

BOOK REVIEW

Magic: A Theory from the South, by Ernesto De Martino, translated and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn, Chicago, HAU Books, 2015, xi + 205pp., translator's note, preface, figures, references, index, (paperback), ISBN: 987-0-9905050-9-9

To be honest, I had never heard of Ernesto de Martino prior to being asked to review *Magic: A Theory from the South*. I now not only feel that I had been missing out on some genuine intellectual delights, but also that my ignorance was inexcusable, such is the importance of this book in anticipating current trends within anthropological discussions of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. Had he been working in English and not his native Italian, one has to think de Martino's stature and regard within anthropology would have been considerably greater, and that this work would be counted alongside other famous anthropological examinations of the occult. In this light, high praise must be tendered to both Dorothy Louise Zinn and HAU Books, the first for her meticulous translation of the original into English and the latter for their efforts in making sure such excellent studies receive their rightful, if belated, due.

The book is set in Lucania/Basilicata, a region of Southern Italy not far from de Martino's own native Naples, and is the second in his Southern trilogy of ethnographic monographs. Originally published in 1957, only eight years before his death in 1965, *Magic: A Theory from the South* is a book brimming with vitality and depth. de Martino's focus is the 'low ceremonial magic' of the Lucanian people. The book is organised into two parts, one descriptive and the other analytical, and explores three key contexts: the place of magic in the lives of the Lucanians, the relationship of magic to Southern Catholicism, and, lastly, how these magical ideas and practices figured within and were shaped by the seventeenth-century Neapolitan version of the Anglo-French Enlightenment.

Reading the first part of the book made me slightly uneasy, but in a productive way. Dispensing with the anthropological formalities of introducing the reader to the community or the fieldwork situation, de Martino instead plunges us headlong into the world of Lucanian magical ritual, where we feel somewhat out of our ontological depth. He exhaustively describes the innumerable rites and spells that the Lucanian use against 'binding', a process of being acted upon by an occult force that renders the victim literally selfless, without autonomy. Across a multitude of cultural contexts, including fertility, marriage, childrearing, and so forth, de Martino describes an 'existential regime' characterised by a deep-seated need for protection in the face of envy and jealousy, with not only humans but also cats and dogs being seen as a potential threat to one's well-being (46). The rites described to ensure protection from binding are elaborate and present a curious mix of local and Catholic content, which he moves to analyse in the early stages of the second part of the book. de Martino's insightful argument is that despite 'an immense cultural distance' dividing Lucanian magic from Catholicism, these two spheres of ideation and ritual interpenetrate based on a common 'fundamental magical nucleus of the mythical horizon of the crisis and the de-historification of the negative on the exemplary level of the myth' (123). By this he means that both the original Lucanian practices and Southern Catholicism are essentially magical and share a ritual technology oriented towards dissolving singular negative instances into a broader, 'metahistorical' cultural order (or cosmology) encoded in foundational myths.

From here, the latter stages of the book explore how the Lucanian world was influenced by the Enlightenment era and its presentation of 'the choice between magic and rationality,

wizardry and science, and exorcism and experiment, which constitutes one of the fundamental themes from which modern civilization was born' (130). Basically, de Martino argues that, for a variety of reasons, the version of the Anglo-French Enlightenment that emerged in the southern centre of Naples in the 1600s did not participate fully in this emerging conceptual framework and that the dualistic scheme between magic and science sat only lightly on the minds of Southerners. Instead, the new practice of *jettatura* grew up within the sphere of Neapolitan intellectualism as 'a particular custom of compromise ... combining the ancient magical binding with Enlightenment rationalism' (175). However, unlike serious demonological magic, *jettatura* took on a 'facetious ambiguity' (186); it is 'laughed off' as superstition but never entirely dismissed as a real danger.

Reading de Martino's book, one feels in the company of an open-minded, creative, and innovative mind. Scholars more familiar with the intellectual and political climate within which de Martino was writing would surely be able to cast the significance of the book in a broader light than what I am able to do as an anthropologist whose focus lies principally on Papua New Guinea. Nonetheless, there are three key attributes that the book possesses that to my thinking make it stand out as especially significant for contemporary anthropologists that study human relationships with the sacred. The first is that de Martino very strongly underscores the cosmological significance of magical ritual, seeing it not simply as a means to an end but also as signalling broader parameters of the world enshrined in myths. Conveyed most vividly through his concept of 'de-historification', de Martino argues that as 'a stereotypical operation of reabsorbing the negative in the meta-historical order, magic is more properly ritual' (94), a powerful and important insight that anthropologists would be wise to heed. A second point of significance is de Martino's characterisation of Lucanian magic as not a historical 'detritus' or expression of an ancient past (despite his use of the term 'survival') but rather as something that is thoroughly conditioned by contemporary circumstances. He states that anthropologists 'should never lose sight of a dynamic that refers to the modern world' and that we would 'search in vain' for a continuation of archaic practices (129). de Martino's insights here I think are particularly important for they anticipate by 30 years the line of thinking that emerged among Africanist anthropologists concerning the role of magic in explaining the deleterious effects of globalisation and modernity. A final and broader point is that, as a book focussed on the intersection of magic and Christianity, it forces those of us working in the Anthropology of Christianity to reconsider the received historical narrative that typically attributes the emergence of such studies as having occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Although de Martino does not explicitly frame his work as an anthropological study of Christianity (indeed, he does not frame it as anything and that is part of its beauty) his book fully deserves to be seen as a rich ethnographic study of Southern Catholicism and its intermingling with local occult practices. As such, I think de Martino should be seen as an intellectual forebear of sorts to today's anthropologists of Christianity and certainly scholars working in this field stand to gain much from reading this book, as I have.

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