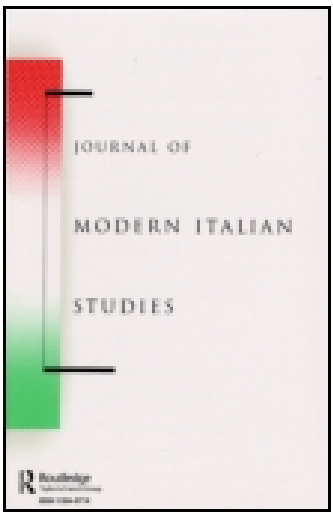

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Looters, collectors and a passion for antiquities at the margins of Italian society

Fiona Rose-Greenland[a]
[a] University of Michigan
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Looters, collectors and a passion for antiquities at the margins of Italian society

Fiona Rose-Greenland
University of Michigan

Abstract

Unearthing old objects was for centuries a widespread activity in Italy. Artefacts were removed from the soil and re-incorporated into the social realm as votives, chits and treasure. Women and men knowledgeable about old things and old places were respected repositories of history. The twentieth century brought significant changes to this sphere of cultural activity: archaeology became a professionalized discipline, regulated by the state, and artefacts became scientific objects belonging to the Italian nation. Today, unauthorized excavators risk prosecution, fines and imprisonment. In this paper I ask: What is the effect of state power on the use and circulation of antiquities by unauthorized excavators and collectors? How do the men and women who inhabit the cultural margins distinguish themselves from each other? My analysis draws on ethnographic data and textual analysis of newspaper articles concerning tombaroli or 'tomb robbers'. I focus on marginalized cultural production, a key dimension that is missing from most accounts of looters.

Keywords

Antiquities, *beni culturali*, black market, cultural policy, social marginalization, *tombaroli*.

Introduction

Michele was 7 years old when his father, Piero, first took him to look for archaeological objects.[1] By the time he was 10, Michele was sent into tomb openings to scout findings for Piero and his friends. He was small enough to get through the shafts that the men punched through the soil with the long *spillone*. 'I thought it was an adventure', Michele told me. 'I felt important because I was often the first one inside the tomb .... I learned quickly what was valuable and what wasn't.' It was on the basis of Michele's scouting work that the adults would decide to stay and dig or to move on to another grave. Sometimes Michele found something particularly valuable: a bit of ancient jewellery, say, or an intact *bucchero* vessel. *Bucchero* wares were especially gratifying to find, since Piero considered himself a specialist in that category of object. 'That is when the adventure really began', Michele laughed. 'My father would carefully wrap it and when we returned home we'd look at it together. And my mother would

say, "Who is this one for?" because the house was starting to fill up with his treasures.'

Today Michele is, he asserts, 'reformed'. It has been more than three decades since he touched a *spillone*. Looking back on his childhood in 1970s central Italy, he recognizes that looting is illegal now and 'probably was then'. But it didn't feel like looting, he told me. 'You hear about these men who steal from excavations or sell things to dealers', Michele said.

> They are the *tombaroli*. They are professional, organized, and unscrupulous. It wasn't like that with my father. He kept some things, but many [of them] he gave away [as gifts]. Some tombs he refused to violate because he felt they belonged to the archaeologists. Real looters dig from greed, not from passion.

Michele's testimony is representative of the thematic patterns that have emerged in my qualitative research on unauthorized excavators. Digging clandestinely for archaeological objects and owning them without official sanction has been illegal in Italy since 1909, and for the past forty years a dedicated military police unit, the Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale (TPC) or 'Art Squad' has been tasked with enforcing the law (Nistri 2011). In spite of the state's attempts to clamp down on the unauthorized circulation of antiquities, the practice continues. It continues in part because there is money in it for those who sell objects to smugglers and connoisseurs. Unauthorized digging continues, too, because people love to do it. As Michele makes clear, 'In a way, it was a family tradition. Technically illegal [perhaps] but not a crime.'

