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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?¹ What will they make of the now cryptic words that lie within its tattered and frail pages? Beyond muttering gnomic 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 26th century future.

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¹ 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-21st century. But beyond the similar fates of those two bibliothetic edifices, there any similarities end.



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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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Book Symposium Article

A New Research Programme for Cultural Sociology: On Christopher Thorpe's *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations*

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical appraisal of Christopher Thorpe's 'Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations' both as a contribution to the historical sociology of English cultural representations of Italy and as the foundations for a new research programme in cultural sociology. It analyses the most important theoretical and critical choices made by Thorpe in setting up his project, and how these inform the analysis of English representations of Italy. It explores the role played Bourdieu's Field Theory and the Strong Programme of Jeffrey Alexander and the Yale Cultural Sociology (YCS) group in the new approach advocated by Thorpe. It identifies particular strengths in Thorpe's new programme, in particular in addressing the complex temporalities of cultural change, as well as some weaknesses linked to the structuralist model of culture in YCS, with its over emphasis on discursive meaning as the essence of culture. It suggests these shortcomings could be ameliorated with the help of Peirce's semiotics, certain strands of recent psychology, and some aspects of action theory.

Keywords: cultural sociology, Bourdieu and field theory, Alexander and the Strong Programme, historical sociology, Peirce and the materiality of culture

INTRODUCTION

Christopher Thorpe's (2024) stimulating new book not only offers a substantive historical sociology of English representations of Italy from the early modern period to today, but also outlines a significant new research programme in cultural sociology, namely the 'cultural sociology of cultural representations'. It is a remarkable book in terms of both its theoretical ambitions and its empirical range. Edward Said's critical theory of representation is transformed and renewed through a dialogue with the cultural sociologies of Pierre Bourdieu and Jeffrey Alexander, an intriguing and at first sight unlikely combination, bearing in mind Alexander's (1995) excoriating attack on Bourdieu. The range of empirical materials analysed within the theoretical framework developed by Thorpe is simply vast: extending from Italian etiquette books and their translation for the English court in the early sixteenth century through to Jamie Oliver's *Italian Kitchen* television series in the twenty first, taking in the aristocrats of the English Grand Tour, travel guides for their bourgeois successors, the poetry of Byron and Shelley, eighteenth century Gothic novels, and the films of Merchant and Ivory.

In the appraisal which follows, I seek first to lay out what I would see as the most important theoretical and critical choices made by Thorpe in setting up his project, and to sketch how these inform the analysis of English

representations of Italy which forms the core of his book. I will then focus on some of the key strengths and weaknesses of this critical framework, their sources and entailments, before concluding with some final reflections on the potential of cultural sociology of cultural representations as a research programme.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

The starting point of Thorpe's study is an interest in how Italy has been represented over a very long period of time as England's cultural Other, culminating in the 'love of Italy' as a distinguishing attribute of the English middle class in contemporary Britain, manifested in phenomena such as enthusiasm for Italian cuisine and style at the more affordable end of the spectrum, and villa holidays and second homes in Italy for the more affluent. Thorpe points out that elements of this cultural complex date back as least as far as the early modern period, when Italian artistic culture and Renaissance learning were emulated in the courts of the Tudor monarchs, paradoxically at the same time, following the English Reformation, as Italy was conceived as a negative Other, the home of Catholicism and Popery, and as such a major threat to the English state and the Anglican settlement.

As Thorpe points out, there is a rich tradition in both the humanities and the social sciences (especially anthropology) of analysis of representations of the cultural Other, influenced by Edward Said's (1978) classic study of *Orientalism*. On the face it, Thorpe acknowledges, Said's work ought to have been an appropriate model for his own project: the combination of literary critical tools from the humanities, and post-structuralist styles of analysis drawn above all from Foucault, permitted Said to range across a similarly broad range of cultural representations. These representations were linked to particular institutional settings, which shaped their character and informed their cultural agency in the context of broader social and political environments, above all the colonial and imperial projects of European nation states in the Middle East. But in relation to English representations of Italy, Thorpe suggests, the Saidian paradigm has one major shortcoming, namely an exclusive focus on the ways in which the Other was negatively represented, as the inferior of those making the cultural representations, forms of symbolic violence which played an active role in the articulation and legitimation of colonial power. How then to address the ways in which, in the long history of English representations of Italy, in different periods and in different contexts, negative representations of Italy – as the nursing ground of Catholic plots in sixteenth century, or as the home of a decadent and corrupt people, incapable and unworthy of self-government in the eighteenth century - sat alongside positive representations – the home of classical humanism in the Renaissance, the source of canonical traditions in the visual arts, like the masterpieces of the Venetian school emulated by English painters, the country which had to be visited to complete the civilising education of aristocratic tourists in the eighteenth century and their middle class counterparts in the nineteenth century and since?

It is against the background of this limitation in the Saidian paradigm that Thorpe turns to the tools of cultural sociology to develop alternative approaches, which can address simultaneous processes of cultural affirmation and cultural denigration, and the complex manner in which these interact with each other in ways which are mutually constitutive in changing social, institutional and historical contexts. The concepts drawn from Jeffrey Alexander and the Yale School of Cultural Sociology (YCS) address primarily the level of cultural analysis of representations, those drawn from Bourdieu's Field Theory (FT) the social contextualisation of those representations, with a particular view to explaining which representations emerge to (or disappear from) prominence and when, over the very long-term history which Thorpe addresses. But it is worth addressing exactly which concepts Thorpe takes from each tradition, and which he ignores, and how he articulates the two on the face of it rather discrepant approaches for the purposes of his own research programme.

From Alexander and YCS, Thorpe takes the 'structural hermeneutic' approach to cultural representation, with its emphasis on the 'structural' dimensions of meaning making. This starts from the Durkheimian assumption that an opposition between the sacred and the profane 'is the fundamental division around which all cultures are organised and structured' (27). This fundamental opposition informs systems of binary classification which ramify, branch like, through culture from its highest to its lowest levels. Such 'meaning' is rooted primarily in language, and as such is arbitrary or conventional, in Saussure's terms, and fundamentally 'discursive'. The moral force of the systems of cultural classification and categorisation which are the fundamental structures of culture come from 'generative and dynamic' (27) tensions between the sacred and the profane, and the affective charge to which that tension, and associated systems of interdiction, give rise. This provides a model for describing the ways in which particular features of Italian civilisation are 'coded, weighted and collectively represented within English culture'. It also provides a way of addressing some distinctive processes of cultural change, specifically through the idea of 'cultural trauma', a concept developed through collaborative research within the YCS group but particularly associated with Ron Eyerman (2012) and Alexander et al. (2004). 'Cultural trauma' refers to circumstances in which a community's collective identity is threatened or undermined in ways that leave 'indelible marks on the group consciousness' (Thorpe, 2024: 28, quoting Alexander, 2003: 85) 'changing their future identity in fundamental and

irrevocable ways'. Such events or circumstances only become traumatic if they are culturally defined and represented as such by 'claim makers' whose definition of the situation as 'traumatic' carries sway with the larger community. Such events necessarily entail transformations in existing meaning structures and intensive meaning making activities, to repair the old meaning structures or construct new ones which restore some sense of 'ontological security' (28-31).

The hinge that Thorpe uses to articulate YCS cultural sociology with Bourdieu's Field Theory (FT) is the role of the claim-makers and 'carriers' of cultural representations. He observes that cultural representations of other peoples and cultures entail claims to knowledge, to know and represent the truth, in this case about Italy and Italian culture. Knowledge claims, and their acceptance, inevitably entail issues of cultural authority, that is to say, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolic and cultural capital, linked to class and to positions in particular cultural fields. Accordingly, Thorpe draws on FT to 'track and trace two interrelated developments: the "classing" of Italy and the "fielding" of Italy' (33-40). 'Classing' refers to the ways in which 'claims to know and represent Italy' have been associated with specific classes and/or status groups over time. 'What Italy means, and how it is represented to and by members of a group is determined by a class-based habitus' (34) shaping a particular envisioning of Italy and Italian culture. Such visions are inflected by the social and cultural interests of a class, and the specific forms of capital which characterise it: even within a specific cultural practice, like the Grand Tour for example, there were differences between the experiences, and their representations of them, on the part of aristocrats (high in economic capital, rather middling in cultural capital) and the paid tutors (high in cultural capital, low in economic capital) who guided them.

Representations of Italy were not a direct expression of class habitus but were further refracted by the 'fielding' of Italy, that is to say through the structure of the field of literary production in the context of which representations of Italy were produced and circulated: the social basis of the field, its relation to and degree of dependence on or autonomy from neighbouring fields (political, religious, economic), and its internal structure (the system of positions internal to the literary field and the kinds of competition or struggles to which these gave rise). These changing structures of the field of literary production 'have made possible particular representations of Italy while constraining and precluding the emergence of others' (33). Needless to say, the structure and character of the field of literary production is transformed many times over during the more than five hundred years of English and Italian history with which Thorpe is concerned. At the beginning of the story a literary field as such scarcely exists: literary production is embedded in the structures of church, court and state, giving rise to the kinds of writing that the performance of religious and political roles required. This is reflected in the character of the writings produced: ambassadors' reports on their visits to Italian courts; martyrologies to strengthen faith, like John Foxe's (1516-1587) *Book of Martyrs* describing the sufferings of Protestants at the hands of the Catholic Inquisition. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of an increasingly autonomous field of literary production, which offered forms of specifically literary success, corresponding to different positions which could be taken in the field, and the different kinds of economic and cultural capital that they required: middle class authors of Gothic novels (set in Southern Italy), of relatively limited economic and cultural capital, positioned at the commercial pole of the field of literary production, opposed to the aristocratic Romantic poets, like Shelley and Byron, richly endowed with economic and cultural capital, occupying the restricted pole and playing for the more purely symbolic stakes of specifically literary creative genius.

Thorpe makes very clear that this linking of YCS and FT is not intended as some kind of grand synthesis, but more simply the selection of two different tools for doing two rather different kinds of job in the research problems that he wishes to address: they complement each other in allowing us to look at the same material, and to understand cultural processes, from differing but complementary angles. He acknowledges very clearly that this involves downplaying or excising certain elements of each theoretical scheme, and the costs and benefits of these choices. Most notably he pays little attention to the pragmatic and performative turn which was an important development in YCS, addressing the kinds of micro-level processes by which the grand cultural binaries of Durkheimian/Saussurean structural analysis might be mobilised, and specific cultural meanings realised, in particular social settings or contexts of interpersonal interaction. So too, it is a repeated refrain in the context of the chapters of empirical analysis that we are not going to receive any Clifford Geertz style 'thick description' (cf. p. 60 eschewing 'overly thick descriptions' of anti-Catholic cultural structures in Elizabethan England; 143 etc), a striking departure from YCS norms, where Geertz is seen as a key ancestral figure in the creation of a strong programme in cultural sociology, and doing thick description is seen as one of the distinguishing features of strong versus weak programmes (Alexander, 2003: 14). Thorpe does not try to disguise this difference, making the not unreasonable claim that in the kind of *longue durée* study that he is undertaking 'it is necessary to operate at a level of abstraction that is highly sensitive to but nevertheless involves compressing significant amounts of empirical detail by which meanings are made, performed and fuse or not with actors and audiences' (25).

ANALYSIS: CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN PRACTICE

How does this conceptual framework operate in practice? For the most part, the analysis Thorpe offers is exceptionally clear and lucid. The broad orientations developed in the introductory chapters are developed as more specific questions period by period, with YCS and FT played off against each other within individual chapters or across pairs of chapters. Because, between the two theoretical frames, there is quite a lot of complex analytical work to be done, the exposition is extremely dense, and defies any straightforward summary, but it is worth offering a sketch of some key moments in the story, however skeletal. Chapter 2 sets some long-lasting parameters informing the cultural representation of Italy in England, shaped by the Renaissance and the Reformation. For the court of Tudor England, very much on the margins of European culture, Italian Renaissance humanism became a cultural model offering both a new style of education for the civil servants of an emerging modern state, as well as models of civility in court etiquette and aesthetic culture. With the Reformation, the 'assemblage of collective representations' of Italy in England became 'increasingly tension laden' (58). While humanist culture, and classical education inherited from 'Italy-Past' (Rome) continued to be valued (Elizabeth I was a great Latinist and spoke Italian), these positive representations were 'overwritten' with 'negative representations of Catholic Italy-Present as spiritually polluted home to the devil incarnate in the figurehead of the Pope' (58; 'sacred-evil'). Protestant tracts and stage dramas were key media in which the cultural structures of 'English anti-Catholicism crystallised and became obdurate' (60), and Italy and Italians-present resignified negatively as politically, morally and sexually corrupt.

The end of chapter 2, and chapters 3 and 4 explore how Italy-Past (classical civilization, and ultimately also the early Renaissance), was separated from Italy-Present in English collective representations, through a series of acts of cultural appropriation. This major transformation in the cultural structures of English representation of Italy was once again significantly conditioned by cultural trauma, in this case the English civil war, culminating in the execution of Charles I, and Cromwell's Commonwealth, before the restoration of the monarchy. Roman republican and imperial history was used as a model for 'working through the traumatic events of the regicide and the civil wars' (85) in ways which exculpated the aristocracy of any responsibility, and helped articulate new cultural structures of Britishness, based on Roman *Libertas* (but reconceptualised by Locke with an emphasis on private property), and with an increasingly prosperous and ambitious Britain as the modern heir to ancient Rome, 'the embodiment of world civilization and the greatest imperial superpower of the present' (85). This provides the cultural context for the invention of the Grand Tour. The tour involved English aristocrats visiting the archaeological sites where they could commune with the traces of Roman antiquity, and the churches, palaces and museums which housed the heritage of the Italian Renaissance. The Grand Tour is described by Thorpe as an instance of what Jeffrey Alexander has described as 'ritual-like practices'. Such practices have some structural parallels (orientation towards sacred objects, heightened affective arousal, and collective effervescence consolidating solidarity of participants), with the kinds of traditional and institutionalised religions studied in classical religious sociology (Durkheim, Weber), but, in the highly socially differentiated societies characteristic of modernity, they lack the ability to 'fuse' (YCS concept) with the whole community, characteristic of traditional religions. Correspondingly, writers from the ascending middle class criticised the Grand Tour, and the behaviour of the aristocrats who indulged in it, on patriotic grounds, as frivolous wasting of national wealth and sycophantic favouring of foreign culture over British.

It is at this point that Field Theory begins to play an increasingly important role in Thorpe's analysis. The consecration of travel to Italy as a highly valorised form of cultural capital, and the 'iconicisation' (another YCS concept to which we will return) of classical styles in art and architecture, patronised by the English aristocracy and royal family, formed the background to the creation of the Royal Academy, under the leadership of Joshua Reynolds, in 1768 (92-3). This was a crucial moment in the formation of a relatively autonomous artistic field, in so far as it created an institutional space which in some degree insulated artists with the right forms of cultural and symbolic capital (acquired by travelling to Italy, and learning from its artistic heritage) from the constraints of both the market and direct patronage. This entailed the gradual institution of specifically artistic capital, with the work of painters being evaluated according to professional criteria set by them, as articulated in the Discourses of Reynolds and later academicians, and rewarded in terms of symbolic capital (prizes), specific to the field and in some degree set against the purely monetary rewards secured through patronage or the market.

So too, the appearance as a new 'carrier group' of the 'critics and commentators drawn from the educated fractions of the ascending middle class' (88) marked the emergence of a specifically literary field of cultural production (disembedded from religious and aristocratic patronage) characterised by commercial and restricted poles, soon differentiating into two increasingly bounded fields. Various forms of commercial and serial publication, amongst them the new newspapers and journals (*Spectator*, *Tatler*, *Gentleman's Magazine* etc), characteristic of the developing public sphere in eighteenth-century England, permitted the emergence of the role

of professional author. These writers articulated alternative ‘counter-representations’ of Italy, not just the critiques of the Grand Tour, but also the new genre of the Gothic Novel. Setting such novels in Southern Italy, relatively unknown to Grand Tourists, afforded ‘an imaginative terrain on which to think through and consolidate the coordinates of a steadily crystallising middle-class sensibility’, characterised by ‘simple moral and social oppositions’, and revelling in stories of ‘corrupt monks, compromised nuns, sexually voracious Latin males and unpredictable and volatile Italian spouses of both genders’, all serving to reinforce, in refigured form, the inherited cultural structures associating Catholicism with ‘terror and superstition on the one hand’ (Reformation) and ‘moral, political and sexual corruption, on the other hand’ (108-9).

The professionalisation of literary art, and the differentiation of the literary field, Thorpe argues, gave rise to a corresponding differentiation of representations of Italy. Like the critics of the Grand Tour, emerging middle class professional poets – Wordsworth, De Quincey – were characterised by a habitus which opposed that characteristic of aristocratic Grand Tourists. They were ‘negatively disposed towards the upper-class veneration of Italy and classical Italian civilization’ and ‘instead championed the natural beauty of the English landscape’ (115). The writing of these Romantic poets took place against the background of another epoch-making cultural trauma, namely the Industrial Revolution. The cultural disorientation to which this gave rise resulted in a ‘polarized and polarising response’ (133) as the new ways of life associated with industrialism and urbanism clashed with old ways of life and cultural structures. The new concept of the Romantic artist, as a divinely gifted individual, was at the same time a response to the fragmenting character of industrial labour, and a way of ‘making and marking symbolic boundaries separating out the restricted from the commercial field of literary production’ (113). Whilst middle-class poets like Wordsworth valorised English nature, their aristocratic counterparts, Byron and Shelley, refigured the traditional aristocratic representations of Italy as a place of salvation and liberation, in which Italy-Present, the whole way of life, becomes the focus of celebration, ‘a life-giving alternative to the oppressive and repressive nature of life under social conditions in modern Industrial England’ (139).

This new positive representation of Italy-present was extended in the context of the democratic discourses of the newly emergent ‘civil sphere’ (YCS concept) characteristic of nineteenth century Britain. These discourses located sacred social values in the civil sphere, amongst them popular sovereignty and the right to national self-determination ‘recoded within the symbolic discourse of liberal democracy and reweighted as sacred-pure’ (142). This provided the culture structure basis for cultural processes of ‘psychological identification and moral extension’ (YCS concept), which helped to ‘overturn three hundred years of negative representations of Italians-present and make them moral equivalents of British’ (143). Thorpe discusses some of the main carriers of this new cultural structure, from newspapers and civic associations, to poets like Elizabeth and Robert Browning, who represented the struggle for Italian liberation in ways ‘which involved personalising and making morally and personally meaningful (...) the oppressed plight of the Italian people (...) compelling identification’ (145).

Concluding chapters show how this new positive representation of Italy, in particular with an emphasis on Italy-present as embodying a whole way of life, has been elaborated from the late nineteenth century, largely following a consistent cultural structure (no new cultural traumas, perhaps until Brexit?), proliferating and differentiating with developments in class structure and their intersections with transformations in the field of cultural production. Particularly telling is the analysis of the increasing degree to which the dominant representations of Italy in Britain are produced and circulate within the commercial field of cultural production. The poetry of Shelley and Byron, in which the Romantic vision of Italy had been articulated in the restricted field of literary production of the early nineteenth century, is recycled in the later nineteenth century, transformed into easily consumed gobbets in the guidebooks produced by John Murray for the first package tourists, ‘culturally empowering for middle class travellers’, whilst at the same time reproducing their subordinate status within ‘the wider hierarchy of class-based visions of Italy of which they formed part’ (161). This represents an early instance of what Thorpe describes as ‘making Italy fit for market’ (191), in which the logic of commodification of the commercial field increasingly informs ‘every stage of the production and circulation of cultural goods’ (187, quoting Bourdieu, 2003: 67). Thorpe shows how exactly the kinds of cultural processes identified by Bourdieu as characteristic of the field of commercial production of culture have informed British representations of Italy into the present. Anything difficult or sharp edged, which ‘might divide or exclude potential consumers’ (190) is erased. The result is a ‘highly romanticised, idealised, homogenised, depoliticised and dehistoricised’ representation of Italy. Thorpe argues that this modern vision of Italy is particularly ‘highly sensorialised’, its primary contents being visions of ‘life-affirming and in many cases positively life-changing sensory experiences’ of a kind that ‘British people and the British lifestyle typically repress and struggle to express’ (191), above all sexual and social liberation and gastronomic pleasure: think the Merchant and Ivory production of *Room with a View*, *Jamie’s Kitchen* and lifestyle magazines like *Italia!* or *Italia Segreta: the Italian Lifestyle Magazine*.

CULTURAL STRUCTURES, CULTURAL PROCESSES, CULTURAL AGENCY: SOME STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

There is a great deal to like in this book, and in the vision of cultural sociology which it articulates: the emphasis on the autonomy of cultural levels of analysis, the investigation of cultural structure and cultural process, coming from Jeffrey Alexander and the YCS tradition; the effort to bring Alexander YCS and Bourdieu FT into some kind of relationship; the *longue durée* perspective that brings complex issues of time and temporality into thinking about the relationship between social structures and cultural structures, realised through the application of Bourdieu's Field Theory. But there are also places where the theoretical tools chosen do not seem adequate to the task.

Let's start with the strengths. Much of the vocabulary taken over from YCS structural hermeneutics does a good job. In particular, the recurrence of the same vocabulary in different contexts helps the reader to see significant parallels and differences across time in the logics according to which cultural structures are articulated and transformed. This gives added value to Thorpe's reworking of the more period specific secondary sources of humanities scholarship on which he draws, where the closer embedding in the specifics of particular periods or particular cultural forms might obfuscate the visibility of such structural patterns. A great deal of secondary and primary source material is effectively integrated by Thorpe through such synthesising concepts as 'resignifying', 'coding and weighting' of represented contents, 'overwriting of positive with negative representations' and the like. Similarly, although the analysis of cultural structures does not offer the kind of thick description offered by Geertz's Balinese Cockfight, a consistent set of terms in which to analyse cultural structures – addressing 'the most salient codes, rhetorical devices, tropes and narrative structures' (60) in terms of which they crystallise and take enduring form – ensures a clear focus and a consistency in the degree of resolution at which the analysis is conducted, enhancing the degree to which the reader feels they can rely on the comparison of the multiplicity of different cases that make up the five centuries of history of cultural representation embraced by Thorpe's study.

