CHAPTER 5

Critical Ethnocentrism (1949–1959): The Southern Period and the Articulation of a Post-colonial Anthropology alongside Claude Lévi-Strauss

1 Notoriety without Success: Controversies with Croce and Intellectual Isolation within the Roman School of History of Religions

The World of Magic can be regarded as a symbol for de Martino’s fundamental role as a promoter for the study of religion on the Italian peninsula. Because of his involvement with some of Italy’s most distinguished publishers, such as Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (1926–1972), Alberto Mondadori (1914–1976), and Giulio Einaudi (1912–1999), it has been argued that “half of the books published in the field of anthropology and religious studies” between the late 1940s until the mid-sixties, ‘carried the stamp of de Martino.’1 His collaboration with the Einaudi publishing house was an immense success, leading to the publication of a series known as Collection of Religious, Anthropological, and Psychological Studies (Collezione di studi religiosi, etnologici e psicologici).2 It was co-directed by de Martino and the renowned Italian literary figure Cesare Pavese (1908–1950) until the latter’s suicide in 1950. Supported by Raffaele Pettazzoni and Angelo Brellich, two important historians of religion—who collaborated with translations and introductions3—the series is also commonly known by the name Purple Series (Collana viola) for the distinguishing color of its cover.

However, his magnum opus also stands for de Martino’s isolation within this disciplinary matrix. Indeed, his professional development as a historian of religion was not burgeoning as he had hoped. In 1948, after his book was published as the first volume of the Purple Series, de Martino was rejected from a teaching position in anthropology at the Sapienza University in Rome. There, two of his closest allies, Boccassino and Pettazzoni, considered his work to be too philosophical and not anthropological enough. In the words of one

1 Angelini, 10.
commentator, we could say that de Martino “experienced notoriety but no success.”\(^4\) The academy rejected him for his wide range of concerns and orientations that failed to align with any single one of the intellectual orientations of his time. He was neither really accepted by the proponents of the Italian School of History of Religions nor willing to limit his curiosity in psychological interpretations of religion, which remained largely foreign to this tradition of scholarship. Placido and Maria Cherchi’s illustrative description of de Martino’s “anchoring within the historical post-pettazzonian school [as] the docking of a solitary seafarer at a hospitable island,” might be the most appropriate sketch of his affiliation to the Roman school.\(^5\)

Without a professorship, de Martino had no choice but to teach in high schools. After working in Lucca and Faenza, he returned to Bari in 1945 to resume his teaching position there.\(^6\) At this time, he was joined by his wife and his two children, who returned from Cotignola, carrying *The World of Magic* in their luggage. In the summer of 1947, de Martino finally accepted the call from the *Liceo Virgilio* in Rome and began teaching there by the side of his wife Anna, who was employed as an art history teacher. However, even though he was officially engaged there from 1947 to 1959, de Martino was frequently on leave for numerous reasons.\(^7\) Most importantly, the post-war years were marked by physical sickness and de Martino spent months in the hospital, undergoing several surgeries for various ailments on his lungs between 1948 and 1951.

More importantly, his *magnum opus* led to further isolation by challenging Croce’s historicist philosophy. Indeed, de Martino explicitly dedicated his study to dimensions that were far from being considered legitimate objects of study by his teacher. Taking Hamlet’s reminder to Horatio—“there are more things in heaven and earth […] than are dreamt in your philosophy”—as his guiding principle, de Martino addressed the crisis of classical Italian historicism. Describing it as “lazy” (*pigro*) and “preaching” (*sermoneggiante*), he claimed that this type of philosophy “tends to interpret the dignity of the real as spirit in a metaphysical sense and to transmute it into a static truth,


in which the mind rests, dogmatizing." In 1946, in a commemoration for his first teacher Adolfo Omodeo, de Martino similarly criticized the mainstream of Italian historicism for being "sermonizing or even psalmodious," regarding history "detached from the real plexus of reconstructive thought," thus inevitably converting itself "into a new philosophy of history."

Croce would not have been the intellectual leader of an entire generation if he didn't counter the challenges posed by his student. In his review of *The World of Magic*, Croce addressed it within the context of "the years that we are currently living in," noting on "the serious and terrifying drama," which was manifesting in his contemporaries' "tendency to immerse and submerge themselves into the irrational." He rhetorically asked whether we will "invoke the wizards, which we have already experienced in the form of dictators of undifferentiated and totalitarian states, entering into a new savage age only to leave it after a few centuries," or, whether we will instead "stand by our own interior strengths and resist?" Before closing his review with a harsh critique of "the sanctification or at least veneration that de Martino cultivated for the wizard, putting him at the origin of history and civilization," Croce deployed his forces into the battlefield. He lambasted his rebellious student for making the transcendental unity of self-awareness, that is "the presence," into his "supreme principle," thus "severing the spiritual unity of his forms with an impossible incision." Croce argued that "neither the categories of consciousness, language, art, thought, practical life, moral life, nor the synthetic unity that groups all these things, are historical products—products of epochal manifestations of the spirit—but rather they are spirit that creates history."

Since the acute observations by Renato Solmi in 1952, scholarship has argued that de Martino, in response to these reprimands, returned within the fold of Croceanism by abdicating his interpretation of the historicity of the self. Commentators used a diverse range of terms—such as "return" ("ritorno"), "reverence" ("riverenza"), "retraction" ("sconfessione"), or "repentence" ("pentimento")—to describe de Martino's attitude towards Croce after the publication

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11 Croce, 253.
12 Croce, 249.
13 Croce, 248.
of *The World of Magic.* In three specific instances throughout the 1950s, in fact, de Martino stated that “Croce was right,” avowed to “have gradually rejected the postulation of a magic world as a historical age,” and clarified that “history is never the history of categories but takes place within the categories.”

2 Shaking Earth and Intellectual Transitions: Political Militancy and Ethnographic Journeys in the Italian South

This being said, de Martino’s relationship with Croce remained ambivalent even after his supposed return. After the war, it was his political activity that forced de Martino to distance himself from his teacher. In fact, even after becoming president of the Liberal Party and publishing *History as the Story of Liberty,* Croce “had little taste for politics.” In the words of David Roberts, we could say that de Martino was one of those “intellectuals,” who, “at a moment of dramatic collective decision for his culture,” took their distance from Croce “because he didn’t seem to have anything convincing to say on a number of matters of immediate concern.” Croce, so these critics claimed, offered little more than “a sterile conception of liberty, an empty faith in history, and an evasive, politically expedient interpretation of fascism.” As a result, young Italians like Ernesto “were bound to shop around when the culture opened up after fascism” and Croce “inevitably seemed a bit provincial.”