In this paper I focus on the figure of the *tombarolo*, treating it as a cultural actor marginalized from mainstream Italian society. My approach differs from the dominant scholarly position on illicit diggers, which considers them thieves or criminals. In the first part I review prevailing sociological and anthropological theories of marginalized or deviant cultural production. I consider how the notion of marginality might change the way we think and write about the people who participate in the 'black market' in *beni culturali* (cultural goods). Then I turn to a sustained analysis of the figure of the *tombarolo* and ask what it can teach us about how national culture is contested and shaped in non-mainstream society.

I use this formulation – 'figure' of the *tombarolo* – deliberately, treating it as an abstract construct in order to unpack the assumptions that define it. Using popular media reports, published testimonials of (self-avowed ex-)*tombaroli* and my own interviews with practitioners of unauthorized excavation, I argue that unilateral vilification of the *tombarolo* effaces the cultural complexity of illicit digging. Among illicit excavators there is a moral code that militates against certain practices, such as stealing from active excavations and carelessly destroying artefacts. This moral code creates a space – rhetorical but also physical, in the case of illicit excavation sites – for casual diggers to express and negotiate their own ideas about artefacts' meaning and valuation.

Within this variegated group of collectors, antiquarians and unauthorized diggers, there is a shared understanding that *tombaroli* really are enemies of heritage. *Collezionisti di antichità* contrast their genuine passion for art with the greed and moral repugnance of the *tombarolo*. *Collezionisti* profess to hate *tombaroli* just as much as state archaeologists and Art Squad agents do. Nobody self-identifies as a *tombarolo*. Self-identifying as a *collezionista*, on the other hand, is justifiable on grounds that it is a practice driven by love of art. In the public sphere both types of actor are presented as *predatori dell'arte*, but at the cultural margins there is active boundary work to keep collectors and looters separate and morally distinct.

Culture and agency at the margins of society

Theorizing marginalization

The papers in this issue deal with different aspects of marginalization. Cantarella's examination of immigrants in Italy demonstrates the harrowing experience of peoples forced to stay outside of mainstream society (by law, by bureaucratic practice and through rhetoric) because of broader negative perceptions of their ethnicity (Cantarella 2014). When it comes to illicit excavators and collectors of art, working with theories of marginality is not immediately obvious. This is because marginality is an intellectual space that has been largely reserved for peoples with whom scholars (and their readers) sympathize: persecuted minority groups and others who are disempowered and disenfranchised by law. Extending the concept of marginalization to so-called cultural criminals can, I suggest, produce both a more insightful theory of marginalization and fruitful avenues of analysis of cultural crimes.

What does it mean to be marginal? By definition, being peripheral, whether to an issue, institution or group, is context-dependent (Smith and Pitts 2007, 6–8). Clough Marinaro's (2014) study (in this issue) of Roma in Italy offers what is in many ways a classic study of a marginalized people. Romas' ability to express their political opinions through speech and ceremony is constrained by structural conditions imposed by Italian law, and they are economically disenfranchised by discrimination. Within Roma camps, however, social dynamics are different: individuals who are at the margins of mainstream society may enjoy normative privileges. It is not that Roma camps are devoid of stigmatization and marginality. But the parameters and zones of marginality shift across and within spaces. So when we characterize a person or group as 'marginalized', we need to remember that it is often not a fixed characteristic. This is especially the case when it comes to cultural practices.

In sociological studies of non-mainstream cultural practices, there is a tendency among scholars to classify non-mainstream cultural practitioners as social deviants. Richard Lachmann (1988) accepted this premise in his study of graffiti artists in New York. He went on to argue that, although graffiti artists are

widely understood to operate beyond the bounds of mainstream society, they actually inhabit an organized, well-functioning artistic subculture. The idea of deviance is often linked with anarchy and lack of organization, but Lachmann demonstrates that graffiti art is the product of shared norms, techniques and aesthetic values. Seen as a chaotic, messy public nuisance by mainstream society, graffiti art is meaningful to and aesthetically organized by members of the graffiti subculture. This finding is replicated more recently in Hannah Wohl's (2013) ethnographic study of a private erotic art club, the 'Salon'. Members of the Salon draw or paint naked women and share their productions in tightly restricted circles of connoisseurship. As with the graffiti artists in Lachmann's study, the members of the Salon are part of a subculture organized by normatively prescribed codes of taste, which Wohl theorizes as a case of social aesthetics. Although there is no formal law against the Salon members' practices, Wohl's ethnographic data reveal awareness among members that their interests are non-mainstream. In a sense, then, they operate at the cultural margins by their own volition. This marginalization only enhances the significance and profundity of the artistic productions, according to the Salon members' views.

