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# History as Palimpsest. Notes on Subalternity, Alienation, and Domination in Gramsci, De Martino, and Fanon

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# History as Palimpsest. Notes on Subalternity, Alienation, and Domination in Gramsci, De Martino, and Fanon

## **Abstract**

The article aims at considering a number of issues common to the theoretical projects of Gramsci, de Martino, and Fanon, though the context of their work and their life trajectories was so different. More particularly, my analysis takes into consideration the debate on folklore and its natural opposition to hegemonic world representations; the special role of protest and historical consciousness among subalterns; the value of a “symptomatic reading” (Althusser) of history, able to recognize those fractures, silences, and contradictions that are often forgotten by official history, or just classified as signs of alienation. This perspective allows us to see history as a palimpsest, and the subalterns’ speech recognizable only when we explore all the strata that compose their history.

## **Keywords**

subaltern world, colony, symptomatic reading of past, collective consciousness, folklore

***History as Palimpsest.  
Notes on Subalternity, Alienation,  
and Domination  
in Gramsci, De Martino, and Fanon\****

Roberto Beneduce

Though its narrativity, historiography furnishes death with a representation that,  
in placing the lack within the language, outside of existence,  
has the value of an exorcism against the anguish [...]  
In sum, narrativity, the metaphor of performative discourse,  
finds its support precisely in what it hides:  
the dead of which it speaks become the vocabulary of a task to be undertaken  
(de Certeau 1988, 101-102)

*1. Writing the «cultural history of the oppressed»*

«No one has ever written this dramatic cultural history of the oppressed: but someone needs to get down to doing it» (De Martino 1996, 39).

It is a thought that runs through the whole project of De Martino's ethnography. It emerges in various forms, but always as the organizing principle of a plan of staggering density and range, in which the historical and anthropological questions examined are incarnated in living bodies, and the analysis of funeral laments, forms of popular religious feeling or magical-ritual healing is combined with that of the protests of the labourers.

But it is in his «passion for chaos» and his «periodic suspension of the historical order» in peasant society that De Martino captures an as-

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pect that is fundamental for contemporary political and anthropological thought. This is particularly true when he raises questions on the condition of subalternity or the forms of resistance deriving from Catholicism and the Enlightenment among the poor of Southern Italy – namely, the forms of political structuring of aspects of social and cultural life, with the controversial theme of the «weapons of the weak» (Scott) or the «politique par le bas» (Bayart).

However, for De Martino, this «periodic suspension» did not only concern the magical-therapeutic rituals (the idea of «institutional dehistoricization»), nor was the «passion for chaos» limited to the «tragic seriousness of the festival»; it emerged, not only in the «taste for scurrility», typical of the «rural poor», but also in «collective revolt». And this, precisely because of its unruly and almost «orgiastic» nature, continued to seem to him «hard to regulate politically», and only with great difficulty could it become a «considered awareness of the struggle and liberation» (De Martino 1996, 20)<sup>1</sup>.

These reflections are clearly influenced by the effect of Gramsci's ideas, and by an interpretation of subalternity, crisis and deliverance that we can reasonably apply to contexts unlike those that were in De Martino's thoughts.

I am not offering a philological analysis. What interests me more is exploring how De Martino combined his analysis of evil and Magism with an account of a distinctive experience of the traumatic past and history, which reveals his familiarity with Bergson and suggests a sense of time typical of those in a state of subalternity (and so, in my view, a special form of memory and historical awareness that they experience, a particular kind of «durée» and temporality, particularly in moments of crisis).

These notes aim to survey the sometimes indirect ways in which De Martino's perspective matches similar concerns in the thought of Frantz Fanon, who also analysed the specific forms of subjection, alienation and revolt among subalterns, and the distinctive forms of

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<sup>1</sup> His reflections on the «festive and orgiastic» aspect of the peasants' revolt reveals both his dialogue with Gramsci's ideas on destiny and the form of revolutionary movements, as well as a striking closeness to Fanon's theories on cults of possession (2004).

time experienced by the colonized (his pages on the idea of «fatalism»), probably influenced by his reading of Gramsci, whose work was already starting to appear in France in 1953<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the question on the relation of the oppressed with history (a history that repels and humiliates, according to De Martino 1996, 21) may be the central question from which many of their thoughts begin.

Let us be honest: there is little strictly philological justification for the comparison between Fanon and De Martino. The former did not know the latter, and the latter refers to the former only in a short review of *The Wretched of the Earth* – a review as short as it is superficial – in which one is struck by his error on the date of Fanon’s death<sup>3</sup>.

However, even those short notes, which analyse Fanon’s book within a specific theoretical and political context (the writings of Lanternari and Worsley on cultural apocalypses; the work of Richard Wright, with whom Fanon was in contact before their relationship cooled), seize on some crucial questions.

First: for De Martino, «the themes of Marxism, Freudianism and Sartrism are revived and tried out» for the first time, thanks to Fanon, “within the decolonization process” – i.e. in Fanon they were not «mechanically “applied” to the colonial situation», but critically rethought in a context other than that «in which they originated historically».

There was nothing accidental in this acknowledgment: it was the same perspective that De Martino had adopted when he interpreted the magic and religious world in the South through the prism of Gramsci and dialectic materialism, considering particularly the hegemonic aspects of Catholicism, as well as the conflicts and mediations («the compromises of the outgoing impulse») it had caused. More particularly, as we shall be repeating later, he was to rethink such ideas as «crisis of presence», which was originally conceived to reflect on the condition of primitive societies, in various contexts (European socie-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Gramsci (1953, 1955, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> «His life was cut short prematurely in 1957 at the age of 37» (Fanon actually died in 1961 at the age of 36; De Martino 1962, 3). In his review De Martino recalls Fanon’s interest in comparative psychology, an aspect on which the present author has long insisted, writing of Fanon’s critical ethnopsychiatry (Beneduce 2011, 2016a)

ties in the throes of Nazism and the second world war), where that crisis and the accompanying risk of regression can once again emerge.

The second point is equally important. It is the role that Fanon attributed, in De Martino's view, to the proletariat on the one hand, and the peasant class on the other. Significantly, in the short space of a review, he chose this aspect as worthy of mention among the many that crowded the pages of *The Wretched of the Earth*. For Fanon, the proletariat («tram-drivers, taxi-drivers, miners, dockers, interpreters, nurses») had everything to lose from decolonialization, writes De Martino, unlike the rural masses («the peasant, the humiliated, the starving») who were fully aware of their condition and the fact that the anti-colonial struggle would inevitably be violent.

Fanon's closeness to the peasant classes is not far from De Martino's feeling for «those who were last» (Daniel Fabre's expression). Fanon would be much criticized for what seemed to many a romantic reading of rural society in Algeria (Bourdieu, for example<sup>4</sup>, criticized him sharply for his utopian and misleading vision of the country, even though his own line in a piece from 1961 on the meaning of the revolutionary struggle and the changes that the anti-colonial war brought out in practical behaviour and symbols was almost identical with Fanon's) (Bourdieu 1961).

Though De Martino proclaimed himself a «militant of the working class», his research would give special attention to the condition of the peasants and farm labourers, in whose experience of oppression he found signs of a rebelliousness often expressed in special forms and codes. And, while Fanon thought of the millions of the colonized whose lives were « beset by death», and the «humiliated of all the world» (Fanon 1965, 102), De Martino was to transcribe the songs, protests and inhuman weariness of other wretches of the earth, such as the labourers of Tricarico, who refused to resign themselves to playing

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<sup>4</sup> «I think these men [Sartre and Fanon] contributed to what Algeria became because they told stories to Algerians who often did not know their own country any more than the French who spoke about it, and, therefore, the Algerians retained a completely unrealistic utopian illusion of Algeria [...] [T]he texts of Fanon and Sartre are frightening for their irresponsibility. You would have to be a megalomaniac to think you could say just any such nonsense» (Bourdieu, cit. in Bura-woy [online]).

the mere role of the «uneducated». His portraits of their labour and the expressions on their faces sometimes have the same brush-strokes and palette as Carlo Levi, but are unlike him in their strong sense of the role of the intellectual: one, who, in De Martino's words, should give the poor a voice, «but as an intellectual, not as a mere *cabier de doléances*» (De Martino 1996, 40).

Another idea that brings together Levi, the historian of religions recording the protests of the peasants of Lucania, and Fanon, the psychiatrist become spokesman of the anti-colonial movements, is the idea that individual alienation is a reflection of collective alienation. In both of them, their dialogue with Freud and Hegel would lead to the project of a critique of their respective disciplines, and the urgency of a deconstruction of ethnology in one case, and of colonial psychiatry in the other.

However, this did not stop De Martino from making a third observation in his short review of *The Wretched of the Earth*, drawing attention to Fanon's «somewhat summary» analysis of «religious liberation movements», which failed to recognize the social, psychological and political value that had been brought out in those very years by other scholars<sup>5</sup>. Underlying his criticism there is certainly the idea of «cultural apocalypse», on which he would work intensely in the following years, but above all, that of «progressive folklore», drawing on Gramsci's thinking on the subject.