Indeed, the handling of this long-term history is one of the signal strengths of Thorpe's study, and he seems to me fully justified in the broad claims that he makes for the approach that he has developed for the cultural sociology of cultural representations, namely that his framework allows him to 'cast light on various patterned processes, structures and dynamics that would otherwise remain concealed from view' (211) and that he has been able to 'explain the mechanisms modulating continuity and change' to the meanings and representations of Italy (215). The use of 'trauma theory' and field theory play a particularly strategic role in transforming YCS style analysis – often looking at processes of relatively short duration, for example Alexander's classic analysis of Watergate (2003: 155-78) or his account of the Obama election campaign of 2008 (2012) – to a long term historical cultural sociology. It offers a cultural sociological basis for the periodisation of Thorpe's study. Rather than the slightly arbitrary categorisations which structure humanities scholarship – Elizabethan, Romantic, Victorian – trauma theory identifies key turning points in English/British history in terms relevant to the theoretical issues at hand: the moments when situations and events – Reformation, Regicide, the Industrial Revolution – effect 'tears to the social fabric' which threaten established identities and the basis of agents' 'ontological security' (28-9). This creates an opening for cultural change - a little like Ann Swidler's (1984) account of the ways 'unsettled times' give rise to cultural innovation - in which both established and new cultural entrepreneurs or 'carriers' play key roles, some making visible a crisis by giving it cultural definition, others seeking to repair and restore the rents in transmitted representations of cultural identity, with varying impacts on how Italy was represented as cultural Other.

Field theory, in its turn, complements trauma theory, by showing and explaining the extraordinary complexity of the cultural representations to which the response to trauma gives rise, refracted through multiple levels of social structuring: the differentiation of fields of cultural production, with specific structural properties, in terms of the positions they offer to cultural producers, the kinds of class habitus (associated with specific distributions of economic and cultural capital) of cultural actors who take up those positions and so on. This could hardly be further from the invocations of some kind of unified period spirit (*Zeitgeist*) which is associated with the inherited periodisations of much humanities scholarship, sometimes updated with post-structuralist notions of period epistemes on the model of Foucault (and surprisingly even invoked as an analytically meaningful concept in YCS scholarship – Alexander, 2003: 17 on Willis and the '*zeitgeist*' (sic) of 'the lads'; Bartmanski, 2012: 430 on periods when intellectuals become 'iconic'). The interplay between YCS and field theory gives Thorpe's study an exceptional richness and sharpness in being able to show the diversity and even the contradictory character of cultural representations of Italy in any particular period (the account of the nineteenth century, coming out of the trauma of the Industrial Revolution is particularly strong): an intrinsic logic entailed by certain cultural structures, the field based logic of their elaboration, the tensions between the visions of actors with their specific class based habitus, the possibilities and constraints afforded by specific positions of cultural producers in their respective fields, all combining to inform processes of cultural change which are at one highly dynamic, open ended (no

teleology) and internally contradictory, and yet highly structured. It is really a model of analysis that is able to show, explicate and explain complexly structured patterns of cultural change operating at a number of different levels of temporality over an extended period of historical time: long term cultural structures (the split between Italy-Past and Italy Present, with Catholicism as sacred-evil, coming out of the Reformation and the creation of a Church of England), medium term ones (for example linked to institutions like the Grand Tour or the emergence of specific cultural fields), and short term ones, the kinds of interventions of poets and pamphleteers in response to the immediate events of the Italian struggle for independence led by Garibaldi.¹

All that said, there are some places where the theoretical apparatus creaks, and the analysis is not fully satisfying. The difficulties seem to me to come mainly from certain inherent contradictions in some of the ways in which culture has been conceptualised in YCS, and which Thorpe's work inherits. The ultimate root of these problems lies in Jeffrey Alexander's model of culture based in Durkheim's sacred/profane binary, mapped with Saussure's structural linguistics, and its assumption of an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, and coming with this the assumption that culture is fundamentally discursive, grounded in these binary, culturally conventional, language based systems of categorisation. A number of difficulties arise from YCS style cultural analysis rooted in these assumptions. The first is the slipperiness of the categories, of which the structure and the status is not always clear, sometimes pitched at a rather high level of abstraction and operating in a rather procrustean fashion in relation to the cultural texts which are the object of analysis. At one moment, for example, the opposition between sacred and profane maps onto one between good and evil, whereas at another we have the 'mundane' (so neither sacred, nor profane, thus a ternary structure rather than a binary one), and the invocation of oppositions such as sacred-pure versus sacred-evil (27-8, spelling out the basic concepts with reference to the resignification of Catholicism as sacred-evil).²

As a result, it is too often unclear in Thorpe's analysis where these categories and oppositions are either

- (1) ontologically given categories intrinsic to any human cultural categorisation (like sacred versus profane for Durkheim and Alexander), or
- (2) analyst's categories providing a simplifying representation of the cultural representations being analysed, or

¹ Although the target of explanation – cultural change rather than social change – is somewhat different, Thorpe's approach could be interestingly compared with that of William Sewell (2005), where the latter is much more explicit in his appropriation of Braudel's approach to time, only rather vaguely alluded to in Thorpe's invocation of the *longue durée*.

² The confusion is already present in Alexander's in many respects very interesting attempts to develop a sociology of evil: Alexander (2003, 31-38, 109-20). Alexander argues that: "evil must not be seen as something which naturally exists but as arbitrary construction, the product of cultural and sociological work. This contrived binary, which simplifies empirical complexity into two antagonistic forms and reduces every shade of grey between, *has been an essential feature of all human societies but especially important in those Eisenstadt (1982) has called the Axial Age civilizations*" (31; emphasis added). There are two different arguments blended here: (a) that all societies have a concept of evil as a logical counterpart to good, and a counterpart to the fundamental opposition between sacred and profane, indeed mapping onto it; (b) what varies across cultures is what gets defined as evil, and when it gets defined as such, as Alexander shows very clearly in his study of the changing discourse around the killing of Jews in Nazi concentration camps, from simple mass killing to the evil of the Holocaust. But if the opposition is an 'essential feature of all human societies', as indeed the polarising cultural logic which it entails, how can it be 'especially important' in some societies, but not others. If it is an 'essential' feature, in opposition to good, like sacred versus profane, cultures and societies are unimaginable without it. If it is not essential, then it is a culturally specific concept, which has to be invented before it can structure human cognition; but then it does not make sense to use it as an analytical concept, a kind of ontological given, like sacred and profane, as both Alexander and Thorpe do.

It is by no means clear that all cultures are possessed of a concept of radical evil (that is to say a good/evil polarity, in addition to simple good/bad), such as Alexander assumes as a kind of logical/cognitive necessity as the counterpart to the category 'good'. A case in point would be the Confucian mandarins of classical and early medieval China, as analysed by Weber. The Confucian orientation to the world involved harmonious adaptation, rather than the strong tension characteristic of the Christian, and in particular the Puritan, tradition. Not good conduct was characterised as impropriety, or bad manners, showing a lack of taste since it undermined smooth and harmonious intercourse. Weber's argument has been challenged, in particular in relation to the capacity of the Chinese tradition to generate some kind of equivalent to the Protestant ethic from within, and scholars of Neo-Confucianism, like Theodore de Bary and Thomas Metzger, have identified a sense of evil, and the guilt associated with it, in the writings of late imperial (Qing Dynasty) bureaucrats – but of course this was in part the result of a long history of the reshaping of Confucianism through interaction with (Indian) Buddhism, characterised by a radically different cosmology (for a succinct discussion: Shinohara, 1986).

Much of Alexander's account of evil has a deeply puritanical Christian character, reminiscent of certain passages from Weber's Protestant Ethic, accounts of the witch trials in Salem, or the Counter Reformation Inquisition: p. 115: "Such knowledge and fear triggers denunciation of evil in others and *confession* about evil intentions in oneself, and rituals of punishment and purification in collectivities. In turn, these renew the sacred, the moral, and the good... Evil must be coded, narrated and embodied in every social sphere – in the intimate sphere of the family, in the world of science, in religion, in the economy, in government, in primary communities" (emphasis added).

(3) culturally specific categories or oppositions embedded in the cultural texts / discourses being analysed, and thus actors' categories.

One example of where this leads to confusion (at least for this reader) is pp. 49ff, discussing the 'deep cultural codes' of Italian humanism. We are told that the humanist discourse of civility centered on 'binary codes' which 'emphasized "society" over the "self" (49) (perhaps, but what about Burckhardt on Renaissance discovery of the individual?), and while a corresponding 'discourse of barbarism was rooted in many of the same anti-ideals we continue to associate with civility: proximity to Nature (...) "tribalism" and "disorder" over "social integration" and "formal organisation". Some of these categories seem to be actors' categories: civility itself of course, but also barbarism and Nature. But it is hard to see how barbarism and Nature could have been aligned in Renaissance discourse: after all, Nature was the model for Renaissance artists, partly on the basis of the inheritance of 'naturalism' from classical antiquity, partly refigured on the basis of Nature being God's creation, and thus the most worthy object of imitation (in particular by contrast with the work of other artists) (Blunt, 1940: 18-20 on Alberti, in the broader context of exactly the broader civic humanist discourse with which Thorpe is concerned; 24-33 on Leonardo; Summers, 1987). Art imitating nature, whether classical or Renaissance, was contrasted with the anti-classical, anti-naturalistic art and architecture of the Gothic 'barbarians' of the Middle Ages, 'totally lacking in grace, design and judgement' (Ferne, 1995: 32 – extract from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*). Other categories seem to be neither ontological categories (like sacred/profane), nor actors' categories (like Nature, barbarian), but rather categories of a sociological theory kind, dropped into the mix – 'social integration', 'formal organisation': it is difficult to see of what commonly used concepts in Italian Renaissance thought these terms could be translations or counterparts. This sometimes makes for rather confusing and not always persuasive cultural analysis.

The use of the YCS model of culture also gives rise to some problems with how Thorpe handles the *agency* of culture. Culture certainly does have agency for Thorpe. First, there are the fundamental categories of sacred and profane, good and evil, which have a deep structural status as intrinsic to human cognition. Then, as we have seen, there are cultural categories and oppositions that have a very long-term character, like the opposition between Italy-Past and Italy-Present, between Protestantism and Catholicism as sacred-good and sacred-evil, which are established during the Reformation, and endure for centuries. And with each of the changes in cultural representation that Thorpe analyses – whether changes as the result of cultural trauma, or in the context of changes in the structure of the field of cultural production, or in relation to cultural carriers with different class habitus and in different positions in such fields – it is very clear that the inherited cultural structures act as constraining and enabling factors in the elaboration of new structures. Thus, in some respects the YCS/FT combination overcomes the criticisms of the Marxian reductionism sometimes attributed to Bourdieu's field theory (notably in Alexander, 1995).

But the way in which cultural agency is described is a rather rationalist and reductive one, articulated in terms of the *coercive* effects of meaning, a function, I would argue, of the strictly linguistic model of culture formulated in YCS. The 'coercive capacity' of the symbolic discourse of civility is 'what led Henry VII to install Italian courtiers, musicians and philosophers at his court' (53). 'Compelled by the coercive power and pervasiveness of Republican and Roman imperial symbolism' (97), members of the English aristocracy set off on the Grand Tour. It was the 'coercive capacities' of liberal discourse and the civil sphere that were harnessed to the 'symbolic reframing of the oppressed status of Italians-present' in the struggles for Italian liberation and unification in the 1840s (140). The writings of poets like the Brownings succeeded in 'compelling identification' (145) with the Italian cause, with their texts as agents of 'psychological identification and moral extension' such that the Italian people were resignified as 'sacred pure and the occupying forces as morally impure and polluted' (146-7). Coercion and compulsion seem to me to be unhelpful terms for describing how culture operates: on the one hand it seems to equate the agency of culture with brute force, which seems undesirable in all kinds of ways; on the other it effects an idealistic reduction, effacing the agency of the actor in relation to their cultural setting. There are much better vocabularies to explain what discourse does, namely influencing, persuading, activating value commitments, which recognise the active role of culture, but also that of the individual human actors whose, on some level, consensual response is entailed in their being persuaded and influenced, or having their value commitments activated. Henry VII, for example, was not 'coerced' by Italian discourses of civility and aesthetics; rather he chose them, from amongst a field of possibilities (including inherited English late medieval culture), in part because primed by his earlier education and the prestige of the classical (intensified by Renaissance culture), in part because the new education and the humanists afforded useful resources in the creation of a more effective (early-modern) state, in part influenced by contemporaries (especially the circles of the French aristocracy with whom he had lived while in exile), in part because the new culture also afforded more powerful ways of projecting the symbolic aspect of the new state. They were the reasonable choices of a knowledgeable agent, with already existing value orientations, in the context of social circles through which he was influenced and in relation to specific interests and normative obligations given in his role as monarch. (Other monarchs in comparable situations made less good choices: Mary, Charles I, etc.).

The cultural analysis operating at the level of categorisation and reclassification – the ‘resignification of the Italian people as sacred pure and the occupying forces as morally impure and polluted’ (147) in the aesthetic texts of poets like the Brownings - works quite well; but less so the claims about ‘psychological extension and moral identification’. It is here that one would really like some thicker description to understand how in practice these processes work, and the vocabulary of compulsion is simply not up to it. Both psychological identification and moral extension – which presumably refers to what in pre-YCS vocabulary was referred to as inclusion and the extension of scope of solidarity – presuppose some kind of reference to the personality as relatively autonomous subsystem of action (alongside its social and cultural counterparts). Interestingly in their programmatic article - ‘The discourse of American civil society: a new proposal for cultural studies’ – which established the theoretical core of what was to become the Strong Programme, or YCS, Alexander and Smith acknowledge that as it stood, their account of the articulation of the cultural with the social based on the Durkheim/Saussure synthesis was significantly incomplete: “It is one thing to lay out the internal structure of cultural order and quite another to say precisely what role this culture structure plays in the unfolding of real historical events or in the creation or destruction of empirical institutions. As far as general statements of this problem go, Parsons’ AGIL model still does the job. Culture is always a generalized input, but only through a ‘combinatorial’ process with more concrete and more material exigencies does it actually affect social life” (Alexander and Smith, 1993: 159). They conclude (p. 196): “We do not claim to provide in this article anything approaching a complete theory of the relationship between culture and behaviour. An adequate account would have to involve a detailed consideration of the psychological, not merely the cultural environment of action, an account of socialization, motivation, and personality that is beyond the scope of our essay.” This promise on giving the personality system the same kind of analytic status as cultural and social systems was never made good, and as what became known as the Strong Programme grew ‘stronger’, YCS doubled down on the notion of discursive meaning, articulated in terms of the culturally arbitrary binary codes of language, for the core of culture (Alexander and Smith, 2018) all as part and parcel of producing a definitively ‘post-Parsonian’ (Smith, 1998: 3; Alexander [and Smith], 2003: 16) cultural sociology, in which the role of personality as a system and Parsons combinatorial model of process are erased.³

Alexander and Smith have sought to address some of the initial criticisms that the Strong Programme was simply a form of cultural idealism (for example Battani et al., 1997, esp. 784; Biernacki, 2000: 290-2; initial response, Alexander and Smith, 1999), most notably in the context of their development of the performance turn (Alexander, 2005), which focusses on the role played by social interaction in the realisation of culture’s agency. Alexander and Smith might attribute the shortcomings I have indicated in Thorpe’s analysis to his failure to address this, which, to be fair, Thorpe acknowledges. In order to make manageable the kind of *longue durée* approach that characterises his study, he chooses to focus on the structural hermeneutic level of the Strong Programme, rather than the cultural pragmatic or performative, and thereby compresses ‘the kinds of micro-level processes by which meanings are made, performed, and fuse or not with actors and audiences’ (25). But in practice I think cultural idealism, and an inability adequately to conceptualise the expressive-aesthetic (and hence the affective) is baked into the initial theoretical core of the Strong Programme, as articulated by Alexander and Smith (1993), and there is a case for seeing the various new directions within that programme as attempts to elaborate a protective belt around the core, but in practice introducing newly contradictory elements (see Lakatos, 1970 for this terminology in characterising research programmes). Nowhere is this more true than in Alexander’s theory of ‘iconicity’, which Thorpe draws upon in his discussion of the role of visual arts in English representations of Italy.

Following Alexander, Thorpe (28) discusses icons as ‘containers into which sacred meanings are distilled and condensed’, in which discursive ‘meaning takes material form’. As such, icons give rise to a special mode of consciousness, ‘iconic consciousness’, that is to say ‘modes of consciousness receptive to moral, sensuous and aesthetic forces’. Thorpe never really spells out what he understands by an iconic mode of consciousness and its entailments, but in YCS studies, and in particular the work of Jeffrey Alexander (2008, 2010) it is a key context in which feelings enter into cultural representation – ‘the material feeling of meaning’ as framed in the title to his 2008 article – alongside the affective charge intrinsic to the sacred/profane opposition which Alexander, following Durkheim, sees as the underlying deep structural basis of all cultural classification. ‘For a material substance to become iconic, its aesthetic surface must, at one and the same time, stand for an invisible discursive depth’, Alexander and Bartmanski (2012: 2) state. In the periods with which Thorpe is concerned, this cultural phenomenon plays an important role particularly in the eighteenth century. The Grand Tour is marked by the

³ Symptomatically, when a YCS adherent (Woodward, 2007: 137-40) asks how we can move beyond ‘meaning centered’ approaches to objects, focussed on ‘communication’ to a framework of analysis that can also address ‘motivations, drives and attachments’, his answer is to introduce (ostensibly as some kind of innovation) approaches ‘recently charted by sociologically oriented psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow’, exploring how ‘people create and experience social processes and cultural meanings psychodynamically – in unconscious, affect-laden, non-linguistic, immediately felt images and fantasies’ (Chodorow, 2004: 26), apparently unaware that Chodorow’s work, dating back to her classic study *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) is deeply indebted to Parsons’ Durkheim-Freud synthesis.

'iconicisation of Renaissance art works and architecture as the embodiment of high art' (76). Correspondingly, in addition to collecting classical and Renaissance art, the English aristocracy commissioned country houses designed in the Palladian style and often intended to house and display their new collections of classical and Renaissance painting and sculpture. The bold forms, symmetry and clean straight lines of Palladianism, Thorpe suggests, contrasted with the ornate character of French baroque architecture. Whilst Palladianism expressed 'the sacred purity of Roman and Renaissance ideals and values', 'the aesthetic surface' of baroque architecture was 'encoded' by 'English Protestant commentators... as signifying the superficial, deceptive and overly decadent morality associated with profane Catholic depth' (91). To be sure, this was all part of the set of 'ritual-like' performances associated with the Grand Tour, refigured in an English context, and 'serving to consolidate the identity and solidarity of the English elite' (86), through processes of symbolic 'fusion'. But, as both Thorpe's and Alexander's account of how this works suggests, such fusion, and the affects associated with it, are a kind of epiphenomenal fluff for more fundamental discursive meanings. This is exactly the account of art, as 'mere cladding for thought', that Hegel and the entire German critical tradition in art history sought to overcome (Podro, 1982: 26), a tradition interestingly ignored in Alexander's accounts of aesthetics which jump straight from Kant to late twentieth-century thinkers like Danto (Alexander, 2010).⁴

Still more problematic is the underlying assumption that these artistic and architectural styles and iconographies only become affectively charged in the context of this 'iconicisation'. Being receptive to moral, sensuous and aesthetic forces, and the affective involvements they entail, far from being something special and unusual, as the YCS theory of iconicity suggests, is very much part of everyday experience, and characteristic of all properly socialised human beings (Staubmann, 2022). Visible expressions of pain and pleasure – manifested through the face or bodily comportment – invoke feelings of empathy. A Mother's Day card with a beautiful picture of a mother's favourite flowers may express feelings of gratitude on the part of a child, and evoke an affective response on the part of the mother, moved by her child's remembering and expression of filial love. What changed with the collecting of Renaissance art was not whether its viewers were 'receptive to moral, sensuous and aesthetic forces' when engaging with it but the social and cultural structuring of such receptiveness. Typically, in a church setting, such paintings would have added affective intensity to the ritual performances which happened in their proximity, whether a woman praying to the Virgin Mary for some kind of intercession, or a priest invoking a painting of the Virgin in his sermon to enhance attachment of those listening to women's roles as defined in church teaching. In the country houses of the eighteenth century, and the public museums which are their successors, the affective focus shifts to appreciation of and response to the genius of the individual artist, or the national school which a particular artist represents, within the context of the art critical and art historical discourses which were developed as part and parcel of the process of the developing autonomisation of the artistic field (well discussed by Thorpe, 92-4) characteristic of late eighteenth century England. It is far from clear to me that YCS theory of iconicity adds anything to the more conventional vocabulary of 'consecration and canonisation' which Thorpe also uses (e.g. p. 92) to describe the status attributed to ancient Roman and Renaissance art styles in eighteenth century England. On the contrary it comes with a lot of misdirection and extremely undesirable theoretical baggage, all a by-product of the assumption that culture is almost exclusively a matter of discursive meanings, structured along the lines of language as described by Saussure.

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS AS A RESEARCH PROGRAMME

These criticisms doubtless seem a bit harsh, and in terms of an overall evaluation of Thorpe's project it is important not to let even quite numerous and substantive points of disagreement overshadow the larger achievements. Consequently, rather than focussing on specific shortcomings of the study at hand, it is perhaps more fruitful by way of conclusion to step back from *Visions of Italy* and focus more on thinking about the research

⁴ It is symptomatic of the logocentrism of Alexander's cultural sociology, that his account of visual art is so strongly articulated in terms of aesthetic philosophy, notably the eighteenth-century 'aesthetic-cum-moral binary of the beautiful and the sublime' (2010: 13) which he sees as continuing 'to provide the fundamental categories of sensuous experience' even today. According to Alexander, they are the fundamental concepts in the aesthetic sphere (surface), of a similar status to the sacred and the profane in the moral (depth), the two binaries combined in iconicity (2020: 385). Completely ignored are the kinds of material oppositions identified by art historians and visual psychologists as characteristic of artistic practices, whether Wolfflin's 'fundamental categories' (linear/painterly, closed form/open form, planimetric recessional etc), or the oppositions grounded in our physical embodiment in relation to art objects as manufactured objects in real-spaces, which we (as viewers) share with them, and where 'indexical inference' of facture is necessarily prior to symbolic interpretation (Summers, 2003). For a brilliant account of the mediation of the indexical, the iconic and the symbolic in visual art, indebted to Peirce, see the classic article of Meyer Schapiro (1973), 'Frontal and profile as symbolic form'.

programme in *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations* of which it is to be hoped the current volume is just the beginning.