Anthropologists take a different approach to marginalized cultural groups and to looters in particular. Rather than drilling down into the specifics of deviant subgroups' organization, anthropologists situate the deviant practice or practitioner in a broader scheme of cultural norms and obligations. What this allows for is the possibility that the deviant practice is a *productive* practice, not one undertaken merely to subvert the rules. In Cristiana Panella's (2011) study of looters in East Africa, for example, she first recognizes her subjects as social actors with a variety of roles and then asks what meaning they bring to their engagements with cultural goods. Through this holistic analysis, Panella explores the tension between local and international moral scripts concerning cultural goods and heritage. There is no monolithic 'looter' figure that inhabits the social space, but rather several categories of actor that use and interpret cultural objects. Similarly, Kimbra Smith (2005) demonstrated that *huaqueros* in Peru are repositories of local knowledge that inhabit a grey space between licit and illegal cultural expertise. *Huaqueros* are both denounced publicly by archaeologists for their looting activities and consulted privately by archaeologists for information about emerging sites and recent finds (see also Attwood 2004 on *huaqueros* and destructive looting).

Both Panella's and Smith's work push us to re-think looters' stock characterization in media accounts of, and scholarly discussions about, illicit digging. At a 2013 conference on the global trade in cultural objects, for example, I heard a presenter describe illicit diggers as 'seedy', 'greasy', 'thieving' and 'ruthless' in the space of a 20-minute talk. Most scholarly publications abjure this sort of pejorative labelling, but the negative characterization persists. Specifically, the received wisdom on illicit diggers is that they are motivated by greed and unconcerned about protecting culture. In this paper I want to push back on these assumptions. For a start, 'looter' is not a static, monolithic

category of social actor. It needs to be understood in a socio-historical context. Making distinctions within the diverse group of people labelled 'looters' can help us to understand the range of practices bound up in this sphere. This work can be productively undertaken by starting with illicit diggers' own ideas about where to draw moral boundaries between types of unauthorized excavators and collectors (Thoden van Velzen 1996).

'Tombarolo' and the power of labels in analysing marginalization

The *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* identifies 'tombarolo' as *gergala* (slang) and defines it as 'a thief who violates ancient tombs, which are protected by law, to steal objects for sale to collectors'. One of the first known print appearances of the word '*tombarolo*' comes from a 1965 newspaper article about five men who were accused of stealing objects from an archaeological site in Tarquinia (*Il Tempo*, May 23, 1965).

In English, *tombarolo* is typically translated as 'tomb raider' or 'tomb robber'. These phrases are misleading, however, because they summon images of Hollywood drama. In Italy the *tombarolo* is a figure that is at once jocular and bumbling, crafty and evasive. Finding and raiding tombs, and turning their wreckage into treasure, requires a mix of rural esprit and outdoorsy confidence, but also a low regard for cultural policy or institutionalized norms concerning *beni* and cultural property. The *tombarolo* figure is characterized as 'heavy' (*pesante)* rather than elegant, and bumbling rather than calculating. The *tombarolo* is best thought of not as a generic looter (Italian has another word for that: *saccheggiatore*), but rather as a particular category of social actor who is associated with a specific area (typically central and southern Italy). As becomes clear very quickly, this area of analysis is rife with words that carry problematic assumptions. To call someone a tomb robber assumes that we know the person's motives as well as his or her observable actions. Similarly, the phrase 'antiquities black market' is associated with the agency, manipulation and illegality of other kinds of black markets (narcotics; weapons; sex workers). In truth, the stakes and dynamics of this 'market' – if it is that – must be specified and studied on their own merits (Brodie 2008).

Tombarolo as a marginalized cultural actor

There is a long history of amateur excavation in Italy.[2] Until the late nineteenth century, archaeology was a loosely institutionalized profession (Schnapp 1997). There were few state officials to supervise excavations, issue dig permits, or keep track of newly unearthed artefacts. In light of this, most excavating was, by today's standards, private or casual. Small-scale, private diggers were a source of local knowledge and in some cases local revenue. In this reading, their activities had positive qualities. This perception was to change sharply in the twentieth century.