And so, leaving aside the very different context of their civil and political commitment, as well as the different paths they took, their shared ethical and ideological sensibility<sup>6</sup> and parallel (though not al-

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<sup>5</sup> De Martino is referring here to works published in those years by Bastide, Lanternari and Worsley. On this issue, and more in general on the «political-religious connection» between subaltern and rural masses in colonial Madagascar, see Condominas (1960, 91-92). For a recent reading of the religious-political experience of subalterns in Gramsci, see the valuable work by Zene (2015).

<sup>6</sup> The young De Martino wrote in an anonymous «manifesto» that is unanimously recognized as his work: «For all those persecuted politically – for the misfits who are denied the joy of an honoured hearth in a free country – for those who suffer in silence in the solitude of the fields, in the din of the workshops [...] I STAND UP IN PROTEST AND SWEAR [...] not to tolerate the deliberate, open, vulgar wrong done to freedom, and to vindicate it with every means that is in my power and that opportunity gives me, from passive resistance to patient evangelization, from cunning stratagems to armed rebellion and sacrifice; to watch over the life of freedom even in private» (De Martino 1997 [1944], 215-216). Fanon seems to be answering him a few years later when he

ways coinciding) thoughts on essential questions justify this comparison on the forms of historical consciousness among the oppressed.

My reflections aim to interrogate their texts, and their analysis of the peasants of Southern Italy or the colonized, by questioning what we are used to calling «collective consciousness», and how we can interpret those particular forms of «consciousness of history» that emerge unexpectedly, for example, from the words of a prophet, such as David Lazzaretti, or a man encountered in a psychiatric hospital in South Africa (John and Jean Comaroff's 1992, 157). Or again, I would like to consider the forms of «experiential appropriation of the past» that collective imagination (folklore, myths, or mythical images) makes possible to the oppressed. As Taussig has suggested, the fragments and remnants of myths and religious traditions are not just the tenacious traces of a tradition but the signs with which the oppressed think of their dispossessed history and of the anguish of their present. This «appropriation» operates, according to Benjamin and Bovenschen, as a strategy of redemption (Taussig 1984, 87-88).

## 2. *The kingdom of rags*

Well: *Il mondo Magico* (only later did this become clear to me) was no more than a contemplation, at world level, of the ever-impending dark theogonic anguish in the gaze of the poor peasants of Puglia, a contemplation that tried as hard as possible to be pure – that is to say, universal and objective – but, for that very reason, reinforced my practical commitment as a militant of the working class (De Martino 1949, 434).

De Martino came out with this formula in a complex article of 1949. A year after the publication of *Il mondo magico* and the polemics and misunderstandings this work had caused, the article on the «subaltern popular world» seems almost a kind of afterword for the author to clarify his thought and the theories he had formulated the previous

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writes: «If the question of practical solidarity with a given past ever arose for me, it did so only to the extent to which I was committed to myself and to my neighbor to fight for all my life and with all my strength so that never again would a people on the earth be subjugated» (Fanon 1967, 177).



year, replying to his critics and taking up, one after the other, the questions raised by his reflections on magic thinking. But, in returning to the questions on the crisis, recovery and tasks of ethnology, the article also aims to redefine, absolutely unambiguously, his political position.

His thoughts on anthropological knowledge, the intellectual's commitment alongside the working classes, how popular culture should be understood, and the elucidation of his suggestions in his analysis of Magism as a response to the threat of the crisis, are the interweaving themes in this short article, and will help advance out own reflections.

One of the dominant themes is, first of all, his condemnation of that «applied ethnology», which, from the tradition conception of folklore to the various specific uses of anthropology, expressed in exemplary fashion the «connection between political exploitation of the subaltern popular masses and the naturalistic consideration of their culture».

The humanism of «western civilization», adds De Martino, is actually a «circumscribed» humanism<sup>7</sup> that concerns only bourgeois society: «Precisely because it is a characteristic of this society that Christ does not go “beyond Eboli”, the world that lives beyond Eboli seemed to bourgeois ethnology and folklore *ahistorical* – a possible history but one that for the present *makes no appearance in the historiographer's memory*» (De Martino 1949, 412).

No «historical pity», he continues, had animated the studies of Tylor or Frazer: what we see is no more than a catalogue of «barbaric» customs, written with the dictionary of evolutionism and designed to show the «ravings of ignorance».

British functionalism had further worsened this approach by wanting its colonial administrators to be ethnologists, and foreshadowed another situation in which ethnology might have been usefully applied in western societies too. Which?

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<sup>7</sup> Similar criticisms were to be made by Sartre and Fanon of the comedy (the «striptease») of a humanism that celebrated human rights in the heart of empires, but then quickly forgot its principles in the colonies.

Professors E. G. Resliserger of Harvard University and W. G. Dickson of the «Western Electrical Society» have written a book «La direzione e l'operaio» (at last: see at what point we are), in which the “scientific” technique of the functionalist colonial administrator is transferred into the field of administration and direction of a certain mass of workers, enlisted by a capitalist enterprise (in the specific case, the western electrical society) (De Martino 1949, 415).

And so the real project of bourgeois ethnology is unmasked. And to these examples was added the drift of an «ethnopsychology» seeking to imagine the «culture of any people as something determined once and for all by the relative psychic model».

A different ethnology was offered as a model in the face of these perspectives: the Soviet example, which sought to find in societies and cultures the endless game of the tension between «old, outmoded aspects and new, progressive ones» (De Martino 1949, 427).

There seems to be room in his thought for questions he had long reflected on in the war years, when proximity to death and clandestinity, and his familiarity with the humanity that had peopled the long months spent with his family at Cotignola<sup>8</sup>, had certainly stamped a particular outline on his questions about the «crisis of presence».

De Martino had been exploring for years the totality of the strategies that seek to oppose the threat of this crisis, considering all the contexts in which they emerge – no matter whether Magism and the shaman’s powers, the beliefs of the «rustic poor», or those parapsychological phenomena whose study methods were at the centre of numerous controversies. All of them were to be doggedly studied in their irreducible ambiguities, in their social distribution, and in their many significances. In short: folklore (popular culture) and Magism cannot be discussed in the singular.

Though the article criticized the traditional conception of culture and folklore, it also recalled one particular manifestation of the «crisis»

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<sup>8</sup> The family of his wife, Anna Macchioro, came from Cotignola. On the young Ernesto De Martino, see Charuty (2010). On the political dimensions of De Martino’s thought, see also Di Donato (1993) and Severino (2003). On the period spent at Cotignola, see the detailed analysis in Ciavolella (2016).

of ethnology in that period – «the renewed psychological interest *in the dark side of the soul*, in the supposedly sub-conscious world, for dreams, and in phenomena that are customarily called paranormal» (De Martino 1949, 423; my emphasis). That interest, indeed, marked the very limitations from which De Martino wanted to distance himself, but at the same time bring out the need for another approach.

It is a fundamental and controversial passage in the dialogue with magic powers De Martino had been setting up for years, aware of the tragic fascination that Nazi Germany had felt for questions of irrationality, and for the limitations in the popular world of the illusory attempt to achieve in an «ideology of the hereafter» «deliverance» from one's subaltern condition, without producing a «real solution» to it.

In the article on the subaltern classes mentioned above, De Martino tries to distinguish his field of enquiry from parapsychological studies and the Parapsychology Foundation with which he had begun what was to prove a longstanding dialogue, giving rise, years later, to an animated exegetical controversy between Silvia Mancini and Giordana Charuty<sup>9</sup>.

Still in 1956, the same year as the publication of the article on the crisis of presence, De Martino took up these questions, recognizing that his hesitation («embarrassment, uncertainty») in analysing parapsychological phenomena had two sources: he did not feel he had the necessary expertise (although he was «very interested in parapsychology»), but he was also unaware that «relations between parapsychology, ethnology and the history of religions are at present almost inexistent [...] And, in any case, there is not yet any *active and serious collaboration, based on observation and experimentation by a team*»<sup>10</sup>.

Others wanted to sidestep the unavoidable questions for the historian of religions of the reality of magic powers, such as the shaman's

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<sup>9</sup> This article will not deal with this aspect, which has been analysed exhaustively by Giordana Charuty. See Charuty (2001), Mancini (1999), and Mancini and Méheust (2002).

<sup>10</sup> De Martino 1956, 96; my emphasis. This journal – «La Tour Saint-Jacques» –, which dealt with esoteric matters and questions of astrology among other things, contained articles by Emilio Servadio, Mircea Eliade, André Breton, and many others, in an often bewildering mixture of perspectives and approaches. De Martino (and the Gramscian vocabulary that had been evident in his writings for years) certainly seems somewhat out of place there.

gifts, or the widespread idea in many peoples that shamans can fly. De Martino, however, insisted on the importance of the question, on the very definition of reality and nature, even wondering what the effects might be of regaining powers like those of the shaman, which the development of civilization seemed to have transcended:

If we limit ourselves to the traditional concept of nature established by the sciences, we risk ending up in a blind alley [...] We need, then, to adopt the idea of a *culturally conditioned nature*. It is, in any case, a concept that our sciences support. And we may find in it, if not a point of agreement, then at least a point of discussion in which we may meet the psychologists. *It is a matter of knowing whether regaining these various powers entails losing our civilization. If that were so, then the shaman can fly as much as he likes and let's not bother about it!* Or if it is not so, then the historian (and the historian of religions) has never failed in his duty (De Martino 1956, 96; my emphasis).

