

INTERPRETERS OF CULTURES. DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE
CULTURES IN CONTACT*Claudio POVOLO*University Ca'Foscari of Venice, Department of History,
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e-mail: povolo@unive.it**ABSTRACT**

An interpreter of culture is fundamentally a person who, in the process of carrying out his activity, establishes a relationship between learned culture and a culture that can be defined as more properly popular. In this process the interpreter has at his disposal cultural codices which inevitably entail a certain selection and determine choices characterised, on the whole, by their essentially historiographic value. This operation becomes even more important at such a moment as when, for instance, beginning with the second half of the 18th century, a substantial diversification starts taking place between dominant and popular cultures. Thus the everyday world, dominated by oral form and flexibility, becomes a subject of study and interest of important representatives of the dominant culture. With the rise of folklore the popular world seems to re-emerge from an indistinct yet fascinating past. But even subsequent anthropological studies will have to face the key problem of the very definition of culture. It is possible to recognise in the usual institutional figures who perform their activities in the social world interrelationships between the various forms of culture. Through their concrete work, public notaries, judges, lawyers, physicians, priests and many other institutional figures act as direct vehicles of the diversifications and interrelationships between multiple forms of culture. Similarly, travellers and diarists express in their memories the decisive aspects of the cultures described as well as the stereotypes and prejudices from their own worlds.

Key words: interpreters, cultures, judicial anthropology

With relation to cultural dimension, the main aspect of the term interpreter aims to underline primarily the act of interpreting carried out by those individuals who, over the course of centuries, have approached a culture different from their own due to their specific activity or interests, with the aim of outlining its characteristics, or, likewise, to relate it somehow, with other objectives or intentions, to their own cultural codes.

The act of interpreting obviously involves different levels of analysis. First of all, it presupposes an operation of maneuvering between two cultures. This cross cultural maneuvering displays not only more or less significative or generalized features of diversity, but also the capacity and the interest of the individual who describes in order to transmit the *other* culture, with the help of more or less codified interpretative parameters. It seems obvious that this operation emphasizes above all the transmission between oral communication and writing, between the written customs and norms, between a law that is deeply ingrained into the social practices and rites and the intricate language of institutions.

The act of interpreting emphasizes those individuals who, with different objectives and interests, created a relationship between the wide range of popular cultures and dominant cultures.¹

The connotation of the term *interpreters*, and especially *interpreting*, is used to emphasize the inevitably *historiographic* function (even if only of institutional character) of those who, through their activities, condensed in their writing and their works the physiognomy and characteristics of cultures to which they did not (partly or wholly) belong. This is a historiographic function that is being weighed, delineated and evidently captured in its most essential characteristics. And this presupposes, for those who turn their attention and interest to these *interpreters*, a further act of interpreting that aims not only to outline the cultural codes used by interpreters, but also to, in as much as possible, arrive at the heart of the very culture they are describing.

The *historiographic* value included in the activity of the interpreters implies, obviously, that not only the cultural components related to their role and functions are being considered, but also that there is an awareness of how this same activity has considerably changed over the course of time. The diachronic dimension of time and the cultural context within which the *interpreters of cultures* functioned, thus reveal

1 On the terminology and meanings related to the definition of popular culture, see also Cirese, 1973. It seems evident that the term *popular culture* (or *religion*) (in its singular meaning) is intended above all in its juridical and customary dimension, characterised essentially by orality and the flexibility and openness of its propositions. Underlining the plurality of forms of popular culture can seem obvious or granted on the historical level, if we consider the multiplicity of contexts that characterised them. The emphasis on the term *custom*, especially in the way it is used here, is used to identify some of the common features active within popular cultures.

their own capacity to put into relation the different social stratifications existing in every society.²

All this presupposes a different kind of reflection: what was the relation between the varying popular and customary cultures on the one hand and the dominant and written cultures on the other? How many and which elements united or, likewise, divided the two? And which institutional hierarchies and actual powers did the diversifications and mixtures follow? In what measure and when did the dominant cultures attain the cultural codes that differentiated them considerably, if not entirely, from the popular cultures?