The Italian state's main strategy for protecting and controlling the circulation of antiquities is through nationalizing all sites and objects of artistic and historic interest. Antiquities and other art treasures were declared state property in 1909. This means that cultural objects made in Italy fifty years prior to the present date (or, in the case of ancient artefacts, objects imported to Italy from other ancient lands) cannot be excavated, bought and sold, or removed from the country without official permission. In 1969, around the same time when *tombaroli* were presented as a growing problem by newspapers and government officials, the state created the Art Squad to enforce the growing collection of antiquities protection laws and anti-looting regulations. This task involved cracking down on the international trade in Italian cultural goods and teaching Italians how to be good cultural citizens. The *tombarolo* was no longer a jocular, bumbling peasant with a penchant for finding treasure. The *tombarolo* was now a plague on the nation's culture, to adopt the language of the Art Squad's promotional film *Gli Anni del Drago* (TPC 2011).

When the Italian state asserts that it is the rightful caretaker of the nation's patrimony, it constructs a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable modes of engagement with cultural objects. This is a powerful move. Mainstream cultural discourses reaffirm the myth of *beni culturali* (cultural goods) and the positive character of those citizens who help to enforce its tenets. They do this by visiting public museums, refusing to purchase artworks and archaeological artefacts with dubious provenance, and reporting to authorities the illicit cultural practices of other members in the community. These behaviours are consistently articulated in and encouraged by official media productions of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali, in the press and on museum display boards. The deviant or marginal cultural citizen, by contrast, buys, digs up or otherwise acquires *beni* without official approval. He or she may participate in illegal excavations (*scavi abusivi*) and sell artefacts to collectors. When the marginal cultural citizen sells artefacts to foreign buyers, he knowingly deprives the Italian national community of the materiality that binds it culturally. What is surprising is that unauthorized excavators themselves adopt this bifurcated view of cultural citizenship and must work assiduously to explain their moral position within it.

Unauthorized excavators position themselves against an ideal-type *tombarolo*, which can be best understood by examining the story of Omero Bordo, a celebrity tomb robber. Tracing the arc of Bordo's career, from criminal to media darling to 'crafty figure' (*figura furba*), will help us to specify some of the dynamics at play in the margins of cultural production.

Tombarolo, *scourge and superstar*

Omero Bordo learned to break into tombs in and around Tarquinia, an area noted for its rich Etruscan tombs and settlements. He served a prison sentence in the 1970s for his looting activities and subsequently reformed himself. His post-

prison life has been colourful and professionally successful. Distancing himself from the hated *tombarolo* figure, he now presents himself as an artist. But his very public commitment to preserving Etruscan art and archaeological sites is viewed with scepticism, even hostility, from prominent members of Italy's cultural and intellectual establishment.

Bordo was born in 1943, a turning point in the war as American soldiers forced German forces to retreat from Italy. The difficulties endured by rural Italians haunt Bordo's recollection of his early years. It was, he says, a period of perilous challenges for rural residents, during which civilians still died regularly from bombs, hunger and sickness. As a toddler he was sent to his aunt's house at Montarozzi, near the heartland of ancient Etruria. This experience spawned his fascination with antiquity. Reflecting on his first youthful forays into Etruscan tombs with his father and brother, Bordo hits on two themes, somatism and emotions, which are integral to his defence of unauthorized digging. Exploring tombs and disinterring objects felt utterly natural: 'As a child I began to breathe the very air and feel the same energy as the ancient rulers and priests, warriors and ordinary people, children of the Tyrrhenians who were still shrouded in mystery.' His youthful explorations eventually paid dividends. At the age of 16, Bordo was approached by a man in a bar who asked whether Bordo might be able to bring him Etruscan collectibles. Bordo assented and, with a friend, returned the next day with a haul of pottery that earned them 350,000 lire (Cecchelin and Bordo 1987, 23–24). This was an enormous sum for a rural boy. It was Bordo's first inkling that the objects he loved held monetary, not just sentimental, value.