This article related the discussions at the conference of Royaumont and was published a good eight years after *Il mondo magico*. What is striking in it is the strong conviction that ethnology *must* in any case consider the problem of the reality of «paranormal phenomenology», despite the polemics with the Italian Communist Party that would shortly after lead him to allow his membership of the party to lapse<sup>11</sup>.

It is most certainly a significant passage, which suggests the author's methodological awareness of the risks that had till then assailed research in these areas, where we seem to hear the echo of Gramsci's warning in his criticism of De Man – as early as 1929 – that indicated the need for these fields to be studied historically as well as sociologi-

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<sup>11</sup> At one point in his article on the history of the relations between ethnology and parapsychology, he claims peremptorily: «Paranormal phenomenology is neglected as a possibility [...] It is, in effect, impossible to study the magic or religious ideology of what are called 'primitive' civilizations starting from the assumption that we can ignore the reality of paranormal phenomenology [...] Lévy-Bruhl's theory presupposes that paranormal phenomenology does not exist, and that normal reality – what is the 'norm' for the West – is paradigmatic reality, the only possible one and the only objective one. Now, this premise is denied by the fact that so-called paranormal phenomena *exist*, and civilizations different from the Euro-American industrial one treat these phenomena with great importance» (Ernesto De Martino 1956, 97-99; author's emphasis). In a recent article on the different images of Gramsci to be found in De Martino, Gino Satta cites Togliatti's irony in a phrase quoted in the work by Severino already cited, when the Secretary of the PCI alluded to the «extremely serious studies on the cognitive value of witchcraft» (Satta 2016).

cally. But, at the same time, those notes also recall that De Martino had no intention of evading those questions.

The chronology of these works (*Il mondo magico*, the 1949 article on the history of the subaltern popular world, the address to the conference of Royaumont published in 1956) traces an itinerary of questions as close-packed as they are stubborn. Though his interest in folklore and therapeutic-ritual practices or magic powers was to continue to inspire his research in Lucania and Salento, in a tension that at times was not without its contradictions, De Martino was also troubled by the question of his own personal political commitment.

As in Fanon, his criticism of bourgeois ethnology, his militant practical work alongside the labourers, and his questioning the intellectual's responsibilities are seamlessly combined with his reflections on the «will of history» of the oppressed. In this development, he underlines the urgency of a different conception of folklore and popular culture, which was also a central motif in Gramsci. This famous passage summarizes some of these aspects, which were to be taken up systematically by De Martino too:

We might say that, so far, folklore has been studied mainly as a «picturesque» element [...] We need, rather, to study it as a «conception of the world and of life», *implicit to a great extent*, of certain specific strata (specific in time and space) of society, *in opposition (it too mainly implicit, mechanical, objective)* to the «official» conceptions of the world (or in the broader sense of the historically determined, educated parts of society) that have succeeded each other in historical development (Gramsci 1975 [1935], 2311; my emphasis)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> On the interpretation of novels and popular culture, see what Gramsci writes about the *Conte of Monte-Cristo*: «The novel of appendix replaces (and favours in the same time) the fantasizing of the man of the people; it is a true daydream». Referring to Freud, Gramsci adds, «fantasies stem from a (social) “inferiority complex” that determines long-lasting fantasies about the idea of revenge, of punishment of those are responsible for their adversities, etc. In the *Conte of Monte-Cristo* there are all the elements to cradle these fantasies and therefore to propose a narcotic that muffles the sense of evil» (Gramsci 1975, 799). Here Gramsci seems close to Fanon's consideration on possession cults in colonized societies: «Symbolic killings, figurative cavalcades, and imagined multiple murders, everything has to come out. The ill humors seep out, tumultuous as lava flows. One step further and we find ourselves in deep possession. In actual fact, *these are organized seances of possession and dispossession*: vampirism, possession by djinns, by zombies, and by Legba, the illustrious god of voodoo. Such a disintegration, dissolution or splitting of the personality, plays a key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonized world. On the way there these men and women

For Gramsci, folklore is a conception of the world and of life that, *objectively, mechanically, and implicitly* is «opposed» to official conceptions (religious, scientific, moral). While Cirese would find it illegitimate to attribute a generalized value of protest to folklore<sup>13</sup>, regarding the *progressive* characteristics Gramsci found in some of its aspects as unjustified, he did not fail to grasp the importance of this new formulation – which was different from what Gramsci had proposed only a few years before.

This «progressive» character of folklore, bound up with precise historical events, revealing the incessant moulding of symbolic and cultural materials, was taken up by De Martino years later in his article on the *songs* of Romagna, where, among the usual verses on love and the avenging of honour, he had found precise references to the assassination of Matteotti (De Martino 1951, 254).

I cannot consider the whole of that debate here, but will simply refer to the passage from another short piece published the year before on Rabatà, a district of Tricarico plunged in the chaos of poverty, in which De Martino analyses that «confused form of socialist evangelism (or evangelical socialism)» that, in his view, expressed «an *initial* detachment from traditional conformity, an *initial* awareness of the contradictions of bourgeois society, and an *initial* introduction to a radically different vision of the world. This awareness is sometimes expressed, he writes, in a bitter, slanderous and *even scurrilous* rebuke» (1950, 661; my emphasis). Not produced by elaborate moral reflections on the differences between the Church of the rich and the Jesus of the oppressed, that awareness, in many respects close to Gramsci's idea of «instinct», emerged as an «ideological reflection», born «on the

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were stamping impatiently, *their nerves "on edge"*. On the way back, the village returns to serenity, peace, and stillness» (Fanon 2004, 20; my emphasis). On Gramsci and Freud, see Boni 2007.

<sup>13</sup> One recalls the peevish passage in which he comments on the title given to an interview with him in 1967 published by «Rinascita sarda»: «The title of this piece – *Folklore come rivolta* – was an act of violence: it was added on an impulse, without my knowledge, by some communist sub-editor, to the text of my interview, which had not a word, not a comma, to justify it [...] I too fell briefly into the trap of Ernesto De Martino's nonsense on "progressive folklore" and I have one or two blunders on my conscience, like that of the "masses as protagonists" (sooner or later, unless I lose the one eye left to me, I'll write a piece of self-criticism); but I soon had second thoughts (see the notes on "folklore of protest and folklore as protest" published in 1976)».

terrain of political and social struggles» (De Martino 1950, 661). In the end, this was the real matrix of new, special forms of historical or political consciousness: it would be the same for Fanon, for whom only the anti-colonial struggle could generate a new form of subjectivity and a new experience.

But it is the sense and potentiality of *opposition* as Gramsci writes of it that I am anxious to quickly explore here, partly to leave behind the shallows of a debate that, at times, has ended up overturning decisive intuitions.

Gramsci was no more able than de Martino and Fanon to find any coherent character in the dull, but obstinately present, sound of what others were content to define as folklore, appealing to that confused dimension of social criticism that could only be perceived when songs and cultural manifestations were caught «*in flagrante*» (De Martino), or when the artistic forms were registered in the movement of history and struggle (Fanon).

It is in this sense that the *Note lucane* are a valuable document for rethinking the question of «progressive folklore», which can express themes of decisive importance when it turns its attention to the experience of dominion and the condition of the subaltern.

First, there was the relation with the religious, which had two contrasting forms: that of a Catholic Church that «makes use of the spiritual arms it possesses to guarantee victory to the landowners», counting no small number of believers among the farm labourers and the poor of Tricarico, and that made up of faith, political consciousness and the rage of «socialist evangelism» of which De Martino writes. Representatives of this strand were peasant-women like Rosa Stasi and Lucia Zasa, who no longer believed in the parish priest, but only in Jesus, and cried out that it was poverty that brought the devil into the home, and not communism. Then there was the visionary religious feeling of Donato Manduzio – farmer, magician, healer and untiring narrator, who, inspired by the Old Testament, dreamt of creating a community of converts to Judaism in the Gargano area, and of a

promised land where the poor farm labourers of San Nicandro, oppressed by poverty and fascism, might settle and live free<sup>14</sup>.

Secondly, he analysed the ways in which phrases or refrains whispered in the public squares, snatches of mime and silent corteges constituted an authentic theatre of protest and opposition – fragmentary and enigmatic, most certainly, yet also unequivocal in its content and as to who is on the receiving end of its social criticism. Some labourers, for example, delight in stealing his hat from the Marshall of the Carabinieri and hiding it under an apple tree, and others at election time mock those who supported the party of the bosses (Christian Democracy).

For De Martino, one could recognize in these unexpected, determined gestures, or in the verses that quickly caught on in popular songs, «the peasant tendency to represent dramatically, to *redeem the true state of things through impersonation and mimicry*». But it was the Song of Rabata that revealed these sung protests most effectively, these arts of resistance of *those who know they have everything against them* (the image of the family whose child dies in a domestic accident, and then sees his wretched home “filled with the Law and the doctors”, is a perfect allegory of the experience of domination that De Martino wants to explore, and that Fanon would later describe unforgettably in speaking of the family and colonial medicine in Algeria).