Thorpe's approach could be fruitfully extended to many other comparable case studies, which would provide opportunities to develop the approach, both testing some of the specific arguments developed in *Visions of Italy* and refining the theoretical and methodological frameworks laid out by Thorpe in his agenda-setting monograph. A number of possible cases leap to mind. What would an equivalent cultural sociology of German representations of Italy look like? Many of the same traumas that informed the English case – Reformation, Industrial Revolution – are also relevant to the history of Germany, with the additional complication of religious variation, with some regions being Catholic, others Protestant. Versions of the Grand Tour, and the art-collecting and patronage associated with it, were also practiced by the German aristocracy, and their bourgeois counterparts. Goethe's account of his Italian journeys attained such a classic status that it informed both the preferred destination and in some degree the character of the traditional Abitur-Reise of young Germans, on graduating from elite high schools (Gymnasias), at least up until the 1980s.

Each of these cases would offer interesting patterns of similarity and difference with the English case, which might help to confirm or question the mechanisms informing patterns of cultural process identified in Thorpe's study. They would also raise the issue of how far the representation of Italy was shaped not on a national level but on a European level, and to what degree this varied over time, in relation to the formation of nation states, with their very different temporalities (England and France relatively early; Germany late). One might guess that if we were to look at the early part of Thorpe's story – the emulation of Italian Renaissance culture and learning at the Tudor court – that one would find pretty similar patterns in France and Germany, all in the service of constructing both the symbolic and the efficient (humanist bureaucrats) aspects of early modern states, a common culture much enhanced by Latin as a shared language. Then the patterns would refract through specific Reformation and Counter-Reformation histories (different 'traumas' and radically different classifications of sacred-good versus sacred-evil resulting from them), divergence from common European patterns being enhanced by the shift from Latin to vernaculars as the primary languages of publication and learning, with perhaps a return to more similar kinds of representations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in relation to pan-European political and cultural transformations (development of public sphere; Romanticism).

One might also want to look at the history of English representations of Greece and Spain. In the sixteenth century Spain must have been at least Italy's equal as 'sacred-evil' in the context of competition with the Spanish empire, the threat of the Armada and so on. And in the modern era it has been idealised in ways comparable to Italy as the place to pursue a lifestyle that is the antithesis of the British lifestyle – sun, sex and sangria – whether on holiday or, like Italy, as a place for a second home or permanent immigration, but with, I would guess, rather different class (and age?) demographics than Britons moving to Italy. Simultaneous processes of cultural affirmation and cultural denigration have also characterised English representations of modern Greece, particularly during the later eighteenth century when, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, Greece replaced Italy as the ultimate destination of Grand Tours. In many respects the sacrality of Greece-Past, as the fount of freedom and democracy, was even more marked, with similar doubts about the worthiness of Greeks-Present as heirs to that past (appropriated by the English and the Germans as the true Hellenes), or as viable candidates for self-rule. That said, the current rulers of Greece, the Ottoman Turks, were, in Thorpe's terms, doubly sacred-evil, as both Muslims (Greeks though Orthodox were at least fellow Christians) and imperialists, preventing the Greek people's national self-determination. European support for the Greek war of independence, with Byron participating as both poet and fighter, in certain respects anticipates the cultural context described by Thorpe in relation to the unification of Italy. In short, Thorpe's research programme should be one with a lot of legs.

In the course of these studies, Thorpe, and others who take up his research programme, will doubtless find it necessary to revise certain parts of the theoretical framework advocated in this volume. In this context, one of the more attractive aspects of Thorpe's work is the open and ecumenical character of his theorising, and in particular the way he is happy to put unlikely partners into dialogue, seeking the best out of each to perform particular analytical tasks, within the whole, Thorpe's own programme, being greater than the sum of its parts. This is strikingly different from the somewhat sectarian approach of Alexander and his colleagues in the formulation of the so-called Strong Programme. Alexander and Smith (2018: 14, 19) refer to this as 'our trademark combative manner', 'picking fights with weak programs'. David Gartman (2007: 382) describes the approach as a 'slash and burn strategy', by which Alexander (2003) 'hastily hacks down most of the established traditions of research in the field [of cultural sociology], refusing to share ground with the weak and ill-bred': 'all mongrel and hybrid approaches that bear the minutest taint of the objective or material are declared "weak", then summarily mowed down and set ablaze'. Gartman enumerates the remarkable range of potentially interesting work in cultural sociology which gets consumed in this bonfire of the vanities, and effectively written out of what could be interesting contributions to cultural sociology: Foucault's studies of discourse and power, the production of culture

perspective, Max Weber, the Birmingham School (synthesising Marxism with structuralism), Bourdieu and field theory; even Parsons' action theory is condemned as 'insufficiently cultural' (Alexander, 2003: 16).

As Thorpe's work suggests, there is much to be gained from seeking some kind of accommodation between YCS and the traditions of thought that were anathematised in the early essays where Alexander and Smith sought to define their new research programme. For my own part, I think most of the considerable advances in cultural analysis achieved in YCS could be retained, without the weaknesses (especially in relation to issues of expressive-aesthetic culture) if we were to see the Saussurian account of language which is the basis for YCS cultural analysis, as one specific model of human communication, namely the 'symbolic', alongside and variably intermixed with icons and indexes, as in the semiotics (or semeiotics for the true acolytes) of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's triadic concept of the sign (or rather of sign processes) – ground, object, interpretant – builds in the kind of dynamism that Saussure's structural linguistics lacks. Concepts such as the energetic interpretant and emotional interpretant already imply the links to action, affect and embodiment that YCS rather struggles to reestablish in adding a theory of performance and theory of iconicity onto their Saussurian model of cultural signification (Rochberg-Halton, 1982; McCarthy, 1984).⁵ Conceptualising the ground of a sign (-process) in terms of varying qualitative possibilities of signification – iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity – would open up the kinds of cultural sociology developed by Thorpe and YCS to a much deeper inter-disciplinary dialogue with long-standing and more recent research in visual studies, whether the critical tradition in art history, with its close relations with Gestalt psychology (Verstegen, 2005), or recent studies in neuropsychology and neuroarthistory (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007).⁶ I would see the next step in developing Thorpe's cultural sociology of cultural representations as integrating these theoretical frameworks into the discussion.⁷ Perhaps not the least of Thorpe's contributions in his exciting new study is to have demonstrated that the choices open to us in developing cultural sociology are not as binary as the very concept of 'the Strong Programme' might seem to imply.

⁵ It is a mystery to me why Peirce only appears as a kind of failed counterpart to the successful Saussure in the key papers in which the theoretical core of the Strong Programme was developed: e.g. Alexander (2003: 29) on early concentration camp reports accepted as facts, 'realistic signifiers of Peirce rather than the arbitrary symbols of Saussure'; 2008: 12 on the inadequacy of Peirce's concept of the sign; 2010: 10 on misleadingly realist assumptions of Peirce's concept of icon. It seems particularly odd when the performative turn within the Strong Programme is partly based on a positive appraisal of the pragmatic tradition in American philosophy and sociology, and yet both Dewey and Mead were significantly influenced by Peirce, and it is difficult to imagine the pragmatic tradition in American sociology without that background.

⁶ Particularly relevant to this, note the article by Ringmar (2020), on the ways in which recent work in cognitive neuroscience could provide better grounds than the discursive/textual model of culture advocated by YCS in explaining the affective agency of performances, (published, it is worth noting, in the YCS house journal). This line of argument, although without the assistance of the cognitive neuroscience Ringmar is able to draw on, has already been developed in Lidz and Lidz (1976) (especially pp. 220ff. on expressive symbolism), using Piaget's cognitive psychology to explore the character of the 'behavioral system', and its interpenetrations with the social, cultural and personality systems. The behavioral system is as equally important an environment to culture as the personality system and the social system for the combinatorial model of how culture operates, developed by Parsons, and acknowledged by Alexander and Smith – at least as far as the personality system went – in their early essay, only to be forgotten as they developed the Strong Programme. Bearing in mind the new credence given to the embodied bases of empathy, coming out of the research programme in cognitive neuroscience discussed by Ringmar, and the central concept/finding of mirror neurons and their operation, it might be interesting to return to Heinrich Wölfflin's (1966, o.v. 1888) *Renaissance and Baroque*, which gives an account, in terms of empathic embodied perception and response, of the opposition between the two styles of architecture which Thorpe addresses (pp. 90-2) in terms of symbolic discourses, meanings to be decoded.

⁷ Of course, like any critic, I have certainly engaged with Thorpe's approach from a certain theoretical orientation (cf. Tanner, 2000), and he might well argue that, had he sought to incorporate the concepts and levels of analysis that I am asking for, his book would have very much longer than it is, and likely longer than anyone would wish to read (a bit like this essay). It is probably as well to add only one new level of complexity at a time, and trying to do more, as Thorpe himself implies, could well have inhibited the remarkable explanatory power, the unusual empirical scope, and the exceptional clarity that comes from the dialogue he stages between Bourdieu's Field Theory and the Strong Programme of Alexander and the Yale School. That said, I think such concepts could usefully clarify some theoretical gaps in the logic of Thorpe's argumentation, and significantly strengthen his accounts of how culture works.

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Book Symposium Article

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

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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.

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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, fizzes 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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Book Symposium Article

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

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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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Book Symposium Article

'Every Book is a Failure' (But Typically Not for the Reasons Envisaged by the Author): A Response to My Interlocutors Concerning Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to only a small number of the questions and comments raised by my interlocutors in relation to my book, *Cultural Sociology of Cultural Representations: Visions of Italy and the Italians in England and Britain from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. The article begins by clarifying the key points I wanted the book to make and the reasons why, before turning to address the comments of my interlocutors in light of their respective interpretations and readings of the text. Rather than adopting a defensive posture, the article operates instead with the assumption that to varying degrees all books fail to realise the intentions of their authors. As such, the article is receptive to the comments of the interlocutors, and, in various cases, identifies and reflects on additional ways in which the book might have been a more successful one had I elected to do certain things differently. The article concludes by noting that while ultimately all books fail, the small victories they achieve on the road to failing are perhaps what matter most, together with the fact that the highly-patterned nature of certain failures is instructive for demonstrating to one's peers the pitfalls associated with particular types of intellectual endeavour.

Keywords: Italy, Britain, cultural sociology, cultural representations, sociology of culture

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year I finally got round to reading George Orwell's (2004) essay, *Why I write*. Given how much I love Orwell's writing, I am at a loss to explain why I had never got to it before. I mention this because the essay contains a line that has stuck with me: '...every book is a failure, but I do know with some clarity what kind of book I want to write'.

I am not a writer by any stretch of the imagination, and I have a very vivid imagination. I do have to write, however, in order to be able to think and to make a living as 'a thinker'. 'Writing a book', Orwell notes in the same essay, 'is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness'. That has always been my experience. Unfailingly. Writing makes me ill. But if you really want to know what you think about something you have to be prepared to write about it.

Orwell's remark about every book being a failure intrigues me not least because he does not really explain why he believes this to be so. I guess we will never know now. What I do know, is that in the case of my own book, I was sure when I was writing it that I already knew why it would be deemed a failure. As it turns out, I was wrong.

We are not our own best critics it would seem. Just as well in my case. In other words, the book has not been read by my interlocutors as the failed exertions of...

...a bourgeois sociologist who studied a long-standing bourgeois domain of interest in an un-reflexive way.

...a sociologist *manqué* who thinks he is a historian.

...a wannabe historian masquerading as a sociologist.

...a conceptual commitment-phobe who refused to nail his colours to the mast.

...a theoretical prankster who locked the arch proponents of the sociology of culture and cultural sociology together in a monograph to see if they could get along.

I have not been accused of any of the things I had envisaged. I find myself confronted instead with a far more imaginative and thought-provoking set of responses from my interlocutors than I was able to foresee. Given the limited number of words available to me, perhaps the best way to organise my response to only a very small number of the wide-ranging comments and questions raised by my interlocutors is to start by providing some 'clarity', to refer back to Orwell, as to 'what kind of book I want[ed] to write'.

Above all else, I wanted the book to stimulate a conversation about cultural representation and the strengths and limitations of social-scientific thinking about such matters since the publication in 1978 of Edward W. Said's classic study, *Orientalism*. A central claim made in the introductory chapter is that after *Orientalism*, the study of cultural representation has come to be defined by and confined to one giant exercise in, to use Nick Prior's phrasing, 'ideology critique'. In a nutshell, the book takes issue with these developments and their entailments. As analytical terrain, cultural representation can, of course, be gainfully conceived as one on which to observe the processes by which other cultures and cultural others are denigrated and essentialised. But, as I argue, a more analytically nuanced, conceptually differentiated, and less partisan approach to the study of cultural representation would be able to theorise much more than this too. In seeking to develop just such an approach, the book deploys Field theory and Yale School Cultural Sociology (YSCS) thinking and concepts to do so.

Representations of Italy, conceived as discursive 'visions' (field theory) and 'collective representations' (YSCS), have shaped and been shaped by all manner of changes to and developments within English, and later British, society and culture over the course of the last six centuries. As such, Italy and the Italians have been understood and represented in both highly negative and/or positive terms. Analytically, the division, and the generative tension arising out of it, between negative and positive representations is the fundamental division on which the study rests. It is the master division on which further analytical divisions e.g. established/new, past/present, are layered. Broadly, then, the study

(1) deconstructs and reconstructs both negative *and* positive representations of Italy and the Italians, and

(2) explores and specifies their significance vis-à-vis practices of cultural othering and denigration, and processes of positive cultural identification and veneration.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE AMBIVALENT

When I was writing the section of the introductory chapter devoted to explaining the distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' representations, I suspected that a humanities scholar could not but read it and think - 'duh! No-brainer!'. And they would be right. It surprised me very little that Freyja Cox Jensen found 'the thesis that cultural representation is all about domination...[and]... submission...somewhat bizarre'. Cox Jensen is a historian, and I know enough about history and enough historians to know that 'the Humanities/History perspective is very different'. 'For us', Cox Jensen notes, 'of course there are positive and negative representations...?'

But 'of course', what constitutes a 'no-brainer' in one scholarly context cannot be assumed to be a 'no-brainer' in another. Sociologically speaking, how and why certain ideas and discourses come to assume the status of 'no-brainers' is, in a quite fundamental sense, precisely what is at stake in the analysis. It certainly is in terms of what I wanted the book to do vis-à-vis the limited ways in which the study of cultural representation has come to be collectively represented and *theorized* among and by social scientists. That not one of my interlocutors appears to take issue with this thesis, I confess to being greatly surprised. Inter-disciplinary common sense, it would seem, is not as common as one might think.

For Jeremy Tanner, a more problematic move than differentiating analytically positive from negative representations, is how I sought to operationalise the categories of 'positive' and 'negative', 'good' and 'bad' etc. using YSCS concepts. I say now that Tanner's reading of my book is an incredibly close, in-depth, and nuanced one. It is a reading that warrants a far more considered response than I can provide here. That said, Tanner is right to question certain ambiguities and inconsistencies concerning my application of the binaries, sacred/profane, sacred-pure/sacred-evil. Indeed, as Tanner (very charitably) notes, a proper response to these inconsistencies would involve referring back to the ambiguities surrounding the terms as they operate within the conceptual universe of YSCS thinking more broadly. For now, then, I limit my response to Tanner's comments to

acknowledging the limits of my attempt to use them to reconstruct and organise the analysis of various empirical materials.

Likewise for Fiona Greenland, the use and ordering of particular analytical distinctions and categories to organise the study is cause for comment. Greenland asks: ‘do you really believe that the English and British worlds you are...analysing here are always divisible into binary categories of meaningfulness?’. No, I do not, is the short answer! But if such studies are to be written at all, then sharp and contestable divisions and distinctions require to be drawn. I do not believe that it is to dodge the question to say, as I did in Chapter 1, that trying to organise the empirical material into a coherent analytical framework was consistently the most difficult task I confronted. Increasingly so the further forward in time I moved towards the period designated ‘the present day’ (Chapter 7). Simply put, the more differentiated things became, the more difficult it was to decide what to include and what not to include, what to play up and what to play down, what to back-ground and what to fore-ground.

From the reader’s perspective, I was certainly highly aware that the richness of the data required the analytical divisions and categories used to organise them to be clear and consistent. (In this direction Cox Jensen’s remarks on the accessibility and comprehensibility of the analysis were very pleasing to read). This is why for each chapter I limited the analysis to focussing primarily on what was positive/good and what was negative/bad; what was new and what was not; how representations from the past and present interacted or not. That I used these master binaries as the basis on which to further interrogate the data using the categories of class, gender, and sexuality was not arbitrary – it was led by the empirical material. Ultimately, though, the decision to allocate primacy to the normative distinction negative/positive, I say again, must be seen in relation to the primary aim of the book. Namely to try to move the study of cultural representation beyond the limiting range of concerns around which it is organised and has ossified.

Of course, none of this is intended to suggest that giving centre-stage to the distinction between negative and positive representations has not resulted in other potentially fertile analytical categories being marginalised, ambivalence, for example, being one such category. And yet throughout the researching of the book, I was struck by the fact that ambivalence towards Italy is not something one gets the impression that many people who have left behind textual traces of their opinions and experiences have felt – at least not for long or beyond a certain pitch. Ambivalence presupposes the co-presence of contradicting forces, or traits, to sufficiently equivalent degrees such that ‘how best to proceed’ remains uncertain. On this understanding, ambivalence and anomie are clearly very closely related. This point goes some distance towards explaining why ambivalence towards Italy is central to, if not the defining feature of, the position-takings of writers such as Henry James and E.M. Forster during the final stages of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century, a period during which a lot of anomie was sloshing about. It is certainly no coincidence that at the same time James and Forster were worrying about the overly freeing effects of Italy on the northern psyche, similar types of concerns about freedom and constraint were crystallizing within the thought of Durkheim.

Far more than not, my reading of the material was such that at any given point in time, the Janus-faced nature of Italy’s representation could have, but ultimately did not, give rise to a great deal more ambivalence than it did. Rather, a situation of cognitive and cultural dissonance was kept at bay precisely because the kinds of distinctions and divisions, the like of which I extrapolated out from and used to organise the analysis of the data, were the same distinctions and divisions drawn by and that actors drew on to orientate themselves practically and discursively towards Italy and the Italians. Thus, and as I have argued, the overwhelming tendency has been for Italy-past to be appraised positively *despite* Italy-present being represented wholly negatively (parts of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) and for Italy, present and past, to have become increasingly positively represented, certainly within mainstream British culture, *despite* all that remains negative about Italy, present and past (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7).

A final point to address regarding the organisation of the analysis and the categories and categorisations driving it, is raised by Greenland, which I shall now paraphrase: ‘can there be said to exist visions of Italy that were ‘wholly’ new, particularly if for new meanings to be made, they must draw, at least in the first instance, from already established structures of meaning and the modes of comprehension corresponding to them?’. Would it be churlish of me to invoke Theseus’s Paradox in response to Greenland’s point? I suspect so. As the phrase from *Ecclesiastes* goes, there is ‘nothing new under the sun’. As Greenland points out in relation to what I pointed out but ultimately reneged on, there can be nothing ‘wholly’ new if everything can only be understood in light of something that is already (partially) known. Probably, then, I should not have prefaced the word ‘new’ with the word ‘wholly’ without further explicating the context in which such claims about ‘wholly new’ representations were made and presented.

DEPTH VS. BREADTH

The omission of particular persons, cultural objects, and events, from the analysis was something that I suspected might draw considerable critical fire from my interlocutors. I was sure I was in for an ear-bashing from the historian in the pack. Not so (much)! Rather, it is Greenland, a fellow historically-oriented sociologist, who

suggests that 'depth is sacrificed for breadth, at the cost of historical nuance and the hermeneutic approach'. My response to this is to say: 'guilty as charged!', albeit knowingly so. Depth *is* sacrificed for breadth. Why? Because one of the main tasks I set myself was to try to identify and give form to mid- to long(er)- term processes and patterns that could not be seen were I to have focussed in on particular periods, personages, and events.

Thus, it is perfectly reasonable that Cox Jensen should feel that 'there's not quite as much attention given to less mainstream representations as [she] might have liked'. By turns, Greenland is right to identify Madame de Staël as someone whose contribution to the reimagining of Italy among elite European artistic circles I could have explored in far greater depth for the reasons she identifies. Edward George Bulwer Lytton, author of *The Final Days of Pompei* published in 1836 (a novel that passed through numerous filmic incarnations during the 20th century, and no doubt there are many more to come), comprises another conspicuous omission from the study. Of various Italians, such as Giuseppe Baretti, a good friend of Dr Johnson, I could have said more. I will not even mention, which ultimately I did not, Luigi Barzini, author of *The Italians* (1964). In short, I was highly aware of a lot of what might have otherwise gone into the book had the book set itself a different set of tasks and only used YSCS resources to undertake them.

I suspect Greenland recognises this because she raises the very pertinent question as to whether there is 'room for hermeneutics in more macro-scalar cultural sociology?'. At the moment, my response would be to say, 'I suspect not'. This is so for two main reasons: first, because YSCS explicitly confines itself to mid-range level theorizing, *which I did not*; and second, because if one tries to go beyond a mid-range level using YSCS resources, they quickly meet with the charge of being insufficiently thickly descriptive, *which I have been*. 'The quality is in the detail', Alexander (Alexander with Smith, 2003: 14) notes of YSCS forms of analysis. Undoubtedly so. But too much detail surely detracts from the quality of the analysis in terms of being able to keep one eye firmly trained on the wider whole of which it forms part, a point attested to somewhat ironically by the historian Cox Jensen.

NATIONAL, INTER-, AND TRANS-NATIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALY

Much of the book, as noted by Prior, treats representations of Italy and the Italians within 'elite' English and British culture, whereas the focus for the final substantive chapter drills down into more mainstream visions. The paucity of scholarly analysis of mainstream representations of Italy in Britain during and following on from the First and Second World Wars is a marked feature of the analysis in Chapter 7. Reflecting on this, Greenland suggests that what this shows 'is that cultural historians and sociologists have moved away from national containers and toward more global perspectives on how cultural representations are created and change across time, space, and highly diverse societies'. Perhaps so. But if this is the case, then the issue of how and why particular nationally-specific representations and images persist does not diminish in significance; quite the opposite, it demands to be explained. For all the talk of the limits of methodological nationalism, rising levels of cosmopolitanism, and the increasing inter- and trans-nationalisation of the world and everything in it, national containers remain markedly resilient social forms.