In 1975, Bordo was arrested for his activities. He was formally prosecuted for selling fake antiquities, which he made in his home and passed off as authentic (a charge he vehemently denied). He was indignant: 'Fundamentally, what had I done wrong?', he asked rhetorically in his biography. Bordo argued that he made replicas of Etruscan wares and that if his buyers could not discern the difference between his productions and the ancient versions then it was 'their fault'. The case worked its way through the courts for months, a period Bordo refers to as 'my odyssey', a classical reference that also points to the origins of his name (Omero is the Italian form of Homer; Cecchelin and Bordo 1987, 166). It was in the prison at Civitavecchia that Bordo began to make Etruscan objects with support from the prison officials, this time as legitimate copies. It was sponsored as a model activity for the other inmates. This was, he wrote, a means of transforming his relationship with Etruscan heritage. After his release from prison, Bordo began working full-time on his Etruscan ceramic vessels. He was a new man: 'Despite adversity, he emerges fortified, master of an artistic maturity capable of refining his work.'[3]

Bordo's ceramic productions first attracted the notice of international artists in the early 1980s, and then became a sensation in Italy in the following decade. He was a regular figure on an Italian variety show in the 1980s, and by the 1990s had earned sufficient money to 'realize a dream' by building a faithful

reconstruction of an Etruscan town. Etruscopolis was inspired by his sustained contact with 'the underground Etruscan world'. The faithful reconstruction of Etruscan tombs would serve not just as a project of scholarly study. It would be an act of reparation for the 'violations' that he had committed on the sacred area of his ancestors. After all, Omero saw himself as 'the last of the Etruscans' (Bordo n.d., 4).

Etruscopolis opened in 1997. In the United States, newspapers heralded the founding of 'Etruscan Disneyland'. In Italy, media outlets reported with a mix of humour and fascination the painstakingly reconstructed 'city of the dead' in Tuscany. Bordo's fame grew. But a close reading of the media records suggest that popular reception of Etruscopolis was complicated. Its eventual demise stems from the public's fundamental distrust of fakes, and the stigma of the *tombarolo* label.

In newspaper articles it was common for journalists to hint at Bordo's amateurishness while supposedly reporting the facts of his activities. *La Stampa* (17 August 1990) pulled no punches: 'No, he doesn't seem at all like Indiana Jones, this predator of ancient art: he has the thick, heavy figure of a man who likes a good meal, a crafty look [and] a slight sleepiness to his eyes.' By this characterization there is no mistaking Bordo for a swashbuckling Indiana Jones. He is, rather, a 'predator' – more inclined to feast and nap than dig trenches and shimmy into tombs.

Bordo's physical deficiencies were compounded by his supposed intellectual shortcomings. One article disclosed that he had 'no idea' how much to charge visitors after the initial 3-month free admission period, which was subsidized by the regional government. He was quoted as bragging about the independent nature of the venture: 'I didn't receive a dime of government money. I built this all by myself.' Both statements point to a character flaw that is particularly damning in the Italian context: aggressive independence. To an American readership, the idea that a person was so driven by his passion for ancient Etruria that he ploughed his body and money into constructing a museum by hand fits comfortably into the narrative of the striving, self-made man. In Italy, by contrast, this form of independence borders on insolence and signals a core vice in collective self-characterization (Patriarca 2010). Bordo's failure to collaborate with recognized authorities, such as archaeologists, museum curators or state authorities, additionally signals his refusal to conform and, very possibly, his lack of understanding of how the cultural 'system' works. Etruscopolis was closed during my 2012 fieldwork period and is not scheduled to reopen.

Professional archaeologists provided their own criticisms of Bordo. Dr Maria Gabriella Scapaticci, Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Etruria meridionale, was interviewed by the Associated Press about the impact of Etruscopolis on scholarly research into and popular appreciation of the ancient Etruscans. Scapaticci was unimpressed: 'Omero Bordo is a man of low education (*scarsa cultura*) and is not an expert. With this business [Etruscopolis] he wants to ingratiate himself to the authorities after many years of pillaging (*depredato*) many

tombs' (D'Emilio 1997). Scapaticci's comment hits on two recurrent themes. The first is that formal education is correlated with expertise. This theme is especially resilient in archaeology, a discipline that has struggled to separate experts from amateurs for more than a century. We encounter it again in the comments of prominent Etruscologist Lorella Maneschi, who told the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that Bordo's recreated tombs have 'no scientific value whatsoever' (Marianna 2001).