Once again, the semi-fictional earthquake narrative surrounding his birth, somewhat paradoxically, allows the intellectual historian to firmly implant de Martino within the ground of his native land. Just as Benedetto Croce lost his parents and his only sister on the island of Ischia during the earthquake of July 1883, two other thinkers who moved decisively beyond the orbit of the

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15 De Martino, “Crisi della presenza e reintegrazione religiosa,” 19.
17 Ernesto De Martino, “Prefazione,” in *Le origini dei poteri magici,* by Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Henri Hubert (Torino: Boringhieri, 1951), 9–14.
19 David D. Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 79.
20 Roberts, 69.
The novelist Ignazio Silone (1900–1978) lost his mother in the earthquake in the Abruzzi in 1915 and the historian Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957) lost his wife, his sister, and all five of his children in the Messina earthquake described by de Martino in his semi-fictional birth-narrative. De Martino knew both figures and shared their concern for opening up the Italian intellectual horizon to the Italian South, Marxist social theory, and existentialist thought—in short, influences that decisively transcend the concerns of Italy’s most important philosopher of this time.

Of course, the ultimate fruit of this expansion of horizons is the so-called “Southern Trilogy,” which consists of Death and Ritual Weeping (1958), South and Magic (1959) and The Land of Remorse (1961). The years in question were marked by increased integration of de Martino’s bourgeois identity with that of the masses of the Italian South. Before leaving for Rome to teach at Virgilio, de Martino met a new love in the form of Vittoria de Palma (b. 1930), who was his student of philosophy in Bari in the 1946–1947 school year. As a consequence, de Martino repeatedly tried to dissolve his marriage with Anna through the Catholic Church. In Italy, a land where divorce had no legal basis at this time, de Martino’s attempts remained unsuccessful and he had no choice but to make Vittoria his new “life partner.” Separating from his wife in the late 1940s, he nonetheless employed her to translate Eliade’s Techniques of Yoga (1948) and continued to share an intense political militancy with her.

As for the two new lovers, upon their move to Rome, Vittoria dedicated her time to the study of anthropology, opening up the possibility for shared ethnographic expeditions in the Italian South during the 1950s. In the preface to


22 After the work of Charuty, which contains a few precious pages of information, the best study on De Palma is a recent article by Marzo. Marzo, “Etnografia e servizio sociale”; Charuty, Ernesto de Martino, 46–50. As for the date of birth of Vittoria, things are not clear to me: in her study, Marzo says that she was born in 1927. Di Donato, on the other hand, mentions once that she was 21 in 1951 and another time that she was 20 in 1949. What is even more perplexing is that Marzo cites the first of Di Donato’s passages without commenting on the obvious discrepancy regarding the DOB that she states in the opening passages. Marzo, “Etnografia e servizio sociale”; Riccardo Di Donato, I greci selvaggi. L’antropologia storica di Ernesto de Martino (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1999), 161, 187. Through personal inquiries with Adelina Talamonti, this plot has received another twist. While I was able to verify that her official birthdate is August 25, 1927, she claims that her document is not correct and that she was instead born in 1928.

23 Mancini, “Postface,” 414.
Death and Ritual Weeping, the first book of the Southern trilogy, de Martino offered his partner a beautiful dedication, highlighting how her practical and emotional qualities contributed immensely to the success of his study on practices of lamentation in the Italian South. Financially too, with de Martino's salary from his job as a high school teacher as the only source of income, the situation of the couple was anything but comfortable and marked by significant hardship; a circumstance which quite possibly contributed to Ernesto's increasing identification with the underprivileged strata of the South of Italy.

In The Land of Remorse, certainly his most popular book, de Martino offered a study of the spider-bitten women of Southern Italy. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Salentine peninsula in 1959, de Martino studied Apulian tarantism, a form of possession related to the belief in the bite of a mythical tarantula and exorcistic dance practices that operate by means of a special type of music whose name derives from that of the spider, the so-called Tarantella. De Martino's work, drawing on interdisciplinary research, offered an account of the phenomenon that is both rigorous and compassionate as the possession cult is not reduced to a mental illness but rather explained in light of its cultural history, specifically the consistent marginalization of the Italian South. In the book, he cites a Jesuit missionary, Michele Navarro—who himself described the lands as an “Italian India” (“Indias de por acá”)—to demonstrate how the South was conceived of as a radical alterity.

It is apparent that de Martino, unlike Croce’s “narrowly Eurocentric historicism,” envisioned his scholarship as centered on the marginalized groups of people that had only recently “irrupted into history.” This is nowhere as apparent as in South and Magic, a study of ceremonial magic and witchcraft in southern Italy, in which the problematic nature of magic for Western society becomes the driving question of investigation. In fact, a local correlate of the global processes of decolonization and liberation of Western imperialism, the irruption of subaltern masses was accompanied by a national rise to prominence of the Southern population of Italy, which suffered from its own

25 Charuty, Ernesto de Martino, 46–47.
26 Ernesto De Martino, La terra del rimorso (Milano: Il saggياتore, 1961), 43.
27 De Martino, “Intorno a una storia del mondo popolare subalterno,” 1949, 421; De Martino, La fine del mondo, 277–78.
sort of suppression in the preceding centuries.\textsuperscript{29} The “South,” also known of mezzogiorno (literally meaning “mid-day” in Italian), designates large parts of the country whose participation in the processes of modernization has lagged behind the rest of the country. Until today the region is described as primitive and savage, poor and agricultural, feudal and corrupt, patriarchal and discriminatory, superstitious and irrational.

Although the idea of the “Italian India”—stemming from the sixteenth century when the South consisted of the Neapolitan Kingdom of the Two Sicilies—shows the remarkable constancy of this “othering,” the “Southern Question” truly emerged after the Unification of Italy (\textit{Unità d’Italia}) in 1860. In many ways, it reached its peak towards the middle of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{30} First, the liberation of the Southern part of the country from Mussolini in the fall of 1943 was followed by several uprisings of the peasants who occupied the so-called latifundia, large tracts of privately owned lands.\textsuperscript{31} Then, in 1945, when fascism was finally defeated in the North, the Southern Question polarized even more as the mezzogiorno was discriminated as a radical form of alterity, separated by an invisible yet insurmountable boundary.

While these three book-length explorations of various phenomena of religious and magic practices in the Italian South have received some attention in recent years—with two of them having even been translated into English—it is important to note that there exist also other sources of interest for the reconstruction of de Martino’s Southern Period.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, in his bibliography, we find a list of over 80 smaller publications in between 1948 and 1957, which not only protocol de Martino’s remarkable ethnographic journeys into the Italian South and the refinement of the theoretical conceptions of religion and magic, but also his political maturation as a socialist and communist activist. De Martino was a key figure in Italy’s coming to terms with the crisis of the South, particularly through his publication of an article entitled “About a History of the World of the Subaltern Masses” (1949). The article, published in the journal \textit{Società}, hit the Italian intelligentsia like a bomb and caused a vast and fertile, albeit heated, debate with some of Italy’s leading thinkers, which would

\textsuperscript{29} Cherchi, \textit{Il peso dell’ombra}, 27.
last well into the following decade.\textsuperscript{33} The controversy not only dominated the pages of the Communist journal, where de Martino would publish no less than eight articles, but also a host of other less specialized journals and daily newspapers—most prominently *L’Unità*, *Avanti!, Il Mondo, Il Nuovo Corriere, Nuovi Argomenti, Paese Sera, Cronache meridionali*, and *Rinascita*.