During the researching of the book I acquired a lot of historical knowledge. Much of that knowledge never made it into the book, even if the book I ended up making is marked by it in all sorts of tacit and indirect ways. I learned a lot, for example, not just about how Italy was understood and written about in France, Germany, and America, but also what it was about Italy specifically, as opposed to Spain, France, and America, not to mention Iceland, Denmark, and China that has continued to be understood by generations of English and British writers, thinkers, artists, and so on, as so important for the purposes of self-edification and self-realisation.

I say this because Tanner is right to point out that the kinds of representations of Italy forged in the English and British contexts were similar to and have similarly informed intra-societal and state-formation processes within various European nations. 'Many of the same traumas that informed the English case', Tanner notes, 'are relevant to the history of Germany'. Similarly, 'emulation of Italian Renaissance culture...versions of the Grand Tour, and the art-collecting and patronage associated with it', can be found in the contexts of 'France and Germany'. As an interesting aside, I note that the view of sodomy as a specifically Italian (read Florentine) vice, finds expression in the German language in the form of the word '*Florenzeyer*' as early as the 16th century (Malcolm, 2024). To connect back to Greenland's original comment, how nationally-specific ways of imagining Italy have fed into and back from various inter- and/or trans-national forms of representations, comprises a very interesting set of concerns, albeit not ones that I attended to.

The influence of certain inter- and trans-national representations of Italy (I am thinking here of Prior's remarks about the super-abundance of internet-based and AI-generated images of Italy and 'Italianness') notwithstanding, I remain struck by the obdurateness of the peculiarities of specifically British understandings of Italy. In other words, representations of the (Italian) cultural Other remain markedly nationally-specific despite, and no doubt partly in spite of, various ongoing globalizing processes and their cultural entailments. Again, how and why this is the case is as important to understand as how and why this can be shown *not* to be the case. While I have failed to

cast much light on the latter, the book certainly contributes something towards illuminating the *hows* and *whys* of the former.

FIELD THEORY VS. YALE SCHOOL CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

I think it fair to say that the move of bringing field theory and YSCS into the same sphere of analytical orbit has been largely well received. That said, I take on board David Inglis' meditations on the theoretical constitution of the book and its contribution towards a 'condition of vulgar theoreticism'. Two points are worth emphasising here in light of Inglis' remarks. The first is that strictly speaking, the book offers very little in terms of adding to or refining the broad range of conceptual tools brought to bear on the analysis of the material. Were any more evidence required to demonstrate this, I refer the reader to Tanner's highly illuminating remarks on the limits of my application of the concept of 'iconicity' deployed in Chapter 3. Conceptually, then, the innovation lies in the attempt to combine and apply cultural sociological tools to established historical terrains.

The second point to make in response to Inglis' meditations is that once again I find myself guilty as charged. In seeking to secure victory on one front, I have lost the war on another. In attempting to push back against the limiting and reductive approach to the study of cultural representation characteristic of Said-inspired studies of such matters, I have inadvertently contributed to reproducing various forms of theoretical dictatorship operating on the home front. In my defence, not that I feel that I am under attack, the enemy was less the theoretical hegemony of the field in which I am positioned and more the hegemony of a particular and by now paradigmatic approach to the study of cultural representation derived from other fields.

Given this is the situation I am confronted with, I take a degree of comfort from the idea that it is preferable to be constrained by structures of thought germane to one's own field than it is to be hostage to structures of thought derived from other fields. Indeed, as I reflect on it now, for all the talk of heteronomy – in certain very specific senses, a recalibrated version of Gramsci's concept of hegemony – Bourdieu said very little about nor did he seem to care much to reflect on the irony of his own rise to the status of a hegemon not just within one field, but within and across many (inter-)disciplinary fields. Considered in this way, I am led to think that there may be some value in trying to secure research funding for the purpose of commissioning a sociological remake of Monty Python's classic, and in certain quarters profoundly heretical film, *The Life of Brian*, first released in 1979 (the same year *La Distinction* was published).

The film would be entitled, *The Life of Bourdieu*, and would be duty-bound to reconstruct that most memorable of scenes intended to capture the problem confronting any prophet-cum-messianic figure charged with the task of communicating to their followers the path to self-realisation. I can see it now. A weary and exasperated Bourdieu sits in a pit (of despair), looking up at the crowd who refuse to stop following him. Despairing at having read yet another study that claims to 'put to work Bourdieu's field theory...', a demoralised Bourdieu screams at the assembled: 'Oh why don't you all just F*CK OFF!', to which a lone voice from the assembled cries back: 'How shall we F*CK OFF, oh Dieu?!'.

My response to the problem of how to damp down the influence of Bourdieu on my own thinking has been to enact an epistemological break(down). Immersing myself within the intellectual universe of YSCS, a putatively very different one from that in which field theory is situated, has been a very interesting and insightful exercise. Even if it has been interpreted by certain colleagues as tantamount to an act of theoretical betrayal. The petty politics of intellectual life aside, the point of using YSCS in concert with field theory was to try to cast light on the pitfalls and potentialities of both as they relate to the wider aim of rejuvenating the study of cultural representation. I defer to my Italian readers (if there are any) to enlighten me as to how and in what ways the book fails to grasp various processes and phenomena that cannot be conceived as a(n unintended) consequence of its 'vulgar theoreticism'.

Let me draw my response to a close by returning to Orwell's remark about all books being failures. Has anyone ever written a book that lived up to the vision of it that they imagined? (What would it mean if they had?). If I am totally honest, which it is never pleasant to have to be, I certainly have not managed. I suspect that all books are failures in the eyes of their authors. Yet, in a certain sense, it is of supreme indifference what an author thinks about their book. Once it is written and goes out into the world, the views of the author comprise but one of many possible readings. Thereupon a book is only as bad (or as *good*) as its readers. Thankfully in the case of this symposium, I have had the good fortune to have five very insightful readers, each of whom has been far more laudatory than condemnatory about the book I have written. All books are failures in the eyes of their authors, which is precisely why we defer to others to illuminate their weaknesses and strengths.

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A Critical Account of the Digital India Initiative

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I inquire how India's public policies like the Information and Technology Rules (IT Rules) have become a conduit to channelize a majoritarian agenda. I rhetorically analyse the IT Rules to demonstrate how it employs technology to create a rift between the people on the basis of their religious identities. In what follows, I will highlight that the current predicament of civil discourse in India is a result of religious extremism which is codified and formalized through the amendments to the IT Rules. To counter this waning of civil discourse, I propose rhetorical interventions through the mobilization of ample debates and conversations around public policies that can be harnessed to shatter the deliberative impasse gripping the country. As a response to that call, this article is forwarded as a rhetorical model of civil communication in practice weighing the conflicting values of security, rights, and privacy that are often in play in conversations about cyberspace and new technology. Additionally, by instituting rhetorics as a cornerstone of principled and effective civil discourse, I suggest that our efforts to resist communal polarization in India should also include developing heterogenous deliberative models that can accommodate India's diversity of religion, caste, language, and culture.

Keywords: public policy, rhetoric, belonging, IT Rules, India policymaking

INTRODUCTION: A PUBLIC TRUST BROKEN

Munawar Faruqui was jailed in India on 1 January, 2021, for a comment he never made. In a rather surreal and absurd story, this young Muslim stand-up comedian was arrested in the city of Indore, as he was preparing to perform a set in a café that evening. A group of Hindu nationalists walked up to his stage, referred to his Muslim identity and accused him of hurting Hindu sentiments. There was little information on where and when this "hurt" happened, yet Faruqui was taken away by the police for "intending" to offend Hindus – a crime granting up to four years in prison. After being denied bail repeatedly by the sessions and high courts of the state of Madhya Pradesh, Faruqui took his case to the Supreme Court of India. It took him more than a month and a strong intervention from the Supreme Court to finally be released on bail (Faleiro, 2021).

Like Faruqui, twenty-one years old Disha Ravi, a climate change activist and co-founder of the group Fridays for Future India, was arrested by Delhi Police in February 2021. The law enforcement officers travelled over two thousand kilometres outside their area of jurisdiction to arrest her, for sharing a *Twitter* message in support of the farmers' protest ongoing at that time around New Delhi. The *Twitter* message that landed Disha Ravi into trouble was also shared by the climate change campaigner Greta Thunberg for the same cause, earlier that month. Both Disha and Greta posted the same "toolkit" for their audience, explaining the background and suggesting ways to support the Farmers' movement. The social media toolkit contained instructions to organize campaigns for social justice in nonviolent ways (Gunia, 2021; Shekhar and Kumar, 2021).

A closer look at these events suggests a complicated reality. Apart from the fact that the justification for these arrests seems arbitrary to many – including the defendants – it also exposes blatant violations of constitutional rights by law enforcement agencies in India. The swift handling of Ravi's and Faruqui's arrests was made possible through a controversial and newly amended Information and Technology (IT) policy that, since its implementation, has allowed heightened scrutiny and vigilance by the Indian government to identify and criminalize digital users. Both Ravi and Faruqui had inadvertently treaded on that path, the former when she chose to support the farmer's movement, and the latter, by simply being a Muslim artist in a Hindu majoritarian state. While the police action against the two young professionals clearly points to an overreach in the interpretation of the law, unfortunately, they are by no means rarities in contemporary India. A spate of arrests, imprisonments, and incarcerations without incriminating evidence have led to speculations that the new IT policy has been more useful in silencing rather than encouraging speech. In the opinion of many civil society organisations, research groups, policy analysts, and legal activists, the impact of these rules is more harmful than beneficial, affecting users' rights, internet companies' administration, and even a fair and meaningful life on the Internet in India (Tripathi, 2022).

Grouped under the "Digital Media Guidelines and Policies" of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), the Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, (hereafter referred to as IT Rules) are part of public policies published by the Government of India, as custodians of internet usage in the country. The recent amendments to the original IT Act of 2000 were necessary, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) explains, for an "Open, Safe & Trusted and Accountable Internet." These amendments are designed to provide a comprehensive framework that "deals with Fact checking related to online content pertaining to Government" (Press Information Bureau [PIB] Delhi, 2023). Principally, a fact checking unit established by the same government now has the authority to identify any news about the Central Government that it conceives as untrue or misleading in nature. Following the publication of these rules, the Editors Guild of India, the Association of Indian Magazines and the News Broadcasters and Digital Association, and stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra, filed petitions in the Bombay High Court challenging the rules. They claim that these rules are contrary to the principles of natural justice and will restrict freedom of speech and expression (Deshpande, 2023). The digital rights groups Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) is also concerned about how these amendments will "cement the chilling effect on the fundamental right to speech and expression," particularly on news publishers, journalists, activists and others, which will "directly and negatively" also impact "the right to receive information" (Panjiar and Waghre, 2023).

In this article, I inquire how public policies like the IT Rules have become a conduit to channelize a majoritarian agenda. I rhetorically analyse the IT Rules to demonstrate how it employs technology to polarize the population on the basis of their religious identities. At stake in this narrative are the questions: Why should rhetoric be included in the analysis and discussion of public policies like the IT Rules? How can rhetoric arbitrate upon deliberative impasses created by public policies? Can rhetorical intervention stall the spread of communal polarization in India by instituting counter-narratives of 'belonging' and nationalism? In what follows, I will highlight that the current predicament of civil discourse in India is a result of religious extremism that is codified and formalized through the amendments to the IT Rules. Policies such as the IT Rules are designed to stoke polarization among citizens, building divisive social capital while leaving scarce room for opposition. The IT Rules have created an unprecedented political crisis where civic virtues – a shared set of behavioural norms and basic moral rules – are being nearly obliterated. Very few people in India will now agree that the country has progressed in the last decade to be more tolerant of differences of opinion; that the current political environment encourages freedom of speech; or that they feel united in creating a more just and democratic society. Rather, they will recognize that the country is increasingly defined by a culture of contempt in which people treat opposing viewpoints with suspicion and loathing. Lack of deliberations around public policies, such as the IT Rules, have created an impasse where any robust civil debate has become implausible. To counter this waning of civil discourse, I propose rhetorical interventions through the mobilization of more debates and conversations around the IT Rules that can be harnessed to shatter the deliberative impasse gripping the country. As a response to that call, this article is forwarded as a rhetorical model of civil communication in practice, weighing the conflicting values of security, rights, and privacy that are often in play in conversations about cyberspace and new technology. Additionally, by instituting rhetorics as a cornerstone of principled and effective civil discourse, I suggest that our efforts to resist communal polarization in India should also include developing heterogenous deliberative models that can accommodate India's diversity of religion, caste, language, and culture.

A government's inability or unwillingness to accept criticism can pose a problem in maintaining democracy within the country. When citizens are fearful of the consequences of expressing opposing viewpoints and feel that dissenting opinions will not be heard, or worse, forcefully silenced, they lose interest in participating in democratic practices. Something like this seems to be happening in India. Over the last few years, it has become more and more difficult to speak out against unfavourable policies that proliferate an atmosphere of distrust, condemnation, and castigation among the public. Increasingly, public policies have become a central issue causing rifts between

citizens, making them feel unsafe to express their views openly. On one hand, there are those who support the agenda of leading the country to a majoritarian advantage at the cost of minority rights. Then there are others who oppose such manipulations and uphold the secular principles supported by the Indian constitution. Adding to the already chaotic environment of involuntary silencing, scepticism, and incarceration, public discourse has been pushed beyond casual disagreements towards intense cultish altercations.

Generally, public policies are planned and implemented for the benefit of the masses, and public interests are safeguarded as long as the policy remains active. Yet, many Indian citizens are currently enmeshed in disputes and litigations over the misappropriation of IT Rules. Few can deny that there has been a breakdown of communication between the public, governmental agencies and the judiciary over this policy. In the absence of other deliberative methods, most people carry their disagreements to courts where backlogs mount and resources are stretched thin. With long-drawn-out intervals between court hearings and delayed judgements, the protestors are often redirected to protracted political confrontations like street demonstrations, public meetings and selective media representations. In the midst of such a state of affairs, not only freedom of speech is threatened, the entire practice of democracy is put at risk.

POLICY AND PERSUASION

Any analytical discussion of a policy as complex as the IT Rules requires a multipronged methodological approach. My primary interest here is to realize the full scope of the impact of the policy by revealing the citizens' response and protests against its implementation. While the feedback available on government websites and the number of public interest litigations are a good measure of the people's reaction to the policy, I also examine the general atmosphere of fear and distrust that this policy has created. This is what, I argue, leads to the deterioration of civil discourse and the absence of deliberative instances. In addition to that, I explore the various kinds of rhetorical interventions that have been made to counter the situation, ranging from requests for more transparency through debates and discussions to unveiling alternative narratives of secular nationalism. The methodological framework of this article is structured to stake claims on rhetoric's continued influence in public policy analysis. To accomplish this, it reviews the history of scholarly debates on the subject and highlights how the fundamental concerns of rhetorical critics discussing public policies have evolved over the years. It also addresses how a rhetorical reading of the IT Rules might offer a new perspective, forcing us to rethink critical paradigms on policy analysis.

Rhetoric's association with public policy emerges from the latter's instrumentality in all forms of democratic politics. As a feature of politics in action, public policies are deeply rooted in rhetoric and power. Some of the earliest scholarship inviting a rhetorical intervention in public policy analysis centres around Frank Fischer and John Forester's seminal work, *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*. Published in 1993, it shifted the archetypes of policy analysis from a dominant empirical analytical approach ensnared in problem solving, to the study of language and argumentation as essential dimensions of theory and analysis in policy planning and making. The inevitability of public consultations in designing fair and just public policies, although apparent to critics of rhetoric, has not had the attention of hard social scientists who saw policy analysis to be a "value-free, technical project" (Fischer and Gottweis, 2007: 2). Fischer and Forester were the pioneers in foregrounding a humanistic approach to a deeply deliberative process that is otherwise engulfed by formulaic technocratic, and analytical systems.

Following them, Frank M. Stark in his *Communicative Interaction, Power, and the State* (1996) revived the thesis that a rhetorical perspective can be an invaluable resource for assessing public policy arguments. It also shifted attention from what governments *say* to what they *do*, translating all policies into a form of state action. A decade and a half later, in a special issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* published in 2010, Robert Assen reopened the case of why and how scholars of rhetoric must read public policy documents. In his "Introduction" to the issue, Assen addresses two aspects of the relationship between rhetoric and public policy: "the place of rhetoric in the policy realm and rhetorical approaches to studying policy" (2010: 4). Assen is not interested only in case studies of policies, but also in the "meta" questions of "place" and "approaches" (2010: 3-4). Pointing out a lack of scholarship on the theory of concepts and critical methodology in the area, he recommended newer visions in interconnecting practice, theory, and criticism in the study of rhetoric and public policy.

Later, scholars like Fischer and Gottweis revisit Fischer and Forester's earlier work arguing that keeping in mind the risks, uncertainties, and complexities of contemporary politics, the ambiguity and messiness of contemporary policy challenges can potentially generate more conflict than they can resolve. Specifically, in a disorderly political scenario, "research methods that assume a stable reality" can run into multiple blunders and inaccuracies (Fischer and Gottweis, 2007: 3). Instead, Gottweis (2007) suggests that a number of so far neglected rhetorical phenomena like "trust, credibility, virtues, emotions, feelings and passions" that play a crucial role in policy writing, must be included in policy analysis too (237). Writing in the same year, Michel van Eeten (2007)

too, in his description of narrative policy analysis sees public policies as more than ordinances from a passive speaker to a hapless audience. It is important to persistently underscore the merits of policy analysis structured on communicative practices, since many social scientists continue to reject or reduce the scope of argumentation and deliberation in social and political explanations. It has become increasingly clear that ideas, discourse, and argumentation matter in both policymaking and its analysis.

Most governments, democratic or not, show an avariciousness to retain political power. This intoxication with power play limits their comprehension of the value and ambit of free and open discussion of public policies. They rarely display democratic principles, preparing and executing “public policies within a broader discourse of full disclosure, public consultation, and a consensus-based management” (Scollon, 2008: vii). Opening a public consultation on public policy ensures a constant exposure and participation in the development of the policy. For the government to remain democratic, public consultations must be practiced in all policy decisions.

When public opinion in public policies is rendered ineffectual, it foretells the demise of political spaces associated with democratic deliberation, challenging our understanding of how rhetoric functions within contemporary society. Subsequently, even if decisions are made democratically, the institutional arrangements may or may not be democratic. This reduces policymaking to a conscious political process where social change for better public life cannot be taken for granted. Rhetorical interventions seek to dispel “politically debilitating binaries” while upholding “virtue” as an essential “dimension of rhetorical action” (Schneider, 2014: 168). In societies moving through political turmoil as in India, where the anxieties and grievances of majority elites are stoked to prevent them from empathizing with minority concerns, virtue-based articulations of rhetorical action can acquire great significance. Efforts to rehabilitate the role of public in public policies as a “deliberative body capable of political action” can be successful when rhetorically empowered publics can be convened around a cause. Rhetorical action is then transformed into a method to detect shared problems, steer inquiries, and shape responses (Schneider, 2014: 169).

Sharon Crowley’s hypothesis on how rhetoric can be a possible antidote for deliberative impasses that lock public discourse into “repetition and vituperation” (2006: 3), is relevant to this discussion. Crowley makes a persuasive case for rhetorical intervention by pointing out that the tactics typically used in liberal arguments, essentially empirical based reason and factual evidence, may not always be effective in situations where faith based reasoning or religious interpretations of texts are used to ground claims (2006: 4). Drawing evidence from American social life, she determines that discussions of civic issues repeatedly face impediments in the US because they take place “in a discursive climate dominated by two powerful discourses: liberalism and Christian fundamentalism” where each presents very different pictures of the country and of its citizens’ responsibilities (2006: 2). While liberalism takes scant notice of beliefs or practices that reside outside of the public sphere, fundamentalist Christians prefer to “restore” biblical values to the center of American life and politics (2006: 3). The central point of contention between these two differing groups rests on whether religious and moral values can find a spot for themselves in civic affairs or should such sentiments be set aside when state policies are discussed (2006: 4).

The making of the IT Rules without adequate public deliberation; the implementation of the IT Rules and its impact on dissent, both point towards a betrayal of India’s democratic values. It is as if a section of Indian society – mostly those belonging to privileged upper and middle classes – decided to redefine democracy as an unquestioning support to a Hindu majoritarian ideology, disseminated through the leaders of the ruling party. Therefore, they look away in indifference as some of the fundamental rights of minorities and other disempowered groups are blatantly violated. Not just the IT Rules, but a whole panoply of laws – around sedition, preventive detention, stopping protests from taking place, allowing police to easily arrest protestors, supporting anti-conversion, and regulating NGOs – were introduced in the last few years, decimating, in a sweeping gesture, the civic and democratic values painstakingly inculcated since the country’s independence in 1947. Clear lines of contention have now been drawn between a large section of urban, educated, upper-caste Hindu folks with access to socioeconomic privilege and multiple resources, and the Dalit, poor, non-Hindu masses, who continue to strive to get their voices heard at the risk of being harassed, jailed, or worse (Kumbhar, 2024).

I share Crowley’s faith in developing a holistic argumentative approach if we hope to engage in civil discussions over public policies in a society as polarized as contemporary India. Besides appeals to reason and evidence for persuasive efficacy, rhetorical argumentation’s adaptability to emotions, beliefs, desires and values sets it apart as an unique deliberative model, that may successfully intervene in disagreements that seem unresolvable. Perhaps then, we can find a way out of the current ideological impasse in Indian political discourse by foregrounding virtues that identify congruities across differences. This ensures that the relationship between rhetoric and public policy is not determined only by its technical accuracies, but also by considering other social factors that influence the people’s reception of the policy.

