

Book Symposium Article

Vulgar, All Too Vulgar: Untimely Meditations on *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations*

David Inglis ^{1*}

¹ *University of Helsinki*, FINLAND

*Corresponding Author: david.inglis@helsinki.fi

Citation: Inglis, D. (2024). Vulgar, All Too Vulgar: Untimely Meditations on *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations*, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 9(2), 13. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/15785>

Published: December 31, 2024

ABSTRACT

This response to Thorpe's book *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations* deals with two sets of questions. The first concerns how 'cultural representations' are to be conceptualised, and it notes the highly limited nature of the critical post-colonialism of Edward Said. The second is about the nature of sociology and the nature of the discipline of history, as well as the relations between the two. It argues that long-term historical sociology is a necessary corrective to the myopia of scholarly specialisms, while warning against using currently dominant theoretical vocabularies in unmediated manners.

Keywords: cultural representations, culture, Bourdieu, history, Italy

INTRODUCTION

Not so long ago I was a witness to a *contretemps* that reminded me a little, although admittedly not that much, of scenes in the novels of Henry James. It took place in the grounds of a hotel housed in a late 19th century bourgeois villa on the Lido of Venice. This was a location that brought to my mind, if not Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig*, then certainly Luchino Visconti's high-camp film version of it from 1971.

Imagine the scene. A portly late middle-aged Englishman, judging by his attire clearly of the lower middle class, was sitting in the villa's portico. He was polluting the silence of the lovely garden and the surrounding villas by playing a radio at a distressingly loud volume, spewing out post-match coverage of a football match in the English premier division. A lady, rather classically dressed in white linen, passed out of the hotel. She was clearly of higher social standing than the noisome English guest and from a Nordic country, lands where silence is more highly valued than in petit bourgeois England. On hearing the din, she grew very irate. 'There's some fat bastard listening to BBC News!', she commented loudly to her paramour, deliberately commenting at a high enough volume to be heard both above the blaring radio and by the miscreant. 'How vulgar!', she spat out as she continued haughtily, but with a certain élan, through the garden gate and out towards the little canal beyond.

I had raised my eyes from the pages of *The Aspern Papers* – the reading of which the radio noise had undoubtedly been affecting negatively – to observe the passing drama. The lady's angry outburst was, I reflected, slightly reminiscent of Tobias Smollett, the choleric Scottish novelist and traveler of the 18th century who had absolutely nothing positive to say about Italy and the Italians, especially the quality of their food and their inns. But the critical barbs were this time directed not at the awfulness of Italy but at the vulgarity of the English in Italy. This unhappy interaction on the Lido was a scene that James, Dickens, Wharton, Twain and many other novelists and short story writers, all of whom were connoisseurs of these sorts of miniature social clashes, would have relished. Certainly,

they would very likely have enjoyed such an ill-starred meeting far more than the tacky pleasures of the overcrowded main island of Venice could nowadays afford them.

The English have been spoiling Italy, by first their occasional and then by their repeated and *en masse* presences in it, for centuries. For even longer a time they have been representing it in myriad cultural forms. They have moved between thinking of it either as a corrupt, dangerous, disease-ridden, dirty, Papish hellhole, or, in complete contradistinction, as an idyllic refuge from their own barren, rain-sodden, banal, and dirty (but in a different way) country and its typically awful modes of existence. Some of their major artists have dwelt on such matters, as have myriads of more run-of-the-mill characters.

The dualistic nature of Italy as far as the English (and the British, and then in different ways, the Americans) have been concerned lends itself in an obvious manner to a kind of sociology concerned with dyads of light and darkness, purity and pollution. The fact that it has been upper and upper middle class cultural producers who have been at the forefront of representing Italy in these variously demonising and idealising manners also indicates that any study of such matters that sidelines social class and the sorts of privileges it warrants or denies is going to betray the material it is engaged with.

Christopher Thorpe's (2024) book *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations* is at one level a study of these different sorts of representations, and how and why they have changed over time. But it also raises two sets of interlocking and much more general questions.