This song, whose uncertain number of strophes are in no definite order, and was able to incorporate images of new conflicts and new tragedies, was in fact

[an] anonymous *literary testimony of pain and rebellion, of reproach and threats* [...] As is often the case in popular literary compositions, it was created by each one bring-

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<sup>14</sup> «Le fascisme avait supprimé toute possibilité de révolte par la grève : tout moyen de fuite devant la misère et la répression en émigrant au-delà de l’océan ou dans les pays européens avait disparu. Dans les bourgs surpeuplés, il ne restait à ces hommes qu’une voie de salut, pour oublier la terrible condition qui était la leur : la spéculation religieuse. On vit alors les hommes et les femmes s’adonner avec véhémence, avec passion, à discuter de Dieu : à la faim de la terre, pour un temps se substituait la faim du ciel» (Cassin 1993, 239). That Manduzio thought of Judaism in the dark days of the racial laws is, in any case, a particularly effective expression of what religious or visionary discourse can formulate, even in seemingly oblique forms. On the “vision” issue, see also Beneduce (2017)



ing his own contribution, his own strophe or part of a strophe, sometimes no more than a word, and its unity derived from the shared experiences, poverty and aspirations of its creators, and also from the good-humoured, convivial fraternity of wine, amusements like *morra*, and drinking games. [...] Rabata, it says, is in ruins, and in it, as in a kind of circle of hell, men reach out to each other, asking help of each other. Roads and latrines were promised, but nothing came of it, and only the square of the archbishop's palace has been made new (and is, indeed, the cleanest and most decent spot in the town). *But the party must end, announces the refrain, class differences must be abolished and if anyone resists, there will be trouble* [...] But other strophes express the proud awareness that, though the peasants of Rabata might be regarded as Zulus or Bedouins, beasts that eat and sleep together with the animals, they are really "the youth of the world" [...] The polemic ends with a bitter rebuke to the self-styled intellectuals [...] I believe the song of Rabata is an extremely eloquent document of the local people's "*will*" to have a history [...] They want to enter into history, not just in the sense of taking over the State and becoming protagonists of civilization, but also in the sense that, from now on, from the present state of indigence, their personal stories will cease to be worn away privately in the great decay of the district of Rabata, and to sink *without any vistas of memory* in the mud and dung of its squalid days. They want these unlit days, lived in filthy dens that are halfway between a tomb, a cave and a stable, to be notified to the world, to acquire a public character through newspapers, the radio, books, and so to build up a tradition and a history (De Martino 1950, 658-660).

The article also raises the question of the political commitment of the researcher, and of the ethnological research that must now necessarily face the problem of what perspective to assume, of what space to occupy.

### *3. The mummification of culture*

The first significant expression of the theme of personal commitment appeared, as we know, in the famous «Solemn Oath», which appeared in the journal «*Il Nuovo Risorgimento*». Its contents and its tone, the analogy with Mazzini's oath, the context («Adopted for the first time on the evening of 18 Nov. 1942 in Bari, when the Liberal-Socialist Party was born there, it was then the oath of all its members in many centres of Italy») – all these things are well-known. And I have

already recalled how close the ethical-political sensibility and the conception of freedom expressed there, even in its tones, was to Fanon's.<sup>15</sup>

In the following years, when the war was over, his research in Lucania fostered his questions on the role of the intellectuals. In his speech presenting the imminent expedition to Lucania, De Martino (1952a, 3) claimed:

We shall go from town to town, and in every town we shall be calling for a generation of a new kind, *the generation of human persons*. And when we return to the city we shall tell everyone what we have seen and heard [...] and we shall publish in a scholarly work an account of this forgotten kingdom of rags, we shall make everyone know *the lives that are eked out without vistas of historical memory* in the secrecy of the domestic hearth [...] What most readily appears of the popular world is the permanent fact of poverty, or rather certain episodes that every so often break the tragic calm of the poor districts. *We shall start from here too*, but so that we may *enter the less accessible world of the cultural life of the oppressed*, and establish a bond of relations and a continuity of events *between everyday life and exceptional events*, and, above all, join together again the present to the past, and the present to the future. We shall not resign ourselves just to registering the gusts of wind that lift the rags of the kingdom of poverty: *but we shall also try to learn what happens in the meantime, between one gust and another*. Everyone remembers Giuseppe Noviello dying on the earth of the occupied estate [...] But few remember the ancient song of the hoers<sup>16</sup>.

1952 was an important year. In articles and reviews aimed to analyse the relationships between hegemonic and popular culture, De Martino, his mind now filled with the social vistas of the peasants of Lucania, had to *develop* and get beyond Gramsci's position on folklore. Those songs, those beliefs and those speeches on disease that he had encountered in the countryside of Stigliano, Tricarico and Gorgoglione were decisive for illuminating the experience of subalternity, exploring how the dominated relate to the precariousness of existence or the violence of the estates, as well as trying to emerge, to be «in some way in histo-

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<sup>15</sup> See note 6.

<sup>16</sup> «Poor digger digs and digs, and his pockets never have money. In the evening he comes back slowly slowly, takes off his shoes and then lies down. His wife goes to him and offers him her arm. "Off with you, my wife, I'm half dead. Take the cask and go get some water (the water that he usually went to take from the fountain when returning from work). Go into mourning, as I'm dead"». On this subject, see also Satta (2015).

ry». But De Martino also suggests a different punctuation when he recalls that

*Precisely because* these men were not in fact *citizens of history*, their presence was historically *non-integrated*, and *culturally* they were committed to *being in some way in history through magic or saving themselves through religion*. In this way, through these living experiences, partly political and partly cultural, I entered into *a Marxist perspective of history*, or at least in one of its fundamental aspects (De Martino 1996, 16-17; my emphasis).

For De Martino, if experience is often fragmentary for the oppressed, if their *presence* is not «integrated» and undergoes special forms of crisis, if there is still frequent recourse to Magism among them, it is because *they are not* «citizens of history» («Precisely because...»). And it is their condition that makes their conceptions of the world (those expressed in folklore) dispersive<sup>17</sup>. Fanon was to echo him in the first lines of *The Wretched of the Earth*: «It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject» (2008, 2). That is to say, it is colonial domination that forms alienated subjectivities and fosters contradictory and fragmentary representations of the world.

There was a tension similar to Gramsci's in De Martino's judgment on folklore, and there was no shortage of sometimes violently contradictory judgments over the years<sup>18</sup>. In 1952, however, his main idea was that, *on certain conditions*, the study of the «living experiences» that animated folklore, experiences «in part political and in part cultural»,

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<sup>17</sup> «Nothing is more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore», Gramsci had written (1975, 1105).

<sup>18</sup> A few years later he could not resist decreeing the urgency of driving back «the kingdom of shadows within its boundaries» so that a new civil consciousness might at last come to light among the oppressed. The following passages indicate his growing distance from a folklore that seemed to me more and more of a limitation to the development of civil forces and as darkness: «For the Southern Italians, too, it is necessary to abandon the sterile embrace of the corpses of their history and open themselves to a heroic destiny that is higher and more modern than what they had in the past [...] To the extent that this will take place, the kingdom of obscurity and shadows will be chased back within its boundaries [...], and it will cause the specious light of magic to fade, a light that uncertain men in an insecure society, for practical motives of existence, substituted for the authentic light of reason» (De Martino, 2015 [1959], 188). See also E. De Martino, V. di Palma, 1996 [1961], 378.

allowed one to penetrate a «Marxist vision of the history» of the oppressed.

But how do we distinguish a folklore characterized by the sentiment of resignation and passivity from a folklore where the will of history is manifest in the songs, in the beliefs and in popular religious feeling, disclosing a Marxist vision of the history of the dominated?

In thinking of a history of the subaltern classes, Gramsci had criticized those judgments that had hastily attributed popular movements like Lazzarettism the value of a «Messianic current». Cavalli's, for example, was an exaggeration, since it contained no authentic reforming action. What it had expressed were, at most, «isolated and separate events that, more than anything else, revealed the “passivity” of the great rural masses»<sup>19</sup>). And yet, only a few years later, Gramsci was to proclaim the stubborn presence of a «morality of the people» directly connected to religious beliefs. The heterogeneousness of its various «strata» made it possible to recognize in it the principle of an opposition, of an almost natural dissent from «official morality»<sup>20</sup>.

Earlier, I underlined the term Gramsci uses to bring out the special relation between the conception of the world of the subaltern classes (folklore, or at least some of its «strata») and the «official» one of the dominant groups (an objective «contrast»). But no less decisive for my argument is another of Gramsci's terms, whose importance has recently been brought out by Jackson (2016). It is the idea of «mummification», which is particularly significant for the connections suggested here between Gramsci, De Martino and Fanon<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Gramsci 1975, 812-813. This is a critical remark to Armando Cavalli's *Correnti messianiche dopo il '70*, «Nuova Antologia», 16 November 1930.