Like Crowley, Hogan and Rood also view the impasse over gun violence in America as rooted in something more than just a lack of civility. They argue that the problems are deliberative in nature, the most glaring of which

is a failure of rhetorical leadership on the part of the elected leaders who have trapped the citizens into a deadly cycle of gun violence, deliberative dysfunction, and political inaction (2015: 360). Calling for a rhetorical intervention, they invite deliberation by attending to the long rhetorical history and genealogy of the debate, and by identifying key players, important policy texts, and transformative moments. In the eyes of ordinary citizens, public policy deliberations can quickly escalate to the realm of political babble, losing whatever momentum they could have otherwise gathered towards amicable resolution. Following Hogan and Rood's methodology of collective, evolutionary and dialectical approach warrants that participants of policy debates make meaning collectively as they engage with one another, adjusting and recasting their positions and the positions of their opponents, and propelling the debate in new directions. Frank Fischer (2004) and Albert W. Dzur (2008) also advocate for the presence of experts who can become facilitators of civic debates as they continue to impart technical information. One of the tasks of the experts is to assist the public in comprehending the complex political language of policies. In unmasking, decoding, interpreting, and elucidating evidence on the public's behalf, the critic can play the role of a rhetorician by counterpoising larger themes of disagreements with multiple delicate and nuanced factors affecting contestations.

Policy texts can function in atypical ways and their thematic plurality is constructed from the dynamic positioning of participants in policy debates. Under such shifting conditions, the rhetorician-critic is faced with two choices:

- (1) to either be a theorist and use their disciplinary expertise to analyse the objectives of public policies and predict their sustainability or
- (2) be a facilitator of unlikely coalitions among citizens and find ways of initiating, moderating and deliberating on controversial policy debates to make a difference in their outcomes.

Comparably, it is possible to make a difference in the stalemate around the IT Rules if more professionals join the debate, arguing not only for reforms in legal and institutional structures, but inviting the opposition to engage in deliberations through multiple small scale modules in local, public, and popular forums. Instead of keeping their knowledge and proficiency exclusive, experts can help citizens make sense of complex issues by deploying their expertise beyond scholarly arenas, guiding themselves and the opposition through a process of introspection and reflection on the impact of the policy in their everyday lives. My interest in collating and close-reading the events surrounding the IT Rules is an effort to create a foundation for a critical dialogue that follows Hogan and Rood's recommendation to move beyond "the rhetoric of special interest" (2015: 368) and make meaning collaboratively. When it comes to mitigating some of the severely harmful impacts of a public policy it is crucial to not be mere partisans of one ideology or another, but to build workable consensus among many, to assist others to become intelligent consumers of public discourse, so that more participants eventually speak up for themselves.

This methodology and line of inquiry can be advanced while analysing the IT Rules, to observe if rhetoric can exert any exceptional influence countering hopeless impasses, since it is able to address ideological and emotional claims as well as rational ones. Moreover, as case studies are evaluated, the rhetorician can look at opportunities for deliberation and reconciliation in situations where disagreements are rampant. Chances are, this dual undertaking of being a critic as well as rhetor seeking revisionary openings can bolster the confidence of all stakeholders, to imagine themselves and their relation to political dissent not through anger and silence but in other revolutionary ways.

In the next few sections, I go on to discuss:

- (a) how the IT Rules came to impose - through secrecy and silencing - major structural changes in constitutional rights and laws;
- (b) once formalized, how these changes stoked feelings of majoritarian kinship and belonging by creating echo chambers;
- (c) if rhetorical interventions can disband the deliberative impasse created by a polarized state by invoking newer spaces for deliberation and
- (d) can heterodoxy account for a more inclusive future for India?

SECURITY AND SILENCING IN THE NEW IT REGIME

Can technology ensure equitable access to information and prevent minority rights from being eroded? I initiated my discussion in this essay with the stories of Disha Ravi's and Munawar Faruqui's arrests because such detentions have become glaring examples of the declining nature of the privacy and security of users of digital platforms in India. To understand the full extent of this decay and examine the overreach of India's digitalization policies, it is necessary to look at the different versions of the IT Rules notified by the government of India between 2018-2023. The Information and Technology Act (IT Act) was first published in 2000 as a mechanism to moderate responsible usage of digital media. Although people's use of digital platforms witnessed a notable rise in numbers in the last couple of decades, prompting a revision of the original law, some of the most drastic amendments took

place particularly in the last six years. A close reading of these amendments will demonstrate how the language of the policy has been modified in each draft for a particular rhetorical outcome. An analysis of the ideas, discourse and argumentation within the policy reveals that it may not be designed to fully act in public interest. The rhetorical outcomes of public policies are determined by their tangible effects, the exigencies they create which drive civic engagement and bring social change. Wrongful implementation of necessary policies can be as dangerous for public interests as is the lack of a policy. Although the fundamental purpose of the IT Rules was to enable an enhanced digital experience, it resulted in denying citizens' accessibility to rights, along with unequal treatment of citizens based on their political ideology, religion or caste. To assume that all public policies can be found to be "democracy in action" can be misleading, since policymaking is a type of "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions" (Tutchings, 1979: 4). In this approach, even when decisions might seem to be made democratically, the institutional arrangements may or may not be democratic. This reduces policymaking to a questionable political process where social change for better public life cannot be taken for granted.

The first set of IT amendments that were introduced in 2018 proposed changes to a subsection of the original law. Section 79 of the IT Act, 2000 affords a "safe harbour" to social media intermediaries who host user generated content, exempting them from liability for the actions of users on their platform, if they adhere to guidelines prescribed by the government. Notwithstanding this assurance, a "confidential" meeting was held between government representatives and selected intermediaries on December 24, 2018, in which a set of amendments to the rules under Section 79 were discussed (IFF, 2021). The proposed rules levied new responsibilities that required "significant social media intermediaries" or SSIMs like Facebook or YouTube to qualify for legal immunity from Indian law in return for the fulfilment of certain duties and responsibilities. Some of these duties included creating a functional grievance redressal mechanism; the appointment of certain officers and contact persons in India offices; publishing Periodic Compliance Reports; identifying the first originator of information; active monitoring; voluntary verification and removal of information or disabling access to information. If for any reason an internet intermediary could not abide by these additional responsibilities, they would have to forfeit the immunities granted under Section 79 making them legally liable for the acts of third parties on their platform (Bajaj, 2021).

According to the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), one of the foremost advocacy groups on digital rights and liberties in India, there are serious concerns about the process by which these meetings were held and the way the public were kept out of it. The IFF notifies its audience about the far-reaching consequences of the newly amended policies for everyday users of the Internet, that are bound to impact their right to privacy and freedom of speech and expression. Raising concerns about the cleverly disguised language of the policy, the IFF asserts that there are more productive ways to regulate misinformation and other malpractices over the Internet, mostly through a guided constitutional path. The current strategy of arriving at policy decisions through a secretive process, written in equivocal language, and undermining fundamental rights is a harmful approach for all its citizens (Gupta, 2018).

It must be clarified here that this is not a debate on whether some aspects of social media are indeed flawed and impairing for its users. Without doubt, large platforms owe their users rights and accountability. Law practitioners like Prashant Reddy argue that for far too long the law allowed "internet intermediaries to enjoy unprecedented and wide-ranging immunity from legal liability, at little to no cost" (2021). In his view, no other intermediaries could enjoy such immunities from legal claims of defamation. For this particular oversight in the law, unlike newspapers and broadcasters who have always operated under the threat of legal liability for "defamation and other speech related offences" intermediaries have managed to escape liability despite behaving as publishers. There are definite financial benefits for the intermediaries to read the law in its earlier version as it reduces their operating costs considerably (Reddy, 2021). Still, others would contend that the current amendment has actually worsened the situation instead of improving it, by increasing censorship and reducing user privacy.

It is not that in the earlier versions of the IT Act, there were no initiatives to safeguard data privacy or that it lacked benchmarks for ethical practices on the Internet. However, with the newer amendments (in 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023) a lot of the decision-making is left to the government's discretion in determining which platforms, companies or individuals need to comply with what regulations. It also generated a climate of assumed threats and constant vigilance, giving authorities ample leeway to micromanage all responses in all social media platforms. It created new categories of social media intermediaries with different obligations, treatments and arbitration strategies. The newer, stringent rules accorded very little time for the grievance redressal mechanism to work fairly, mounting pressure and responsibilities on the grievance officers to respond within a narrow window of time. The hasty timeline made little change to ensure comprehensive investigation of cases or ethical adjudication. Moreover, at the time of the last amendment in 2023, India did not have a data protection law in place. Without the legal coverage of such a law, the data retention period by intermediaries was doubled in the IT Rules 2023, due to which they could now essentially preserve information for 6 months without any accountability, possibly even after a user has deleted their accounts. A voluntary verification process was also introduced by which intermediaries were required to allow their users to voluntarily verify their accounts, through an active Indian mobile number or

government approved identification. This information, stored by the intermediaries and accessible by the government at their will, could potentially be breached without consequences. Similarly, by tweaking some of the earlier agreements, social media intermediaries were now required to enable tracing of the originator of information on their platform if required by a court of competent jurisdiction or a competent authority. This basically entails that with the help of the IT Decryption Rules, the government could break encrypted messages and reveal the identity of the person and get to know the content of messages. As the IFF highlights the impact of this clause, it also rues that this specific requirement will “break existing protocols for the deployment of end-to-end encryption that has been built through rigorous cybersecurity testing over the years” (Bapat et al., 2021).

One of the most significant and lasting amendments to the IT Rules was steered through the regulation of Digital News Media (DNM) and Over The Top (OTT) media service platforms. Exhibiting an excessive delegation of power, this regulation establishes a non-judicial adjudicatory process by creating an “oversight committee”, to resolve grievances regarding content published by DNM and OTTs. It is important to note that the original IT Act does not empower the government to approve this regulation without the consent of the parliament. However, instead of taking recourse to the rightful passage of a Bill in the parliament, this policy was adopted by expanding the ambit of the original IT Act, to include digital news media and OTT platforms. This approximates to a Constitutional violation, since no legislation can be amended through an executive order without the parliament deliberating on the issue. In one broad sweep, the law that was meant to protect and ensure freedom of the press, was manipulated to have a chilling effect not only on the free speech of publishers but also the right to access information for consumers of content.

It is not lost upon the citizens of India that the new IT Rules are being implemented even though they have not been discussed in the parliament. Its provisions have been invoked multiple times, the most recent being the blocking of video links of a BBC documentary that criticizes Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In response to a Right to Information query by transparency activist Venkatesh Nayak, Lok Sabha Secretariat responded that “its bulletin does not have any mention of the rules being tabled in the House” until August 2023 (The Wire Staff, 2023). Nayak finds the “reluctance of the union government to be more transparent about its actions” suspicious and wonders about the government’s intentions as it continues to block content on social and digital media platforms in the name of social media reform. To deny showing the same accountability and transparency that the government expects all internet users to display, he adds, is not only hypocritical but also an “abuse of administrative discretion” (Joy, 2023). Venkatesh Nayak’s apprehensions about the lack of parliamentary debates and unsatisfactory integration of public comments in the making of the IT Rules, 2023 are not unfounded. Widespread criticisms continue to unfurl, pouring in from various stakeholders, reiterating the lack of constitutionality in the structures of the policy, an inadequate representation of voices other than the government’s, and a disregard for the fundamental rights to freedom of speech, expression, and privacy.

There is very little to show by way of evidence that the makers of the public policy had sincerely considered comments, feedback, and public opinion on the IT Rules prior to the policy’s implementation. Following the recommendations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Indian Ministry of Law and Justice issued a policy on Pre-Legislative Consultation in 2014, bringing to the forefront of the Indian policy landscape a much needed but seldom visible feature of public consultation. The new policy required the Central government to supplement each draft of the policy proposal with a note justifying its necessity, its broad financial implications, and an assessment of its impact on the environment, as also on the fundamental rights and the lives and livelihoods of the people it would affect. Later, comments received from the public had to be summarized and placed on the website of the department or ministry concerned which were to be included in a note to the Cabinet along with the draft proposal (Matthan, 2022). Unfortunately, the advancements in public deliberation that could have been achieved with the Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy (PLCP) in February 2014 were stalled by the change of government in the parliamentary elections that same year. The non-obligatory nature of the PLCP 2014 allowed the new government to bypass its recommendations without justification. The Union Minister of Law and Justice stated in the Parliament that paragraph 11 of the PLCP gives sufficient leeway for any Ministry/Department to eschew it on the grounds that it is not feasible or desirable to do so (PIB Delhi, 2022). At a time when increased participation of citizen stakeholders in policy-making and other legislative processes is encouraged by democratic governments worldwide, the non-mandatory nature of the PLCP in India stands out as an anomaly. As we see in the various amendments to the IT Rules, the public consultation program was never optimally utilized to arrive at a fair and impartial decision on the policy.

Of the five amendments to the IT rules executed since the PLCP was established, only one – the IT Rules 2018 – shows extensive compilation of public comments on MEITY’s website. A document, addressing the public’s concern and some counter comments, is also published on the same website. However, this is the only time in the history and chronology of the various amendments to the IT Rules that we see any display of public consultation and negotiation by the Ministry over the features of the policy. In the subsequent iterations of the policy, even

when invitations to public opinions are duly posted on MEITY's website, no additional information on the place, nature or discussions of public responses are available.

This does not mean that the public were equally disinterested in sharing their opinions and suggestions with the government. The Public Comments on Draft Intermediary Guidelines Rules, 2018 (hereafter referred to as Comments on Draft IT Rules, 2018) is a document that runs over 600 pages with about 130 entries on suggestions/comments on the proposed policy. From individual citizens to large corporations, non-governmental organizations, academics, civil society groups, and media houses, this list of questions, concerns, and feedback on the Draft IT Rules, 2018's proposed amendments are notable for such an outpouring of public participation on an important policy decision. A substantial part of the feedback and concerns centred around

- (a) vague language leading to indiscriminate criminalization,
- (b) lack of judicial approval for clauses that curb or limit fundamental rights,
- (c) the unconstitutionality of certain provisions made in the rules,
- (d) encroachment upon the right to privacy and the constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression,
- (e) too broad and generic definitions of terms like "national security", "fake news", "anti-national elements", "intent to spread disharmony" and "violence",
- (f) over-regulation of intermediaries and excessive delegation of responsibilities upon them, and
- (g) not following the best practices and measures by other countries who have successfully implemented safe internet practices (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [MEITY], n.d.).

None of these issues were ever addressed by the Ministry or any measures taken to assuage the concerns of the people. On the contrary as the scope of the IT Rules broadened, with each subsequent amendments rendering more and more discretionary power in the hands the government, there was a corresponding decline in paying attention to the citizens' feedback on the policy.

The IT Rules were primarily designed to grant authority to a fact checking unit to identify internet content concerning "any business of the Central Government" as "fake, false or misleading" and mandate its removal from the Internet (PIB Delhi, 2024). What they have ended up being is a censorship mechanism that has helped a majoritarian nationalist ideology to create echo chambers for its own political benefits. It can now allow itself to disseminate its own manufactured news and extremist publicity materials with minimal accountability, creating a social capital based on rogue ideologies, and becoming an exclusive breeding ground for hate speeches and communal polarisation. Inspired by this, majority of political discourses now revolve around civilizational narratives on who belongs to India, a quest for the original and true patriot of the soil, while outsiders are randomly identified and attacked. Each year since 2018 has seen manifold increase in hate speeches and other violent acts that promote enmity between groups on the basis of religion and caste. While some of these have been registered by the police, many more escape any legal action and a negligible few are convicted. According to a recent report, as the country advances towards its general elections in 2024, anti-Muslim hate speeches have increased by "62% in the second half of 2023 compared to the first six months of the year" (Singh, 2024). The IT Rules have made themselves available to political manipulation by granting the government immunity from prosecution on one hand, and prompting it to be the arbitrator of all opinions expressed about itself in digital spaces. By avoiding any public consultation in introducing this public policy that is fundamentally a set of regulations on free speech, the state has ensured that it can be used capriciously to silence all opposing voices. In felling all dissent surrounding this specific policy, the rhetorical functions of subsequent comparable policies and liberal political discourse at large were also extinguished.

BELONGING IN A DIGITAL NATION

"Belonging" stands out as one of the most piercing questions that continue to vex the people of India. It lies at the heart of all community formations – real and imagined — whether they are decreed by birth, religion, caste, class, or of choice. Everyone shares a need to "belong," and a sense of belonging is indispensable to a person's well-being. At the same time, citizens disagree on degrees of belonging. Such disputes can be fiercely competitive, in the sense of believing that one's own community is better than others, or claiming to belong more than others which can occur when different ideas of belonging intersect and overlap, with each idea of belonging competing for primacy (Joshi, 2015). According to Joshi, "belonging" can simultaneously operate on two disparate interests. In the first one, a person belongs to, as in identifies with, a place, a people, or an institution. In the second sense, a person who "belongs" is deemed to be the possession of a place, a people, or institutions, under a possessive authority that "demands that one comply with the rules and hierarchies of the community" (Joshi, 2015). For a country as unusually heterogeneous as India, this question is not a new one. It definitely posed a dilemma for the framers of the Indian constitution as they sought to build a secular liberal democracy out of the country's complex history and diversity. The architects of the post-independent nation conceptualized India as a mosaic, not a

monolith—a polity composed of diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional identities. Today, while the outward framework of Indian democracy remains in place, its content, some argue, may have shifted.

In the eyes of its many critics, the government of India has built a thriving community on an alternative social capital of anger and hate through its management and control of digital media. For the last few years, civil society organisations have been claiming that groups of young people are being radicalised by political parties to build communal insecurities and hatred (Jain, 2023). Although religious radicalisation is not the only form in which this anger manifests itself, it is quite evident that the secularist ideals that steered the nation in the first few decades after independence, is now finding itself being replaced by “an indigenous (Hindu) concept of majoritarian nationalism”. A major part of this indoctrination is enforced through a crackdown on dissent, interference into the private lives of citizens, curbing fundamental rights of minorities and extensive surveillance systems. Such manipulation of content, tone, and intent of online interactions has undoubtedly become a grave concern, says The Pew Research Center (Smith et al., 2019), possibly threatening the future of internet usage in India. Notions of belonging are warped into a narrative that is manipulated to generate polarization, and create supremacist social formations, that deeply damage the country’s existing social and political fabric, at a steep cost to its fabled diversity.

The discourse of belonging, as framed by the Hindu majoritarian nationalist groups in India, is far removed from what Robert Putnam had in mind when he defended social capital as “connections among individuals” that create “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000: 16). Embodied in organizations like churches, bowling leagues, reading groups, or even in less-structured conversations, such as dinner with friends or exchanges around the office coffee machine, they are called “capital,” because they have value, particularly in improving the productivity of individuals and groups. Social capital, for Putnam, comes in two forms: bonding and bridging. Bonding creates a solidarity and trust between people who find similarities based on a shared identity (the in-group), but not with those who do not share this identity (the out-group). While bonding social capital can create a strong sense of belonging, it can run the risk of creating binaristic tendencies that foster an “us-versus-them” mentality. By contrast, bridging social capital brings differing groups together and sustains their attachment to each other by dismantling barriers and fostering trust between people who are not alike. Putnam argues that an abundance of social ties makes it easier for someone to find a job, resist illness, cope with stress, leading to a more satisfying life. Eventually, Putnam fosters the theory that communities and regions which are “rich in social capital, suffer less crime, educate their children better, and have more smoothly functioning economies” (Kiechel, 2000). As a shared set of behavioural norms and basic moral rules that make the functioning of a civil or political order possible, social capital stands out as a civic virtue, that which promotes an internal trust within a society, building expectations that one’s “outward honesty and civility will be reciprocated by others” (Brooks, 2024: 25).

It is not that Putnam was unaware of the limits of social capital or how it can distort a benign interpretation of belonging. In politics as in religion, he observes that civic energy and resources can easily migrate into the hands of passionate extremists. It is also possible for certain public policies to impinge on social capital formation, destroying highly effective existing social networks and norms. Putnam comments that “deep-seated technological trends are radically ‘privatizing’ or ‘individualizing’ our use of leisure time” which might disrupt many opportunities for positive social-capital formation. Indiscriminate use of the Internet has exponentially grown in the past couple of decades to become the most obvious and probably the most powerful instrument of this revolution (Putnam, 1995: 75).

About two decades after Putnam’s hypothesis, Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms in their book *New Power* (2018), show the efficacy of the Internet in mobilizing new structures of power. In this innovative work, they specifically emphasize how the ability to build community or to build movements can now reside in everybody’s hands. Advocating a paradigm shift in wresting authority from older, more conservative and exclusive power systems, Heimans and Timms explain that along with technology, human behaviour and expectations are also changing. It only takes one to figure out how to channel this energy and appetite in new and impactful ways. Although the interest in organizing collaborative communities is not new, “there has always been a dialectic between bottom-up and top-down, between hierarchies and networks” (Heimans and Timms, 2018). It is only recently that people can come together and organize themselves, owing to constant and ubiquitous connectivity, in ways that are “geographically boundless and highly distributed and with unprecedented velocity and reach” (2018). New models and newer methods of consolidation and communication emerge from this hyper-connectedness in the name of a new power. Yet, they might very well be transformed into rebels rallying for militant causes, with the intent and means to spread misinformation or propagate violence. Even at the height of their optimism, neither Putnam nor Heimans and Timms can hide the possibilities of abuse and wrecking of their entire project at the slightest hint of misappropriation of power. The tools that brought people closer together can also drive them further apart (2018).

When it was first launched, digitalization in India too promised many empowerments, including a dynamic digital ecosystem premised upon technology, knowledge, and culture, to integrate digital literacy with already

available resources. India's political foray into digitalization officially began when the government announced a new initiative called Digital India. To many, it was the rightful first step towards a more democratic society and a robust knowledge economy, particularly for a postcolonial nation such as India. Soon after, the foundation for a digital economy was laid with the launch of the Digital India campaign in 2015, which included infrastructure, empowerment, and governance as its main initiatives (Digital India, n.d.). Most citizens were persuaded to think that digitalization is emancipatory and empowering. When the government made internet access central to a massive emerging digital ecosystem, more and more citizens were not only encouraged but also given numerous reasons to go online. As a result, there has been an enormous growth in internet users in India in the last few years with a corresponding rise in users of social media and other digital platforms who produce extensive personal data that has now come to be accessible by the government.