As Peter Burke noted, it was during the course of the 18th century (but even earlier in some geographical areas) that the so-called *withdrawal of the ruling classes* occurred, and with it the resulting split between the dominant and subordinate cultures, that had shared many values only as far back as the 16th century.³

The weakening of these shared values coincided with strong waves of opposition, albeit with different intensity and time, from the Protestant and Catholic countries alike, directed at some of the most typical characteristics of popular religious devotion. These include "holy representations ('miracles' and 'mysteries'), popular sermons and especially religious feast days, like days dedicated to saints and pilgrim-

2 This problem is, in a way, extremely recent and poses some inherent problems on the theoretical level, such as that of religious concepts and their relation to other perspectives human beings use to interpret the world. Clifford Geertz, in emphasising that the religious perspective is a particular way of interpreting the world, observes how this perspective differs from the perspective of common sense, in that it complements the reality of everyday life by resorting to other, broader realities. In this sense, this perspective also differs from the scientific, since it doubts everyday reality in favour of more vast realities. Through ritual, the religious notion is strengthened and acquires validity. All this, obviously, has a strong social impact. Geertz observes that the impact of religious systems on social systems "makes generic judgments of religion in moral or functional terms impossible. One of the main methodological problems when writing scientifically on religion is to immediately do away with the atheist and the preacher of the village, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents, so that the social and psychological implications of particular religious beliefs can emerge clearly and in a neutral way... Of course, there is still the non negligible detail regarding the truth of an assertion or the authenticity of a religious experience, or the possibility of veracity of religious assertions or genuine religious experiences. But questions like these cannot be posed, and much less can their answers be found, within the limits a scientific discipline imposes on itself" (cf. Geertz, 1987, 168–182).

3 "The crucial knot of all these examples would be the insistence of the reformers on the separation of the sacred and the profane, a separation that at the time began to be made much more clearly than in the Middle Ages". Feast days were seen as "occasions for sin, more particularly, for drunkenness, greed and licentiousness [...]; another argument of moral order against popular entertainment was the belief that these occasions represented "vanity", which was not dear to God, since it made people lose time and money" (Burke, 1980, 203–211). As the English scholar noticed, "the Catholic reformers of popular culture were less radical than the Protestant ones; they did not oppose the cult of the saints, but only its "excesses", like the cult of false saints, the belief in certain anecdotes from the life of the saints, or the expectation that saints would provide earthly favours, like healing and protection; they demanded that the feast days be officially recognized, not entirely abolished".

ages". The crucial knot of opposition was in the insistence of the reformers to separate the world of the sacred from that of the profane.

Undoubtedly, the split between dominant and popular (customary) culture was witnessed with interest already during the 18th century by both ecclesiastic and political intellectuals and reformers dedicated to popular culture. This interest was targeted toward the *description* of a world that was perceived as different, but also seen as having exotic and superstitious traits.⁴

It is this *description* that ultimately testified that the split between the two cultures became relevant and was not situated merely, as in the previous centuries, by the contempt often shown by the intellectual and political elite with regard to popular and peasants' cultural values which were shared to a great extent.⁵

The 18th century also saw the emergence of an increasing interest in cultural customs. As noted by Louis Assier-Andrieu, the concept of custom gradually acquired a tradition and dynamic and, although it still seemed to be represented in an atemporal dimension, the investigation into its material causes lead to a "relativisation of its influence in the context within a certain society, in any given moment of its evolution and situated in relation to a plurality of social determinants" (Assier-Andrieu, 1999, 20–21, 27).⁶

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- 4 In his historical review, Paul Erickson wrote: "Enlightenment schemes of universal history were united by the common themes of human reason, progress, and perfectibility. Reason referred to the exercise of human intellect unfettered by authoritarian faith, including faith in religion. Progress referred to the resulting positive direction of historical change, opposite the direction presupposed by medieval Christianity, which considered humanity degenerate and fallen from the grace of God" (Erickson, 1999, 36–37).
 - 5 In relation to this, Peter Burke reports how it was precisely the gap created between the two cultures that forced even the intellectuals and reformers to observe popular culture in terms of something like *description*: "the changing of the attitude of the men of culture was really considerable: if in 1500 they disdained the common people but shared their culture, in 1800 their descendants spontaneously stopped participating in popular culture, but were on the verge of re-discovering it as something exotic and therefore interesting. In fact, they started to admire the "common people" from which this profoundly different culture took its roots" (cf. Burke, 1980, 277).
 - 6 The author focused on the first studies that, since the 18th century, dealt with the concept of custom, especially the works by P.-J. Grosley, who saw custom as "an element with the capacity to adapt to the changing reality of human relations, directly deducible from empiric observation of social facts, and an element of the fundamental essentiality of these relations, inscribed in an unavailable regularity and a negating permanence of every historicity. The custom is therefore either a living site of change, or the authoritarian call to the obedience to the origins or, in today's words, the structure, atemporal and ahistoric by definition." With A.-Y. Gouget, the concept of custom later acquired historicity and dynamic, and became linked to its material context. Jurists and anthropologists focused on the concept of custom, trying to identify its theoretic and material traits. A delineation of juridical custom can be found in Losano, 2000, 257–323. The *Voice*, written some years ago by Bobbio, 1961, is of great importance. Although referring mainly to traditional African juridical systems, Rouland (Rouland, 1992, esp. 177–200) examines the concept of custom in intense correlation to the concept of community. Extensive and original reasoning on customs (and their declination in the vendetta of the Sardegna region Barbegio) can be found in Pigliaru, 1975. In relation to the concept of custom, I would also like

