

Book Symposium Article

## Wholly New Visions: A Response to Thorpe's Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations

Fiona Greenland <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *University of Virginia*, USA

\*Corresponding Author: [fg5t@virginia.edu](mailto:fg5t@virginia.edu)

**Citation:** Greenland, F. (2024). Wholly New Visions: A Response to Thorpe's Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 9(2), 11. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/15783>

**Published:** December 31, 2024

### ABSTRACT

Christopher Thorpe breaks new ground through his willingness to build theory with concepts and paradigms that are not normally put together in sociological studies of culture. Specifically, Field Theory and the Yale School of Cultural Sociology come together in a study of the historical development of cultural representations of Italy. The result of this experiment is an innovative theoretical framework and a sweeping historical assessment of layered generations' worth of ideas, myths, and symbols about one of Europe's most recognizable sources of cultural imagining. Thorpe invites a vigorous discussion about historical and comparative methods, the uses of different kinds of material to make comparisons, and the explanatory affordances of thick description.

**Keywords:** Italy, cultural sociology, comparative history, Britain, cultural identity

### INTRODUCTION

Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, cultivated her reputation for purity as much in body as in practice. We might then ask, Christopher Thorpe suggests, why she very noticeably spoke Italian at court. At this point in English history – after the bloody Reformation instigated by her father – visions of Italy as “paradise” were gone. A much darker version replaced it. “Why did the Queen of England, sacred purity incarnate,” Thorpe writes, “allow for the language of a nation and people presided over by the Catholic Church, the incarnation of Hell on earth, to pass from her mouth?” (p. 67). It was in keeping with humanist ideals, he explains, that Her Majesty should be multi-lingual and familiar with classical western Mediterranean civilizations. “As such, to speak Italian served to affirm a sacred ideal more than it was understood to contravene one.” (p. 67). The humanist ideal originated in Latin, which remained acceptable as “the language of the ancients.” Good Queen Bess could remain “good” because speaking Italian at court was re-presented as an artifact of “Italy-past” and not the defiled “Italy-present.” The sacred-evil tensions woven into this vignette exemplify the author's deft wielding of the analytical tools of cultural sociology. But it's what he does with cultural sociology's theoretical nemesis that lights up the pages and builds out a novel project of re-presenting the concept of cultural representation itself.

When I recommend this book to students and colleagues, it will be with enthusiasm for its theoretical experimentation. Specifically, I am deeply impressed by Thorpe's willingness to build theory with concepts and paradigms that are not normally put together in sociological studies of culture. In fact, this is putting it mildly. Bourdieu's field theory and the Yale School of Cultural Sociology's (YSCS) strong program are to each other as

chalk is to cheese. Thorpe explains why this antagonism is both unnecessary and capable of generating better explanatory frameworks. In an early passage, he focuses on the concept of autonomy as exemplary of such possibilities:

The issue of whether culture should be conceived as wholly, or relatively autonomous from, social factors lies at the very heart of the division between so-called ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ programs of cultural (sociological) analysis. [...] As conceived using Field Theory, the autonomy of culture is not so much ‘guaranteed’ as it is seen to be contingent on the organization and structure of particular forms of social relations [...] (pp. 23-4).

In other words, what cultural sociology takes for granted – the condition of affect and meaning having effects independent of social structures – Field Theory insists must be achieved, demonstrated, and documented.

It’s fair to ask whether these positions are reconcilable. If economic and political structures pre-condition us to interpret and practice culture in certain ways, culture is always derivative to some extent and therefore pure autonomy is a non-starter. Thorpe finds a way through the impasse. His first step is to reframe what Field Theory posits vis-à-vis cultural autonomy: it is a situation of *relative* independence and unrestraint from wider structures of power and the actions of other social actors.

Further, “fields characterized by high levels of social structural autonomy” are fields in which cultural producers are relatively unrestricted by religious and political power. This matters, among other reasons, because they can innovate with more degrees of freedom. Through the paradigms of the “classing of Italy” and the “fielding of Italy” (p. 33), Thorpe argues that cultural representations of Italy, while firmly associated with aristocratic English and British people (class), were nevertheless able to be reinterpreted and negotiated through dynamics of exchange and reception in literary production (fields). To see this in action, let’s consider chapter 6. Here, he discusses middle-class writers in the nineteenth century, and how financial freedom allowed them to be more experimental in their stories. The argument is that family money helped but is insufficient to explain the highly creative work that challenged prior meanings of Italy. Visions of Italy in nineteenth century Britain remained *classed*, certainly, though the expanded middle-class enjoyed artistic freedoms not available to earlier generations.