The discovery of exotic lands just a stone’s throw away from Rome after WWII was also a decisive moment in the development of Italian anthropology, a discipline still in its emerging stages in a country that was not marked by important colonialist expansions.\textsuperscript{34} One student of de Martino described it as a veritable culture shock, a “trauma produced by the confrontation with a total alterity.”\textsuperscript{35} De Martino himself used the term “ethnological expedition” (“*spedizione etnologica*”) to describe his journeys into the Italian South, in order to emphasize this spirit of discovery.

Not unlike his youthful fascination with fascism as a civil religion, it was once again political activism that preceded de Martino’s intellectual engrossments with the Southern Question. After returning from the front of the Senio during his time as a partisan in hiding, Ernesto became politically active in the Italian South and made himself a name as a founding member of the Italian Labor Party (*Partito italiano del lavoro*, PIL). In August 1944, he participated, together with his university teacher Adolfo Omodeo, at the Congress of the Action Party (*Partito d’Azione*, PdA) in the Southern town of Cosenza. After the Liberation (*Liberazione*), the party, which was played such an important role during the Resistance, would no longer satisfy de Martino’s thirst for political militancy and so he maneuvered even more left on the political spectrum by joining the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (*Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria, PSIUP*) in 1945, then the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI*) in 1948, and finally the Communist Party in 1953.\textsuperscript{36}

This political militancy—particularly during his years in the PSI, when he worked as the party’s secretary in Bari, Molfetta, and Lecce—led de Martino

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\textsuperscript{33} Most of the articles fertilizing this debate have recently been republished in Raffaele Rauty, *Quando c’erano gli intellettuali: rileggendo “Cultura popolare e marxismo”* (Milano: Mimesis, 2015). I cite from this version.
\textsuperscript{35} Amalia Signorelli, *Ernesto de Martino: teoria antropologica e metodologia della ricerca* (Roma: L’asino d’oro, 2015), 96.
\textsuperscript{36} The date of entry into the PCI is anything but clear either. For many years scholars claimed that he became a communist in 1949 or 1950. However, an article by Valerio Severino has shown that he only officially joined the party in 1953. Valerio Salvatore Severino, “Ernesto de Martino nel PCI degli anni Cinquanta tra religione e politica culturale,” *Studii storici* 44, no. 2 (2003): 527.
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gradually into ethnographic work. Although a completely outline of de Martino's fieldwork remains a desideratum, his archival notes offer us a picture of his thorough exploration of the Italian South. In 1946, while in Bari, he conducted a first “informal” research on the people in the South for the bi-monthly Marxist journal *Quarto Stato* to scrutinize the socio-economic transformations in the area in the immediate after-war years. In “Anthropology and National Culture in the Last Ten Years” (1953), an article rich in autobiographical references, de Martino retraced his development from *Naturalism* and *Historicism* to *The World of Magic* through the years of historical crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, before underlining the importance of his political engagement for the third step in his intellectual development, the transition from an armchair anthropologist to an engaged ethnographer.

Precisely in the years that followed the Liberation, during my political activity in Puglia as secretary of the Socialist Federation of Bari and as commissioner of the one in Lecce, I happened to meet a humanity that until then had a substantially conventional existence, which meridionalistic literature, traditional ethic-political historiography, and the very tedious and frigid folkloristic writings could present me with. [...] But I entered into the homes of the Apulian peasants as a “friend,” as an explorer of men and of forgotten human stories, who at the same time spies on and controls his own humanity; as someone who, alongside the people he met, wants to become a participant in the constitution of a better world in which we all, I who searched and they who were found, would have become better.

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De Martino gradually expanded his independent research, shifting his focus away from a purely materialistic reading of the Southern Question to shed light on the cultural aspects of the region. In “Lucanian Notes” (1950) and “Travel Notes” (1953), we not only find the first portents of the immensely important concept of “critical ethnocentrism,” but also an increasing interest in folk songs, popular theatre, life stories of peasants, and religious and magic beliefs. His intention to integrate these marginalized realms of society finds an expression in a previously underestimated document of de Martino’s Southern Period, namely the first radio transmission of his expedition from 1953. In “Expedition in Lucania,” he reported several cases of “unfortunate” (*sventurato*) birth accounts. In light of de Martino’s depiction of his own nativity scene in the wake of cosmic trauma, it is particularly the case of Caterina Guglia, which proves relevant. Introducing the story of the old woman, de Martino noted that her birth-account shows that “the theme of the unfortunate birth lights up in images, which speak of a true catastrophe that accompanies the birth.” In the poetic verses recounting her own story, Caterina sings:

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When I was born
My mother died
My father died the following day
Even the midwife died
I went to get baptized
With nobody around me

When I was born
The deepest seas dried up
And for that entire year
There was no spring in this world
When I was born
The stars turned dark
And the sun stopped shining.40
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The almost autobiographical nature of de Martino’s documentation does not end here. The anthropologist commented on the account by noting that Caterina “did not remember the exact year of her birth, but only knew that she was born in the year of the earthquake” and that “she remembered the verses

of her birth as a catastrophe with immediate memory." In more explicitly autobiographical writings of those years, we find that de Martino frequently experimented with ways to overcome his own limitations as a man torn between intellect and action. Here, he not only identified ethnographically with the destiny of the subaltern classes, but also believed that it was through political action that his internal tensions could be overcome. More precisely, it is through the militancy as a communist that he united the numerous threads consisting of the historical-cultural crisis of the world surrounding him, his fragmented personality, and his reforming mission as a public intellectual:

I am an intellectual of transition, torn by contradictions, [...] born into the urban lower middle class of the Italian South. I carry within me the numerous weaknesses and the vile sentimentalism of this class without destiny. Nonetheless, I have learned to understand this painful condition and I apply myself to construct myself on a theoretical plane, as a man that I am not in reality. But the contradictions of my being, which reflect themselves ceaselessly in my thoughts, render this path exhausting and problematic. Great theoretical lucidity and many contradictions in real life, a powerful spirit and a fragile existence: This is who I am. All the freedom that I am deprived of in action is transformed, in a cathartic way, into freedom of conceptualization. [...] I cannot reform myself without reforming the world. But, in truth, by the time the world will be transformed, I will not have been on this earth for many centuries. My shortcoming is the product of secular imperfections, of the society to which I belong. In order to overcome them on the plane of reality, one would have to undo concretions of history that have been transmitted from generation to generation; a feat beyond my power. I am nothing more than a hero of the spirit, within the bounds of a purely speculative heroism. Why did I join the working class? Because I hate myself as man, because I detest the lower middle-class traditions of the mezzogiorno that have made me who I am: Uncertain, hesitating, full of contradictions, and feeble in the world of action. This certainly is my "shortcoming." My "greatness" is to have gained a pitiless awareness of this fact and to have joined the class that will reform the world.42