<sup>20</sup> «So it is true there is a “people's morality” [...] which is closely linked, like superstition, to real religious beliefs: *there are imperatives that are much stronger, more tenacious and effective than those of official «morality»*. In this sphere too we must *distinguish various strata*: the *fossilized* ones that reflect the conditions of past life and so are *conservative and reactionary*, and those that are a series of innovations, often *creative and progressive*, determined *spontaneously* by forms and conditions of life *that are developing and contradict, or are simply different from, the morality of the ruling strata»* (Gramsci 1975, 2313; my emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> On the possibility of interpreting Gramsci's and Fanon's thinking from within a shared perspective of a decentred Marxism, see also Bentouhami (2014). The thoughts on the «bureaucracy or general staff of the party», described as «having the force of custom, more dangerous» (Gramsci

On the basis of the detailed contributions by Ciliberto (1989), Frosini (2003), Liguori and Voza (2009), Jackson identifies the various occurrences of the term, and suggests the relations between this idea and other themes in the *Prison Notebooks* (parties, the «language of life», intellectuals, etc).

Unlike Jackson, I am taking this term mainly for its capacity to reveal a closeness between Gramsci's perspective and Fanon's. For example, when Gramsci considers the body of the proletariat (the brain of the Fordist worker is non-mummified, writes Gramsci, only his gestures are mechanized; Gramsci, 1975, 2170-2171<sup>22</sup>), he seems to be able to recognize in this intuition a thought that Fanon was to express years later on colonized subjects – men «dominated but not domesticated» («He is made to feel inferior, but by no means convinced of his inferiority», Fanon, 2004, 16).

Gramsci, De Martino and Fanon have much else in common, however.

For example, Gramsci's criticism of Labriola<sup>23</sup>, a criticism repeated in other pages of the *Notebooks* against the paternalistic spirit of many intellectuals of the left who managed to justify the colonies (Libya, in Labriola's case).

Similarly, Fanon would direct his irony against the «pseudo-solidarity» of the French democrats and intellectuals who not only accepted as obvious the idea of a French Algeria, but tolerated the most brutal violence of colonialism (1967, 77-79).

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1975, 910) for the life of the party, is a further link between Gramsci and Fanon, who also mistrusted the parties and the post-colonial élites.

<sup>22</sup> The image of the Fordist worker outlined by Gramsci is here the opposite of Loria's: «No, ignorant workers, alcoholic, dehumanized by working long hours at night, condemned to all the horrors of a sickening promiscuity by the lack of space in their living quarters, orphaned of any civil customs, cannot be citizens fitted for the new and higher humanity the reformers dream of» (1907, 417-418).

<sup>23</sup> Responding to a student who asked him about the limits of pedagogy and how he would educate a Papuan, Labriola replied: «I would provisionally enslave him; and that would be pedagogy in this case, then we could see if his grandchildren and great-grandchildren could start to benefit from some of our own pedagogy» (Gramsci, 1975, 1366).

Still closer to Gramsci's criticism of Labriola are De Martino's bitter reflections on Croce, when the latter distinguishes between «men who are actors in history» and

men who are *passive*, between men who belong to history, and men of nature (Naturvölker), men capable of developing and men who are incapable [...] Dominion is exercised over this second class of beings, who *zoologically and not historically are men*, as it is over animals, and one seeks to tame them and train them, and in certain cases, when no more can be done, one leaves them *to live on the fringes* [...] Of course, one first tries and makes an effort to *awaken them to manhood* through religious conversions, severe discipline, patient education and schooling, and, *political stimuli and punishments*, which is what is called the civilizing of the barbarians and the humanizing of savages. But if this, and as long as this, is not done, how can we have shared memories with them, *who persist in not entering history*, which is a struggle for freedom? (Croce, cit. in De Martino 2002, 87; my emphasis).

De Martino finds in these words «pitiless crudity, the bourgeois attitude to colonial peoples, with which the predominant practical relation of dominion prevents any “shared memories” and any effective historical understanding» (De Martino, 2002, 88). In the background of his remarks we can see the outline of a history that seems to proceed by dividing humanity in two: one consisting of men who are its actors, the other destined to remain oppressed by the «shadow» of a «bad past» (that is how De Martino defines the land of remorse, in 1959 – the same year as Fanon's speech in Rome. The humiliated and the oppressed, the southerners and the colonized, are those who are kept at the fringes and seek to participate in history, struggling against the forces of oppression as well as against the indifference and complicity of the intellectuals.

His analysis of the paternalism of the ruling classes, the urgency posed by the problems of national culture «in the age of the twilight of colonialism and the cultural and political reawakening of the colonial peoples» (De Martino) thus define a shared range of themes, dominated by the need to understand historically those forms of social and cultural life that seem to be expressed in frozen, closed or mummified forms.

Fanon traces a similar itinerary, but adds an interpretation of the reasons for what he had observed: the culture of the colonized may be

mummified, but only because the colonial situation has created it. The «mummification» of the culture of the dominated and of their institutions is what the colonial domination needs, not unlike that idea of folklore that was long reproduced in ethnology, which De Martino regarded as in line with the interests of the national bourgeoisies. Fanon seeks to question this mummification in the terms of a process to examine all the effects of its alienation:

The social panorama is destructured; values are flaunted, crushed, emptied [...]. The setting up of the colonial system does not of itself bring about the death of the native culture. Historic observation reveals, on the contrary, that the aim sought is rather *a continued agony* than a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture. This culture, once living and open to the future, becomes *closed, fixed in the colonial status*, caught in the joke of oppression. Both present and mummified, *it testifies against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal*. The cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thinking (Fanon 1967, 34; my emphasis).

The culture of the oppressed rebounds against them («it defines them without appeal»): it condemns them to being what they are, obliging them to recognize themselves in the shriveled images of a supposed tradition. Fanon goes beyond this first observation. Because the mummification of the institutions, of culture and local hierarchies, after producing an ossification of social life and the very subjectivity of the dominated, it will feed circularly the production of negative stereotypes that the colonist and his knowledge untiringly shower on the colonized (idleness, inertia, wickedness, «passivity»...):

The apathy so universally noted among colonial peoples is but the logical consequence of this operation. The reproach of inertia constantly directed at «the native» is utterly dishonest. As though it were possible for a man to evolve otherwise than within the framework of a culture that recognizes him and that he decides to assume. Thus we witness the setting up of archaic, inert institutions, functioning under the oppressor's supervision and patterned like a *caricature of formerly fertile institutions* (Fanon 1967, 34).

The process of subjection<sup>24</sup> takes shape in the colony in many different forms: not only effects of dominion, then, but also production of discourses, experiences, and psychological or moral categories. The only alternative, then, will be a violent struggle to «reassume history» (Fanon 1967, 83-84), to emerge from this spell cast by time, from this mummification of bodies, institutions and memories, imposed from outside.

During the *Deuxième Congrès International des Écrivains et des Artistes Noirs*, held in Rome in the spring of 1959, Fanon returned to the *cultural question*, making it specifically political (the theme of «national culture», which was also at the centre – though in a different perspective – of Gramsci’s thinking), removing it both from the banalizations of cultural relativism and from the analyses that had lost sight of what was at stake in the cultural history of the oppressed.

Assuming a perspective not far removed from De Martino’s reflections on the attitudes of those studying folklore, Fanon claims:

The reactions of the colonized to this situation vary. Whereas the masses maintain intact traditions *totally incongruous with the colonial situation*, whereas the style of artisanship ossifies into an increasingly stereotyped formalism, the intellectual hurls himself frantically into the frenzied acquisition of the occupier’s culture, making sure *he denigrates his national culture*, or else *confines himself to making a detailed, methodical, zealous, and rapidly sterile inventory of it* (2004, 171; my emphasis).

Despite Fanon’s awareness of how much culture and tradition can become accomplices of the «mineralization» of the lives of the colonized and his repeated insistence on the fact that artistic and intellectual creations can develop new forms and aesthetics only in the specific moment of the struggle (wooden sculptures, for example), he thinks it impossible to escape the questions on the tactical, situational value that

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<sup>24</sup> «The constantly affirmed concern with “respecting the culture of the native populations” accordingly does not signify taking into consideration the values borne by the culture, incarnated by men. Rather, this behavior betrays a determination to objectify, to confine (*encapsuler*), to imprison, to harden (*enkyster*)» (Fanon 1967, 34)



cultural symbols or religious discourse have for the masses of the colonized<sup>25</sup>.

While De Martino's meeting with the peasants and labourers of Lucania was partly a matter of recognizing the social value of Magism, singing, scurrilous refrains and lullabies (the only way of restoring the status of «whole persons» to them), in Fanon the struggle against colonial power, against a history *that humiliates and repels*, must at the same time overturn racist stereotypes, combat the metamorphosis of their cultural experiences into clandestine practices, and achieve a war of liberation. And that is why he claims that cultural repression, the wretchedness generated by colonization and the violence of repression are only different moments in a single process of dominion, all with the same alienating power:

National culture under colonial domination is a culture under interrogation whose destruction is sought systematically. Very quickly it becomes a culture condemned to clandestinity [...] After one or two centuries of exploitation the national cultural landscape has radically shrivelled. It has become an inventory of behavioral patterns, traditional costumes, and miscellaneous customs [...] Poverty, national oppression, and cultural repression are one and the same. After a century of colonial domination culture becomes rigid in the extreme, congealed, and petrified. The atrophy of national reality and the death throes of national culture feed on one another. This is why it becomes vital to monitor the development of this relationship during the liberation struggle (Fanon 2004, 172).

