleagues who are familiar with the appearance of the person they're encountering, without having the first idea who they are or what, in an academic context, they do. But we never had occasion to meet, or be introduced to each other, until a research away day last year brought together researchers from our two previously distinct Colleges (Humanities, in my case, and Social Sciences for Chris) under the new umbrella of the Faculty of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. Now, at last, our university has mechanisms for people to meet across the Humanities/Social Sciences divide; and Chris and I realised we have, at various times, been working on quite similar topics, albeit from rather different perspectives. Chris's project, neatly summarised by his title, overlaps with work I've done on the ways in which Roman history was interpreted and represented in early modern England; hence the invitation to take part in this written symposium.

This review, then, reflects my first encounter with a sociological approach to material with which I'm partly familiar, in some cases deeply so. As such, it demonstrates the naivety of someone with a deeply interdisciplinary background (I started life as a 'hard' scientist; now my work spans History, Literature, Classics, and the Performing Arts), but no experience whatsoever of the Social Sciences, except from occasional forays into seminal works that have managed to make themselves felt even in my relatively resistant home discipline. It has been an interesting and illuminating experience.

It came as no surprise to witness in this book firsthand how sociologists 'do' theory, and that they do it in a way that's far less prevalent in the Humanities. I have now learned about YSCS and Field Theory...but I'm afraid I'm not especially interested in the niceties of this kind of thing – if any further proof was needed that I'm not a

sociologist, look no further! A true Humanist, trained at an old and traditional institution, I was taught that we mostly just look at sources and write about what's interesting in them. This approach is clearly inimical to the sociologist; Chris tells us that it isn't good, and that the Humanities could do with some more theory. He may be right; and many of my colleagues are far better at this than I am. But I suspect I'm not the only historian who is sceptical of being wedded too closely to theories of whatever kind; theory can often lead one to be blinkered and reductive; it's good for making models, but not always adequate to describe the messiness of the real world in all its human chaos and diversity. It can be a nice lens with which to check one's vision, but it should be used with caution.

As an example: in Sociology, Chris tells those of us who, like myself, don't already know it, acts of cultural representation are always reduced to 'negative forms of othering and symbolic violence' (Thorpe, 2024). This attitude derives originally, Chris suggests, from Saïd's (1978) hugely influential *Orientalism*, which has given rise to the thesis that cultural representation is all about 'domination, submission'. To me, this seems somewhat bizarre. Yes, even in the Humanities, we feel the influence of Saïd; but for the Humanities, as Chris points out, cultural representation is fluid, multifarious, complex, and as often positive as not. In the introduction, we are told that Chris wants to draw distinctions between positive and negative representations – this is, apparently, an innovation, something going against the prevalent theory. The Humanities/History perspective is very different; for us, of course there are positive as well as negative cultural representations, and they're not always about othering; sometimes quite the opposite. For us, it's a spectrum – and indeed some cultural representations can be positive and negative and somewhere in between, all at the same time, and sometimes for the same individual reading or writing one text, depending on the context of the particular passage. In fact, this was a common feature of reading practices in the Renaissance, something Anthony Grafton (1985) calls 'interpretative schizophrenia', and which doesn't fit the sociological model at all.

It is quite unusual to find a historical study ranging as widely as this one does: from the fifteenth century to the present day. There is, of course, the Annales school, and its followers who have embraced the *longue durée*; and yes, there are comparative historians who work across time periods, but this is risky and difficult work, and for the most part, historians tend not to do it. Indeed, historians are a pretty period-specific bunch, probably stemming from our collective obsession with historical context and detail, and a sense that we can't possibly know about things outside our own period sufficiently well to be able to tackle them. On the whole, we wouldn't dare do so, for fear of being annihilated by specialists in that period, because we've missed whatever nuance, subtlety, or abstruse detail they think changes everything. 'Not my period!' is the historian's favourite get-out clause, absolving us of the need to know anything about anything at all. 'Not my period' is a phrase often applied to vast swathes of time in the past; to most of time, in fact; to everything, other than our own little niche.

Unlike historians, who stay within their own pocket of the past, the tendency of cultural sociologists is to 'retreat into the present' (Thorpe, 2024: 7). Sociologists tend to 'outsource cultural representation to other disciplines' (p. 9); yes, disciplines like History, which is precisely why I'm here to review this book. By approaching his subject over a period of more than half a millennium, Chris has done something that is extraordinary for both historians and sociologists; the kind of work historians often talk about, but rarely undertake. The long-term overview afforded by the study of cultural representation over so long a time span has the potential to allow all sorts of patterns to be traced: continuities, disruptions, cycles, and so forth, across many different areas of culture, and thereby to see things that have hitherto been overlooked. It also allows the challenging of assumptions that prevail when we don't look far enough back in time or bother to look ahead at what comes after. Historians know this kind of approach mitigates the problems of periodisation, which can obscure and distort, but few of us ever have the courage to follow through. In this respect, Chris's study of cultural representations of Italy and the Italians is something that would rarely be attempted by an historian or a sociologist, and its ambition is all the more laudable for that.