The researchers into cultural customs could be considered the first declared *interpreters of culture*, like those that, with varying functions, were describing the rural world (one needs only think of the example of intellectuals who worked in the agrarian academies), or the customs of the peoples who were primarily recognized by their cultural diversity (such as works by A. Fortis which describe the Dalmatian Morlacchi⁷).

It becomes evident that these *descriptions* manifest their singular interest primarily through the choice of interpretative codes, used by these intellectuals to connote the culture examined.

We are, without doubt, on the verge of the birth of folklore, a process now well under way and witnessed by the research carried out by the Academie Celtique during the first and second decades of the 19th century, directed at investigating the diffusion of some popular traditions.⁸

The phenomenon is clearly perceivable on the political and institutional level, too. Consider only the reforms introduced in almost all European countries in relation to the so-called *popular feast days*. On this occasion, too, the objectives of the reform and the resulting *descriptions* clearly denoted their historiographic stamp, in that no attempt was made to hide the reformatory objectives directed at the excessive number of feast days, which not only created disorder and took time from economic activities, but also fully manifested a high degree of popular belief and superstition. As we will have occasion to see, the act of describing these events was more or less entrusted to priests who, even on these occasions, carried out the significant function of acting as *interpreters of cultures*.⁹

Folklore began to emerge, a phenomenon that denotes its full historiographic spectre, since it reveals from its very beginning the codes, cultural stylistic elements and interpretative paradigms of the exponents of the dominant culture and the definitive split between dominant and popular culture.

As P. Clemente observes, folklore was born "of the need arisen with Romanticism to use the cultural resource of the 'roots of the people' and preserve that potentiality of the point of reference for different cultures."

to point to my own article in the coming publication of contributions published in honour of L. Berlinguer, *La piccola comunità e le sue consuetudini* ('The Small Community and its Customs').

7 This work by Fortis was published in 1774. For a more recent edition, see Viani, Pizzamiglio, 1986. See also Paladini, 2002 and the fascinating Magno, 2003.

8 On this project and its application in the region of Veneto see Riva, 1966, 3–93, and Bernardi, 1986, 311–334.

9 See also the bibliography by Povoło, 2007c.

The folklorist and the investigator of popular tradition have long since considered their work to be *scientific* in nature, similar to that of the entomologist, inclined to classify and be placed in the *drama* of the almost inevitable extinction of popular traditions.

Folklore studies, as Clemente reveals, have always lacked a precise theory of social and cultural change, "and resorted to very simple models that induced the new to the old in an ahistoric fashion".¹⁰

The figure of the folklorist is nevertheless of great interest, since, as already stated, it reveals the cultural criteria used by the representatives of the dominant culture when describing the subordinate cultures. Moreover, their acts of *interpreting* filter the information and expose the hierarchical structures hidden beneath the surface.¹¹

In the particular Italian context, as has been observed, the study of popular traditions or *folkloristics* always remained prevalent in comparison to the subsequent ethnographic studies. This however was not the case in some other countries, such as France, England, Germany or the United States. It's evident that colonization and decolonization have had a strong impact on the expansion of anthropological studies, up to the point of setting them, at the beginning of the 1950s, in the same European social context.¹² One of many examples is the field of research on the subject of honour that many Anglo-Saxon researchers investigated in the countries of the Mediterranean.

The overall crisis that affected anthropology after the end of colonialism and later, is an understandable result of this process and led to the prevalence of Post-modern theories of subjectivism and skepticism.¹³ A recent work dedicated to the

10 For the passages cited and, more generally, the controversial history of the relation among ethnological disciplines and cultural anthropology, see also Clemente, 2001, 194 and *passim*.