#### 4. *Knotting together history, or the psychic life of history*

It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state.  
(Clastres, *La société contre l'état*)

«Poverty, national oppression, and cultural repression are one and the same»: that is why, writes Fanon, the relations between nation-

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<sup>25</sup> I have analysed in greater detail these topics elsewhere (Beneduce 2011, 2012a, 2016a; Gibson and Beneduce, 2017).

building, anti-colonial struggle and cultural production intertwine like bindweed in a single, shared process. This, claims De Martino, is why we need to try to free folklore from its fate of being a mere reflection «on the cultural plane, of the economic and political dependency» of the subaltern classes, and expressing simply a «servile culture of politically and economically subjugated classes» (De Martino 1952b).

While this prospect seemed a distant hope for Gramsci, for De Martino, it seems to have become possible «in the age of dying capitalism and proletarian revolution»<sup>26</sup>.

Fanon seems to be asking the same questions as De Martino when he tries to surpass those limits that Gramsci had seen as inexorable in a mummified and crumbling folklore. And, in a time of struggle, Fanon grasped the throb of action in the history of those who, till then, had been kept on the sidelines. The image he offers of this process is superb, as is his analysis of the colonial gaze, seeking to defend a supposedly «indigenous style»:

Close attention should be paid to the emergence of the imagination and the inventiveness of songs and folk tales in a colonized country. The storyteller responds to the expectations of the people by trial and error and searches for *new models, national models, apparently on his own, but in fact with the support of his audience*. Comedy and farce disappear or else lose their appeal. As for drama, it is no longer the domain of the intellectual's tormented conscience. No longer characterized by despair and revolt, it has become the people's daily lot, *it has become part of an action in the making or already in progress*. In artisanship, *the congealed, petrified forms loosen up*.

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<sup>26</sup> De Martino continues as follows: «Of course, insofar as the cultural life of the popular masses is backwardness, superstition, evidence of outdated ideologies, etc., insofar as folklore is all of this, Gramsci's judgment is exact. But is folklore no more than this? Is the traditional cultural life of the popular masses only backwardness, superstition, etc., or has it produced things that are still valid and acceptable, above all in the sphere of artistic and literary manifestations? Is folklore only the descent and debasement of the products of high culture, or does the very reception and popular adaptation of these products sometimes manifest an active element, a capacity to rework the materials that is full of human significance? Alongside the process of descent, from high culture to the people, is there not also an inverse process, one that is also ascent? And lastly: apart from the traditional cultural life of the popular masses, apart from folklore in the strict sense, is there not also a cultural life of these masses that breaks more or less decisively with tradition, and that resounds as a «resonant voice of the present», as a reflection and expression of the new experiences in course? I believe we should give as exhaustive a reply as possible to all these questions: we shall do so soon» (1952b).

Wood carving, for example, which turned out set faces and poses by the thousands, starts to diversify. The expressionless or tormented mask comes to life, and the arms are raised upwards in a gesture of action [...] By bringing faces and bodies to life, by taking the group set on a single socle as creative subject, the artist inspires concerted action. [...] Formalism is abandoned. Jugs, jars, and trays are reshaped, at first only slightly and then quite radically [...] The colonialist experts do not recognize these new forms and rush to the rescue of indigenous traditions. *It is the colonialists who become the defenders of indigenous style* (Fanon 2004, 174-177; my emphasis).

While this process reveals a new will of history even in the gestures of sculptors, in popular songs, and in the outline of masks, and while Fanon and De Martino underline the importance of protests that aim to tear away the gag of a petrified tradition, so as to affirm a precise form of critical consciousness, they do not fail to see how much all this can be reduced to an incomplete fragment of individual revolt, or simply to a «symptom». Nor that these crumbling expressions may reproduce – as if cursed – precisely those fragmentary and regressive characteristics generally attributed to them by the dominant groups.

The contradictory outlines of a folklore that is no longer imagined in the monotonous repetition of tradition, but in the concrete context of conflicts (between subaltern classes and bourgeoisie, or between colonized and colonizers); the ambiguous dimensions of revolts that are generally interpreted by the ruling classes as an individual or pathological gesture, or mere mutiny (as in the case of the Indian revolt in 1857)<sup>27</sup>. These phenomena indicate a new repertoire of languages and

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<sup>27</sup> I refer to the Indian Mutiny as analysed by Bhabha and the various interpretations of it provided by English historians in the following years. As Bhabha recalls, for the historians of the time, there were many possible meanings in that strange circulation of *chapati* from village to village (it was one of the behaviours that most puzzled the British colonial authorities in years when anticolonial rebellions and protests became more and more widespread): the symbolic gesture to encourage the expulsion of a disease from a family that had been struck down by it, the announcement that even the most basic forms of subsistence would soon be removed, which was the merest fiction... But, according to other scholars, that gesture had no particular meaning. According to Bhabha, the power of a behaviour that, crossing many boundaries, became able to generate panic and express *an unexpected form of historical consciousness* lay in precisely this «undecidable» dimension, in this political and symbolic vagueness: «My reckless historical connection is based not on a sense of the contiguity of events, but on *the temporality of repetition* that constitutes those signs by which marginalized or insurgent subjects *create a collective agency*. I am interested in *cultural strategy and political con-*

strategies, but without it ever being possible to find a formula that says once and for all what their historical-political significance was.

Notebook 25, which has been studied widely (Boni 2012, Liguori 2006, etc.), ends by asking decisive questions on the problem from which he had begun: the case of Davide Lazzaretti.

His questions on the nature of Lazzarettism, the political project that had inspired his followers even after its inspirer had died (a «jumble of old-fashioned religious doctrines with a good dose of religious maxims and vague gestures towards man's moral redemption»), its repression and the biography of its protagonist, suggest at least three problems that are particularly pertinent for a consideration of Gramsci and anthropology.

The first concerns the complexity of the significance that can be seen in the behaviour of subaltern groups, including the most fragmentary and episodic ones. Analysing them, claims Gramsci, requires us to overcome a banal historicism and choose an «integral» approach («Any trace of *autonomous* initiative by subaltern groups should therefore be invaluable for the *integral historian*»; Gramsci 1975, 2284, my emphasis). It is this term «integral» – one of the conceptual pearls adorning Gramsci's text – that I want to underline here, though reasons of space disable me from drawing out all its methodological implications.

The second problem concerns Davide Lazzaretti's biography and the figures that may have been close to him: visionaries, prophets, revolutionaries, and authors of pamphlets and writings whose criticism of the social order and whose prophetic language gave their words an *actual* political value. The social role they occupy at particular historical moments (the social crisis in post-unification Italy, fascism and the re-

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*frontation constituted in obscure, enigmatic symbols, the manic repetition of rumour, panic as the uncontrolled, yet strategic affect of political revolt» (Bhabha 1994, 199; my emphasis). Fanon considers this issue with regard to Algeria: «Behavior toward fellow nationalists is open and honest, but strained and indecipherable toward the colonists» (Fanon 2004, 14; my emphasis). And his discussion of the “veil issue” is a superb analysis of inscrutable, flexible and ambiguous meanings in the behaviour of the dominated in the context of colonial oppression (Fanon 1965, 47-63). On ambiguous meanings of “resistance” in anthropological debate and ethnographic research, see the seminal work by Ortner (1995). It echoes many of De Martino's and Fanon's ideas on peasant religiosity, culture, subaltern resistance, and political consciousness.*

pression of the peasant revolts, the colonial situation, etc.) makes these figures the expression of a particular way of *thinking of history and its contradictions*, a particular way of articulating its temporality (an incomplete world is prefigured, against another that still persists). This is what makes Gramsci's perspective so original, suggesting, as it does, the need to *knot together*<sup>28</sup> (another decisive term) different phenomena: the bands of Benevento led by Malatesta and Cafiero (the movements of the internationalist anarchists) and Lazzarettism, the post-unification religious ferments, and the «plight» of a pious and visionary tradesman («My Profession was a Tradesman, my age is 35 years. I have a Wife and 3 children»). This latter's «prophecies» had troubled the *carabinieri* to the point of killing him «with coldly premeditated and ferocious brutality» (Gramsci), simply because he had «shown the government *what subversive-popular-elemental tendency* could originate among the peasantry as a result of politico-clerical abstentionism and the fact that, given the lack of regular parties, the rural masses were seeking local leaders who were emerging from the masses themselves, *mixing religion and fanaticism* together with demands that *in elemental form* were fermenting in the countryside» (Gramsci 1975, 2280; my emphasis).