Given my personal research interests (/historical niche), the chapters of most interest to me are 2 and 3, covering the period 1450-1760. As someone who specialises in precisely the content discussed here, it is wonderful to see it summarised in a mere 100 or so pages, including notes and references. The aim of the book is not to 'unearth' 'new empirical data' (Thorpe, 2024: 211), and as such, I didn't really expect to learn anything new about Italy/the Italians and their cultural representation in England in my period... And I haven't. But I have learned a lot about how it would be really useful to talk more to people in different disciplines, especially when we think about how to teach material to our undergraduate students. The evidence is summarised succinctly, cogently, and accurately. In fact, it is highly pleasing, if radically different from what I usually read. I'm more used to 300-page studies of single works or authors, who here receive only a headline notice if they're famous enough, while most of the material early modern literary and historical scholars are now working with doesn't even warrant a mention. This makes it extremely accessible, and easily comprehensible, unlike many of the 'histories' of this period written by historians and literary scholars in recent decades. In fact, I am determined to put these chapters on the reading list for ALL my specialist undergraduate modules, as essential background reading; they say all the most important

things that students need to reach a baseline, foundational understanding of classical reception in the period, from which to delve deeper in to the messiness of it all. I wish I'd had these chapters a decade ago – then my poor students would have grasped the salient points far more quickly! Chapter 3, in particular, has a beautifully articulated set of research questions at its outset, to do with the classical Roman past and its role in the collective identity of the upper social strata of England, their cultural practices, and very different attitudes towards contemporary Italy and Italians. Here, again, is a model for students thinking about how to frame their research projects, on the kinds of topics I often supervise, but with which they frequently struggle.

It has also been enlightening to see the analysis of what I teach each year being directed by concepts that are rarely applied so thoroughly in History: 'ritual-like' and 'iconicity' to think about the ways that the Grand Tour was viewed by elites, and the ways that Renaissance culture and classicising influences promoted attitudes towards very selective positive depictions of Imperial Rome as a pattern for empire; 'cultural trauma' as a way of framing Henry VIII's break with Rome and the English 'Reformation' (or, more accurately, Reformations, as Chris Haigh taught us many years ago, and what historians would call the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, here referred to as the English Civil Wars (Haigh, 1993). The idea of the 'trauma narrative' as what's going on as people within the three kingdoms (though really, we only hear about England) 'work through' and 'work out' the civil wars, regicide, interregnum, restoration, and continuing paranoia about Catholicism is a very helpful way of thinking about the history of this period, especially when it comes to teaching. '[N]arratives gain traction when their social message is clear and clearly comprehensible': thinking about how to get students to understand the history of this turbulent period in these terms, about power, the agenda of those who promulgate 'narratives' and how they get their messages across, helps make sense of a lot of what happens (Thorpe, 2024). I think I have in fact been thinking, and teaching, all of this all along, but I have never framed it in quite this way, and I haven't seen my fellow historians doing it, either.

I will refrain from a chapter-by-chapter commentary – ever the historian, I don't know enough about the later periods to judge – but the same features characterise them all. They're concise, necessarily highly selective in terms of the sources used (or, as Sociologists would say, the 'data'/evidence presented); most of what historians would think of as the primary source analysis has happened off-stage, behind the scenes, whereas we more usually show our working; and we're given clear, powerful arguments that make, to me, a lot of sense, though they sometimes smack of the naturalist observing animals in the wild. I especially enjoyed, 'As a form of purification ritual, the G[rand] T[our] and T[our] o[f] I[taly] provided young aristocratic males with the opportunity to discharge 'impure' impulses' (Thorpe, 2024: 87). The assertion seems self-evidently true – and yet wholly alien to what an historian might write. People would never have thought of it like that at the time, but in essence, this is what was happening, at least in part. Here, perhaps, is another difference between Humanities and Social Sciences – in the Humanities, we try to be sensitive to past realities, to put ourselves into the skin of past people, and try to understand them, how they felt, what they were doing, what it was like to be them. Maybe Social Scientists study the people of the past as 'others'?

This suspicion is reinforced by the way the book is presented; the scientific method is overtly on show in a way that it isn't in most Humanities writing. Chapter 1 is entitled, 'Methods, theory, data'; it starts with explicit definitions of key terms; it makes me nostalgic for the days when I used to write up scientific experiments. And the chapters follow a methodical plan, with 'master categories', and a series of steps within each. There are models for how things (like cultural trauma) operate, come into being, for what needs to happen in order for them to occur... It's a very neat, clean way of looking at human behaviour – and totally at odds with how the history I'm familiar with is written. My sense is that most historians spend our time trying to *avoid* writing in patterns, trying to *break down* models of how things are supposed to work to get at the messy, human reality, and trying to craft something that is anything but formulaic. I suppose we're still very much serving the literary gods of *historia*, or perhaps that should be the muse Cleo, seeking not just to teach but also to delight. I'm not saying we do delight – far from it – and maybe we have delusions of literary grandeur, born of our discipline's origins as a branch of entertainment, of reading/listening for pleasure, in the days when inventing speeches was perfectly legitimate (from the world of ancient Greece and Rome to the Renaissance), and objectivity was far from the point.