11 It becomes evident that the interpretative activity of the folklorist denotes either the difference of level between written and oral culture or the pre-eminent hierarchic position within which it is posed. These two aspects however did not imply a supposed *passivity* of the described world, in that the authors of the descriptions had to resort to *informants* (members of the community or priests) that inevitably mediated the transmitted information. Sometimes the *describers* themselves had to function as spokespersons of conceptual cases that weren't always in their range. P. Clemente (Clemente, 1995, 45–50), when referring to the investigation of the Académie Celtique, entrusted to the intellectual representatives of bourgeois culture, underlines how "the investigations are projections of conceptual models translated in questions to different interlocutors, who were intellectuals, educated or politically active. The notions related to the 'different' uses and customs of everyday life of farmers or citizens came to be defined by strong impulses of philosophical-literary nature, present in the innovative intellectual classes and not always in the scope of intermediate intellectuals" (Clemente, 1995, 46–47).

12 An example of great importance is the work by Pitt-Rivers, 1971, second edition, where in the preface Pitt-Rivers, among other things, addressed the problems related to the conclusion of his work, first published in 1954.

13 A considerable influence, for other disciplines as well, is presented by the works of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Paul Erickson recalls how "throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Foucault's and

anthropological studies developed in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States clearly reveals how a discipline has certainly not resolved the complex relation between the concept of *culture* (with its own interpretative problems) and the individual ethnographic research (see also Barth et al., 2005). In other places, as we shall see, the anthropologist, similar to the folklorist, even if with much more sophisticated interpretative parameters, had to confront problems inherent to *description*.

This was called the strong Italian folkloric tradition, which was probably due to the community, civil or regional dimensions that characterized the country's history for decades. It must also be pointed out, however, how the ethnological dimension in Italy was profoundly influenced, especially from the end of the 19th century onwards, by studies in the history of law, traditionally oriented towards the study of the classical world. The history of law, traditionally sensitive to that realm of cultural customs that contained everything informal or related to non-written traditions, could emerge from society, and justifiably began to provide to the emergent Italian ethnology those interpretative instruments necessary for an exit from the folkloric impasse. The attention of the historiographers of law to the world of customs (think of, for example, Italy in the work of N. Tamassia; Tamassia, 1910)¹⁴ eventually generated the emergence of some anthropological and political dynamics that had been muted by the folkloric tradition.

Some of the contemporary researchers of the history of law developed interesting theoretical elaborations in this respect. The Portuguese historian A. M. Hespanha repeatedly stated in his work that law in the organization and control of social relations also incorporated deeply anthropological content.

The emphasis placed by this meeting on *interpreters of cultures* therefore sees the relation between the different cultural codes and modes of their description as essential. In this respect, the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz helps to better define the essential elements of the type of approach adopted by the historian or the anthropologist. As noted by Ugo Fabietti, "the cognitive process in anthropology is established, following Geertz, through two types of concepts, the "near" and the "far" from the experience of the native". The near concepts are those that the *interpreter* uses without difficulty and that belong to the same culture that is being described.

Bourdieu's ideas had a dramatic impact on anthropological theory. Depending on one's sympathies, their work has been highly illuminating or deeply mystifying. In either case, it is clear that for many researchers, suddenly there seemed no centre, no firm ground from which students of human life could gaze objectively at their subject matter. Henceforth no 'truth' would be taken for granted and no perspective left unchallenged. Deconstruction became a new watchword for anthropologists, because the sanguine ambition of positivism to explain the world was no longer seen as a possibility" (Erickson, 1999, 142–143).

14 Nino Tamassia (1860–1931) was the long-time lecturer of the history of Italian Law at the University of Padua.

The far concepts are those that cannot easily be related, without many distinctions, to the described experiences. The concept of superstitious belief, as used by 18th century reformers to describe the religious feast days, was clearly a concept far from the experience of the rural population, which identified motivations of an apotropaic nature in the religious rites (cf. Fabietti, 1994, 298–299).¹⁵

In a similar way as the historian, the anthropologist must move between the two orders of concepts and carry out a constant inspection of their interpretative activity that puts the two in relation.

The action of the interpreter is therefore essential and that much more relevant if situated in a historical context that reaches us through descriptions in written sources demanding a subsequent interpretation. This aspect, if generally and prudently applied to all historical research, takes on a weighty meaning in research aimed at identifying the dimension of cultures essentially characterized by orality and custom.