41 De Martino, 91.
42 Milaneschi, "Ernesto de Martino e il Cristianesimo," 252; De Martino and Secchia, Compagni e amici, XXI; Mancini, "Postface," 495–96; Charuty, Ernesto de Martino, 37.
3 The Rise of the Cultural-Discursive Paradigm and Self-Reflexive Anthropology

It is in light of this emotional and self-critical language that scholarship recently argued that de Martino must be regarded an anticipator of post-colonial thought in his own right. Although he undertook his expeditions primarily on Italian soil—particularly amongst the peasants of the Southern regions—this encounter provoked a profound perspectival shift in his thinking that parallels developments in the global post-colonial, interpretative, and self-reflexive approaches. After a period of confidence and complacency following WWII—a sort of hibernation after the great global crisis—a new type of critical thinking began to emerge in the 1960s to then develop into a full-fledged paradigm across multitudinous fields of the humanities during the 1970s and 80s. This period was marked by important socio-political upheavals, such as the independence movements in the Third World, the relinquishment of colonies by European powers, the American war in Vietnam, and the rise of civil rights movements. Clifford Geertz described this paradigm shift in terms of a transition from “othering” to “self-doubt” that very accurately reflect de Martino’s own metamorphosis:

The trouble begins with uneasy reflections on the involvement of anthropological research with colonial regimes during the heyday of Western imperialism and with its aftershadows now; reflections themselves brought on by accusations, from Third World intellectuals, about the field’s complicity in the division of humanity into those who know and decide and those who are known and are decided for. [...] But it hardly ends there. Driven on by the enormous engines of postmodern self-doubt—Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gramsci, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, most recently Bakhtin—the anxiety spreads into a more general worry about the representation of “The Other” (inevitably capitalized, inevitably singular) in ethnographic discourse as such. Is not the whole enterprise but domination carried on by other means: “Hegemony,”

43 Fabrizio M. Ferrari, Ernesto De Martino on Religion.
44 Francesco Faeta, Questioni italiane: demonologia, antropologia, critica culturale (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).
“monologue,” “vouloir-savoir,” “mauvaise foi,” “orientalism”? “Who are we to speak for them?”

Scholars of religion too, gradually gained a more sophisticated understanding of the earlier approaches and how they related to processes of modernization and colonialism. Upon closer analysis, they discovered that modernization was just as divided as the discipline of religious studies and, with time, it became clear that the insider-phenomenological and the outsider-explanatory models were essentially representative of two alternative modes for envisioning our own culture within this complex construction of modern Western identity. If the first approach was usually implicated in a critique of modernity by taking the culturally and religious other as a model for a superior civilization, the second approach was deeply grounded within modernity’s values and usually construed “religion” as a retrograde and primitive form of society that is to be abandoned and overcome by means of modern politics and science.

These radically opposed approaches to religion form part of a unified vision. We could define this perspective as the “ontological paradigm” and insert it within a phenomenon that has been described as the “ambiguity of modernity”: Religion is either a higher reality that needs to be approached through personal experience in order to revive modern humanity’s reality or it is an epi-phenomenon of other cultural practices that needs to be abandoned in order for the process of modernization to come to its conclusion. Just as Zygmunt Baumann found the stability of modernity to be hinging on its instability as the “dysfunctionality of modern culture is its functionality,” the discipline of religious studies functioned because of its double nature as represented in the insider-phenomenological and the outsider-explanatory approaches. “When we lack the second level of self-reflexive critique, when we presume that our categories and ‘worlds’ are completely adequate presentations of the world around us,” so McCutcheon explains, “we are left with the peculiar modernist view of the world, which, in an utter irony, is shared by religious and positivist scholars of religion alike.”

In Beyond Phenomenology (1999), Gavin Flood offers a lay of the land of the discipline of religious studies by the end of the twentieth century, arguing that the scholar has three approaches at his disposal. The first two—which

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47 Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence, 9.
correspond closely to the insider-phenomenological and the outsider-explanatory approaches—have existed for a long time and are premised on the “dichotomy of reductive explanation [...] and empathetic phenomenology.” The third, by contrast, is a relatively new development, which Flood proceeds to define it as follows:

This position is both critical and dialogical. It desires both to understand and to offer explanations of religion or religious practices as completely embedded within other cultural practices, but reflexively recognizes the embodied/embedded, narrative nature of the enterprise. In this way it draws upon postmodern critiques of modernist, overarching rationality, but recognizes that any embodied narrative draws upon cultural values which it inevitably articulates, and, at least in the late modern world, is sensitive to the human reasons as to why people elect certain cultural practices.49

The proponents of what I call the cultural-discursive paradigm insist that there is no value-free form of science because of the impact of our own priorities. This type of awareness is premised on the idea that the relationship between the self and the other is more complicated than a simple binary, as it is shaped by issues of power, voice, and perspective. In light of this, the human sciences, particularly the disciplines of anthropology, history, and religious studies, became culturally and discursively self-reflective undertakings.

4  Tristes Tropiques, Critical Ethnocentrism, and the Anticipation of the Cultural-Discursive Paradigm

De Martino anticipated some of these transformations on the international scene by at least a decade as he emphatically presented anthropology as a science that is not concerned with what is culturally other, but rather with the self-reflexive return to one’s own culture. This becomes particularly apparent if his concept of “critical ethnocentrism,” which Vittorio Lanternari described as “one of the most refined and acute instruments and methods that anthropological science has ever elaborated.”50 Already in Naturalism and Historicism in Anthropology, De Martino anticipated the cultural-discursive paradigm’s sensibility for power, explaining that “a colonial politics enlightened by

49  Flood, Beyond Phenomenology, 148.
50  Lanternari, La mia alleanza con Ernesto de Martino e altri saggi post-demartiniani, 124.
Ethnological knowledge is politics and not ethnology” just as “the ethnologist who works for the colonial administrator is a politician.” Rather than colonizing other cultures, he concluded, the anthropologist should “promote a different orientation of ourselves towards ourselves by means of a broadened awareness of our being that has to emerge from anthropological knowledge.”