There are other phenomena and protagonists whose stories it would be useful (and meaningful) to knot together, though here I simply recall once again this story. It is a story difficult to interpret, is as complex as the versatile personality of its protagonist, but its historical richness certainly derived in part from its coming to light in the same years as the racial laws proclaimed by the fascist government<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> «Lazzaretti's tragedy should be *knotted together* with the "feats" of the so-called bands of Benevento, which were almost simultaneous: the priests and peasants involved in the trial of Malatesta took a very similar view of that of the Lazzarettists, as is clear from the accounts of the trial [...]. In any case, the tragedy of Lazzaretti has so far been seen only from the point of view of literary impressionism, while it deserves a political-historical analysis» (Gramsci 1975, 2282). On the need to *connect* aspects that are usually separate if we are to understand what often only receives a pathological interpretation, see Beneduce (2016b) and, especially, Pandolfo (2017).

<sup>29</sup> On this matter, see also Davies (2010). As for Lazzaretti, whose prophecies some of his followers regarded as having come true after the end of the second world war, in the case of Manduzio too, there were prophecies in which political questions concerning the world order, local questions and personal matters seemed to combine in a single story.

But it is the third problem that I am most anxious to call up here, however briefly: the interest of the social sciences and positivist psychiatry (Lombroso's, for example) in "deviant" protest movements and behaviours, as part of a judgment that usually tended to see them as pathological<sup>30</sup>.

At the end of the famous, unfinished Notebook 25, perhaps one of Gramsci's most anthropological notebooks, he wonders what the reasons are for the «tendency of left-wing sociology in Italy to deal so intensively with the problem of criminality». Might it be, he asks ironically, a consequence of «Lombroso and many of his most "brilliant" followers, who then seemed the supreme expression of science, tending towards the left»? Or the effects of the «low Romanticism of 1848», or, again, perhaps because «certain intellectual groups in Italy [were struck by] the large number of violent crimes and thought no decision could be taken without first explaining "scientifically" (or naturalistically) this phenomenon of "savagery"?» (Gramsci 1975, 2293-2294).

The urgency of these questions forced the author to try to understand what was driving Italian intellectuals to avoid any reflection on the real «causes of a general malaise», but to interpret forms of protest, manifestations of suffering, and signs of rebellion within the prevailing

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<sup>30</sup> This is how Gramsci commented on the attitude of intellectuals and scientists of the period to such phenomena: «This was the cultural custom of the time: instead of studying the origins of a collective event, and the reasons for its spreading, for its being collective, the protagonist was isolated and *one simply did his pathological biography*, all too often starting from unconfirmed motives or ones open to different interpretation: for a social élite, *the elements of subaltern groups always have something barbaric and pathologicab*. And, speaking of Barzellotti's work on Lazzaretti, he adds that his reading of the facts «led to trying to hide the causes of general malaise that existed in Italy after 1870, giving *restrictive, individual, folkloristic, pathological etc explanations* of individual episodes when this malaise exploded. The same thing happened on a larger scale for "banditry" in the South and the islands». In proposing a comparative analysis of the thought of Gramsci and Fanon, Bentohuami properly brings out their shared critical perspective in seeking to overturn, one after the other, the premises for criminalizing and pathologizing alterity (of Southerners in one case, and of the colonized in the other) (2014, 104-106). In any case, the *terra del rimorso* had revealed to De Martino the same situation of an inexorable, gradual medicalization of a therapeutic cult, which in the «ritual explosion of wretchedness» (Laplantine 1977) constituted a genuine liturgy of revolt and grief (especially female) against the background of the violence of the landed estate and the economic uncertainty of labourers and peasants. I cannot explore in detail here the theoretical density of the confluence of Gramsci, De Martino and Fanon on this shared thematic territory, which is part of some ongoing research.

frame of naturalistic or pathological reductionism («the violent bandit country of the South», «anarchist bomb attacks», the impulsiveness of the rural masses). As Boni suggests (2012), we can recognize in these questions on the *pathologizing of history* – or rather, of a part of it - a more radical question, which both links up with the dialectic hegemony/subalternity, and also indicates decisively the need to read the history of subalterns «symptomatically». Though an analysis of Lazzaretism suggests we define subaltern «as what tends to be considered not just as invisible or marginal, but also “pathological”, deviant or anomalous in relation to a certain tendency of history» (Boni), the most original aspect to investigate is the fact that

the recognition of the symptomatic dimension of the sporadic emergence of subaltern groups on the scene of history ends up suggesting a symptomatic (*simptomale*) conception of history itself – a history whose critique is to be built not only on its internal coherence and cogency, but on the gaps, the leaps, the unspoken and the incoherencies that make up its story (Boni 2012, 289).

This is the task that Gramsci sees as characteristic of an «integral historian», who, faced with this history made up of crevices and silences, fractures and symptoms, must consult a «great heap of materials that are often difficult to collect» (Gramsci)<sup>31</sup>.

Combining Gramsci's thoughts with those of De Martino and Fanon is a useful exercise, partly so as to also collect other case histories in texts and discourses that stubbornly resist any attempt at political, religious or psychiatric classification, and seem to display a recalci-

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<sup>31</sup> One of these «materials difficult to collect» is undoubtedly the band wrapped round the chest of the patient the two Comaroffs met in a South African psychiatric hospital, mentioned above, on which three letters were visible: S.A.R. The authors comment: «The letters stood for South African Railways, alongside whose track the hospital lay. In fact, at the very moment we encountered him, the night train for Johannesburg rattled by with its daily cargo of migrants. Later, as we puzzled to decipher his message, we kept returning, as he did, to SAR. It was a message that spoke directly to his fellow inmates [...] For, in this world of peasant-proletarians, the railway forged a tangible link between rural and urban life, hitching together the dissonant worlds of the country and the city». On the concept of «symptomatic reading» suggested by Boni and inspired by Althusser's reading of Marx (Althusser 1965) and Lacan's theory of «sinthome» (Lacan 2005), see also – for Althusser – Assister (1984, 288-289) and Friedman (1995, 166-171).

trant and «undecidable» significance, as in the case of the “Chapati Movement” analysed by Bhabha.

We can take a step forward in our analysis, conjecturing that *genre confusion* is the specific characteristic of the subaltern text (look how subalterns speak and remember...; Beneduce 2016c). It remains, both for those who offer it and for those who listen to it, a text that is at once political *and* apolitical, scurrilous *and* edifying, prophetic *and* apocalyptic, poetic *and* religious. It is an enigmatic text, in which one can find mythical-ritual motifs and criticism of the social order, or, as De Martino had observed, the «passion for chaos» and the «taste for scurrility»...

This was the “canon” adopted by the African healers and prophets in the colonial period, who healed illnesses and sterility, but also campaigned against paying taxes (as in the case of Maria ‘Nkoi, a prophet in the Belgian Congo who had survived an attack from a leopard and acquired extraordinary powers; Hunt 2016). It was no accident that prophets and priests of possession cults were often exiled or imprisoned. The diagnosis of the individual sickness was in itself a political comment, as they sought the causes of illness in history: in a «history haunted by the Other’s presence» (Augé and Colleyn 1990, 15)<sup>32</sup>. The threatening nature of subaltern discourse – in the colonies, as in the Italy of Lazzaretti – seems, then, to originate, first and foremost, from its undecidability.

In fact, Lazzaretti, too, in the *Preface* to his *Rescritti*, had declared that he had followed the inspiration of visions that revealed to him a sense

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<sup>32</sup> Referring to the role of African prophets and healers in the colonial age, Feierman (1995, 75) speaks of «therapeutic insurgency» and «healing as social criticism». But a new issue dominates today the anthropological debate about the value of other forms of knowledge and the meaning of what I see as a true *epistemological-political knot*, a knot that Taussig’s perspective (see below) can only partially untie. According to Viveiros de Castro, the perspectivism obliges anthropologists to reconsider their work and to remember that other societies risk to pay a double price to finally enter History and meet a «Marxist perspective of history»: the price of forgetting that their problems are different from “the problems” yet defined by the anthropologist, and the price of leaving untouched and undisputed the ontological presuppositions of Western anthropology about what is Magic, disease, medicine, fetish, witchcraft, and so on (Beneduce 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2015). Of course, Viveiros de Castro doesn’t take in consideration De Martino’s work.



that was *always* «general and allegorical», «enigmatic and mysterious»<sup>33</sup>. The notion of that «arcane Wisdom» at the origin of his writings thus remained so obscure that the reader could not be regarded as responsible for interpreting it. But, then, he added: «It is not true that the destinies of peoples are in the hands of great, outstanding men; no, my friends, they are in the hand of God, and this God *has no need of the great and the strong* to do things *that are marvellous and great*» (Lazzaretti 1870, IV).

One can reasonably wonder, as I have indicated, whether the enigmatic proliferation of symbols, genres and styles, and the uncertain nature of these discourses, do not reveal the particular form in which the oppressed and the subaltern often think of a history that *threatens* and humiliates («the dark theogonic anguish» of which De Martino wrote; 1949, 435), and, in this way, they try to *act in it*. Or rather, we might wonder whether this is not in itself a way of thinking of *another history*, announcing it through that very special period of time that is *waiting*: («the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening»; Benjamin (1969, 263). The idea of waiting, of a “not yet”, suggests another passage.