It is evident that in this direction the definition of interpreters and their role (hierarchical more than cultural) in different societies is essential and determinant for the projection of the complex and undefined links between popular and dominant culture.

The disciplinary categories are in a way insufficient for a clear configuration of the figure of the *interpreter*, if they are not inserted into a concrete historical context. Its institutional and juridical validity, however, constitute a privileged starting point.

The role of the jurist as interpreter undoubtedly assumes primary importance. It was A. M. Hespanha who observed, for example, that even if in the pre-codified (up to the end of the 18th century) societies, a pluralistic reading of law and authority was impossible to avoid, however the jurists "made explicit what everyday life maintained implicit, although functioning [...] they made the social unconscious explicit in their theories. They then gave that back to society in the form of an articulated ideology converted into the norm of action" (Hespanha, 1999, 27).¹⁶

15 As Fabietti observes, two orders of concepts express the relation of the anthropologist to the subjects described: "The first are those 'that anyone [...] in our case an informant could use naturally and without strain to define that what he and his colleagues see, feel, think, imagine and what they would readily comprehend when these concepts would be used in a similar way by others'. The concepts which are 'far from experience' are those with contrary characteristics: 'love' and 'nirvana' are two concepts near to our experience and the experience of a Hindu, in the same way as 'cathexis of the object' and 'religious system' are, for the majority of people in love and believers two concepts 'far' from their experience. Anthropological knowledge, says Geertz, oscillates between these two poles, between the renewal of concepts 'near' and 'far' from the experience of the natives, in a constant attempt, we could say, of *controlled translation* of the former into the latter".

16 And adds: "In one way or another, they carry out an extremely important role in the reproduction of cultural models and the construction of mental schemes that will remain active in European culture over centuries".

It's evident that the jurist as *interpreter* always makes reference to the vast and complex world of customs. Embedded in precise hierarchies of power and animated by a juridical order with strong jurisdictional validity, he placed the customs in a frame of class reference, using the *interpretative* parameters that were profoundly influenced by his high level of culture. If in customary law every social fact had its juridical validity and symbolically recalled the past, the educated jurist and interpreter (like the doctor inspired by customary law) had to resort to a reference frame connotated by abstraction and learned interpretative paradigms.¹⁷ If the right of women to inherit was connotated by the complexity of the social relations within which the woman was placed, the educated jurist necessarily had to put this right with reference to a system of succession connotated, in a contradictory fashion, by the *dote congrua* as well as the legitimate feminine one.¹⁸

The jurist was the person who had to reconcile the complexity of social practices with the abstraction of the juridical definition.

Much in the same vein, the criminal jurist operates in the field of the procedures (*ordines iudicarii*) as well as in the field of crime typology. It was therefore the educated jurist, and this is not the case in just some examples, who was the one who devised such institutes as the *difesa per patrem* or the different typologies of the criminal act of murder which all hid a society profoundly animated by feudal relations. The vast typology of cases aimed to analytically regulate the system of evidence and the procedures of giving testimony make reference to a society dominated by kinship and lineage. It becomes evident that this typology could be used in various ways on the basis of the particulars of the procedure used.¹⁹

The jurist who carried out the profession of judge found himself directly in the realm of customs where traditions, rites and culture are alternately connotating the specific traits of popular culture. The judge of the medieval and early modern age was theoretically and practically bound by the system of legal evidence and testimonies; he carried out the function more of a historiographer and an anthropologist, regulating the conflicting dynamic related to feudal rights. The punishment itself was intended as a retribution that had to mitigate, but not annihilate the social and family demands for a *just revenge*.²⁰ Even when the punishment was connotated by a request for punitive action, it stood mainly to indicate the need to defend and regulate the social equilibrium of the community (see also Lenman, Parker, 1980). The *inter-*

17 On these topics and the creative efficacy of law, understood as proper cultural activity, see also Hespanha, 1999, especially 61–68.

18 These topics were tackled, putting in relation the juridical disposition and anthropological analysis, by Goody, 1995, 281–306.

19 For these issues, see Povoło, 2007a.

20 For a historical *excursus* on the topic, see also Cantarella, 2007; for the contemporary period, see Povoło, 2007a.

pretative activity of the judge was thus directed even further into *reproducing* and defending both a class and legal order that was considered unchangeable; more so than into obtaining the truth inherent in the events examined.

