

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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