A fierce critic of digital data accumulation, Shoshanna Zuboff refers to it as the rise of instrumentarian power, and compels us to see the profoundly antidemocratic vision of society and social relations that current trends of "ubiquitous computing" produce, revealing why such an undertaking is unimaginable outside the digital milieu and the logic of surveillance capitalism (2019). Surveillance capitalism rose to dominance in the US and spread to Europe and other regions of the world from the last decade of the previous century. To comprehend the magnitude of surveillance capitalism, she draws attention to a process called division of learning where people, processes, and things are reinvented as information. On the strength of its unprecedented concentrations of knowledge and power, surveillance capitalism claims human experience as raw material, free for the taking, and translates it into behavioural data while ignoring considerations of individuals' rights, interests and awareness. Ironically, the power of surveillance capitalism does not originate in the state, and its effects cannot be reduced to or explained simply by technology or ill intentions of corrupt people. Instead, they are the compatible and predictable consequences of an "internally consistent" and "successful logic of accumulation" (2019). Surveillance capitalist firms dominate the accumulation and processing of information, especially information about human behaviour. Quite similar to what Heimans and Timms classify as participation farming wherein digital platforms fence in and harvest for their own gain the daily activities of millions or billions of participants, surveillance capitalism too knows a great deal about its unsuspecting participants, but does not grant them equal access to their own data, which is available only to the machines and those who control them.

As India's digital revolution progressed, the results were quite contrary to what was initially anticipated. Just as Zuboff, Heimans and Timms warn us, it quickly degenerated into a treacherous tightrope walk between democratic governance on one hand, and the practice of dissent on the other. Since then, the limitations of this project have been identified and resisted. It is now amply clear that in implementing policies of digitalization in India, multiple citizens' rights were eliminated. Deep control and regulation of all digital platforms allowed unwonted governmental interference, most notable in curbing all forms of dissent and debate. In the end, digitalization made excessive governance not only possible but entirely unrestricted.

While the MEITY continues to assert many irrefutable reasons behind its choice of legislations and regulatory provisions surrounding the IT Rules, a growing number of scholars have voiced concerns over the impact of the Rules. Sangeeta Mahapatra (2021) warns of India's gradual transformation into a surveillance democracy under the garb of becoming a digital democracy. Cautioning that trading privacy for better governance or convenience has consequences, Mahapatra recommends counter-regulatory measures that can prevent big-data misappropriation through governance-based surveillance. She calls upon the European Union (EU) to direct states like India to adopt a more moderate privacy law that does not give wide exemptions to the government; one which may broaden the "definition of unfair trade practices to include harmful types of data surveillance" and "discourage practices like centralised databases" that integrate public and private information of the citizens. For Indian journalists too, the rules define fake news in a way that makes it easier for the government to use them in a manner that justifies curbing press freedom. In an online space already inundated with vigilante publics, Indian journalists have increasingly become apprehensive about the rules that make it easier for such groups to harass and silence the press (Abhishek, 2022).

CONCLUSION: A SPACE FOR DELIBERATION

There are currently numerous petitions challenging the amendments to the IT Rules in Indian courts awaiting final decisions. Looking beyond these legal measures, it becomes imperative to find other spaces safe enough to deliberate upon the issues raised by this crisis. Rhetorical interventions based on dialogue based approaches might accomplish that desired result. Tracing the deliberative models proposed by rhetorical critics like Crowley, Hogan and Rood, two forms of rhetorical interventions can be put forward. First, that which reinforces counter-narratives of pluralism against a divisive majoritarian nationalism, and second by fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogues that addresses questions on nationhood and belonging.

Religion and politics are so pivotal to Indian social and cultural life that every competing viewpoint on the subject not only evokes heated debates, but also subtly raises awareness about tolerance and pluralism. If it isn't for this dual effect of argumentation and deliberation, India's diversity would have splintered the subcontinent into numerous parts by now. This could be a reason why its long heterogeneous argumentative traditions are particularly suited for its unique multireligious needs. In his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), Amartya Sen describes the history of public argumentation in India and emphasizes the practice of what he calls "heterodoxy and dialogue," popular since the Vedic times (2005: ix). Sen asserts that a review of the practice of heterodoxy illustrates a remarkable trajectory speaking of the survival of public reasoning through the nation's tumultuous political and religious histories. The reach and range of this heterodoxy cannot be overstated, Sen argues, and by no account should be seen as irrelevant, particularly now more than ever. Instead, it would be productive to unequivocally reiterate the reception of heterodoxy in the country's classical past and intellectual traditions, mostly to counter the disproportionate attention given by reactionary political parties to build social capital based on an uninterrupted religious tradition (Sen, 2005). A rhetorical intervention based on the principles of heterodoxy is primarily an attempt to revitalize this neglected robust tradition of dissent.

A national ethos of heterodoxy was built piecemeal, from one deliberation to another, through the consolidated efforts of many visionaries across different historical periods. It is not that there were no ruptures in these traditions, or that there were no oppositions. This is far from upholding an incontrovertible description of deliberative performances. But what is significantly influential and dynamic is to agree to invoke a set of culturally-salient virtues, that can become a formidable force against the sectarianism of Hindutva politics. The reliance on heterodoxy can be seen as a first step in the right direction. One cannot deny that there are already too many hierarchies that plague Indian society. Hence, the evocation of a heterodoxical ethos can be an all-rounder ally to also fight against those discriminatory practices. To reform these prejudices, the people must remain committed to pluralism as the more ethical way to nurture a sense of belonging.

If the state enforces its power through public policies that work against public interests, then the revival of community based deliberative practices can become a pivotal space to articulate opinions, without the fear of persecution. Laws against free speech and coercion can be advantageous to a totalitarian regime for a short period, but in the long run they make the order's functioning impossible. While there is hardly a one size fits all solution to the problem of communal polarization, this article attempts to reinstate civil dialogue among the contending groups by arguing for a rhetorical intervention that restores faith in civic virtues. This, I believe, will imbue refreshing deliberative possibilities into spaces that precariously straddle both secular policy debates and religious politics.

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Artist Response During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Athens: Insights into Urban Subversive Festivities

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ABSTRACT

Through urban subversive festivities this paper explores artist responses during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Athens (Greece). The disruption caused by the global pandemic in public spaces has prompted a critical examination of its role in urban claims and the evolving role of subversive festivities in artistic movements. These festivities transcend geographical boundaries and form rhizomatic networks that reclaim public spaces for political engagement through creative expression. The article focuses on urban subversive festivities from a Critical Geography point of view, opening the field to gender and decolonial studies through qualitative research including narrative interviews and mapping in urban space. We draw upon the experiences of two collectives in Athens, highlighting the transformative potential inherent in urban subversive festivities. We also argue the potential of festivities to transcend boundaries, create collective bodies, and spread as rhizomes. Ultimately, urban subversive festivities emerge as dynamic agents of change, claiming territoriality and offering new ways to understand the intersection of festivity, subversion, and public space and can be a constitutive element of resistance.

Keywords: Greece, pandemic, activism, critical geography, urban subversive festivities

Sometime ago a song began to be whispered in the urban spaces of cities.

Shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic, during the 2019 Chilean marches, artists organized in an open orchestra in Santiago and protested through singing.

Then the pandemic silenced everything. This invisible threat emptied cities all at once. Sounds ceased to exist everywhere, people were confined to their homes, and public spaces became deserted.

However, the whispered song rhizomed in urban consciousness. A low voice refrain started to echo louder and louder.

Artists broke the silence of the pandemic. Timidly, they emerged onto the balconies of their homes, filling different neighborhoods of the world with music. Chilean artists organized online and continued the action of the squares, via the internet. Similar initiatives sprang up in various places. On March 8, 2020, ongoing femicides in Mexico sparked to social unrest, leading to a social movement accompanied by a new feminist anthem echoing through the streets of Mexican cities. Two years after Chilean protests, the anger of Parisian artists at the suspension of Culture due to the coronavirus, led an open orchestra

to generate the revolutionary pulse again, placing the state-banned festivities in the heart of Paris, in front of the occupied Odeon Theatre. Subversiveness rhizomed worldwide.

Greek artists heard the refrain too.

Outraged by the cessation of Culture and driven by the escalating challenges in the country's socio-political landscape, they created multiple new realities within the urban space of Athens. Sparks that ignited in Latin America and traveled to Europe, arrived in Greece, rhizomed, and have now created a new urban reality in the realm of urban and civic claims.

Can we hear it?

INTRODUCTION

This research explores urban subversive festivities in Athens (Greece) during the pandemic, with a particular focus on two collectives that employ subversive festivities as their core organizing principles. The research discusses urban subversive festivities as collective actions that have festivity as a fundamental structure of existence, offering nuanced insights into their role within urban contexts and underscoring the new spatial dimensions these actions produce. By examining the existing literature, we find convergences between the characteristics created in subversive carnival (Bakhtin, 1984; Hardt and Negri, 2005), the approach of critical studies to performance and resistance, and the anti-patriarchal and decolonial perspective that aims to create new narratives that include us all. Moreover, the COVID-19 health crisis has led to new social circumstances that have prompted a reevaluation of the discourse surrounding subversiveness, resistance, and urban bottom-up festivities as the spatial prohibitions have rearranged public space dynamics.

Recognizing that established top-down organized carnivals can reinforce existing social hierarchies, we argue that the subversiveness present in bottom-up organized carnivals actually challenges hierarchies and creates new spatialities in urban space. When these elements are incorporated into social struggles we get similar results to the Situationist International and Reclaim the Streets with their action: detournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements (Debord, 1992; I.S., 1958), and claiming of the right to the city for all (Lefebvre, 1967, 2014) with a critical look at dominant aesthetics (Damianakos, 2003; Thrift, 2004). Diverse struggles are rhizomatically enriched (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005) by the poetics of other struggles and include decolonial and feminist perspectives that focus on the importance of corporeality through the (collective) body, acting as body-territory (Gago, 2019; Lugones, 2008; Segato, 2014; Ysunza, 2020).

The aim of this study is to deploy decolonial and feminist perspectives to examine the importance of subversive festivities in urban contexts and the direct correlation with public space and its reclaiming. The key questions of this research are: To what extent do subversive festivities reconfigure the signification of public space? Are these actions mere artistic practices, or do they represent a broader phenomenon that creatively reclaims and redefines public spaces? How do they territorialize when faced with restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this research is grounded in Participatory Action Research (MacDonald, 2012; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) integrating various modes of inquiry to articulate narratives and actions within the context of urban subversive festivities. This approach includes:

- (a) an extensive examination of literature relative to subversive festivities in the relevant territories, excluding discourses that consider creation and creativity as a product to be consumed,
- (b) a systematic engagement with and also recommendations from case studies,
- (c) systematic mapping and spatial analysis via archival research to spatially locate and contextualize these festivities, and
- (d) direct involvement in specific subversive festivities with multimodal documentation of daily experiences through field notes, diaries, and photographs, capturing observations of community practices. During the inventory of actions initial contacts were created, and were followed by a period of interviews, with documentation spanning from April 2020 to May 2021 and qualitative research conducted from February 2021 to February 2022.
- (e) Unstructured interviews lasting one to four hours, following an oral history (narrative) approach, that allows subjects to speak freely, providing rich qualitative data,

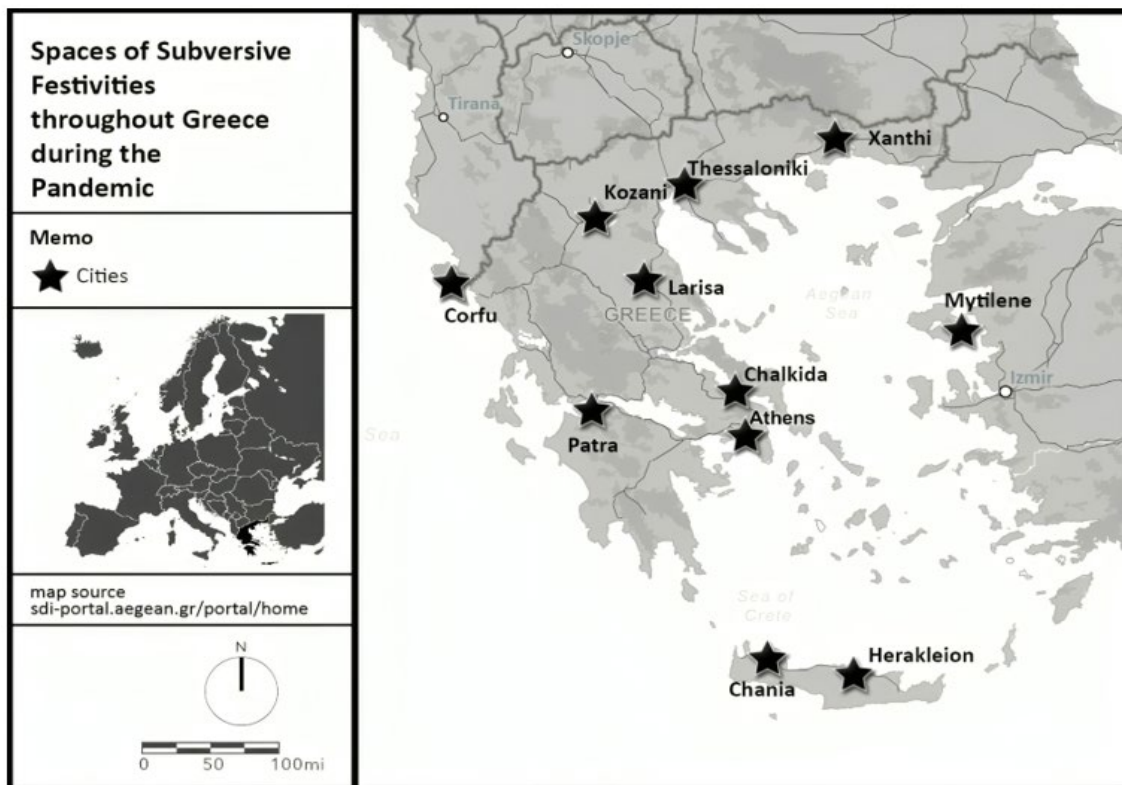


Figure 1. Spaces of Subversive Festivities throughout Greece from April 2020 to May 2021.

- (f) supplementary analysis of documents and archives including speeches, social media communication of actions, assemblies, and mobilizations identifying continuities and common patterns in narratives, and
- (g) and a re-engagement process with collectives and the research findings. The theoretical debate is continuously redefined through discussions with the collectives, and the research findings are compiled into a written text, reviewed and approved by the collectives.

This structured methodology ensures a comprehensive and participatory approach to understanding and documenting the narratives and actions surrounding subversive festivities. The research is aligned with the ethical protocols in academic research to ensure scientific work's integrity, transparency and accountability. To this end, interview excerpts are presented using pseudonyms to ensure participant anonymity. In addition, participants have received the transcripts and have authorised their publication.

During the participatory observation, 68 artistic interventions were recorded, from the protesting student movement on issues of free education and against police violence, to artistic bike rides for environmental issues, subversive ballets, musical protests for artist rights, to protest flashmobs and orchestras in solidarity to all artists. Extensive documentation of artistic protests and participatory research with selected Greek context spanned from April 2020 to May 2021, observing urban subversive festivities in Greece (Figure 1) primarily through social media, due to limited coverage by mainstream newspapers, with occasional mentions by smaller leftist newspapers. Collective actions, not prominently featured in official records, were identified through direct researcher engagement. The selection of case studies was considered crucial to emerge organically following the documentation of activities during the health crisis restrictions. The documentation revealed activities of official art unions (Karakioulafis, 2022; Tsioulakis, 2021), and student movements (Zacharaki, 2022).

The two case studies were chosen due to their invisibility in mainstream media and academic research, and their distinctiveness, where festivity is integral to their existence, not merely a resistance tool. In the case studies we applied adaptive methodologies in critical cultural research, emphasizing continuous feedback in field research (Lefebvre, 1991; Lugones, 2008). Notably, theoretical frameworks such as rhizomatic structures and body-territory concepts emerged organically through our interactions with the collectives, contrasting with the anti-patriarchal and decolonial issues that had been pre-established as central theses. Participatory Action Research was conducted from February 2021 to February 2022 on the case studies and the re-occupation of the Free Self-Managed Theatre *ΕΜΠΡΟΣ* [EMBROS]. Our methodology included 10 semi-structured interviews with a narrative approach, following a decolonial research methodology of "hermeneutics of orality" (Millán, 2014, p. 29) and oral histories (Intersticio Visual, 2019) complemented by informal discussions.

FROM PERFORMATIVE SPACE TO CRITICAL, ANTICOLONIAL, ANTIPATRIARCHAL THINKING

The study of everyday life as resistance (de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 2014) highlights how collective actions of marginalized groups create new realities, in our case through subversive festivities, that exploit the cracks in the system (de Certeau, 1984) and create new cracks in the existing system (Holloway, 2010) offering new spatialities. Social movements enable people to act differently, out of context, and produce new spaces of resistance and existence (Guerra, 2023). This process opposes the dominant habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and through iterative and chronic activity has the potential to change it¹ (Guerra, 2023; Petropoulou, 2020; Wacquant, 2016).

The performative space created by new social movements has been a field of interest for researchers who have variously interpreted both the subversive space and the practices produced in these contexts. For example, the Situationist International emphasized the role of games, poetic-artistic creation, and popular festivities in shaping social reality, as articulated by Debord (1992), who advocated for play as a means of subverting dominant social orders. In the 1990s, the miners' struggles in the U.K. against neoliberal policies inspired the formation of Reclaim the Streets (RTS) in 1995 who used creative protest to challenge traditional civic boundaries and create a practice replicated worldwide (Credland et al., 2003). RTS initiated the International Day of Carnival Against Capital in 1996 (Ramírez Blanco, 2018). Their opposition to Margaret Thatcher's harsh neoliberal restructuring, which included public transport changes and the promotion of the car economy, found expression through spontaneous street parties and artistic interventions with carnival elements. Through these actions, urban spaces were reclaimed, creating shared cultures and communities of drift (Ferrell, 2012).

On performative space, Thrift (2004) posits that performance, encompassing expressive practices like music, street theatre, and walking, raises crucial questions contributing to the exploration of new, vibrant spaces. Lefebvre's perspective (1991) views the situation of revolution as a transformative festival with insurrectionary carnivalesque dimensions capable of reshaping urban spaces and society. Holloway (2010) identifies openness in the Paris Commune and May 1968 likening them to cracks in capitalism. Drawing parallels between multitude dynamics in demonstrations and carnivals, Hardt and Negri (2005) highlight the central role of carnival theory in shaping social movements. However, for social struggles and collectives to transform the signification of space into one that opposes dominant power structures—hence anticapitalist—it requires dismantling the deeply entrenched forms of power rooted in colonialism and patriarchy. Mignolo criticizes modernity and explains that the domination of the world is achieved through the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) which dominates the imaginary (Mignolo, 2007). Similarly, deriving from gender studies, intersectionality, and a critical approach of Quijano's (2000) concept of coloniality of power, Lugones (2008) is concerned about “modern/colonial system of gender”. In the same direction, Segato introduces the idea of “high intensity modern/colonial patriarchy” (Segato, 2022, p. 85) and that “no patriarchy can be a revolution” (Segato, 2022, p. 37). Thus when the critical approach to performative space is enriched with decolonial and anti-patriarchal perspectives that challenge dominant power structures, new spatialities inherent to carnival are produced, where the political context defines the spatial subversion.

Furthermore, this paper posits that subversive festivities constitute a spatial phenomenon. We argue that this phenomenon engenders spatial subversions that propagate rhizomatically across diverse spaces, subsequently becoming territorialized within them. Rhizomatic thinking challenges hierarchical and linear structures, establishing connections between semiotic chains, power organizations, and circumstances in arts, sciences, and social struggles (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005). Operating through deterritorialization and reterritorialization, rhizomes extend beyond tangible public spaces. This means that urban subversive festivities can be spread as collective bodies, where diverse ideas, actions, and participants emerge in public spaces, forming a rhizomatic process of resistance and alternative narratives.

Corresponding perspectives suggest that the body resembles a territory, both substantively and symbolically, offering space for expression, resistance, and claims. Segato (2014) observes the emergence of new forms of war exploiting women and framing the “body as territory”. Gago (2019) similarly argues that the spatiality of the body creates a body-like battlefield. Through the Artifariti Festival, Ysunza (2020) explores the significance of “artivism” as a political practice and methodology, examining the relationship between the body and territoriality. Cultural practices enable the reclamation of space as new fertile areas previously “territorialized” for various reasons. Oteiza's (2019) analysis of the “El Violador en tú Camino” performance by the “Las Tesis” collective highlights

¹ Habitus encompasses a social rather than natural aptitude, which varies according to time, place and distributions of power and is changeable. It tends to produce practices that reflect the social structures that created it, causing a lag between past influences and current conditions. “It is enduring but not static or eternal: dispositions are socially mounted and can be eroded, countered or even dismantled by exposure to novel external forces, as demonstrated by situations of migration and specialized training” (Wacquant, 2016, pp. 66–67) and perhaps the multiple subversive festivities.

the importance of resistance through artistic ingenuity. The objective is to examine subversive festivities with anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal, and often anti-capitalist characteristics, challenging and decolonizing the dominant imaginary.

URBAN SUBVERSIVE FESTIVITIES: INTERSECTIONS OF FESTIVITY, POWER AND RESISTANCE

Bakhtin introduces the concept of a second public life during carnival, where laughter organizes a realm of inverted social institutions, leading to spontaneous restructuring. In Medieval carnivals, the collective body experiences a new existence in the festive square (Bakhtin, 1984) functioning as a grand theatrical creator, akin to the multitude of demonstrations (Hardt and Negri, 2005). Within the festive square, people develop an awareness of shared unity, acknowledging terrestrial mortality while subjecting it to ridicule and deconstruction through the symbolic dethronement of their appointed king reflecting the liminal character of social drama (Turner, 1969). Scott (1990) describes a revolutionary element in the carnival, asserting that cultural expressions of the powerless imply a critique of power and translate into ideological disobedience, what he terms the “infrapolitics of the powerless”. Similarly, inherent in the carnival reversal, the “tradition of rebellion” is identified as the need for resistance by “marginalized groups,” through various aspects of popular culture as exemplified by Greek rebetiko music (Damianakos, 2003). In urban contexts Stavrides discerns the concept of “threshold theatricality,” where the city becomes a stage on which heterogeneous groups of people hover between existing power relations and an alternative yet tangible future creating commons in the city (Stavrides, 2016). Common spaces, when understood as threshold spaces, reveal the transformative power of commoning to create new forms of communal life and sharing, as thresholds connect and separate spaces, facilitating both inclusion and the potential for emancipatory practices.