Similarly, in *The World of Magic*, he spoke of anthropology’s task to “raise problems whose solution leads to the expansion of self-awareness (*all’allargamento dell’autocoscienza)*.” Finally, during the Southern Period, these ideas would culminate in a new method for anthropology, which he described as follows:

In critical ethnocentrism, the western (or westernized) anthropologist assumes the history of his own culture as a unit of measurement of alien cultural histories. At the same time, in the act of measuring, he gains awareness of the historical prison and of the limits of use of his own system of measurement and opens himself to the task of a reform [...] of the very categories of observation, which were at his disposal at the beginning of the research. Only by critically and deliberately putting the history of the West at the center of the contrasting research can the anthropologist contribute to the inauguration of a vaster anthropological awareness than the one contained in dogmatic ethnocentrisms.

To define the key traits of de Martino’s critical ethnocentrism, it might be best to investigate his confrontation with one of his century’s greatest intellectuals, namely Claude Lévi-Strauss. Although the relationship to the French structuralist was so important that it would occupy de Martino until the very end of his life, featuring prominently in his posthumously published notes, the origin of his fascination was likely the ethnographic encounter with the people of the Italian South. Not unlike Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most famous ethnographers and inventor of the term “participant observation,” de Martino and Lévi-Strauss developed some of their most important theories in the context of ethnographic field research. In both cases, we note a dras-

54 De Martino, 394–98.
55 For one of the first reflections within official anthropology on the challenges involved in the ethnographic encounter, one must turn Malinowski. See, for example, Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1922), xv, xvii.
tic transformation of their conception of anthropology, which moved from the anonymous neutrality of science—encountered earlier in their psychoanalytic theorizing on ritual efficacy—to the human warmth and emotions of the personal experience in the field. Although in the preceding chapter, I have shown that the French structuralist program must be inscribed within the outsider-explanatory approach, this is only part of the truth. In fact, ultimately both de Martino and Lévi-Strauss can be regarded as important anticipators of the cultural-discursive paradigm in anthropology.

4.1 Anticipating Said’s Orientalism: Anthropology of Guilt and the Ethnographic Encounter

A first trait of post-colonial anthropology that can be found in the works of both Lévi-Strauss and de Martino is a type of “crisis of conscience.” As Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson recently suggested, anthropologists of the cultural-discursive paradigm “are abandoning explanatory theorizing and some are abandoning science altogether out of guilt about the role that anthropological research has played in colonial repression.” The transformations in geopolitical reality in the 1960s and 70s were accompanied by a general rise of awareness of long-standing forms of complicity between anthropology and imperialism, which is best epitomized in one of the most impactful books of the cultural-discursive turn, namely Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978). The cultural critic argued that academic orientalism was “a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” In arguing for a self-critical attitude towards academic conceptions of the culturally other—paying particular attention to issues of imperialism and power—Said’s oeuvre stands for the rise of postcolonialism in the humanities.

If Alessandro Testa even went as far as arguing that Lévi-Strauss cultivated post-colonial “sensibilities” in his Structural Anthropology, this tendency becomes particularly evident in another one of the French anthropologist’s works, namely Tristes Tropiques (1955). The book has rightly been described as one that is infused with “pessimism,” giving a “vivid feeling of the profound metaphysical despair,” and offering a picture of “the entire civilized world...
Lévi-Strauss, retracing his ethnographic expeditions amongst the indigenous tribes of Brazil from the Mato Grosso to the Amazon, reflected on his complicity in constructing anthropology as a science that imposes itself on other cultures. In the beginning of this book, famously opening with the sentence “Travel and travellers are two things I loathe,” Lévi-Strauss explained that “fifteen years have passed since I left Brazil for the last time and often, during those years, I’ve planned to write this book, but I’ve always been held back by a sort of shame and disgust.” Unlike his structuralist books, which were premised on a pure science from “the point of view of god,” in Tristes Tropiques, we read of a more coercive type of scholarship as other cultures are said to be “like game-birds in the trap of our mechanistic civilization” in a process of “overcoming all others.” Rhetorically, he asked: “I sometimes wonder if I was not attracted to anthropology, however unwittingly, by a structural affinity between the civilizations which are its subject and my own thought-processes.” He continued by comparing his thinking to a “brush-fire” as it “burns itself into territory, [...] leaving devastation behind.” In another passage, he noted that his ethnographic journeys taught him that “the notion of travel has become corrupted by the notion of power,” before elaborating as follows:

The great civilization of the West has given birth to many marvels; but at what a cost! As has happened in the case of the most famous of their creations, that atomic pile in which have been built structures of a complexity hitherto the order and harmony of the West depend upon the elimination of that prodigious quantity of maleficent by-products which now pollutes the earth. What travel has now to show us is the filth, our filth, that we have thrown in the face of humanity.

There is no doubt that Tristes Tropiques played a fundamental role in the development of de Martino’s critique of anthropological ethnocentrism. In the introduction to The Land of Remorse (1961), de Martino cited Lévi-Strauss’ ethnographic self-reflection no less than three times—including the passage

61 Lévi-Strauss, 42.
62 Lévi-Strauss, 90.
63 Lévi-Strauss, 56.
64 Lévi-Strauss, 39.
of remorse and redemption cited above. More generally speaking, during the Southern Period, de Martino frequently spoke of anthropology in similar terms, as “guilt,” “remorse,” “responsibility,” and “redemption” became vital notions for framing his endeavours. It also appears that de Martino anticipated many of the core ideas of his French colleague as his own transition from an armchair anthropologist to that of an engaged ethnographer led him to develop a new understanding of his role as a scientist. Anthropology, so Placido Cherchi put it, became “a real encounter, a living testimony to one’s own dramatic ‘diversity’.” While de Martino acknowledged that he needed to repay an “immense debt incurred” towards the peasants he studies in the South in an article from the early 1950s—such references continue well into the 1960s—the most famous passage is contained in an article entitled “Lucanian Notes;” a text published half a decade before Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques*. Following his first encounter with the peasants in what is now the Italian region of Basilicata, he described it as a powerful moment that provoked a “feeling” (*sentimento*), which is “more than anything an anxious sense of guilt.” Finally, he confessed that “in front of these beings held down at the status of beasts despite their aspiration to become humans, I personally, as a petit-Bourgeois intellectual from the mezzogiorno, feel guilty.”