In discussing Marx’s theories, Chakrabarty suggests to describe as «History 2» all the different types of past that are not “established” by capital, or been involved in reproducing it, or can be thought as having a simple dialectical relation with it<sup>34</sup>. On the contrary, they should be

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<sup>33</sup> In the *Preface* to his book, Davide Lazzaretti wrote that his writings might be «neither scientific nor beautiful» but «simple and good», as the «arcane Wisdom» is «always good», and had suggested them to that «uneducated, stupid» man who was their author. «Their general and allegorical sense» had also often remained «unclear in meaning», as it remained «enigmatic and mysterious» to him too. As for the origin of his project, he adds that he feels himself «a tool of an extraordinary and mysterious Mission» and that he acts «according to the circumstances by means of a spirit that I know does not really come from man; and this spirit works and acts in me, now with instantaneous inspirations accompanied by a most acute headache that makes me sleepy and distracts me from any other thought, and now with visions in my sleep, which remain in my memory when I wake with an extraordinary sense of understanding» (Lazzaretti 1870, II).

<sup>34</sup> «These pasts, grouped together in my analysis as History 2, may be under the institutional domination of the logic of capital and exist in proximate relationship to it, but they also do not belong to the “life process” of capital. They enable the human bearer of labor power to enact *other ways of being in the world* – other than, that is, being the bearer of labor power. We cannot ever hope to write a complete or full account of these pasts. *They are partly embodied in the person’s bodily habits, in unselfconscious collective practices, in his or her reflexes about what it means to relate to objects in the world as a human being and together with other human beings in his given environment.* Nothing in it is automatically

thought of as a history that is not separate, but «charged with the function of *constantly interrupting* the totalizing thrusts» of History 1 (Chakrabarty 2000, 66).

This history, made up of other kinds of memory, of «*other ways of being in the world*», is the history of subalterns, which historians, sociologists and psychiatrists have always regarded as a *naïve* history – anachronistic, obsessed with beliefs, and crushed by the «pre-political» character of protests that are unable to find, writes Hobsbawm, «a specific language in which to express themselves» (quoted in Chakrabarty 2000, 12).

Although Hobsbawm and Chakrabarty are thinking here mainly of the peasant revolts, the latter's reference to practices organized «along the axes of kinship, religion, and caste, and involving gods, spirits, and supernatural agents as actors alongside humans» (Chakrabarty 2000, 11), invites us to see those individual or collective behaviours whose significance remains obstinately «undecidable» in a new perspective, and its *anachronistic* and *fantastic* connotation as characteristic of the revolutionary moment<sup>35</sup>, as Derrida suggests, starting from a reading of Marx:

Far from organizing the good schematics of a constitution of time, this other transcendental imagination is the law of an invincible anachrony. Untimely, «out of joint, » even and especially if it appears to come in due time; the spirit of the revolution is fantastic and anachronistic through and through. It has to be so-and

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aligned with the logic of capital» (Chakrabarty 2000, 66; my emphasis). On the forms of historical consciousness of colonized peoples and the relation between memory, history and epic texts (the *purānas*, an Indian epic text), see Nandy (1995). The idea that there are unrecognized forms of historical consciousness, other ways of thinking about history, has been the subject of many studies in recent years. Without presuming to suggest the existence of a coherent theoretical territory, Goody's contribution on the *theft of history* should be mentioned in this context, as well as the western monopoly of concepts, sensibilities or institutions that were long regarded as *distinctly* western (history, finance, universities, etc). Goody's reflections reveal to the anthropologist, the psychoanalyst or the historian a field of enquiry that is no less decisive when they recall that emotions, too, such as love, were long perceived as *typical* of the West: «Some forms of love, sometimes the idea of love itself, have been seen as a purely western phenomenon [...] Love, romantic love, is frequently believed to go hand in hand with individualism, with freedom (of choice of partner, as distinct from arranged marriage), and with modernization in general» (2006, 267).

<sup>35</sup> According to Benjamin: «What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode» (2006, 395).

among all the questions that this discourse assigns to us, one of the most necessary would no doubt concern the articulation among these indissociable concepts which must, if not identify with each other, at least pass one into the other without crossing any rigorous conceptual border: spirit of revolution, actual reality, (productive or reproductive) imagination, spectre (Derrida 1994, 140).

### 5. Conclusions: «the infinite variety of history»

The interconnections suggested so far have been a rapid survey of some of the main areas covered in the work of Gramsci, De Martino and Fanon, rather like a provisional draft research programme. For all the differences in their disciplines and their situations, those three men examined those themes passionately, with surprisingly similar languages, and shared the same experience of history and crisis, of a «time of iron and fire» (Gramsci 1965, 84), and an «apocalypse atmosphere» (Fanon 1965, 26)<sup>36</sup>.

There are many areas dealt with: the debate on the fragmentary or pathological character usually attributed to the actions and struggles of subalterns; the urgency of recognizing folklore and its multiple «strata» as having a vision of the world *opposed* to the dominant one, potentially able to contribute to a political change (at least in De Martino and Fanon); the need to free the cultural history of the oppressed from the petrification stamped on it by bourgeois ethnology and colonial categories, while deconstructing the supposed unity of the political; the awareness that national unity and the colonies were structurally connected processes<sup>37</sup>; and a shared perspective for exploring the *spectral* (Derrida, Gordon) and *symptomatic* (Ginzburg, Boni) dimensions of history – of a history that is infinitely varied and many-sided:

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<sup>36</sup> On the theme of apocalypse, the remarkable proximity between indigenous cultures and western civilization that this experience determines and the tasks of an ethnographic humanism, see, obviously, De Martino (1977, and the new French critical edition: 2016).

<sup>37</sup> For Gramsci the Italian colonial project was structurally connected to the politics of national unity, in which the alliance with the monarchy and the landed estates played a fundamental role (see Gramsci's pages on Crispi: 1975, 2217-2219). More generally, internal colonialism and external colonialism share similar logics of government and dominion, and in the repression of the struggle of peasants and labourers express a decisive common feature.

This reduction [of philosophy of praxis to a form of sociology] has represented the crystallization of the degenerate tendency already criticised by Engels [...] and which consists in reducing a conception of the world to a mechanical formula which gives the impression of holding the whole of history in the pocket. [...] The experience on which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematised; it is history in all its *infinite variety and multiplicity* (Gramsci 1975, 1428; my emphasis).

Recognizing a single conceptual horizon in these passages is impossible when we remain inside the one register of the deconstruction of diagnostic categories or hegemonic historical models, though this is a fundamental passage common to Gramsci, De Martino and Fanon.

We may need to adopt another methodological perspective and assume the procedure of «montage» made famous by Benjamin and taken up by Taussig in his analysis of the «space of death» in Colombia – a text that is valuable for various reasons.

First of all, Taussig's analysis allows us to recognize that history is inscribed in the relation between nature and society (Indian society in this case): the history of colonization, mediated by images and narratives like that of the vapours exhaled from the bones of ancestors and dead pagans (*evil wind*). Those bones, scattered and buried in places forbidden or unknown to Christians, Taussig reminds us<sup>38</sup>, contain another expression of those «materials difficult to collect», of those odd fragments often forgotten or pathologized, we might add (Beneduce 2012b; Gibson, Beneduce 2017), but which the *integral* historian (or anthropologist) does not miss.

This suggestion seems to me to combine coherently with Gramsci's and De Martino's reading of the experience of subalterns: prophetic language, «fatalism» (Fanon), Lazzaretti's programme, the protest songs and everything else that continued to be formulated in often unsettled and enigmatic forms, are the specific mark of the historical consciousness expressed by the subaltern classes. The stubborn «be-

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<sup>38</sup> «The colonized space of death has a colonizing function, maintaining hegemony or cultural stability of norms and desires which facilitate the way the rulers rule the ruled in the land of the living. Yet the space of death is notoriously conflict-ridden and contradictory too; a privileged domain for transformation and metamorphosis, the space par excellence for uncertainty and terror to stun permanently, yet also revive and empower with new life» (Taussig 1984, 93).

liefs» that are evoked or inscribed are not an anachronism, so much as the expression of an *excess of memory*.<sup>39</sup> In any case, it was Gramsci himself who suggested this idea when he wrote:

The people (that is, all the subaltern and exploitable classes *of every form of society that has existed so far*) by definition cannot have elaborate, systematic and politically organized and centralized conceptions. That is because the people's development has been *contradictory* – multiple indeed – not only in the sense of different, and juxtaposed, but also in the sense of stratified from the most coarse to the least coarse – if we should not actually speak of an *indigestible agglomeration of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded each other in history*, the surviving mutilated and corrupt documents for most of which, indeed, are to be found *only in folklore* (Gramsci 1975, 2312; my emphasis).

In the symptomatic reading of history (Boni 2012) and in its infinite materials (including folklore), in what Taussig (1984) calls «implicit social knowledge», what emerges is the *logic of the palimpsest*.

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<sup>39</sup> In this way one might claim that the «many strata of folklore» include the images of a past that still haunts the present (and the living): traces of a memory that flows into and is sometimes even revealed in ritual healing («It is as if by what that other doctor of the soul (psyche), Sigmund Freud, termed the process of condensation and displacement in the work of dreams and in the constructions of jokes, that the spirits of such dead lowland shamans, or, rather, their fame and repute, collapse centuries of time into compacted nuggets of magical meaning, empowering highland curing ritual» (Taussig 1984, 98).

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