Field Theory, Thorpe argues, *does* allow for cultural creativity that is not predetermined by the forces of class, religion, and politics. The task of the analyst, then, “is to try to understand how and in what ways the levels of social structural autonomy of the field(s) in which the producers of cultural works were situated, enabled for the creation of particular kinds of cultural works, while simultaneously constraining their capacity to create other kinds” (p. 24).

The pages that follow had me pacing the coffee shop in which I read much of the book. I’m sure the other patrons wondered what was going on, but I was oblivious to the norms of public café social structures. *This is theoretical experimentation in action*, I thought. It’s one of the points of admiration that I will take from *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations*. My take is that Thorpe is doing two things: identifying conceptual overlap between YSCS and Field Theory while still acknowledging that they do not impart identical commitments or goals; and demonstrating that the differences between the frameworks have potential to strengthen the overall sociological project of explaining what cultural representations are, where they come from, and how they move, change, and expand. Throughout the book, there are exciting moments when this promise comes to fruition. There are also some not-quite-resolved issues with this experiment, which I’ll address after highlighting another aspect of the book that I admire: Thorpe’s historiographical chutzpah.

Thorpe covers the early fifteenth century through to the present, in a compact 225 pages. I envy his daring. In my own cultural sociological study of Italy (Greenland, 2021), my pre-published draft initially started with the sixteenth century and the early appropriations of Roman rhetorical and aesthetic style prior to full-blown Italomania in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (I was talked off the historiographical ledge by a kind editor, who thereby ensured an actual completed manuscript.) Thorpe is right that this sort of *longue durée* approach can support tracing the uneven temporal and spatial scales through which meaning-making and “visions” unfold over time. There’s something exciting and liberating in such a sweeping history, from pre-Reformation England through BBC2’s *Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy* (2022) (p. 196). In his succinct accounting of historical and social change, Thorpe leads us through religious revolution and the downfall (and restoration) of monarchy; through industrialization and the heady years of global imperial dominion; and through the wanderings, passions, romance, and writings of countless men and women who traveled to, learned about, and imagined Italy.

That this is attempted in a volume this size signals something about the author’s approach to historical materials. Here, however, is where depth is sacrificed for breadth, at the cost not only of historical nuance but also of the hermeneutic approach that he seeks to embrace (p. 25). First, on historical nuance, the *tour de force* recount of names, ideas, debates, institutions, events, and cultural objects is, at times, disorienting. For example, in Chapter 2, “Italy as paradise and hell,” we’re told that Italian humanism transformed England and “how Italian civilization was viewed and understood there. This is the conception of humanism as culture structure and symbol system under

whose sway great men and their works were made possible and made to inspire” (p. 48). What follows is a succinct account of Italian humanism in English culture (“deep cultural codes”, p. 49), English universities (Oxford and Cambridge get a brief paragraph each), and the royal court. What Thorpe wishes to emphasize is that Italian humanism impacted ideas and cultural practices across the English elite. But I was often unclear how this impact actually played out. How did humanist ideas and practices from Italy jump the tracks from the intellectual sphere to the rest of society? The answer given is that humanist discourse “penetrated to the sacred of English society” (p. 50). “Influence” works across royal tutors and aristocratic education, commentaries and travel writings, and the literary arts.

I wanted more evidence of how the English were thinking about and making varied uses of “Italian vision” in this time and throughout the book. To take one example, in chapter 4, Germaine de Staël is mentioned in a passing reference to her 1807 novel *Corinne, ou l'Italie*. Thorpe includes the novel as evidence for growing interest among British writers in Venice and that city’s subsequent influence on Byron, Shelley, and later nineteenth century writers. In an endnote (n. 13, p. 126), Thorpe provides a thumbnail biography of de Staël. He omits the detail that de Staël was a superstar of pan-European literature and cultural and political discourse. Her Paris salon attracted artists, writers, scholars, and diplomats from across Europe and North America. Byron, Thorpe’s focus in the second half of the chapter (pp. 114-123) admired de Staël and praised her intelligence and literary ability. *Corinne* was translated into English and influenced Byron, Jane Austen, and others. But above all, she presided over a cosmopolitan, polyglot salon in which heterogeneous visions of Italy were challenged and debated and celebrated and reconstituted.