However, the common interpretation of carnivals as a subversion of social classes and power relations faces challenges. Decolonial perspectives, particularly from Brazil, highlight class and racist components in carnivals like Rio’s Sambadrome (Sheriff, 1999) and São Vicente in Cape Verde, where socioeconomic distinctions persist despite the notion of an egalitarian festival and the apparent reversal of hierarchy (de Queiroz, 1986, 1994; e Lorena, 2019). Risério (1995) emphasizes differentiating social reversal from a desire for social equality, particularly in white-black hierarchical relations. In these contexts, subversive musical groups such as Ilê Aiyê are of particular importance in Afro-carnival performances, as they represent the corporal politics of the re-existence of the Quilombos (autonomous afro-descendant communities) during the Bahia carnival (Afolabi, 2016; Petropoulou et al., 2021), a dynamic similarly observed in the Barranquilla carnival, influenced by the corporal politics of the Palenques in Colombia (Angarita and Cueto, 2013). Corporal politics encompass cultural reclamation, political expression, community solidarity, subversion of power structures regarding class and race, and intergenerational transmission. These examples demonstrate how carnival traditions in different regions are spaces of negotiation and assertion of identities for marginalized communities, in a context where social hierarchies are constantly reflected in the midst of carnivals.

On the other hand various social subversive manifestations such as the feminist movements in Mexico, the protesting orchestras in Chile, the revolts in Turkey, and Greece, have utilized festive events as a form of resistance. Researchers highlight that these movements continuously evolve their narratives through diverse methods like graffiti and carnival aesthetics, which blend the imaginary with the poetic and express subversion through creative means (Tulke, 2021; Tunali, 2018). Additionally, by using music in protests, these movements enhance their cultural capital and magnify the impact of their socio-political struggles, turning collective expressions into shared resistance (Fugellie, 2020; Ñancupil Troncoso, 2024). The artistic practices that Tunali (2018) refers to as Art of Resistance, manifested through carnival aesthetics in the Gezi Park protests contribute to a collective identity, dissolving the artist-activist divide, and adding artistic creativity within political resistance. In the notion of Performative Politics, Tulke (2021) identifies street art as a significant form of symbolic and material political action during the Greek economic crisis, which creates meaning and transforms public space.

Artistic subversive practices can be diverse: the detournement of public space to re-appropriate it (S.I.), the use of parties to take over the streets (R.T.S.), artistic interventions in spontaneous uprisings that appropriate public space, as in Gezi Park, protesting street art, collective bodies singing feminist hymns, huge orchestras playing Requiem in the struggling squares of Chile are only some manifestations. These examples are not just occasional tactics used by movements or collectives to strengthen their struggles; rather we argue that festivity, which is capable of including all of the above expressions, is a constitutive element of resistance itself. Artistic creativity and expression are integral to the dynamics that collectives can promote in public spaces, with subversive festivities offering a means to include various creative actions within these spaces. The focus of urban subversive festivities lies in the spatial phenomena produced by these festivities and the interconnected relationship between space and celebration, explored through subversive anti-patriarchal and decolonial approaches. We contend that urban

subversive festivities do more than co-exist with resistance as creative practices: they actively create conditions (collective body, metaxis, celebration, dance, song, etc.) that are essential to social struggles. Therefore, the term “subversive festivity” refers to collective actions produced by collectives that create spatial subversions through celebrations, exploiting existing cracks in the system (de Certeau, 1984) and creating new ones (Holloway, 2010), in a rhizomatic way (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005), and including different struggles such as in our case a feminist (Lugones, 2008) and decolonial (Mignolo, 2007) frame of existence.

FESTIVITIES, RESISTANCE, AND THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic can be interpreted as a “manifestation of social vulnerability” (de Geobrujas and Mason-Deese, 2021, p. 171), bringing attention to previously overlooked issues. A global policy framework addressing the health crisis included increased social and physical control, restricted mobility, and enforced quarantine measures globally. Cultural event cancellations impacted artists, causing significant income loss and livelihood disruptions. Despite challenges, artists preserved creativity, finding alternative modes for events and performances during the pandemic while advocating for labor rights and demonstrating solidarity.

Undoubtedly, music played a significant role during the pandemic, with many musicians engaging in live-streaming concerts from their homes, fostering a sense of community (Fürnkranz, 2021). However, sponsored live-streaming events by established artists raise concerns about the potential exacerbation of social inequalities in artistic innovation (Pereira and Ricci, 2023). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we classified observed festivities into two categories. The first involves live streaming and On-Balcony concerts that seek to raise awareness around COVID-19 as a global threat. The global phenomenon of balcony singing, originating in Italy and adopted worldwide, has evolved into a form of acoustic resistance, expressing gratitude to healthcare workers (Taylor, 2020). “Musicking in balconies,” as discussed by Calvo and Bejarano (2020), represents communities seeking collective ways to navigate disasters, building social capital crucial for addressing future crises. Gupta’s comparative study of Italian and Indian balcony performances identifies them as a form of aural resistance against the pandemic, symbolizing life against the silence of death (Gupta, 2023). The on-balcony concerts are individual initiatives of musicians who play music from their balconies while being quarantined, transforming the private space of the balcony into a public space of solidarity and festivity. This spatial subversion is directly related to the spatial dimension of the pandemic and the restriction and control of public space. However, it is also an indication of the correlative power between festivity and resistance.

The second category, in which we focus on through the case studies, includes collective/organized resistance efforts where participants act in public spaces, targeting pandemic-related policies rather than the virus itself. They are the ones who resisted the political use of the pandemic, where governments tried to control social resistance under the pretext of the pandemic. In Chile, before the pandemic, music played a central role during the 2019 social upheavals, with political actions using songs during protest marches. Subsequently, Chilean artists organized a collective event at the Central Market of Santiago, utilizing public space for the rendition of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony (Fugellie, 2020). Fugellie suggests that musicians, through such practices, generate cultural capital, embedding it within shared actions, expectations, and attitudes, closely tied to Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus. Additionally, the orchestra’s performance of revolutionary (and other) songs created a collective body visibly larger than the orchestra itself which resonated in the form of a subversive festivity, which a few months later was territorialized in a similar way (same musical performance, large symphony orchestra, square in front of a theatre) in front of the occupied Odeon Theatre in Paris.

Urban subversive festivities gained prominence during social upheavals in Mexico, with the feminist movement organizing a two-day strike in March 2020. The streets resonated with “*Canción sin Miedo*,” a global feminist anthem against feminicides. The strike introduced a new toolkit for creative performance, unveiling the interplay between intersectional oppression, decolonial practices, neoliberal economy, and Latin American feminism (Alonso et al., 2022). Although we do not assert a direct connection, we believe the emotional resonance of communal singing played a crucial role in invigorating the protesting women.

In France, government pandemic measures sparked an artistic movement, initially seen in trade union protests. Cultural defense demonstrations evolved into widespread theatre occupations, notably at the Odeon Theatre in Paris, symbolically occupied in support of culture by actors, students, and artists. Public space and urban subversive festivities played a crucial role, extending activities beyond the theatre’s confines. Huber emphasizes that the Odeon Theatre occupation was marked by an orchestrated drama of events, employing urban subversive festivities connected to May 1968 (Huber, 2022). A viral video featuring artists performing “*El Pueblo Unido*” in front of the Odeon Theatre on social media platforms further amplified this cultural phenomenon.

THE ARTIVIST MOVEMENT IN ATHENS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Since 2011, Athens has been enduring a long-lasting political and economic crisis that has transformed into a new normality, reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities, including gender facets (Vaiou, 2014). The city center experiences touristification and securitization (Koutrolidou, 2016), extending to surrounding areas, while outlying districts face systematic abandonment. Austerity policies impact the reconstitution of civil society, leading to a new form of ‘elite pluralism’ dominated by third-sector multinationals’ power and influence (Chorianopoulos and Tselepi, 2020). Concurrently, a variety of “grassroots collaborative initiatives” have emerged, contributing to the creation of “new commons” in the city (Stavrides, 2016). Before the pandemic, the link between resistance and art was explored in Greece, particularly in Athens. Argyropoulou investigated improvisation as a cultural activist practice with subversive potential, focusing on the Mavili Collective’s occupation of the *ΕΜΠΙΠΟΣ* Theatre in central Athens (Argyropoulou, 2016). Dimitriou, in an interview with Tzirtzilaki, advocated the reactivation of *ΕΜΠΙΠΟΣ* theatre as a space of commons (Dimitriou, 2020). Zervou “introduces an approach called Selbst-Erzählung (self-narrative) that engages with the narratives of the precarious as a De Certeauian ‘tactic’” (Zervou, 2017). The precariousness of everyday life in Greece, characterized by ongoing crises, has engendered a new condition of artistic creation. This is manifested through the self-narration of precarious experiences in politically autonomous spaces such as EMPROS, which deliberately host political and politicized performances.

The COVID-19 pandemic incited an insurrectionary landscape, prompting demands from various groups. Government measures in Athens, encompassing strict restrictions and selective actions prioritizing economic over health concerns, coupled with heightened policing, repression of specific spaces, and securitization (Leontidou, 2020; Zacharaki, 2022), disproportionately impacted residents based on class, ethnicity, and gender, suppressing rights in the city (Apostolopoulou and Liadaki, 2021), reinforcing spatial phenomena normalized by recurrent crises over the past decade. During this period, new grassroots initiatives emerged as a “solidarity infrastructure” (Arampatzi et al., 2022) with commoning practices against the marginalization of refugees (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022), and “creative resistances” where the act of denial can ignite creativity and resistance, leading to transformation (Zafeiris, 2024). Artists responded to restrictions on performing arts with balcony performances, mutual support initiatives, and later, street performances in various cities. They organized public space interventions to assert their rights rather than create spectacles. Incidents of police brutality spurred the student movement to defy quarantine measures, leading to a convergence with artists who incorporated performances into their protests (Zacharaki, 2022). The #MeToo movement had a significant impact on the theatre industry (Fragkou, 2022) and applied and online theatre in Greece as a spontaneous response to the health crisis was also explored (Gkerlektsi and Dimaki-Zora, 2021). Regarding street musicians a rich diversity of performers from different cultural backgrounds led to a plethora of adaptive strategies to survive, especially during the COVID-19 crisis in central Athens as they adapted their performances, utilized social media, and formed networks with other artists and local businesses to enhance visibility and support (Chryssanthopoulou et al., 2022).

The cultural sector in Greece has encountered significant challenges due to the pandemic, revealing structural issues, notably the prevalent practice of undocumented employment. Policies developed to address the pandemic did not consider the unique characteristics of the cultural sector, revealing the invisibility of art workers to the state and causing discontent among the majority. In response, artists got organized in trade union mobilizations and self-organized initiatives such as Musicians in Crisis, #SupportArtWorkers, Open Orchestra, *Οιστρογόνες* [Oistrogones], reflecting diverse creative mobilizations (Zacharaki, 2022). Karakioulafis explored the trade union mobilization of art professionals through #SupportArtWorkers (Karakioulafis, 2021) and the impact of the health crisis on the employment conditions of artists in Greece (Karakioulafis, 2022). Similarly, Tsioulakis explored how music work is affected by recurring crises in the Greek landscape through #SupportArtWorkers and Musicians In Crisis (Tsioulakis, 2021).

PERFORMING SUBVERSIVE FESTIVITIES IN ATHENS: RESULTS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The following empirical research examines two collectives that emerged in response to the aforementioned conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the analysis of a spatial subversion in which both collectives participated. However, their presence extends beyond mere resistance to the political and social conditions of the COVID-19 period. This was the impetus, demonstrating the importance of festivities in the public space.

Οιστρογόνες

Our first case study is *Οιστρογόνες* [Oistrogones], a collective that exemplifies a radical reimagining of protest by intertwining festivity, corporeality, and carnivalesque elements (Bakhtin, 1984) into their demonstrations.



Figure 2. Oistrogones Collective performing in Athens.

Formed overnight in June 2020 by networks of participants who have actively engaged in other struggles in the past, they self-describe as an “artistic collective of individuals who discuss theory, show their thighs and sing” (Oistrogones, n.d.) (Figure 2). Their formation as a collective was directly related to the restrictive and controlling climate of the health crisis and the subsequent need to assert their freedom of expression in the public space through bodies that were marginalized during quarantine in the private space. These elements advocated the creation of a feminist collective, forming a body-territory collective (Segato, 2014).

The collective has strong carnival elements, which have a direct correlation with previous active participation in collective actions such as the creation and development of the self-managed Metaxourgeio Carnival in Athens, a tradition rooted in the Athens Squares movement since 2010. *Οιστρογόνες* incorporates rhizomatic practices into their current performances, utilizing their past experiences to territorialize in urban space (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005), and are inspired, amongst other things, by Balkan traditional songs, that express a tradition of rebellion (Damianakos, 2003), which they incorporate into their demonstrations. Additionally, their central thesis revolves around the power derived from collective celebration and threshold theatricality (Stavrides 2010). As Maria stated:

“If we gather 2000 ballerinas in front of the Parliament and protest by dancing ballet, who will be able to object? Who will dare to oppose such a beautiful spectacle?”

also emphasizing the potential that lies in urban subversive festivities and exists within carnival practices as cracks (Bakhtin 1984; Holloway 2010).

What distinguishes *Οιστρογόνες* from other protesting collectives is a unique method of protest that integrates the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) in the collective protesting body. During protests, they perform, singing songs with antipatriarchal and anticapitalistic lyrics that are collectively written through an assembly. The lyrics often criticize or satirize the subject matter they address. Through the direct dissemination of the action, such as distributing leaflets with the lyrics to the surrounding crowd, they invite people to join together and create a unified, celebratory, collective body. Sophia said:

“A protest needs emotion to be effective. You can’t resist when you’re on the march and you’re sad. That is why the festivity is needed. The festivity includes within it the collective methexis [participation]

and katharsis [purification]. I strongly believe that beauty will save the world. And festivity is beauty. The festivity also creates a huge collective body. And in the protest, the collective body is ready. It is very important in a movement to create such feelings and to experience the space through them. Let's all together taste the power of the collective, of this Being that is created in the festivity. This is Poesis, this is being human. This is how I resist. That is Being”.

Apart from the aforementioned urban theatricality (Turner 1969; Stavrides 2010), intense physicality and vibrant clothing are also integral parts of the performance. The protest/performance condenses the collective body as a body-territory (Gago, 2019; Segato, 2014; Ysunza, 2020) with intense corporality deliberately pursued. Underscoring the connection between festivities and corporality, Athena focuses on physical movements that emphasize the sexualized parts of women's bodies:

“We have liberated bodies; we are irreparably exposed. It's not just what we do, but also how we do it. We use our whole body. This creates awareness. Once you gain self-awareness, you are not afraid”.

While integrated into the collective body of a demonstration, *Οιστρογόνες* differentiate themselves through their ‘artistic ingenuity’ (Oteiza, 2019). The intentional choice of vibrant attire, enhanced by carnival accents such as flamboyant wigs and extravagant cosmetics, aims to make a statement and highlight the participants’ unrestricted freedom to dress as they please. Additionally, this aligns with the conscious existence of carnivalesque as a form of resistance at the core of the collective, as noted by Irini:

“There's no conceivable scenario where we'd wear black clothes and venture onto the streets with solemn expressions unless it's an intentional part of a performance aimed at satirizing something. What we crave are rhinestones, glitter, and colors, a general exaggeration. We yearn to create an impact, to make a lasting impression. The Communards in the Paris Commune made noise. A revolution demands vividness, voices raised in unison, songs that stir the soul, and above all, emotion. [emphasizes] A lot of emotion”.

The unique dress code defies traditional gender roles, emphasizing the rebellious and festive nature of the community as a whole, while also emphasizing the individual's right to self-determination and personal expression. By intentionally infusing carnival elements as a means of resistance, the collective body showcases its inherent subversive strength.

The *Οιστρογόνες* methods, rooted in feminist ideologies (Gago, 2019; Lugones, 2008; Segato, 2014; Ysunza, 2020), leverage the power of collective celebration and theatricality to create a subversive, empowering space for marginalized bodies. By drawing on historical and cultural traditions of rebellion, as well as their own experiences in community-driven festivities (Damianakos, 2003), *Οιστρογόνες* craft a unique mode of resistance that is both visually striking and emotionally resonant. Their vibrant attire, collective singing, and dance challenge conventional protest paradigms, transforming public spaces into arenas of liberated expression and communal joy that coexists with the rebelliousness and rage (Nancupil Troncoso, 2024; Oteiza, 2019). This embodiment of resistance through festivity not only disrupts normative societal structures but also fosters a sense of unity and collective agency, highlighting the transformative potential of joy and beauty merged with resistance in sociopolitical movements. Through their innovative approach, *Οιστρογόνες* articulate a powerful critique of patriarchal and capitalist systems, demonstrating that protest can be a dynamic, celebratory act of defiance and solidarity.

Open Orchestra

The Open Orchestra (Open Orchestra, n.d.) originated from the #SupportArtWorkers movement (#SupportArtWorkers, n.d.), formed during the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for the rights of art workers adversely affected by the crisis and excluded from relevant labor measures. Originally confined to public spaces, the collective gradually transformed into the Open Orchestra as its members recognized the necessity for a street orchestra in Athens. Describing themselves as a “spontaneous, self-organized, and participatory orchestra,” their performances occur in public spaces like squares, parks, and streets (Figure 3).

The Open Orchestra, an ensemble of professional and amateur musicians, performs in communal spaces, challenging societal detachment and seeking to positively transform their surroundings. They hold regular open rehearsals on Philopappou Hill and participate in protests, aligning with Athens' social movements. Unlike *Οιστρογόνες*, whose territoriality is linked to the gendered body, the Open Orchestra asserts its territoriality through urban spaces. Participants share a consensus on the critical importance of public spaces for collective engagement, as articulated by Zoe:

“We believe that public space exists to nurture and enhance coexistence, exchange, and creativity”.



Figure 3. Open Orchestra performing in Athens, and in Mytilene (right picture).

The intersection of subversion and art, particularly with artists who conceptualize their actions in spatial terms creates a potent combination that allows for multifaceted opportunities. Since its creation, the Open Orchestra has consciously obtained a decolonial and anti-patriarchal approach (Lugones, 2008; Mignolo, 2007; Segato, 2022). The orchestra functions as a collective body that includes people of diverse identities, ages, genders, nationalities, and musical education. This is especially significant in the Greek context, where the assimilation and free expression of people from various ethnopic backgrounds face significant challenges in urban space (Stavrvides, 2016). In Athens, migrants, often subjected to spatial pressures and exclusions over time, find a space for free expression and spatial assertion within the Open Orchestra. In these contexts, Aris and Dimitris mention:

“We realized that beyond the socio-political part of the orchestra, how important it is that people who have no place elsewhere, have a place, and an important place in fact, in the Open Orchestra. And perhaps this is one of the biggest achievements of the Orchestra”.

Their commitment to engaging with diverse spatial contexts reflects their dedication to interacting with varied communities in both Athens and its peripheries (Figure 4). These areas have either experienced touristification or securitization in the past years (Koutrolidou, 2016) or have been affected by austerity policies (Chorianopoulos and Tselepi, 2020). In response, various initiatives have emerged, with which the Open Orchestra has been spatially involved. By utilizing public spaces for subversive festivities, the ensemble can reach a broad audience and establish meaningful connections with them. A foundational emphasis on openness and inclusivity constitutes a foundational mission and methodology, aiming to effect social change through musical initiatives.

The entire Orchestra consistently convenes in public spaces, with weekly congregations on Filopappou Hill in Athens. In addition, the collective organizes monthly open rehearsals in various neighborhood squares through Athens and Attica, fostering active participation in the wider social movement. For participants, subversive festivity begins long before the event or demonstration, with Filopappou Hill being central to this process. Preparatory measures are undertaken to organize the performances, with Sunday rehearsals being crucial to the orchestra’s existence. As per Katerina’s analysis, we can identify the subversiveness of the festivities through various aspects:

“Rehearsal for us is a political act, whether the Sunday rehearsal or the rehearsal in some neighborhood. It is not our exclusive goal to participate in every protest that happens. And just the fact that we consciously choose to rehearse on Filopappou Hill, a hill that has been sold and is being bulldozed,

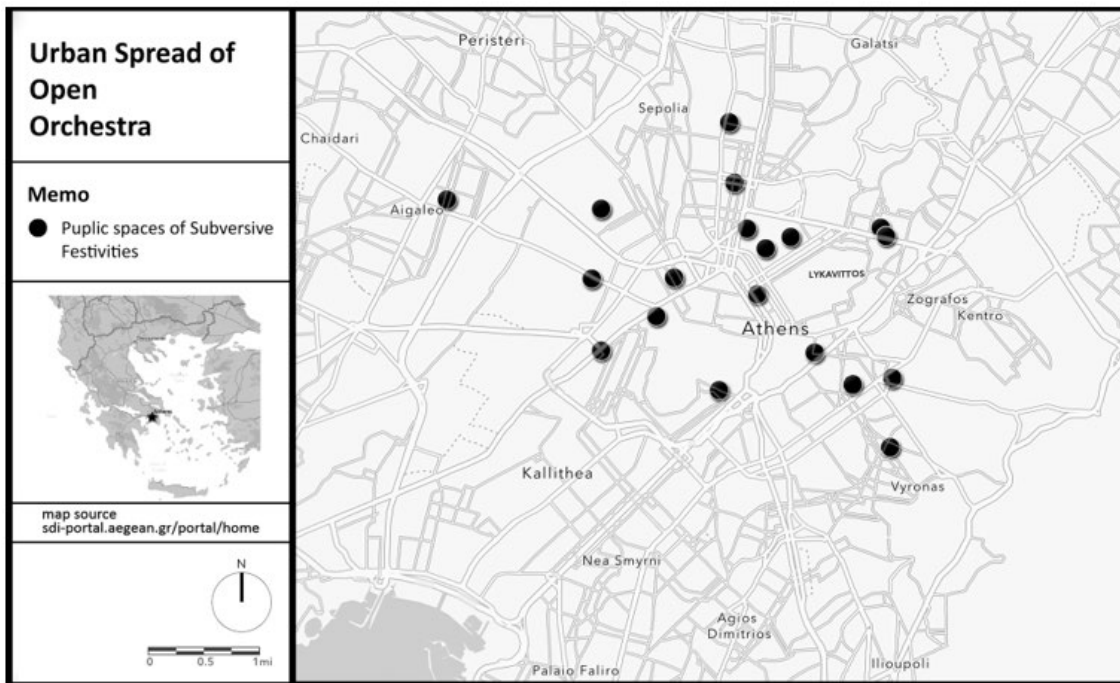


Figure 4. Urban spread of the actions of the Open Orchestra since 2021 in Athens.

where security guards come and tell us that we are not allowed to come in here with our instruments, this is a political act. It doesn't bother us that they don't want us there, but we have to deal with it. The Open Orchestra is there and will remain there".

