Culture as a Process of Negotiation

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Habilitation thesis abstract

This habilitation thesis reconstructs the trajectory of my research since obtaining my doctoral degree through the lens of a set of questions that gradually took shape as my research interests evolved. Despite differences in field sites, approaches, and theoretical frameworks, my scholarly trajectory has consistently examined cultural phenomena not as a stable set of forms transmitted directly and without tension, but as a field of negotiation in which tradition, identity, belonging, authority, and heritage are continuously selected, reinterpreted, performed, and legitimised. Considered individually, my works span ethnology and folkloristics, cultural and digital anthropology, protest studies, humour studies, the anthropology of literature, heritage studies, and the analysis of relationships between religious authority and secular power. Viewed in succession, however, they reveal a coherent shift from investigating how tradition operates in an accelerated society towards a broader examination of the mechanisms through which cultural forms acquire meaning, circulate, and become resources for belonging and legitimation.

In this reconstruction, negotiation is not employed as a retrospective label intended to impose artificial coherence on the different topics I have addressed throughout my career. Rather, it emerges from the objects of study themselves and from the concepts developed over time. E-tradition was conceptualised as a process of selecting and producing cultural content within digitally mediated communities, in which conformity to established models coexists with individual intervention. My studies of protest examined how authority is contested and how legitimacy is produced through emotion, humour, ritualisation, and digital circulation. My research on heritage shifted the emphasis towards the selection and redefinition of the ways in which communities construct their own cultural representations, while the analysis of religious restrictions in 2020 made the negotiation of the very boundaries between spheres of authority the explicit object of ethnographic investigation.

This perspective also explains the interdisciplinary character of the research corpus. Cultural studies provide a framework within which literary texts, rituals, online forums, hashtags, memes, street protests, Facebook pages, traditional masks, and the legend of Master Manole can be approached not as incompatible objects, but as sites where meanings are produced and negotiated. The aim is not to dissolve disciplinary differences, but to make productive use of them. Ethnology focuses on practices and contexts; folkloristics provides tools for examining variation, circulation, and traditionalisation; digital anthropology makes it possible to trace continuities between online and offline environments; cultural studies enable the analysis of relationships between representation, identity, and power; and heritage studies shift the emphasis towards selection, authorisation, and the presentification

of the past. My research trajectory incorporates these perspectives within a coherent framework.

The thesis is organised thematically and conceptually rather than as a bibliographical sequence. I have avoided presenting an annotated chronology of publications, choosing instead to highlight the cumulative contributions of my research and their capacity to generate a future research programme. In each chapter, I revisit published findings, establish connections between them, and, where necessary, reassess them in light of subsequent theoretical developments. Some concepts employed in the earlier stages of my research trajectory—virtual community, prosumerism, Web 2.0, and crowdsourcing—belong to the theoretical context in which they were originally formulated and may now appear outdated. They remain historically relevant to the argument, but today need to be complemented by concepts such as platformisation, algorithmic visibility, affordances, affective publics, and digital curation.

A second principle underpinning the thesis is the strict distinction between individual research and scientific coordination. The collective volumes and special journal issue that I have coordinated are discussed in the section devoted to developing research projects and scholarly communities. The contributions of the authors of these volumes are not presented as findings of my own research. Conversely, where I have published an original study in an edited volume or special issue, it is discussed in the corresponding thematic chapter. This distinction is important both for ensuring accurate attribution and for making visible two different types of scholarly competence: the individual production of knowledge and the ability to formulate research agendas, bring researchers together, and coordinate collective projects.

Overall, I propose that the thread connecting these investigations can be described through four modes of conceptualising cultural phenomena: negotiation, mediation, circulation, and legitimation. These operate across recurring themes—tradition, identity, community, authority, and heritage—and enable a transition from the analysis of particular cultural forms towards a more general model of culture as process. Within this model, cultural meaning is neither exclusively a property of the object nor solely the outcome of individual intention. Rather, it is constituted relationally, through encounters between actors, repertoires, institutions, technologies, and publics.