However, when the system of legal evidence gives way to so-called *moral evidence* and the unhindered attempt at influencing the judge, the judge's investigation was directed at creating a *procedural truth* and, with it and because of it, the reluctance of the popular culture to reveal its physiognomic traits was weakened. With the emergence, beginning in the 16th century, of the inquisitory process, replete with the requisites of secrecy and investigation, the judge's profile underwent great changes in most European countries.²¹ Since then, it has been considered that truth is pre-existent to the process and that the task of the judge is to establish the truth in all its aspects.²² Regardless of the scepticism that soon spread (also among professionals) regarding the actual possibility to make the procedural reality coincide with the actual one, it became evident that an investigation centred on the different understandings of the role of testimony and evidence helped elicit significant qualitative, and sometimes even previously unknown information.²³

In this dense network of procedural and legal relations, the lawyer can paradoxically be viewed as an *interpreter* par excellence. Differing from the jurist or the judge, in defending the position of their clients (on the civil as well as penal level, even if in different ways), lawyers placed themselves in relation to popular culture in a most detached fashion that was marginally concerned with the cultural codes the lawyers belonged to.²⁴ A radical example is that of the so-called *self-defenses* devised by the lawyer in the course of the inquisitory process, where the client's presence in court was not allowed. In these cases of *self-defense*, the lawyer spoke as if he was the defendant and therefore had to, in as much as possible, carry out his function of defense by not only lowering himself socially and stepping into the defendant's shoes, but sometimes even appropriating the defendant's own cultural codes. It is evident, not considering the comical tone that these defenses often involuntarily

21 The topic of procedural truth in relation to the adoption of two rites (accusatory and inquisitory) and the relation between unhindered influencing of the judge and probatory systems are dealt in detail by Ferrajoli, 2004, *passim*.

22 For these aspects, see Garapon, 1996.

23 See also, for example, Povo, 2003, especially XXVIII–XXIX. For the topic of juridical reasoning that filters a series of not exclusively juridical variables, see the recent Posner, 2008.

24 In relation to this, when comparing the juridical cultures of common law and civil law, Antoine Garapon observes: "*Cette foi en la vérité se manifeste d'abord par le statut de l'avocat, infiniment moins élevé dans la culture française que dans la culture anglo-saxonne. Le cinéma français en témoigne, qui présente l'avocat comme un homme futile, sans parole, sans honneur, un 'homme à femme', qui va utiliser sans vergogne toutes les 'ficelles' de la procédure soulevés par lui sont volontiers considérés comme des arguties, comme autant d'artifices qui empêchent la manifestation de la Vérité*" (cf. Garapon, 1996, 158).

ended up having, that the defender's description revealed the interpretative codes he used to describe the cultural context of his client.²⁵

The lawyer played a highly important role in the editing of the thick documentation of pleas, *gravamen*, requests for amnesty, etc, through which the subjects set up a relation with the organs of authority.²⁶ The operation of *translation* was significant, nevertheless certain aspects of the subordinated cultures emerged in a detailed manner.²⁷

The public notaries are also undoubtedly significant interpreters: they pertain in all aspects to educated culture, but operate in close contact with popular customs and traditions. The documents they issue comply with consolidated schemes that theoretically do not allow any space for *descriptions* of the cultures they enter into contact with. But in reality, the notary activity not only encompasses very different social practices that sometimes recall the colourful world of customs (e.g., acts of peace, see also Marcarelli, 2004; Bellabarba, 2008, 76–81, or the description of rites related to the world of the young²⁸), or incorporate this world in the complexity of notary forms and documents, however, not being able to entirely conceal its deep logic (like for example, the passing on of property within a family). Interesting here is, for example, the descriptive code used by the notary to connote surnames, nicknames and family names that bear a strict relation to the dimension of property.

Jurists, judges, lawyers, notaries: all these represent emblematic figures of *interpreters*, which however, by far fail to exhaust the semantic field of interpretation that related the dominant to popular culture.

In this respect, doctors are also figures of extreme interest. During the 18th century in particular, the figure of the doctor was commonly found throughout the rural world. Their rational and scientific mentality entered into contact with social practices that they often did not hesitate to separate themselves from, condemn or perceive as negative; for example, the farmers' bent to christen their children immediately after birth, even during the harsh winter time, or, for example, their sarcastically connotated observations, directed at the village midwives (*comari allevaresse*). In every case, their view of the popular and peasant world was rich with information and wanted to capture, from the outside, a world characterized by custom and orality (Pancino, 1981).