4.2 Anticipating Fabian’s Time and Other: Anthropology as Self-Reflexivity and Introspection

Clifford Geertz not only described Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* as “the finest of his texts and the one that most illuminates the whole of his work,” but also argued that it is “probably the most emphatically self-referring anthropological text we have, the one that absorbs the world’s ‘why’ most shamelessly into a ‘how to write.’” Similar things can be said about de Martino’s “Lucanian Notes.” Like in Lévi-Strauss’ work, we are dealing here with an essay “whose subject is in great part itself; whose purpose is to display what, were it a novel,
we would call its fictionality; a painting, its planarity; a dance, its comportment: its existence as a made thing.”72 Indeed, de Martino’s ethnographic report represented a radical turn in his work as it is the first time that the ethnographer appears as one of the protagonists of his writings. He described his own subjective experience and his reactions to the encounters in the field, which were frequently emotional in nature. Thus, we learn not only that he felt guilt, but also experienced a series of other emotions: outrage and shock, humiliation and empathy, anger and fury. In his “Travel Notes,” similarly, he described his own experiences as an ethnographer while encountering the ritual weeping practices, which would culminate in Death and Ritual Weeping, as follows:

These women, who cry surrounding the coffin should, for me as historian, hold only the value of a document of quality, found in a dusty archive. As a historian, I should only look at the most favorable moment to register their metrical weeping. But here, I am also absorbed in these events of living history, I too have become a protagonist of the drama.73

As Amalia Signorelli recently claimed, it is this “narrating himself” as anthropologist, his “reenacting himself” (mettersi in scena), which is “probably the characteristic of these writings that most conditioned—both positively and negatively—the judgment of the readers.”74 De Martino emphasized that what he felt was not “a testimony of original sin” in the form of “the guilt” in a Christian or Western cultural sense. On the contrary, he explained that describing it in such a way would only be an attempt to liberate himself “from the weight of an uncomfortable analysis, transfiguring this entirely human responsibility into the heavens.” Instead, so de Martino concludes, it is “my guilt.”75

In their call for self-reflexivity, the works of Lévi-Strauss and de Martino anticipated another key trait of the cultural-discursive paradigm. Indeed, only five years after Said’s piece, Johannes Fabian published Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object (1983). Fabian’s book further confirmed Said’s intuition that anthropology constructed the “other” by “implying distance, difference, and opposition,” in order to construct a world “for Western society to inhabit, rather than ‘understanding other cultures,’ its ostensible vocation.”76 Very similar to Fabian, the first principle of de Martino’s critical ethnocentrism

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72 Geertz, 28.
73 De Martino, “Note di viaggio.”
74 Signorelli, Ernesto de Martino, 22.
75 De Martino, “Note lucane,” 666.
is that it uses the encounter with what is culturally other to reflect on the self. In the continuation of his “Lucanian Notes,” we read:

After my encounter with the Rabatani, I realized that there was not merely their problem, the problem of their emancipation, but there was also my problem, the problem of a Southern intellectual from a petit-bourgeois class. This intellectual, with a certain cultural tradition and a certain "civilization" absorbed during schooling, as a result of the encounter with these people, was forced to examine his conscience and to become, so to speak, an ethnographer of himself.77

For de Martino, anthropology and religious studies were no longer disciplines of investigation that limited their interest to what is “other,” but rather tools for self-reflection and critical examination of one’s own cultural-religious horizon. As Placido Cherchi put it, de Martino’s paradigmatic shift might “be the first time in the field of anthropology that the journey towards the ‘other from the self’ is overturned into a journey inside of ourselves or that the observing subject finds itself being self-critically reduced to the rank of object of observation.”78 More recently, Forgacs offered the Anglophone readership a laudable description of de Martino’s “ethnographic encounter [as a] kind of critical self-interrogation,” in which “the ‘remote’ became familiar, as the ‘irrational’ behavior of the people observed became comprehensible and they started to be seen as agents in their own world and not just objects of a scientific gaze.” As a consequence, the observers would be forced to look critically at their own processes of observation,” asking “searching questions about the nature of their own science and the values of their own subculture in the very act of attempting to explain the other.”79 The second passage that de Martino cites from Tristes Tropiques in his own investigation on the exorcistic cults surrounding the spider-bitten women of the Italian South, is precisely intended to support this self-reflexivity in anthropology.

It is a time, above all, of self-interrogation. Why did he come to such a place? With what hopes? And to what end? What is, in point of fact, an anthropological investigation? Is it the exercise of a profession like any other, differentiated only by the fact that home and office-laboratory are

77 De Martino, “Note lucane,” 666.
78 Cherchi, Il peso dell’ombra, 35.
79 David Forgacs, Italy’s Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 141–42.
several thousand miles apart? Or does it follow upon some more radical
decision—one that calls into question the system within which one was
born and has come to manhood?80

In his own analysis of this passage, de Martino concluded that “the ethno-
graphic journey situates itself in the framework of modern humanism as the
total revolution of the mythic journey into the beyond.” Instead of this trip,
which “magicians, shamans, initiates, and mystics [...] undertake to recover
in this elective beyond the loss of the presence in critical moments of histori-
cal becoming,” de Martino emphasized that anthropology is a means to “go
beyond [...] one’s own circumscribed humanity put into question by a certain
historical conjuncture.” The ethnographic exploration, so de Martino con-
cluded, is a “gaining of awareness and a stimulus [...] to arrive at systems of
cultural choices that are simply ‘different’ from ours, in which we were ‘born
and grew up.”81

4.3 Anticipating Smith’s Imagining Religion: Anthropology as the Study
of Culture and the Critical Questioning of Our Categories

We have already seen to what extent Tristes Tropiques was a book about the
science of anthropology, arguing against itself. Yet it was also a book about
Western ethnocentrism and how anthropology could help us gain aware-
ness of our own limitations. “If the West has produced anthropologists,”
Lévi-Strauss argued at one point in the book, “it is because it was so tormented
by remorse that it had to compare its own image with that of other societies,
in the hope that they would either display the same shortcomings or help the
West to explain how these defects could have come into being.” A few lines
later, we read, “if anthropology cannot take a detached view of our civilization,
or declare itself not responsible for that civilization’s evils, it is because its very
existence is unintelligible unless we regard it as an attempt to redeem it.”82

For de Martino, the redemption of the science of culture revolved around
the critique of categories, particularly the concept of “religion.” It is no coinci-
dence that the first time de Martino came across the term “ethnocentrism” was
in a book by another French-trained thinker, whose work is uniquely sensi-
tive to the use of Western categories in evaluating other cultures. It was Sergeĭ
Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff, who in his The Psychomental Complex of Tungus

80  Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques, 374; De Martino, La terra del rimorso, 40–41.
81  De Martino, La terra del rimorso, 41.
82  Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques, 388.
(repeatedly used the term “ethnocentrism” in order to launch a critique of contemporary anthropologists and their failure to approach shamanism with the necessary theoretical openness. Indeed, Shirokogoroff’s oeuvre was not only innovative because of its revaluation of magic phenomena performed by the shamans—moving beyond the psychopathological assessment of earlier thinkers to appreciate the practices as culturally and psychologically productive—but also for its methodological intuitions. Inspired by the Russian thinker’s work, de Martino accused the “men of science,” who consider the practices amongst extra-European peoples as “superstition” and “folklore,” of holding an “ethnocentric” attitude. These ethnocentric thinkers posit their own culture as the measuring stick for other cultures. In Shirokogoroff’s work, the critique of positivist science, the revaluation of magic phenomena, and the turn to a critique of ethnocentrism went hand in hand. As Andrei A. Znamenski recently reported, the Russian anthropologist insisted on “accept[ing] cultures strictly on their own terms.”