The first concerns how 'cultural representations' are to be conceptualised. Thorpe finds Edward Said's (2003) hugely influential theorisation of such matters deeply limiting for various theoretical and empirical reasons, and tries to develop a more capacious approach, which can properly account for positive representations by one group of another, as well as how such positive presentations of Others can help to thematise self-critical self-appraisals on behalf of the representers.

The *English-representing-Italy* case furnishes ample material to work with in this regard, especially materials made nearer our own time. Relatively few were encouraged to go as a fun-loving tourist to the Orient as it was represented by the Orientalists that Said excoriated. But plenty of people travel to Italy today with their actions tacitly driven by certain positive representations of the country that have been in the English imaginary for several centuries, and especially after the onset of industrialism in England, as Thorpe demonstrates. One might well wonder which alternative tracks the study of cultural representations might have taken if Said's book had been concerned not with Orientalist imaginings of middle and eastern parts of Eurasia, but rather with the mixture of positive and negative representations of Italy by the Anglo-Saxons that Thorpe deals with. The mainstream study of cultural representations that sprang up in Said's wake would have been rather different than the way it has turned out. More attention would have to have been given to two sets of phenomena: first, positive representations of Others, and second, self-critical reflections. That latter would encompass negative self-representations, that is self-scrutinising understandings of themselves that the representers may generate through their positive appreciations of people from other countries and cultures, which are felt to be unlike, but certainly just as good as, and perhaps somewhat or markedly better than, their own ones. The book holds up a sociological mirror to the various ways in which the English have over time gazed at Italy, and in so doing have looked into the mirror to gaze back at themselves. What they have found there has often perturbed their senses of self, as much as it has confirmed them.

The second set of general questions Thorpe engages with is about the nature of sociology and the nature of the discipline of history, as well as the relations between the two. Thorpe has undertaken a dangerous sort of enterprise. This is the sort of book that many sociologists do not read because it is *too historical*. This point at least applies to the kinds of sociologists whom Norbert Elias (1987) accused of 'retreating into the present', unable to grasp the deep historical roots of present-day phenomena. Such persons are not likely to be overly enthused about reading this sort of text, which covers more than 500 years of European history. If they do read about history, it is pre-masticated for them by intermediaries who purvey apparently radical but in fact deeply conventional tales. Many sociologists would rather be engaged in such activities as drawing diagrams and crunching large amounts of numbers for the purposes of proving very little that is of real and lasting sociological significance, but which is admired by American journals engaged in the pursuit of technocratic methodolatry.

Meanwhile, historians are likely to avoid engaging with the book because it is going to be perceived by them to be a *sociology* one, and not a Proper History Book (PHB). This is not something that is going to play well with the History REF panel (I give here an insider allusion for disenchanting UK readers). One can just imagine the reactionary huffing and puffing of certain kinds of historians – especially the avowedly right-wing ones who appear on Anglophone TV channels, or who have now been 'cancelled' and frequent YouTube instead – when they get to grips with what Thorpe has to say about their treasured subject matters, which could be either regional (Tuscany), chronological (the late 16th century) or thematic (e.g. the Tudor dynasty).

The book can easily be dismissed by such sages as the work of a mere dabbler, someone who does not get their hands musty in archives. It could be damned as the scribbling of a dilettante (but not a member of the Society of

the Dilettanti), who has not been trained in the craft practices of the professional historian. It could be negatively represented – the very subject matter of much of the text – as the result of the labours of one engaged in the vulgar business of applying vulgarly reductive sociological concepts to material that would be far better told in a straightforward narrative format with loads of footnotes. One can imagine the tut-tutting from the Senior Common Rooms of Oxbridge colleges, if the book ever managed to penetrate the intellectual universe of such places. The same sort of sniffy response would likely happen in equivalent locations in Ivy League universities and in other places that desperately seek to imitate them. It is a book *for the sociologists*, you can hear certain types of historians saying, and we know what a vulgar lot *they* are. Is there any more debased genre than *sociologists' history*?

