

Bureaucrats of the Soul.

Infrastructuring the Delegation of Interpretive Power in Northern Italy, circa 1750–1800.

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Bestowing to penitents instant forgiveness for all the sins they confess to an ordained priest, the Latin locution *ego te absolvo* (I absolve you) would seem to be an exemplar of what John Austin has called “explicit performative utterances” (1962[1955]): a class of sentences that, rather than describing social reality, has the power to change it actively. While sociologists have recently considered the Catholic Church to discuss the relationship between images of the body politic and the delegation of power (e.g., Reed, 2020, pp. 140, 188; Martin, 2022, p. 182) and typify patterns of concentration of specialized knowledge (e.g., Stoltz, Taylor, and Lizardo, 2019, p. 56), sociological interpretations of confession remain anchored to the studies of Max Weber and Michel Foucault. The former hastily framed the doctrine of the Treasury of Merit that justified sacramental penance as a repository of grace that could always be “distributed anew” (Weber, 1963, p. 188), thereby hindering the emergence of a disciplinary *ethos* and encouraging “recidivism among sinners” (Hepworth and Turner, 1982, p. 64). The latter ascribed to confession a key role in the creation of the modern subject through a sweeping fresco (Foucault, 1979; 2011; 2014) that has often been found lacking in theoretical accuracy (e.g., Fox, 1998) and attunement with empirical sources (e.g., Summerson-Carr, 2013; Noiriel, 1997). Thus, notwithstanding the profound differences between these two understandings, both have failed to highlight the historical and cultural processes that “made it possible” (Abend, 2020) for selected individuals to authoritatively interpret on behalf of God in dimly lit confessional booths.

Historians have shown that from the Middle Ages onwards, the Church increasingly codified the administration of sacramental penance. In prescribing that, for their annual confession, penitents had to refer to their parish priests, the IV Lateran Council (1215) instituted a linkage between the administration of the sacrament and its territorial jurisdiction (Brambilla, 2000; Rusconi, 2002). In reacting to the Protestant rejection of the role of priests as mediators between God and the laity—thereby contesting the sacramental nature of penance—the Council of Trent (1545–1563) specified that all clergymen had to be formally approved by the bishops who presided over the diocese where they wished to hear confessions (Mancino, 2000; Prosperi, 2001). This supplemental approval represented an expedient to monitor the training of priests in a scenario characterized by incremental control where the Inquisition tried to extend its reach within the newly invented (and slowly implemented) confessional booths (de Boer, 2001; Prosperi, 1996; Romeo, 2011). And yet, with minor exceptions, the administration of sacramental penance has not received the same amount of attention that the early modern historiography has directed to the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions. This disparity might be accounted for when considering that, as historian John Bossy has remarked in concluding a classic essay, “[t]he confessional keeps its secrets, as it is entitled to do” (1975, p. 38).

In examining the conditions that enabled the wielding of power in confessionals in late 18th-century Verona, this paper argues that the inscrutable character of confessional encounters resulted from successfully working *infrastructures*. The reconstruction of the socio-material

assemblages that organized the administration of sacramental penance in the late 18th century indicates that, far from being the ‘irrational’ foil of Calvinism, Catholic institutions included and articulated a set of infrastructures that were managed via a bureaucratic logic (cf. Weber, 1978, pp. 956–58). Even what might have resembled the most ‘magical’ course of action (i.e., one person uttering a few words to another to release her from all the guilt and providing her with deliverance from sin) required constant training, mediation, surveillance—and a good amount of paperwork, too.

By combining a wide range of archival and published sources such as manuals for confessors, registers of licensed confessors and their pre-compiled licenses, and the written correspondence exchanged between parish priests and the functionaries of the bishopric chancery, the paper argues for the decisive role of disciplinary and cultural infrastructures in organizing the delegation and coordination of interpretive power within confessionals in the late 18th century (Gorski, 2003; Norton, 2014; 2023; Reed, 2020). Given that nobody could enter the wooden booths except for confessors and penitents (and that the confessional seal forbade the interactants from disclosing what they said or heard during the spatiotemporal boundaries of the interaction), the administration of confession can be thought of as an empirical site that, because of its characteristics, intensifies the strategies deployed by organizations to monitor and align the conduct of their agents “at a distance” (Robson, 1992; Law, 1984). The examination of the primary sources reveals the unceasing efforts of the secular hierarchies in devising, circulating, controlling, and repairing a bundle of textualities and practices to create an interpretive matrix that constructed the contacts that took place within confessional booths as fronts where performances of interpretive power had to be meticulously scripted (Alexander, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Norton, 2014; cf. Collins, 2010, p. 11).