For Ariadne, public space is crucial as such. While the Filopappou Hill serves as the established location for rehearsals, the Open Orchestra "goes wherever its presence is needed the most". For instance, the collective has performed in Roma neighborhoods in Athens, in various refugee and working-class districts, and even in refugee camps in Lesbos, creating uniquely subversive festivities tailored to each specific occasion. Consequently, through the collective body of the Open Orchestra, these subversive festivities are both deterritorialized and reterritorialized in various locations (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005). In her discourse, in essence, she associates the Open Orchestra's need to territorialize music in relation to public space:

"Our music is intertwined with the urban landscape. We believe our music can meet and converse with the public space. Open rehearsals in the neighborhoods are an effort of partnership and mutual support with the "forces" of each neighborhood. We want to play music, to spatialize our music, and through space, we try to change the reality in which we live".

Beyond open rehearsals, the Open Orchestra engages politically by fully participating in demonstrations with both instrumentalists and choir members. Like *Οιστρογόνες*, they differ from traditional marching collectives, functioning as a large, vibrant, and resonant entity. Although lacking carnival elements, they use colorful attire and creative placards to "share beauty," as Maria states. In challenging situations with strict police control or confinement, festive elements become crucial. As Konstantinos recounts:

"We managed to approach Alexis' memorial precisely because we were the instruments, which has never happened before on the anniversary of his murder, and we all got together and sang. It was a unique moment, one that could not have happened under any other circumstances."²

During their inaugural performance in April 2021, stemming from the #SupportArtWorkers movement, the Open Orchestra protested with a collective rendition of "El Pueblo Unido". This event, marking the orchestra's formal establishment led participants to commit to sustaining the urban dynamism it created. The performance echoed a similar gathering outside the occupied Odeon Theatre in Paris and was inspired by events in Chile in October 2019. Nikos's account highlights the rhizomatic process by emphasizing the spontaneous and decentralized organization of the performance, which, in its lack of central planning, embodies the non-hierarchical and interconnected nature of rhizomes, illustrating the horizontal spread of ideas and actions across geographic

² This is a reference to memorial day of 15 year old Alexis Gregoropoulos who was murdered on 06/12/2008 by a police officer.

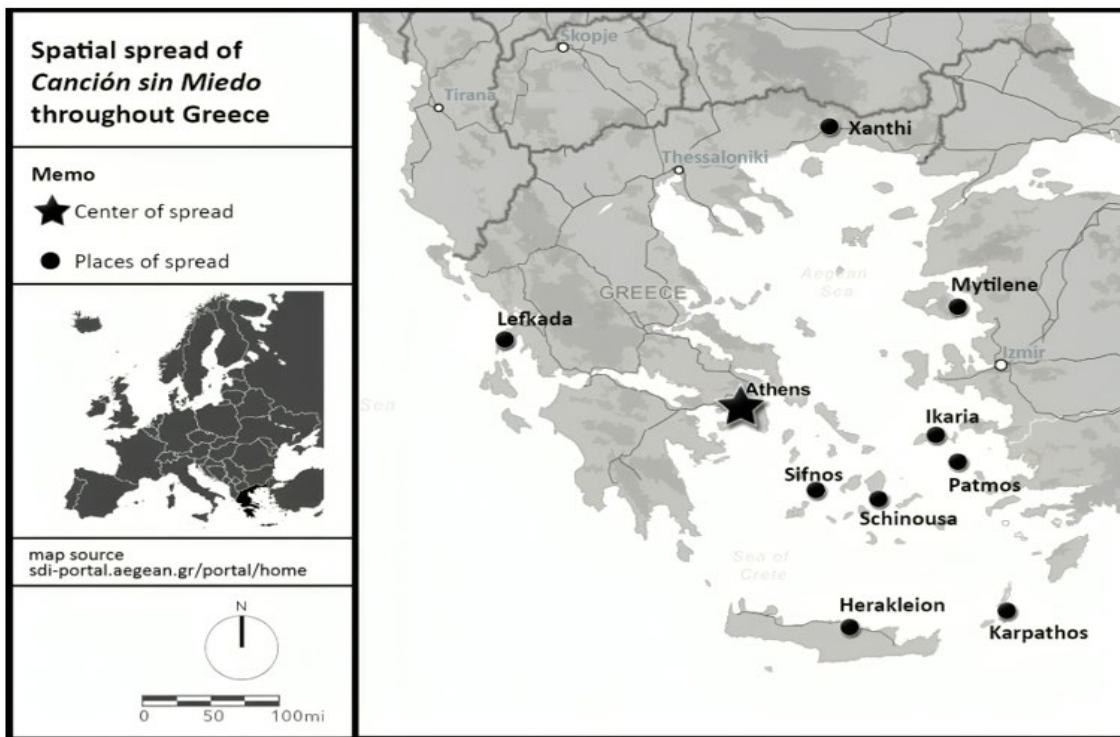


Figure 5. Spatial spread of “*Canción sin Miedo*” throughout Greece.

boundaries and the instinctive, origin-less response to global events that aligns with the rhizomatic principle of multiple, non-linear pathways of growth and connection:

“Those days, while being quarantined in our homes, we saw French artists being so dynamic in their claims through this artistic outburst. It was so inspiring. (...) [In our case] I can’t even recall how everything was organized. It was so straightforward – we just had to get out to the streets. One thing is certain: there was a shared sentiment; we all felt the need to reunite, to stand together, to shout out our support for those in France and beyond, and to voice our solidarity with them and with our own (...) It was a reminder, that no matter what the distance is, there are things that unite us and we will continue to fight for them”.

Although not always directly influenced by other movements, the Open Orchestra’s frequent use of rhizomatic processes indicates a conscious effort to align with global social movements for change. This approach involves territorializing global collective experiences in Athens’ urban space, fostering ongoing dialogue with various movements worldwide. The group documents their actions through YouTube videos, particularly when engaging with or drawing inspiration from other collectives. By constantly adapting the cultural capital of other communities (Fugellie, 2020), it maintains a dialogue with them. For instance, the Open Orchestra expressed solidarity to Turkey hunger strikes of Grup Yorum who fought for freedom of expression against the Erdogan regime, through the song, “*Tencere Tava Havası*” by Kardeş Türküler, by singing from the steps of Herodion along with #SupportArtWorkers.

Another significant contribution was their performance “*Canción sin Miedo*” [“Tragoudame dichos fovo”] in Greek. Initially performed at the March 8, 2022 march in Athens the song gained momentum and spread to feminist collectives throughout the country, introducing new toolkits for creative performance (Alonso et al., 2022). This transformation altered the enactment of feminist marches, progressively incorporating the poetic expression of struggles (Figure 5) and subversive festivities into the broader social movement, thereby contributing to the generation of an agonistic cultural capital (Fugellie, 2020) that has the potential to change the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Petropoulou, 2020).

FREE SELF-MANAGED THEATRE ΕΜΠΙΡΟΣ

In 2011 the abandoned building of the ΕΜΠΙΡΟΣ theatre, located in the Psyrri district of the municipality of Athens, was occupied by the Mavili Collective, a group of artists, as a “reactivation” of the space. After 2012, the ΕΜΠΙΡΟΣ theatre was re-occupied by an open assembly of activist artists and residents which manages the events held within. Their objective was not only to activate cultural spaces that had been abandoned but also to produce

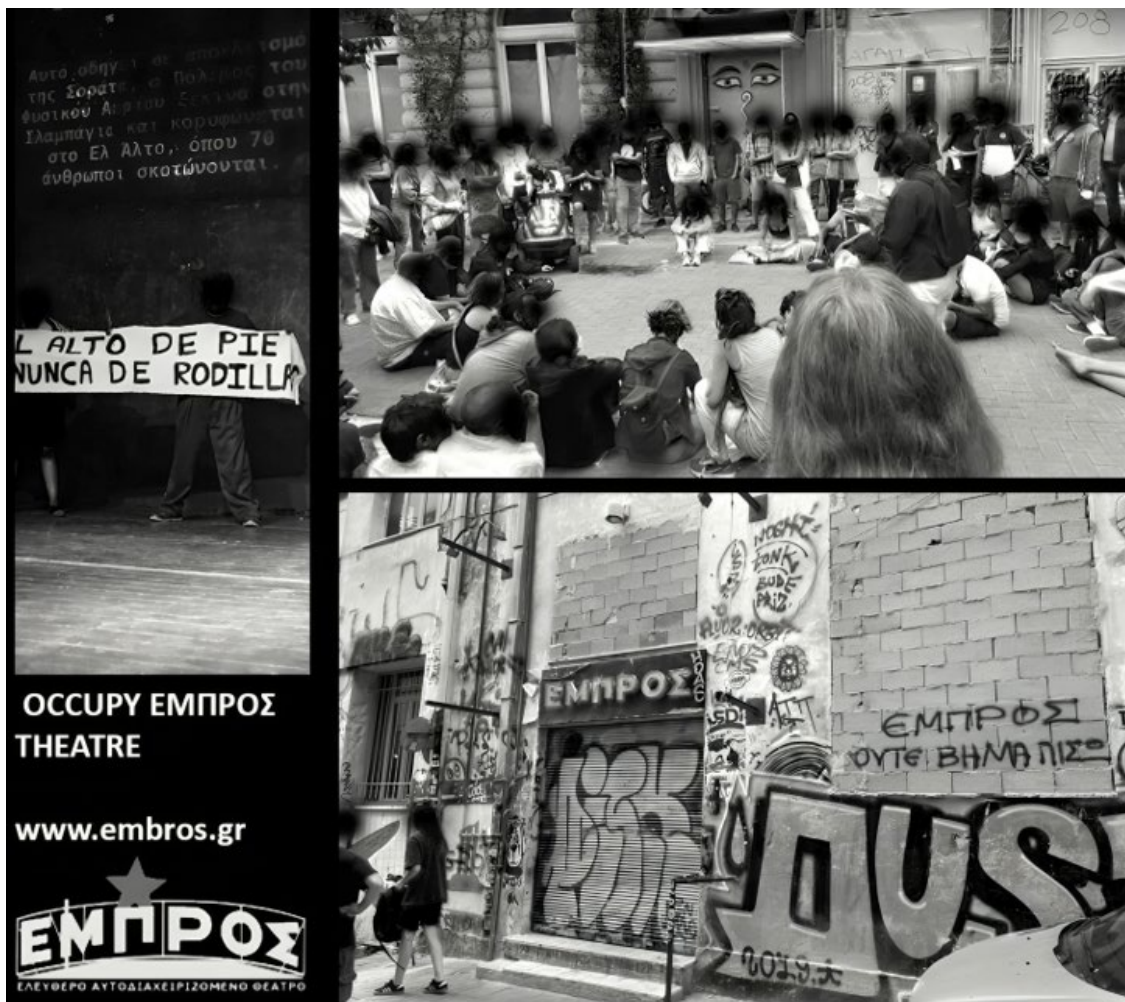


Figure 6. *ΕΜΠΡΟΣ* theatre during its operation before the pandemic, the sealing of the facades by the police, and the civic assembly outside the theatre after the reoccupation (for the reoccupation see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGfdnIwvZrc>).

a collective autonomous political narrative of the concept of theatre and a critique of the dominant culture through everyday actions (de Certeau, 1984). This challenged the entrenched cultural practices of Greece, particularly in the cultural space of Athens, and promoted artistic creation that emerged from shared collective concerns. Engaged in a wide range of activities [theatrical, musical, and other performances, solidarity actions, parties, collective classes, antifascist festivals, queer festivals, partnerships with artistic groups from all over the world, such as the ALBOR theatre from El Alto, Bolivia], the theatre's operations were continuous for a decade.

However, on 19 May 2021 the space was evacuated and sealed after a police operation, possibly in response to the intense artistic presence of the past few months in Athens. A few days later, following an assembly in defense of the theatre, people decided to reoccupy it. Not only did the reoccupation get carried out quietly, but on the contrary a huge collective body occupied the entire street, making it impossible to access the entrance where the occupation was taking place (Figure 6).

The result was a huge festive multitude dancing to the music of an orchestra, applauding the initiative and safeguarding the reopening of the theatre, which had been sealed off with concrete blocks. The “celebration of Art and Freedom,” as called, continued for several hours, while the audio and visual atmosphere remained dignified and triumphant. Both the Open Orchestra and *Οιστρογόνες* participated in the reoccupation, singing and celebrating collectively with the assembled multitude.

The reoccupation of *ΕΜΠΡΟΣ* was followed by almost three weeks of subversive festivities in front of the theatre, resembling the artistic practices that took place in Gezi Park (Tunali, 2018). Among other collectives and artists, the Open Orchestra and *Οιστρογόνες* participated in the creative week, while videos of the artistic actions, musical protests, and street life were constantly broadcast in social media, as Athens was in an interim situation due to quarantine. Although a new sealing of the theatre was attempted two days later, it was prevented through legal action against the Greek police for interfering with a designated monument without the necessary permission from the competent authority of the Ministry of Culture.

The Void Network group, one of the groups participating in *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* and an international group of anarchist cultural activists and theorists³, argues that the targeting of the *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* theatre is directly linked to the government's cultural policies, which they believe are closely aligned with the interests of large profit-driven institutions in the country. As declaration of Void Network (Void Network, 2021) says:

“*ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* is not only a space that hosts cultural activities and is managed by artistic groups; it is a form of reproduction of social space, which has self-organisation, mutual contribution, openness, inclusiveness and horizontality as essential determinants. For the rich kids who run the state and the salon bourgeois who write pamphlets in the bourgeois press, *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* should function like Tecnópolis⁴. For us, Tecnópolis, and all the institutions of the city, should function like the *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*”.

Part of the art movement that had been struggling in the previous months despite the limitations of the pandemic, was able to express itself in an extended space and time through the reoccupation of *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*. Although there was no strict quarantine, Athens at that time was still living under COVID-19 conditions. The reality that was established in front of *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* for those weeks was not at all a pandemic landscape. For Margarita from Oistrogones:

“After so many months of being locked up, what happened in *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* was like a dream. We suddenly found ourselves all together again [referring to the collective body of resistance] and forgot everything. In that moment, all else was forgotten, and joy, methexis, laughter, dancing and singing prevailed. We managed to take back our space, our lives and our professional identity”.

The symbolic value of the *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* theatre remains for the Open Orchestra:

“Art does not obey terror. (...) The thesis of the Open Orchestra is political, it supports *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* and every *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ* and will be there to sing the people's slogans and encourage necessary uprisings. (...) Together. With music and whatever else we have left” [Nikos].

On the other hand, Fenia from *Οιστρογόνες* points out the importance of art and festivity through collective action, summarizing the struggle to defend *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*:

“In the free self-managed theatre *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*, resistance alongside art is transformed into wild joy born out of collective actions toward the common vision of freedom and solidarity. That is why thousands of people came out in support of *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*. Art does not belong to large private institutions. Self-organization, solidarity, freedom, resistance now and always”.

CLOSING REMARKS

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional spatial arrangements, prompting a reevaluation of how urban spaces are utilized and engaged with. This is particularly evident in Greece's arts sector, where artists face financial insecurity. Yet, these challenges also prompted artists to mobilize, form collective bodies, and collaborate with other initiatives to advocate for their rights. Through this dialogue, new geographies are emerging in the public space, transforming the urban landscape with subversive and festive contexts. As Panagiotis summarizes:

“Public space is a free bazaar of ideas. Currently, both art and culture face threats due to the pandemic, and so does public space. For the first time since the dictatorship, a curfew is in effect, and all types of festivities have come to a halt. An unspoken battle is taking place on the street, which tends to become the last bastion of expression. The prohibition of gatherings carries significant risks, with theatres and cinemas shuttered, and art and artists being discredited. (...) It is a tombstone in art which is done because art educates and prompts citizens to ponder. And this is not convenient in this particular dark period. But festivities, I believe, will always find a way to resurface. Despite their prohibition, they persist in different places through alternative means. This is what I've witnessed in Athens – groups gathering on hillsides, playing music, singing, rehearsing, in parks, and in the groves. Festivity is now also in the city movements. Through festivity, we will endeavor to regain everything we lost.”

³ <https://voidnetwork.gr/about/>

⁴ Tecnópolis of the Municipality of Athens is a cultural center located in the Gazi district in central Athens, which has been linked to the area's gentrification (Avdikos, 2014). In this context, Technopolis is contrasted with *ΕΜΙΠΟΣ*, as Tecnópolis is associated with the cultural capital generated through the funding of major national institutions.

In contrast to the individual-focused pandemic climate, *Οιστρογόνες* and the Open Orchestra have brought transformative endeavors to Athens' urban space. Amid a temporal condition in which the body was confined to quarantine—restricted to the private space of the home and unable to engage with public space—*Οιστρογόνες* succeeded in reclaiming public space through corporeality, the collective body, and, particularly, through using their bodies as territory (Gago, 2019; Lugones, 2008). Their subversive festivities facilitated meaningful dialogues, emphasizing collective action and shared experiences. Engaging in street performances and feminist protests addressing gender issues (Ñancupil Troncoso, 2024; Oteiza, 2019), *Οιστρογόνες* focus on challenging patriarchal norms. Their previous commitment to other collective actions territorializes (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005) a tradition of rebellion (Damianakos, 2003) that exists in the city's artistic networks and offers unique instances of resistance. Through performance, they highlight their bodies as a form of resistance, which is particularly striking in a city facing crises and pandemic restrictions that are disproportionately gendered (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2021; Vaiou, 2014).

On the other hand, The Open Orchestra uses music as a form of protest, staging spontaneous performances in public spaces to foster community and solidarity. They harness the unifying power of music to claim space for self-expression, embracing diversity in gender, class, and nationality. These performances serve as acts of spatial subversion, emphasizing solidarity on migration (Arampatzi et al., 2022; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022) and incorporating a decolonial approach (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Additionally, they draw attention to spaces in Athens affected by socio-spatial segregation (Chorianopoulos and Tselepi, 2020; Koutrolidou, 2016; Leontidou, 2020) and contribute to the creation of a rhizomatic network (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005) across the country.

Both collectives have impacted Athens' urban landscape and contributed to urban subversive festivities in distinctive ways, as they pursue territoriality and shaping a new landscape of claims in Athens, demonstrating that public space constraints can be contested through urban subversive festivities within anti-systemic movements. In both cases, these collective bodies are influenced by the broader global anti-systemic movement or previous spatial practices, operating with rhizomatic processes. The network of territorialization and de-territorialization extending from Chile, Mexico and other locations to Athens (Figure 4) and back to the periphery (Figure 5) generates new forms of existence through urban subversive festivities, which influence everyday practices and offer an art of existence (Guerra, 2023); it remains to be studied whether these systemic practices (de Certeau, 1984), through the creation of liminal (Turner, 1969) and threshold conditions during festivities, contribute to the formation of new commons within the city (Stavrakas 2016) and have the potential to change habitus (Petropoulou, 2020; Wacquant, 2016).

However, the defence of *ΕΜΠΙΠΟΣ*, shows some first indications in this direction. The convened assemblies in public spaces, and the sustained artistic interventions, wherein the vibrancy of the street and festivity was consistently sustained (Tunali, 2018), all serve as evidence for the defense of artistic space based on their intrinsic content, particularly the grassroots origin of artistic expression. The fact that the multitude rallied to protect the theatre highlights the futility of any attempt to suppress artistic creation when it is created collectively. During these moments, calls for defense and the public's response also constituted a more extensive political critique of the government's handling of social spaces and squats, as well as the artistic community itself. *ΕΜΠΙΠΟΣ* managed to secure essential support through their struggles for continued existence. The tradition of rebellion within Athens has persisted and continually rejuvenated itself. The realm of culture and the performing arts has successfully combined theoretical constructs with practical applications, emphasizing the intricate interplay between artistic, social, and political dimensions. Moreover, it has undertaken to reinterpret, redefine, and reconfigure the role of art within the prevailing circumstances, notably amidst a pandemic emergency.

In a global scale, giant puppets accompanying the anti-globalization movement, the carnival dimensions of the protest in Gezi Square (Tulke, 2021), female crowds singing collectively in #NiUnaMenos (Ñancupil Troncoso, 2024), huge singing orchestras in Chile (Fugellie, 2020) and women performing the Las Tesis dance to demonstrate the role of power in sexual abuse (Oteiza, 2019) are a few instances of a novel mode of political, yet festive, resistance. These collective actions no longer represent an exception that engages creatively with resistance but rather a widespread movement that claims public space, spreads through subterranean networks, disseminates rhizomatically, and territorializes on a global scale (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005). This phenomenon suggests a transformation of space, the production of cultural capital, and the potential to alter habitus (Petropoulou, 2020; Wacquant, 2016). In the case studies of this article, we identify the imperative of territorialization of the collectivities under consideration, both through corporeality (Gago, 2019; Lugones, 2008; Segato, 2014; Ysunza, 2020) and through public space (Lefebvre, 1991). Furthermore, we demonstrate the importance of the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of Athens, where governmental restrictions on public space acted as a catalyst for these spatial expressions of resistance.

In response to the research questions posed at the outset we argue that urban subversive festivities extend beyond mere artistic practices. Rather they are integral components of wider struggles, as they have the potential to transcend conventional limitations and reconfigure the significance of public space. Through rhizomatic

processes these festivities spread as collective bodies and create cracks within the urban space. Moreover, the critical, decolonial, and anti-patriarchal perspectives signify and define the outcome of the spatial subversion generated in subversive festivities. In the specific context of the pandemic, where spatial constraints confined individual bodies, the collective bodies formed through subversive festivities territorialized, expanded, and challenged spatial significations. Beyond the initial questions raised in the research, personal engagement with the collectives raised new concerns. The systematic action of the paradigms suggests the possibility of changing the habitus expressed in public space. When collectives, that consciously embrace an antipatriarchal and anticolonial perspective (Lugones, 2008), are formed around festivity and the inherent power it contains, such as the *Οιστρογόνες* and the Open Orchestra, they constitute a creative subversion, amplifying their impact. Just like the carnival multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2005) they have the potential to disrupt the whole city when they occur (Bakhtin 1984). The notion of subversive festivity invites the exploration of new modes of resistance: those of wild joy and fearless discourse.

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