Interestingly, the questioning of Western concepts, such as “reason” or “science” was also an integral part of the thinking of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, the French anthropologist, despite his structuralist approach to cultures, became increasingly critical of his own culture’s tools of measurement. In his description of Lévi-Strauss’ The Savage Mind, Georg Iggers rightly noted that it was marked by a “questioning of the possibility of conducting objective historical inquiry at all,” as his “disillusionment with the quality of modern Western civilization brought about a profound reaction against the modern scientific outlook.” Ultimately, so the historian insists, “Claude Lévi-Strauss denied that modern scientific rationality offered any advantage over ‘savage’ mythical thought in seeking to come to terms with life.”

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87 Znamenski, The Beauty of the Primitive, 111.

De Martino’s conception of anthropology found its most radical expression in ways that are reminiscent of his readings of both the Russian and the French anthropologists. In the last years of his life, the Italian thinker believed that the ethnographic encounter with other cultures forces us to drastically question and revise our own evaluative categories as “the ethnographic encounter constitutes an opportunity for the most radical examination of conscience possible to Western humanity.” This “examination […] brings with it a reform of anthropological knowledge and of its evaluative categories.”89 In so doing, de Martino set in motion important developments that continued within the Italian school of history of religions after his death. Particularly Dario Sabbatucci (1923–2002), who took the position as the second chair in history of religions at the Sapienza University in Rome as soon as it was established in 1971, carried forward de Martino’s reservations about the ontological conception of categories. Specifically, Sabbatucci famously argued for the radical historicization of the term “religion,” stating that it is an artificial category created within the Western cultural context.90 Even more radically, Sabbatucci believed that a truly critical study of religion would ultimately lead to the “dissolution of the specifically religious in the generally cultural.”91 As international scholars have commented on this rare instance in which the Roman School’s thinking outside of Pettazzoni moved beyond the awareness of the Italian peninsula, they have argued that Sabbatucci can be regarded as the Italian exponent of a comprehensive transformation within the international discipline of religious studies.92 In fact, on the international scene, one of the first symptoms of the paradigm shift was a radical turn to culture in virtually every field of the humanities.

In religious studies, this trend is visible not only in the growth of interest in “religion and culture,” or “cultural studies,”93 but also in the debates surrounding the category of “religion,” which frequently culminate in an attempt to

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89 De Martino, La fine del mondo, 391.
91 Sabbatucci, 57.
93 Randi R. Warne, “New Approaches to the Study of Religion in North America,” in New Approaches to the Study of Religion Volume 1: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches,
dissolve it within the larger concept of “culture.” The first principle in this new paradigm for the investigation of religion was Jonathan Z. Smith, who in 1981 had argued that “there is no data for religion” and that “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study,” encouraging his peers to be “relentlessly self-conscious,” as it is this quality that “constitutes his primary expertise [and] his foremost object of study.” Since then, we have seen a veritable explosion of research dedicated to the historical review of the discipline of religious studies most of it focused on the formation of the concept of religion. Scholars, amongst them Talal Asad, David Chidester, Michel Despland, Timothy Fitzgerald, Peter Harrison, Tomoko Masuzawa, Russell McCutcheon, Ernst Feil, Hans Kippenberg, Guy Stroumsa, Kocku Von Stuckrad, Wouter Hanegraaff, and Daniel Dubuisson, have joined Smith in arguing that the concept of “religion” is not a given but a created category that has its own history.

The growing field of cultural anthropology followed in the footsteps of post-colonial studies to not only perform a historicization of the concept of “religion,” but also to demonstrate that its creation was not neutral, but rather a prescriptive and hegemonic process that was deeply embedded within politics and power dynamics. These thinkers revealed that the crafting of “religion” was implicated in a larger process of “othering.” Taking place during the colonial encounter with a cultural alterity, the category “religion” turned out to be essential for the self-definition of the modern West. Furthermore, they have noted that similar processes were implicated in the construction of other categories, such as “politics,” “culture,” the “East,” “tradition,” “economics,” “law,” “magic,” and so forth.


96 Smith, Relating Religion, 230, 274.


4.4 Anticipating the Writing Culture Movement: Anthropology and the Language of the People

The cultural-discursive tendency in de Martino’s oeuvre took on even more expansive contours as he started to pay attention to symbolism and language during his ethnographic expeditions in the Italian South. Several other scholars have pointed to de Martino’s charisma as a speaker, his originality in using creative language, and his flair for drama that gave his writings an almost theatrical tone. Commentators like Clara Gallini and Alessandro Testa have made more specific claims. They rightly pointed to the fact that de Martino used anti-ontological conceptions of language that pay high tribute to symbols. Testa, for instance, compares de Martino’s intuitions with the theses of Geertz, “according to which one should not study that what he calls ‘the ontological status’ of a cultural fact, but ‘the thing to explore is its significance’.” Gallini, similarly, suggests that “the tarantula is a ‘symbolic’ animal and [that] the entire analysis of its ritual develops itself in terms and in a language through which the point at which de Martino was arriving in progressing with his theoretical research […] shines.”

There is no doubt that de Martino was indeed attentive to the sundry facets of language and communication. However, rather than thinking within the disciplinary areas of linguistics and semiotics, his concern with language emerges from the ethnographic encounter itself. In fact, reflexivity, for de Martino, was a two-way street as it did not only involve the ethnographer and his categories, but it also had to address the culturally other and his modes of communication. During the Southern Period, in an attempt to break out of the ivory tower of the academy, he became particularly interested in alternative means to educate the common people. This day-to-day aspect of his thinking manifests particularly in his consistent use of various media to communicate his scholarly insights. Thus, he not only collaborated with some of Italy’s most prestigious publishers, but he also effectively used mass media. De Martino wrote for

103 Lanternari, La mia alleanza con Ernesto de Martino e altri saggi post-demartiniani, 33.
magazines and newspapers, published special editions with photographs, and prepared documentary programs for radio and television.

In all of those ventures, he presented his research findings in more popular forms. Particularly the photographs of Franco Pinna and the musical recordings of Diego Carpitella represented intriguing and easily digested evidence from the forgotten world of Italy’s South. De Martino not only tried to lend his voice through multiple media to reach the Italian people, but he further attempted to give a voice to the populace more properly speaking. De Martino skillfully blended high culture and low culture for political and intellectual purposes. Giordana Charuty noted that his ethnographic journey

[...]

becomes the instrument for the establishment of another figure of mediation—the organic intellectual—who has to break the isolation of the social class to whom he belongs. [...] In the same fashion, the inquiry is conceived as a tool to make the “subjects” happen by means of an implicit injunction, namely to narrate one’s life. [All this serves] to transform a collection of objective facts into speaking up (prise de parole), in the written form of letters of grievances, which is association to a very important act: the signing with one’s name.