The book is highly likely to founder on the shores of historians' disdain, if it does not already come to grief on the rocks of presentist sociological apathy. And yet that would be a shame, precisely because the book shows us how sociology of a certain kind can be made to fit together with a certain kind of approach to history. The book lies at the friction-laden juncture of the idiographic and the nomothetic (Windelband, 1998). Reading it brings into consciousness once more that old conflict between those who want to impose some conceptual order on historical materials, and those who would rather deal with specificities as specificities, things that are held to be completely unique, unrepeatable, and not subject to being depicted in terms of big recurring patterns. The sociological history that Thorpe proposes seems to me like a very brave attempt to bridge the divide between disciplines, between fundamental epistemological and ontological positions, and between differing modes of narration and presentation. Whether it fully succeeds or really fails in any specific way in these regards hardly matters, for it is the attempt that counts. And it is to the nature of that attempt that I now turn.

This is a book quite self-consciously positioned as an exercise in, and a contribution to, the genre of 'cultural sociology'. Its telling of a sociological story about historical issues draws upon what are the two main, and most obvious, intellectual resources in the field covered by that term at the present time. These are the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu (2023) and the cultural sociology of Jeffrey C. Alexander (2005).

The most predictable way of assessing the book is to question the degree to which Thorpe has been successful in melding these two apparently very antagonistic positions together. After all, the 'strong program' of Alexander is explicitly ranged against what is taken to be the determinism of Bourdieu's approach to matters cultural, a determinism taken to be almost or quite as bad as that of vulgar Marxism. Indeed, one might say that Alexandrian cultural sociology is almost as much shaped by its opposition to, and attempted negation of, Bourdieu and things like that, as it is by the other intellectual materials and resources that it draws upon more positively and combines (Thorpe and Inglis, 2022).

As it happens, Thorpe's attempted synthesis is a more than reasonable one. This fits neatly with what other authors have tempted in this regard (e.g. Schwarz, 2013). In essence, the absences in one position are compensated for by ideas in the other, and vice versa. Field theory shows you certain things about how real people struggle with each other in terms of what they do, including making cultural products that contain representations. Cultural sociology *a la* Alexander shows you how certain ideas, tropes, and cultural forms take on a life of their own and become (at least semi-)autonomous of the social conditions under which they were produced and through which they travel over time. Thorpe's combination of the one side's emphasis on the genesis of cultural forms and the other side's focus on the autonomy of them, has gone about as far as anyone can in this sort of attempted synthesis, at least in relation to these sorts of historical materials, and at least at the present time.

He is probably helped in this regard by the fact that the materials are often so familiar. This is very well trodden ground by historians of various stripes. One cannot look to this book to find new empirical material about how the English have represented and understood Italy over the centuries. A massive amount of particularist studies have been carried out on this sort of material for decades. Usually, they are written in the style of the professional historian who eschews (sociological) conceptualisation in favour of detailed empirical narrative. It is also entirely predictable that Thorpe would have to deal with the likes of, for example, Shelley and Byron and Dickens, and many other consecrated figures of the Anglosphere who took an interest in Italy in one way or another and wrote about their experiences.

Where Thorpe's approach really does yield dividends is that he can move across the centuries in the ways that historians would normally refuse to do, because they do not like to make any statements as to how things were either very much before or very much after the era that they happen to be acknowledged experts in. As a sociologist, Thorpe is not so picky about such matters because his job, as he seems to self-define it, is to weave a mega-story that stretches across multiple centuries, indicating how large-scale patterns emerge over time, and how transformations from one kind of English vision of Italy to another develop and mutate over decades and centuries.

His book is essentially a grand synopsis of historical material written by others, and it is clearly valuable in that regard. This is precisely because it is the boldness, if not the educated ignorance, of the sociologist that allows them to be so daring as to move through the centuries in ways that most historians would refrain from. This boldness is bound to receive a chorus of catcalls from the professional historians who lay claim to certain patches of this

terrain. But by painting on such a broad canvas, Thorpe has essentially carved out a massive terrain for himself: the total history of English understandings of Italy from the so-called Renaissance up until the time of reality TV.