Scapaticci's characterization of Bordo as poorly educated is part of the larger project of creating a specific persona for *tombaroli*. '*Scarsa cultura*' means not just poorly educated but poorly acculturated. This touches on a key trope: the *tombarolo* as coarse and socially unformed. Problematically, the *tombarolo* encompasses the classic yin-yang of Italians' negative self-characterizing: *furbo* and *fesso*. Where *furbo* means cunning and shrewd, *fesso* means foolish. Bordo was deliberately showcased as a bit of both: shrewd enough to cash in on Italy's cultural awakening to Etruscans, but not so shrewd that he knew how much to charge his visitors; sufficiently cunning to pass off his own Etruscan pots as authentic, but also woefully inexpert.

What was missing from the public discussion about Omero Bordo was the possibility that his work had cultural merit. Maneschi's criticism of Etruscopolis as having 'no scientific merit' is odd. Bordo has no obligation to uphold the institutionalized goals of archaeology. Cultural critics were evidently too distracted by Bordo's physical appearance and accent to notice that he taught himself to make Etruscan ceramic wares so authentic looking that they fooled even seasoned collectors. Bordo's claim that he was the last of the Etruscans was sceptically reported by journalists and gently presented as evidence of his delusion. In this example we find another key point of distinction between the *collezionista* and the *tombarolo*. Both figures explain their penchant for excavating as rooted in a passion for art and history. The respectable collector reigns in his passion to conform to acceptable standards of cultural consumption. The disreputable tomb robber foolishly follows his interest down paths that lead to jail time, public ridicule and such embarrassing misuses of culture as 'Etruscan Disneyland'.

'We never stole from the archaeologists'

Michele was at pains to explain to me the difference between excavating a new site and taking objects from an officially sanctioned excavation site. He had already told me that his father taught him not to explore the archaeologists' trenches. I pushed him for detail. Why, I asked, did the context matter? Was it really any different to take an Etruscan vase from an archaeological dig site than to take it (equally illicitly) from a so-called virgin site?

> Well, looking back at it I guess you could make the argument that yes, stealing is stealing. But you have to understand that in that context, what we

> were doing made perfect sense. My father sometimes worked with the archaeologists, you see. I think he admired their profession and fancied himself an amateur [archaeologist]. He even received a little bit of money a few times to help dig trenches. He loved the work. And from this respect came his rule that you must not take from an archaeologist's site. [On the other hand] if you found your own [tomb] it was yours to dig. That was only respectable. Enjoy the finds, sure, but you have to earn it [by doing your own digging].

In the moral frame of this (reformed) unauthorized excavator, what made illicit collecting acceptable was doing the work to find one's own site. From this vantage point, submerged objects belonged to no-one in particular. At official excavation sites, archaeologists laid claim to artefacts by digging them up. To take finds from the archaeologist's storage shed or trenches was to steal. But because submerged objects have not been claimed by a specific scientist or project, they are up for grabs in spite of the state's pre-emptive assertion of ownership of all *beni culturali*, unearthed or submerged. Michele, then, sets forth one differentiating factor between *tombaroli* and *collezionisti*: the former do not respect archaeologists' work and (by implication) allow greed to supervene good cultural practice, whereas the latter excavate in tangent with archaeologists. This distinction has strong implications for cultural legitimacy.

Marco, a 57-year-old café manager in Rome, shared a similar perspective. Marco grew up on the western coast of central Italy near a former Roman port city. Before the archaeologists 'discovered' his hometown, he says, it was easy to collect Roman coins, amphorae and statue fragments. At the seaside, he told me, children picked up potsherds and used them to scoop sand or take home as trinkets. His own grandchildren know better than to do this today. He winked as he told me that they lecture him about taking artefacts, although he still sometimes does it:

> It was very different then, of course. Everybody took things. You could find an entire pot ('amphora') and nobody cared. [*FRG*: What did you do with the finds?] My brother and I, we used to take them to my uncle's house. He loved that sort of thing. He worked for the civil service .... He used to read books about geology, archaeology, Roman history, and he really knew a lot .... Some of the objects he gave away. Many things, he kept. He had two big shelves in his front room. He loved to tell about them! [laughs] Really, he was proud to be the local history expert.