The paper is structured as follows. First, I review sociological theories on confession (Hepworth & Turner, 1986), emphasizing how both the Weberian remarks on the theology of penance and the Foucauldian perspective cannot account for the emergence of confession as “a pervasive network, in which the power of the Church produced not only the self-knowledge of the subject but also the systematic knowledge of a Christian society” (Asad, 1983, p. 254n17). In the case of Weber, this failure is due both to his preconceptions of Catholicism (Stark, 1968) and his bypassing of social situations in analyzing how individual beliefs are inscribed into infrastructures (Collins, 1985, pp. 884–85, but cf. Gorski, 2003). Taken together, these two diverted the analytical focus from the social organization of the administration of sacramental penance and the competing logics that permeated it from the late Middle Ages onwards. On the other hand, while Foucault observed the “dramaturgical” character of confession (2014, p. 210), his theory falls short of clarifying the conditions of production and distribution that make disciplinary discourses impactful on concrete social situations (Hepworth & Turner, 1986, p. 101). Similarly to other explanations of statal rule, his analysis relies on a “magic” image of power (cit. in Norton, 2023, p. 182) that undertheorizes the “logistics” that allow for the “parcelization of sovereignty” (Adams, 2005; Mukerji, 2010; Reed, 2020).

In other words, Weber and Foucault failed to consider the infrastructures of sacramental penance—the emergent “network of practices and institutions” (Gorski, 2003, p. xv) via which bishops attempted to make the interactions unfolding within confessionals simultaneously legible (to make sure that the conduct of confessors remained aligned with the prescribed standards) and inscrutable (to make sure that no one besides the parties involved could acquire

information on the interaction). After reviewing how the notion of infrastructure has been mobilized in historical sociology (Gorski, 2003; Mukerji, 2009; Norton, 2023), I move in this direction in the second part of the paper. Taking stock of historiographical literature, I show how a series of interrelated events (the invention of the printing press and the development of a postal infrastructure; the Reformation; the Council of Trent) created the conditions for the deployment of an infrastructure that organized the delegation of interpretive power within confessionals.

Following a note on case selection, data, and methods, the paper evaluates “*along the grain*” (Skarpelis, 2020, p. 397) five kinds of files that organized the infrastructure:

- 1) Printed licenses to hear confessions and list of reserved cases that specified the particular jurisdiction of confessors, working as *inscriptions of delegation* (cf. Latour, 1986), which often had to be renewed at a fast pace (e.g., licenses lasted from two to ten months);
- 2) registers of licensed confessors, which operated as a *cartography of interpretive power* for the bishopric chancellors who compiled and consulted them, detailing the boundaries of the jurisdiction within which confessors could hear confessions (e.g., a particular parish; only specific types of penitents, etc.);
- 3) reports of examinations where those delegated with the power to assess the preparation of confessors attested the reasons for their promotions (or the motives for the denial or the license), which I conceptualize as *inscriptions of evaluation*;
- 4) credentials written by the immediate superiors of confessors (e.g., parish priests) that attesting to their good conduct, training, and cooperation in the routinary responsibilities of the care of souls (e.g., visiting the sick, teaching the Christian doctrine, etc.), acted as *inscriptions of reputation*;
- 5) reference letters that archpriests and parish priests forwarded to the chancery to introduce and intercede for the delegation of interpretive power, thereby operating as *inscriptions of negotiation* that consolidated a patronage network (McLean, 2007).

In addition to these components, I also underscore how, in the late 18th century, other types of textualities (e.g., pastoral letters prescribing the titles of manuals for confessors, petitions to renew or relocate confessionals within church buildings, etc.) were pivotal in creating the conditions for confessors to interpret on behalf of God and create a “network of homologous performances” (Norton, 2014, p. 1548) within confessional booths.

Combining historical and cultural sociology to interpret primary sources in a “constructive-empirical” bent (Mayrl & Wilson, 2020, p. 1358), this paper contributes to several threads in scholarly debate. From a historiographical perspective, it provides fresh insights into the processes of training and selection of confessors and their supervision at the diocesan level using hitherto overlooked sources, providing a unique “formation story” of this infrastructure (Hirschman & Reed, 2014). From a sociological viewpoint, the paper qualifies some intuitions and insights on the relationship between religion and the notion of “bureaucracy,” here understood as “a strategy for routinizing individual loyalty” (Gorski, 1995, p. 786), while specifying an argument on the relationship between cultural systems and repertoires and the emergence infrastructures. In particular, the paper develops an insight of Bruno Latour, who observed: “[t]he ‘rationalization’ granted to bureaucracy since Hegel and

Weber has been attributed by mistake to the ‘mind’ of (Prussian) bureaucrats. It is in the files themselves” (1986, p. 28; cf. Mukerji, 2011), arraying empirical evidence in arguing that, while the theodicy scaffolding of sacramental penance might have generated a weak disciplining *ethos*, the socio-material arrangements deployed to ensure that the interpretations produced during those encounters could be binding contributed to incorporating and distributing a ‘rational’ approach to delegation.

In addition to contributing to the integration of notions developed within the subfield of Science and Technology Studies into the historical-sociological study of infrastructures, the paper adopts a set of conceptual tools initially elaborated using early modern and modern states and empires as their “model case” (Krause, 2021) to explain the workings of the Catholic Church in one of its dioceses in Northern Italy. Thus, the paper contributes to probing their soundness as analytical tools beyond the sphere of the “secular.”

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