Of course, when painting on such a wide canvas, the strokes are bound to be broad, if not at times crude. And yet the book itself is a bold gesture at trying to do something more capacious than the standardised academic division of labour of the present day demands and polices. Inevitably, some of the things he says about particular periods, authors, texts, and cultural institutions will be thought very lacking by historians who want very careful, detailed analysis of very specific things. But their own unwillingness, if not inability, to do the broad-brush work that Thorpe has done somewhat incapacitates that sort of critique. If Thorpe had not done what he has done, then probably no one else would have tried to do it. And it is better that he has tried, rather than the alternative, namely that no-one would have tried at all.

But it is not the occasional crudities or excesses identifiable by historian reviewers that I think are the really important issues here, at least for sociological readers. Rather, it is the seemingly *inevitable* choice of Bourdieu and Alexander, and the equally apparently inevitable desire to unite their positions, that seems to me to be the crux of the matter in appraising this book. In the current state of play in sociological studies of culture, both authors and the wider positions they are taken to represent have become unavoidable reference points, or so it seems. And therefore any book of this sort written in this historical period seems to have to engage with their respective accounts of cultural autonomy and apparent non-autonomy.

But what if Pierre Bourdieu had never written a sociological word in his life? What if he had stayed in his native region of the Béarn and become a baker or a TV repairman? Then many thousands of sociologists would not practice sociological studies of culture in the ways that they habitually do now. There is no intrinsic need to see cultural production in terms of fields, it just so happens that many sociologists feel that this is an inevitable thing to do at the present time, partly because of the enormous prestige and influence that Bourdieu came to enjoy (Inglis, 2024).

Likewise, if Bourdieu had never existed, the ‘strong program’ of Alexander would probably look very different than it does now, because it would have had alternative theoretical antagonists to take on. It might have become a lot less hostile to the kinds of phenomena that are widely regarded as having Bourdieu’s imprimatur, if not intellectual copyright, on them. It is entirely historically contingent that the field called ‘cultural sociology’ should be so marked today by these two conflicting positions.

Like many other authors, Thorpe has operated under the assumption that if he is doing a sociological study of some sort of cultural phenomena, it is incumbent upon him to try to unite these two positions. And yet, it is entirely contingent that it is their tools that we should have inherited from the past, and that many sociologists think that it is necessary to try to combine them. What would the substance of this book’s appraisal of English representations of Italy have involved if both Bourdieu and Alexander had never written a word?

This seems to me *the* fundamental question about the dictatorial nature of, and dynamics within, intellectual and scholarly fields. By having become obligatory passing-points for sociologists interested in issues of cultural matters in general, and cultural representations in particular, it has become the case that the stories that get narrated about certain things are hugely – and perhaps unhelpfully – shaped by whatever operates as the theoretical consensus of the time. Thorpe rails against the overwhelming influence of Edward Said on the study of cultural representations, but the same points apply to his preferred thinkers too.

One need only look back to the early 1970s, to the antecedents of the sociology of culture, to see how apparently obligatory making use of the concepts of Louis Althusser once was. Nowadays, no-one in their right mind would frame their monograph in Althusserian terms, unless they were very powerful figures in the field, and they thought that they could get away with promoting an unexpected, but apparently daring, Althusser revival (a strangled wife notwithstanding). Given that Thorpe’s book considers the *longue durée*, one wonders how dated its conceptualization of the empirical material is going to seem in the future, even just in 20 years, let alone in 100 years’ time. This is not an idiosyncratic failing on Thorpe’s part. It is rather testament to the somewhat suffocating tendencies of intellectual fields and their modes of inquiry, as they make demands on scholars at any given point in time, such that it is very widely assumed that you have to think about certain things in certain sorts of ways at certain historical junctures, if you are going to get published. Each historical period of a scholarly field involves the use of intellectual tools that regenerate the past in certain ways but not in others. One can start to imagine the possibilities that would emerge if the elder Thorpe were to rewrite this book in 20 years’ time. What would the apparently obligatory intellectual tools of that time be? Of course, there is no way of knowing at the moment. But it is a fair guess that Bourdieu and Alexander will not necessarily be amongst the necessary intellectual resources of that future period. Yet one never knows, because it depends who is doing the cheerleading for the ongoing reception of certain thinkers and how influential those cheerleaders may be.