At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, a skilled land surveyor (like the Napoleonic) carried out the significant function of *translation* in relation to a world of customs that proceeded with traditional measuring systems and that

25 On self-defense in Venetian processes, see Cozzi, 2000, 149–229; and the recent Rossi, 2007.

26 A topic that has long gained the attention of historians, see also, for example, Nubola, Würigler, 2002.

27 The bibliography on this topic is extremely rich. See Nubola, Würigler, 2002. For the particular form of pleas, see Zemon Davis, 1992.

28 An example is given in Povo, 1997, 401.

on the toponymic and legal level represented a spatial dimension that didn't always overlap with the aims of the person who was required to register the land measurements.

In the field of religion, the character of the priest clearly stands out in all of its importance. Defined as the mediator between high and low culture, the priest was endowed with an education and written culture, but he also very much lived in the world where he carried out his duties. His personal notes, the reports written to his superiors, are direct evidence of his function as interpreter. But even more important are the duties he carried out within the realm of his office.²⁹ With the Council of Trent, the priest was entrusted to hold canonical registries: an inexhaustible source of information and social practices existing in the parish. In the burial registries, the long lists of illnesses made reference to the specific relation of the rural world towards death. In the registry of christenings, the priest reported on, and not only with curiosity, the rites and traditions related to birth.³⁰

During the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the priest was called on by secular institutions to carry out the important and fundamental role of *describing* phenomena related to popular culture; for example, the priests' descriptions of the popular feast days existing in their parishes in the 17th century.

Let us not forget that this figure, in the course of the modern age, attained a high level of importance and inevitably became antithetical and in opposition to other figures. Consequently, the role of the witch stood out from the background, with her enormous power of exorcism which provoked not only the inquisitor's ghosts, but also the harsh opposition of the priest, with whom she was in competition. Coming from the outside, the doctor, with his logical and scientific argumentation, often facilitated the emergence of the contiguity with some aspects of popular cultures.

On the other hand, the bishop with his pastoral visits registered not only the jurisdictional and institutional good order, but also the devotional practices that often clearly emerged in relation to the regulation and control he exercised (Torre, 1995). Social practices related to the activities of brotherhoods and, more generally, devotional sensibility, more or less directly caused the emergence of an oral and customary culture deeply embedded in the life of the rural and popular world.

The interpreter's *institutional* function undoubtedly speaks not only of the problems of the *translation* from oral to written culture (cultural codes, styles of expressions, formulae, abstract concepts and so on), but also of the very role of the interpreter in well-defined orders of hierarchy and power. This is an aspect the *interpreter*

29 The bibliography on this topic is extremely rich. I would like to recall here two works that can be said to be antithetical on the interpretative level, but that both have as their central reference point the role of the institution of the parish in the frame of religious popularity: Le Bras 1976; Bossy 1985. For some aspects tackled here, see also Lebrun, 1988.

30 The bibliography is, understandably, very rich; I only recall here Le fonti della demografia, 1974.

cannot avoid, and one that facilitates the operation of decodification as carried out by the historian and the anthropologist in relation to the *description* undertaken.

It becomes evident that the hierarchical position of the person who describes an event suggests not only their *cultural distance* to what is being described, but also the precise tasks and goals, related to the description he is making. A report on a riot that broke out in one of the local neighbourhoods as given by the policeman to his superiors is not constituted, beyond the fidelity of the explicit content, with the same interpretative criteria as those used in an investigation carried out by a judge on the same matter, although the two descriptions are obviously related on the institutional level.

Over the course of the 19th century, it was the civil clerks who, next to folklorists, were entrusted with conducting large-scale inquiries into the rural and popular world. It is evident that their descriptions take on a slightly different, though at first sight neutral, aspect: their description of subordinated cultures clearly assumes the form of investigation and denunciation. In this sense, it is important to observe the first emergence of *sympathetic* connotations of the described reality and the indications for possible interventions by organs of the state.³¹

It was during the 19th century that the great statistics described the subordinated cultures according to parameters that expressed the interests and the goals of the nation-states. It is, however, possible to discern even in the preceding centuries the first tentative attempts to *comprehend* the subordinated cultures in the frame of precise interpretative schemes. Demographic and fiscal descriptions are coming closer to the family registries (*status animarum*) edited by the ecclesiastic authorities.