On this point about historical nuance, my questions for the author are: how might our understanding of cultural representations through time be shaped through thick description of a salon like de Staël’s? For example, would the preeminence of women in this milieu lend additional information about who was empowered to lay claim to cultural knowledge, and how this power was exercised in non-literary fields? What might we gain theoretically by leveraging the full texture of the multi-national, multi-lingual meaning-making characteristic of cosmopolitan salons? By sticking to an English/British story of Italian “visions,” Thorpe is forced to parameterize. Fair enough; we all do some form of this in our scholarly work. But one byproduct of the insistence on “British” visions is the omission of sustained consideration for pan-European sources of knowledge about Italy. Byron’s “vision of Italy” would have been incomplete without de Staël’s French-Swiss-Italian one.

This brings me back to hermeneutics, which I noted as the second cost of prioritizing breadth over depth. Some of the best analysis in the book comes in chapter 4, when Thorpe discusses writings by Shelley and Byron. He knows well the pulse points in the dramatic poetry of Byron (pp. 119-21), in particular:

I love the language, that soft Bastard Latin,  
which melts like kisses from a female mouth,  
And sounds as if it should be writ on satin,  
With syllables which breathe of the sweet south

(*Beppo* XLIV)

Byron’s words are delicious, sensual, and deliberately evocative of romanticized Italian and Italianness. This is no longer the pre-Reformation paradise of pure learning, but rather a sexually charged, tactile, vernacular of experience of self through (known) Other. Thorpe is onto something critical in these passages. He demonstrates that there is real explanatory power in presenting original examples of the cultural objects that propelled cultural representations forward. Given that he uses hermeneutics to such brilliant effect in chapter 4, I wonder why he does much less of this in the other chapters. Part of the answer, I suspect, is methodological necessity. To make his *longue durée* project feasible, Thorpe relies heavily on secondary accounts (often omitting scholarship from the last 20 years that has now become essential reading in critical reception studies of Italy). Provocative macro-level theorizing, in other words, trumps micro-level empirical analysis.

On this point I would welcome the author’s reflections on the nature of the historical work that he has created with this book. Thorpe tends to collapse “Italy” into a single category of “Other” as seen by the British (*pace* Said, e.g., pp. 10-12). If instead we were to take seriously the variations of Italianness that Italians themselves articulated – including the “southern Other” (Moe, 2006) and, in the twentieth century, Africans colonized by Italy (Del Boca, 1984) – how might the theoretical account of cultural representations change? Or, what might happen if you were to enlarge the aperture from literary discourse to serious study of art, sculpture, and public display spaces? Here I think of the British Museum as an influential place for encountering “multiple Italys,” and the Great Exhibition of 1851, whose contemporary (British) visitors and commentators contrasted British industry and cultural achievements with the “declined” states of Turkey, Italy, and Austria (Auerbach, 1999: 167). When such spaces of cultural production and meaning making are left out, I’m left with a dilemma: can we make more room for hermeneutics in macro-scalar cultural sociology? The answer to this question may help address the next one.

## “WHOLLY NEW VISIONS”

Are wholly new visions possible? This question is central to the book. It has implications for how we understand and use theory to explain individual and group agency in meaning-making. Therefore, it's worth leaning into the question and Thorpe's treatment of it.

On page 19, the author refers to “the diversifying range of established, partially revised, and wholly new visions of Italy arising from [structures of] gender and sexuality.” Here, he's referring to his application of Field Theory to the British literary field in the nineteenth century. Seven pages later, however, comes a statement that seems to make a different suggestion about “wholly new” visions: “[...] part of the process by which new phenomena are coded involves understanding them in light of already established meanings. If meanings were wholly new, they would remain unintelligible to others” (p. 26). Thorpe's specific interest here is in the power of cultural codes to shape our encounters with unfamiliar objects, practices, and ideas. But the two statements reveal a tension in the overall framework, as I see it. Are “wholly new” visions of Italy possible, especially after the “horizon of affect and meaning” is saturated with Italian and Italy-derived ideas, aesthetics, and so forth?

Thorpe's answer is yes, but it's a conditional yes. The *vision* can be new, he suggests, but its underlying meanings are not. As he explains,

The creation of new meanings is necessarily rooted in and partially determined by the structure of established meanings embedded within the culture of a group (p. 26).

He elaborates on this argument in chapter 6, “Multiple Italys past, Multiple Italys present.” Nineteenth century British creatives disagreed with each other about how to “classify the Renaissance” (p. 163), with influential thinkers including John Ruskin going so far as to reject the Italian Renaissance in their effort to reimagine British cultural and intellectual life. Ruskin's rejection, as Thorpe points out, served, ironically, to reinforce the centrality of the Renaissance (pp. 164-5). But what I want to emphasize is Thorpe's reference to a “range of established and new ways of seeing Italy” without an example of a “wholly new” vision of Italy that came of this range.