Therefore, the story told about changing English representations of Italy over 500 years is probably in the future going to be rather different than that which Thorpe – or anyone else who carried out a similar study – has been able to offer at the present time. Or at least it will be different in conceptual terms, if not empirical ones. The

contingency of how sociologists can tell historical stories is very marked, precisely because different theoretical paradigms come in and out of fashion. I suspect that in, say, 30 years' time post-colonialism, new materialisms, ANT and other current wonders of our age will have come to seem horribly antiquated, and subject to the patronizing judgments of History (the cosmic force, not a university department), just as today people laugh at Parsonian functionalism of the 1950s for being not only very much of its time, but also as apparently being intellectually much *less* than its time deserved.

So, any critic regarding Thorpe's book in negative terms for not engaging with those sorts of theoretical positions I noted above is simply imposing upon the study of English representations of Italy whatever happens to be the flavour of the month right now. Deriding sociologists' typical enslavements to current theoretical positions is not thereby to praise the empiricist and a-theoretical dispositions of certain sorts of historians. They too are caught up in history in ways that they probably are not fully aware of, although their training makes them very aware of their historical locatedness in other ways.

One of the silliest ways of talking about sociological theory is to say that it is merely a 'toolbox' for the purposes of studying the empirical world. This is a vision of theory coined by empirical researchers who do not really understand what the nature of theory, theory construction, and theorising are. Liking a concept to any old hammer or chisel completely misunderstands the nature of hammers and chisels, and how to make them. You cannot pick such tools up randomly and start to hit empirical reality with them in any way you fancy. Instead, the tools shape the reality being perceived as they go about their work. If you go looking for field-like phenomena, you will probably find them. If you go looking for evidence of cultural autonomy and long-standing cultural structures, you will probably find it. In each case, you can then tell a story that reconfirms the nature of your tools.

To some extent, this is what has happened in Thorpe's book. By taking up the hammer of Bourdieu, Thorpe regenerates the empirical material in a field-driven way. By taking up the chisel of Alexander, he also finds Alexander-style things going on in the history of the changing representations. It is not that either of these sets of claims is untrue. But to say this is to force an admission that the theory deeply drives what is told about the history.

One could say that the best kind of theorising is the kind that can find, and then can acknowledge, empirical material that does not agree with it. One would then hope that the theorising would be altered in light of what are taken to be obdurate facts. But when you are seeking to reconcile two apparently antagonistic positions, the danger is that what does not factually sit well with one of them can be mostly or completely explained by the other. The major drawback in Thorpe's book is that there are no apparently obdurate facts that exist in ways that challenge *both* Bourdieu *and* Alexander, either individually or (more interestingly) when taken together. The latter possibility would throw into high relief assumptions shared by both positions, assumptions that might be found to be unsustainable when confronted by certain sorts of evidence. The yoking of the two horses has created a cart that is completely led by them, and it may have travelled by historical things that fit with neither of them.

Thus, the major question becomes what would happen when the empirical material does not fit with either of these paradigms, and also does not fit with other obvious theoretical position-takings, such as Actor-Network Theory and its emphasis on artworks as actants in and of themselves? What remains outside the purview of the standard positions in cultural sociology today? What is it about English representations of Italy that remains mysterious and occluded, as far as these various theoretical positions are concerned? For if there are no such inconvenient facts, then all we are left with are endless self-confirmations of theory, a condition of vulgar theoreticism.

So the question that I pose to Thorpe is this: what is there in the historical record of English representations of Italy that seems uncondusive to being theorised in the standardised modes of theorising available to sociologists at this point in history?

If the Englishman disrupting the placidity of life on the Venetian Lido had not felt the need to listen so much to loudly conveyed news from the homeland, maybe he could have attuned more sensitively to his surroundings. Likewise, if the sociologist was less tuned into the currently dominant theoretical perspectives seemingly imposed upon them, they might see Italy-related materials in other ways. They might even see English representations of Italy through Italian eyes, although that may be a step too far.

That raises another, final, question: what do Italian sociologists (and historians) make of all of this, and which theoretical edifices would they draw upon to comprehend such matters? At the very least, the Italian (version of) Bourdieu is a rather different creature from the English one (Santoro, 2009), a fact about which we probably should be very glad...

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