For all its scientific intentions, there are things a work dealing with so much history cannot do, however. Because of the scale of this study, I think there's perhaps not quite as much attention given to less mainstream representations as I might have liked – as a specialist, that is... Or rather, Chris hasn't gone looking for places where countercultural ideas of Italy and the Italians might be expected to be found. For example, I'd be very interested to know what recusant individuals and communities made of Italy/the Italians during the (first) Elizabethan period; or the Jacobites... And perhaps it would have been nice to follow some of the strands from earlier periods into later chapters – for example, Italy as Catholic therefore corrupt and corrupting – as attitudes towards Catholicism shifted within England. That would have allowed for the tracing of more patterns, albeit at the expense of other material. We are taken on rather a whistle-stop tour through the famous episodes of English history, with reference to the Italians, and I can't help but feel that surely, lots of important (complicated, contradictory, untidy) reality is being missed... Again, this is a disciplinary bias; I just can't help but wonder what's

actually going on at a smaller scale, because that's the way I've been trained to think academic histories should be written. Perhaps this doesn't matter; when it comes to it, I much prefer to read a book like Chris's, rather than a lengthy examination with lots of detailed analysis of all the primary texts.

Having said all this about the differences between History and Sociology, the underlying principles of Chris's book demonstrate nothing as much as the similarities between the intellectual objectives of the two disciplines. The aims, laid out beautifully clearly in the opening pages of the introduction, read very much like things I have written myself, in grant applications and in the pages of my own work: 'How does one culture represent an-other?' 'Why do particular representations emerge when they do, continue, and change over time...?' (Thorpe, 2024: 3). Whatever our approaches, and however we present our findings, we are engaged in the same enquiries into peoples and pasts, and that is a lovely thing to realise.

We don't always know how similar our disciplines can be, and vocabulary is partly to blame. I work at the intersection of history, literature, and classics, with a focus on classical reception in the early modern period. In my field, there has been a lot of work in the last 20 or 30 years on what we call 'reception', reception studies, the way one (usually later) culture has inherited, used, and reimagined ideas about (something to do with) another (usually earlier) culture. In my case, I am concerned with how bits and pieces of the histories of Rome (and Greece) were passed down to, received by, recycled by, repackaged by, people living in the years when Europe started printing: the 'Renaissance' or 'early modern' period, depending on your disciplinary background and semantic (/philosophical) preference (contentious matters we need not consider here). And yet, in all the work that I've read, skimmed, and engaged with to various degrees in the last couple of decades, I don't think I've ever come across 'cultural sociology' before. This means, presumably, that neither has anyone else working in my area; or if they have, they certainly haven't said so, unless I've just missed it, dismissed it, not seen it because it sounds so far removed from what I've been trained to think?

Interestingly, in the first few pages of Chris's book, I don't see 'reception studies' mentioned, either, except a very brief mention of 'reception' on p. 7. The walls between our silos are rigid and impermeable indeed. As I understand it, when we talk about 'receptions' and 'cultural representations', we mean the same thing. There are perhaps different connotations to the two phrases: 'reception' might suggest passivity, perhaps, which of course is very far from being the case, while 'cultural representations' is far more active, with people *doing* the representing, but it doesn't hint at anything about the derivation of the ideas lying behind the representations. In neither case do we necessarily intend a temporal implication; a reception need not necessarily mean a past being used in a later age, though the term is often used in this way. Maybe this says most about attitudes in traditional Humanities and Social Science disciplines; as we have already seen, the Humanities usually look back at where things came from, and the Social Sciences deal with the present and where things are going...

I have, in fact, argued that my work is valid, and should receive public funding, for precisely the same reasons Chris claims his work matters: that by understanding how people receive and imagine another culture, we can understand something about both parties; and the way people have done these things historically to some extent informs what they've turned into in our current world, and will shape the future. This is especially important in a world where identity politics are everywhere, and nationalisms (jingoisms?) and particularisms appear to be on the increase, at the expense of tolerance and openness. Our world is so much concerned with; concepts of 'them' and 'us', the invisible and visible boundaries groups draw between themselves and the 'other', and the way people construct ideas that can be labelled, so their world can be understood...just as the Sociologists say, à la Saïd. This is what Chris's book sets out to understand, along with the inverse: how particular things happening at certain times affect the ways 'we' and 'they' are conceived. And this matters; we see it happening around us every day; which is why a book like this is well worth a read, and will hopefully generate further, related work in the future.

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