My own conclusion, after reading the book, is that the “new visions” credited to nineteenth-century British writers were not “wholly new.” They were claimed as such by adopters or later critics, perhaps for their strategic position-taking in their own cultural fields. I would be curious to hear the author's thoughts about whose interests are served by “wholly new” visions and why some forms of novelty take hold and others barely pass notice. Similarly, I found myself wondering about the interpretive circumstances that shape “new visions” into iconoclastic practices or objects that disrupt entire political and social systems (Zubrzycki, 2016).

## PUSHING THE BOOK'S THEORETICAL BOUNDARIES

A key achievement of the book, as I have suggested, is the author's attempt to reconcile and fuse core theoretical premises of the Yale School of Cultural Sociology and Bourdieu's Field Theory. This is exciting and generative. What I'd like to do in this final section of my essay is push the boundaries of his experiment further.

Thorpe provides a dutiful summary of YSCS tenets and concepts, including cultural trauma, carrier groups, and iconicity. At times I struggled to identify his own ideas about these concepts, including how to fit them to five hundred years' worth of social, cultural, political, and economic change. I'd like to ask: What is your own comprehension of how cultural codes are braided into variegated strands of religion, ethnicity, gender, nationalism, and so forth over time? More bluntly: do you really believe that the English and British worlds you are studying and analyzing here are always divisible into binary categories of meaningfulness?

The author's commitment to binary codes is made clear in his frequent use of the phrase “dividing up and out” (or cognate language such as, “separating out and severing” (p. 68)). I counted thirteen instances of the phrase. We read about the “dividing up and out of the world along the lines of the sacred and profane” (p. 32), the dividing of the nations of Europe into “civilized and uncivilized” (p. 51), and the “dividing out and division between” literary fields (p. 155), as well as the dividing of the “Graeco-Roman past” from “Italy present.” This is a lot of cognitive and semiotic labor on the part of Thorpe's historical subject, and little is said about how these divisions were enforced or what became of the “severed” bits. At times, the divisions feel *too* tidy – as with “Graeco-Roman”, a term that was, to the best of my knowledge, first attested in writing in the nineteenth century. As such, I wondered how it could be representative of the mental categories available to the people who appear in the book.

Cultural codes and binary divisions are braided into Thorpe's analysis of cultural traumas (i.e., pp. 133-5), which he divides into “two species”: discrete and self-contained situations or events, such as the beheading of Charles I, and sudden or fluid states of ongoing social change, such as industrialization (p. 29). What should we make of the long stretches of time without either form of trauma? What does cultural representation work look or feel like

outside of trauma paradigms? Can you tell us more about this work, perhaps with a more thorough definition of “refraction” – a term that pops up frequently in these pages?

Above all, *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations* left me with a hunger for more discussion of imagination as a sociological phenomenon. Italy has been a fertile source of inspiration for all sorts of ideas and productions, and Thorpe is strong on the “symbolic debt” (p. 87) of England, and then Britain, to Italy and Italians. Leaving aside codes and fields for the moment, what might a *longue durée* history of cultural representations teach us about who we think we are and where we fit in the world’s colorful and dense fabric of people and societies? One of Thorpe’s observations about his book is that it addresses a scholarly gap: “the history of cultural representations of Italy in Britain during and following on from the two world wars has yet to be written” (p. 182). He might be right; I trust his bibliographic digging. But what this gap shows, I think, is that cultural historians and sociologists have moved away from national containers and toward more global perspectives on how cultural representations are created and changed across time, space, and highly diverse societies. In light of this scholarly turn, it might be productive to think with the author about what a fully historicized assessment of postwar Italian visions in Britain can teach us about why post-Brexit Britain once again stands outside of Europe, and where its people imagine its symbolic debts to lie today.

## REFERENCES

- Auerbach, J. (1999). *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ww3tw8>
- Del Boca, A. (1984). *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*. Rome: Laterza.
- Greenland, F. (2021). *Ruling Culture: Art Police, Tomb Robbers, and the Rise of Cultural Power in Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226757179.001.0001>
- Moe, N. (2006). *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Zubrzycki, G. (2016). *Beheading the Saint: Nationalism, Religion, and Secularism in Quebec*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226391717.001.0001>