Although rarely written by the author’s own hands—in a cultural context where illiteracy was common—the letters composed by the Southern peasants have an authentic and subjective feel to them. Instead of long questionnaires, where short answers and boxes with check-marks impose most of the structure upon the respondents, de Martino’s use of letter-writing allowed the narrative subject to express himself more freely. In two short articles written in the communist magazine *Vie Nuove* in July and August 1952—headlined with the title “Inquiry Into the Customs of Lucanian Farmers”—de Martino not only reported on some of the letters of the peasants he interviewed and attached a series of pictures revealing the life-circumstances amongst the marginalized strata of Italian society, but he also reiterated his motivation behind his

104 De Martino wrote for cultural magazines, such as *Società*, or Nuovi Argomenti and newspapers, such as *Il Paese*, *Il Calendario del popolo*, or *Il Messaggero*.

105 See my discussion of the two articles published in *Vie Nuove* below.

106 The Radio transmissions have been edited by Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani and Letizia Bindi, De Martino, *Panorami e spedizioni. Le trasmissioni radiofoniche del 1953–54*.


108 Despite the formal freedom, however, the letters still read rather dry, moving in between detailed descriptions of daily activities and complaints towards the government that read like copies of socialist political pamphlets. Archives De Martino, 6.15.
ethnographic journeys.\textsuperscript{109} He noted that these explorations were “not born from the pedantic intention to inform a limited circle of specialists about customs, superstitions, and popular tradition that have not yet been inventoried” or “from a sort of romantic passion,” but from an altogether different motivation:

Leaving from Rome, we know that the fact of an expedition in Lucania—it’s almost as if we were going to get to know the cultural life of the Bantu peoples, or of the Hottentots, whereas in reality we were simply dealing with our brothers and compatriots—would by its very virtue denounce ancient and recent guilts. Indeed, it was our task to not only collect their legacy but to also repair these guilts. But, most of all, we know one thing: the cultural problem of conducting an expedition of this type was not born in us as the fruit of our individual whim, or from an act of personal unjustified brilliance, but because the very Lucanian proletariat, as part of the national proletariat, was in movement, and had by now posed the question of its emancipation within its most advanced strata. In this way, they required also us, men of culture, to emancipate the Italian cultural life from this monstrous limit for whom the Lucanian farmer is only a poor boor, illiterate, ignorant, superstitious.\textsuperscript{110}

In these popular publications, we not only note the coexistence of anthropological guilt and ethnographic disgust—manifest in a self-critical attitude in light of a blatant form of ethnocentrism—but also a great emphasis on doing anthropology from the bottom up. The goal of his inquiry was “to conscientiously reestablish the reality of things and to let them speak, as much as possible, in their own words.”\textsuperscript{111} On the international scene, the cultural turn’s emphasis on the intricate association between knowledge, power, and political domination gradually led to a dual focus that reflects de Martino’s discussions of the South. On the one hand, “the underdogs, the perceived ‘victims’;”\textsuperscript{112} on the other hand, the role played by Western intellectuals. In the 1980s, this trend was continued by the so-called Subaltern Studies Group, whose


\textsuperscript{110} De Martino, “Sonno, fame, e morte sotto le stelle,” 12.

\textsuperscript{111} De Martino, 13.

\textsuperscript{112} Roberts, \textit{Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy}, 271.
best-known work, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, was published in 1988.\(^{113}\) Around the same time, feminist and gendered approaches to history emerged, further contributing to the movement towards studies “from below.”\(^{114}\) Subsequently, in the wake of this narrativist philosophy of history, anthropologists also started to pay more attention to the relationship between ethnography and writing.\(^{115}\) This increase in focus on the process of writing itself culminated in what is known as the *Writing Culture Movement*. The volume founding this movement, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, was edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus in 1986 and has been described as an attempt at “out-Geertzing Geertz.”\(^{116}\)

In the same year, George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer published *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, in which they argue that “anthropology is not the mindless collection of the exotic, but the use of cultural richness for self-reflection and self-growth.”\(^{117}\) “Anthropology,” so they claim, is “to serve as a form of cultural critique for ourselves. In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and

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makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions.”

Scholars have noted that the Writing Culture Movement is premised on a radical identification between ethnography, writing, and theory, so that the “ethnographic experience and its representation in writing are of a piece.” Applications of such self-reflexive, personal, and participatory forms of ethnographic writing have also been practiced by anthropologists of religion, with Karen Brown’s Mama Lola (1991) being one of the most prominent examples.

George Saunders, who directly associated de Martino with the work of the Writing Culture Movement, rightly noted that he anticipated many of the traits of the cultural-discursive paradigm. De Martino not only noted that the illiteracy of the Southern peasants is a result of his own society, which “condemns them to labor,” but he also recognized that they “never inertly accepted this sentence” and continued to cultivate “their own cultural world.” As a result, de Martino showed that they have their own language in the form of an oral tradition, which “has been the natural carrier of this work of cultural memories, the truly great school, which substituted the one that society denied them. It is to this tradition, to this school that we tried to come closer to during our journey.”

Although the four examples outlined in this chapter have shown that de Martino anticipated certain key traits of post-colonial anthropology, it would be a mistake to over-emphasize these communalities. In fact, even the “Lucanian Notes”—arguably the most cultural-discursive moment in de Martino’s career—contain a response towards the loss of hope in light of the anthropologist’s guilt; primarily in the form of what we could call a “combative” attitude. De Martino’s sense of guilt for his complicity in colonialist domination of marginalized strata of his country is accompanied by a much more forceful feeling, namely anger (collera).

I perceive that another mood is associated with this sense of guilt: Anger, the big historical anger that solemnly spreads out from the most authentic part of my very being. Here, I assess the distance that separates me from Christianity, which is essentially hatred of sin and sacramental salvation of history threatened by sin. My anger, by contrast, is entirely historical.

118 Marcus and Fischer, 1.
because all of history is my own fault (just as it is the fault of the social group to which I belong). My anger cannot find any sacramental outlet, nor liturgical compensation. It is Christian love, but overturned, amputated of any theological extension, and ultimately constrained to walk on its own feet. Precisely because of its historical nature, my anger is that of the men who struggle to emerge from the darkness of the Rabatani district, and my fight is their fight. I thank the Rabatanian district and its people for having helped me better understand myself and my duty.122

While de Martino’s gratefulness reminds us of *The Scope of Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss’ inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, where the French anthropologist acknowledged that he will never be able to repay his debt to the people he studied—vowing to remain “their pupil, their witness”—there is an important difference between the two statements.123 As we shall see in the following chapter, he not only understood the risks involved in the cultural-discursive paradigm—particularly a romantic longing for cultural alterity and a revival of religious sentiment—but he also repudiated any relativism relying on negative or deconstructive terms. Instead, he formulated his science on combative attitude best summed up in the “loyalty to the cultural homeland.”

122 De Martino, “Note lucane,” 667.