The act of *interpretation* can sometimes take on more direct aspects that are, however, less bound by precise roles and hierarchies, when this act is carried out outside precise institutional typologies. In this case the *descriptions* are less filtered by precise codes that select the information, but are more and more directly influenced by the filter of memory or prejudice. Travellers' accounts and diarists' memories are therefore sources which in many cases make a more or less explicit reference to the relation between popular and hegemonic culture.

Another example includes all those treatises that, especially from the 16th century onwards, in describing the new ideology and lifestyle of noble or hegemonic classes, indirectly connote the detachment from subordinate cultures (see also Donati, 1988).

In a very much different vein, the descriptions of popular or rural cultures on the literary and artistic plane (e.g., Ruzante) offer an important cultural cross-section where the *interpretative* filter takes on rich symbolic meanings.

31 For an Italian region see, for example, Lazzarini, 1983.

A bordering figure, in close contact with both cultures, was the elementary school teacher, especially at the moment when nation-states launched their educational reforms. The written culture, which is ideologically well connotated, enters decisively into the popular and rural world. But the elementary teacher, called on to carry out this extremely delicate role, is a direct witness to the impact caused by the introduction of values from above and of their complex reception in popular culture.

An *interpreter* par excellence, next to the folklorist and the anthropologist, is the historian, who has turned his attention to subordinate cultures only recently, but is undoubtedly no less prone to prejudice and a priori judgments. The so-called *history from below* that has been focusing intensively on the study of subordinate cultures since the 1970s, had to re-set its interpretative instruments and fields of inquiry, often by resorting to paradigms of more properly institutional and legal disciplines (Evans, 2001).

The attention given at the scientific meeting to the topic *Interpreters of Culture* therefore sought to investigate a series of issues of great historical significance that concentrate around the relationship and the links between hegemonic and subordinate cultures, focusing primarily on cultural codes and stereotypes that characterize the *descriptions* of the former in relation to the latter.

Obviously this relation and these links are not unidirectional. One of the extremely interesting fields of inquiry is, for example, the perception of subordinate and customary cultures by the hegemonic cultures. An extremely difficult topic not so much because of its theoretical definitions, but because of its practical realisation on the historiographic level.

Eminently oral and customary, subordinate cultures can reveal their perception of hegemonic cultures through the *contaminations* received or suffered (which led to a reformulation of their own cultural codes) in those spots where the eye of the trained interpreter could step away and readjust. One thinks here of, for example, all the rites related to religious feast days or dances, or ancestral rites related to birth or baptism that, as was the case in South America, had to adjust to the imposition of Christianity (Bernand, Gruzinski, 1988). But this case also lacks the direct filter of the interpreter that would enable us to verify the descriptive process of the subordinate culture in relation to the hegemonic.

This is a type of perception that, in some cases, can be captured by institutional interventions of the hegemonic cultures. It is evident that in such cases the interpretative and *historiographic* procedures become extremely complex and bring along an analysis of the plurality of *descriptive* fields. The testimony of a 19th century farmer, called to testify in a court investigation launched by the state on a homicide committed during riots of groups of young people of two neighbouring countries, obviously emerges from a source (the penal process), produced by institutions that are part of the hegemonic culture. This testimony will provide us with direct information on ru-

ral culture, as filtered by the penal procedure, but also, and this is even more interesting, the same testimony can also be seen as a *descriptive field* in which the perceptive dimension of the subordinate culture in relation to the external intervention can be captured (see also Povoło, 2000).

For the gathering of *direct testimonies* of popular culture, as in the case of texts (or defendants) called to testify in penal (or civil) processes, it becomes evident that the applied language codes deserve particular attention. The verbalization of testimony took place using a *vulgar* legal language that *translated* jargons and dialects used by mainly illiterate people who responded orally to questions asked by the judge. The legal transcription was, in principle, probably loyal to the oral testimony, but there could have been the possibility for the emergence of nuances and *variants* of conceptual nature. If the clerk of the court had to re-read to the witness or the defendant their testimony so that they could confirm it by the obligatory oath, how did this reading come about? Which of the two languages (oral, written), connotated the *iter* of the testimony? Some cases of processes even included a proper translation, since the witness and the judge were not using the same language. Interesting in this sense are the transcriptions of processes edited by Venetian legal representatives in Istria and Dalmatia that involved a population with a different ethnic background.

It is therefore a very vast topic that this conference has addressed, with the awareness that the contributions can only offer a cross-section of a reality that in the future can certainly be further developed and deepened.

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