When I asked Marco whether his uncle sold objects, Marco said that he did not know for certain but that it would not surprise him to learn that his uncle did sell things casually. 'Was he a *tombarolo*?', I asked. Marco was taken aback by my question, and I interpreted his strong reaction to be a signal that I had insulted him. 'Of course not', Marco replied firmly. 'He was a hobbyist. He collected.

You are thinking of those men in trucks who go in the night [to dig]. My uncle, no, never. Completely different.'

Marco's answer made some allowance for my foreignness. His brief digression into a clarification of terms ('You are thinking of those men in trucks . . . ') was intended to ease the mutual discomfort of my offensive question. I knew before asking the *tombarolo* question that Marco might have his feathers ruffled. I bought my morning coffee at his café and we regularly made small talk so I thought I knew him well enough to pose a provocative question. His strong reply revealed deep antipathy towards *tombaroli*. This antipathy is disseminated in Italian media and the scholarly press. The widely shared hatred of the figure of the *tombarolo* is all the more interesting for being accompanied by popular fascination with, and fetishistic admiration for, looters.

Conclusion

In this paper I have treated the *tombarolo* as a social construct. In so doing I have not sought to create the impression that the looting and smuggling of artworks and artefacts are somehow imagined or exaggerated. As a trained archaeologist who has seen, firsthand, damage inflicted on excavation sites by looters, I know all too well that the deleterious impact of illicit excavating is real. What I mean by social construct is that '*tombarolo*' stands for an ideal type of cultural actor and is deeply embedded in a system of shared cultural meaning and feeling. That shared system derives from a long tradition in Italy involving popular miscreants who were also folk heroes, including brigands and revolutionaries, romanticized for circumventing the policies of state. The system draws, too, from a more recent history of articulating Italian culture as a single, discrete, bounded entity that is presented as integral to Italian identity and special to western civilization.

This discussion has brought to light two points. The first is that there are specific, stigmatized categories of marginalization *within* the sphere of marginalized cultural work. *Collezionisti di antichità* themselves inhabit the margins of respectable cultural production, a lamentable situation (in their view) because their passion is misunderstood. At the same time *collezionisti* create another, more intensely marginalized category of actor – the *tombarolo* – that is immoral and anti-culture.

The second point is that the experiences of Michele, Piero, Marco and Omero Bordo demonstrate the complex careers of *beni culturali* outside the preferred path of state jurisdiction. In Michele's household, specific categories of artefacts were treasured as the purview of Piero, who self-identified as a *bucchero* expert. For Marco's uncle, it was understood that artefacts were repositories of local history and lively conversation pieces for visitors to the home. Bordo's production of Etruscan-inspired pots, crafted using tools and methods that the ancient Etruscans themselves used, challenges conventional assumptions about looters' supposed lack of appreciation for the 'real' value or significance of cultural objects.

National culture is an ongoing, dynamic, contested project (Harrison 2013). States attempt to shape it through policy and enforcement mechanisms, but ultimately the value and meaning of national culture – and its informal rules and norms – get worked out by ordinary citizens. I have argued in this paper that the margins of the social sphere are rich environments of using, circulating and making meaning of Italian antiquities. A nuanced study of what illicit diggers do and why they do it will help to build a more robust conceptual framework of cultural agency at the margins.

Notes

1 In order to protect their privacy, subjects' names have been changed. Interviews were conducted with approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan (study number HUM00064574).

2 To get a sense for how this worked, Yannis Galanakis's (2008) work on the nineteenth-century antiquities trade in Greece is illustrative. The cases of Italy and Greece are broadly comparable along lines of market dynamics and local relationships with cultural objects.

3 http://www.ultimoetrusco.it/biografia-int/testo4.htm ['1982' page 4/5]).

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