

# International Gramsci Journal

---

Volume 2  
Issue 3 *Gramsci and Anthropology: A "Round Trip"*

Article 13

---

2017

## Gramsci's «Prison Notebooks» and the "re-foundation" of anthropology in post-war Italy

Gino Satta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci>

---

### Recommended Citation

Satta, Gino, Gramsci's «Prison Notebooks» and the "re-foundation" of anthropology in post-war Italy, *International Gramsci Journal*, 2(3), 2017, 239-257.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol2/iss3/13>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Gramsci's «Prison Notebooks» and the “re-foundation” of anthropology in post-war Italy

### Abstract

In the 1970s, when the identity of Italian “demo-ethno-anthropological” studies was being defined and their academic status consolidated, scholars debated the features of a national tradition of studies. Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks were then presented as the source of new ideas, which in the aftermath of WWII contributed in decisive ways to a renewal of scholarly theory, helping scholars to get rid of romantic leftovers such as the notion of “people-nation”, and encouraging them to turn away from “picturesque” oddities to address important social and cultural issues. This inscription of Gramsci into the genealogy of Italian anthropological studies, which recognizes the important role his thought played in scholarly debates, nonetheless risks concealing the different readings his reflections received when they were first published soon after the war (1948-1951). The paper focuses on the debate regarding Gramsci and folklore organized by the Gramsci Institute in Rome in the late spring of 1951, in order to sketch out an array of very different readings of Gramsci's contribution to the study of folklore. On that occasion Paolo Toschi, a recognized and distinguished scholar, dismissed Gramsci's theoretical contribution and presented Gramsci as an amateur folklorist, while Ernesto De Martino, a young scholar still in search of academic recognition, gave a very one-sided and political interpretation of Gramsci's thought, which he was later to radically rethink. Alberto Cirese, attending the debate as a very young man, was later to propose a third and very influential reading of Gramsci's observations. Through the prism of these different readings, the post-war Gramscian moment of Italian anthropology appears as something much more complex and controversial than 1970s accounts would have it.

### Keywords

History of anthropology; Ernesto De Martino; Antonio Gramsci; Alberto Mario Cirese; Folklore

***Gramsci's «Prison notebooks»  
and the “re-foundation” of anthropology  
in post-war Italy***

Gino Satta

1. For several generations of Italian students of anthropology, Antonio Gramsci has been a familiar character. Before the nineties, when Italian historiography began converging with mainstream international narratives of anglo-american origin, his name figured between the founding fathers of a national anthropological tradition with remarkable distinctive features; so distinctive that an influential critic was to write about the alleged «autarkic tendencies» of Italian anthropology (Remotti 1978), raising an important debate<sup>1</sup>.

The publication of the *Prison Notebooks*, in the aftermath of WWII, contributed in decisive ways to a theoretical renewal of Italian studies. It helped scholars to get rid of romantic leftovers such as the notion of “popolo-nazione”, and encouraged them to turn away from “picturesque” oddities to address relevant social and cultural issues, inserting scholarship in the midst of post-war democratic debates. This was what students could read in Italian handbooks published in the seventies, when anthropology was undergoing a consolidation of its academic institutionalization and its genealogy began to be outlined; and particularly in *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, by Alberto Mario Cirese (1971), which has been with no doubt the most widespread and influential of all them<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Remotti's provocative essay was followed by some dense replies, such as Signorelli (1980), Parisi (1980), and Tentori (1984). It was re-published with other essays in Remotti (1986). For further informations see Massimo Squillacciotti's note on the debate in Borofsky (2000, 309).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent multi-vocal reflection about *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne* (Cirese 1971), and its relevance for Italian anthropology, see «Lares», 81, 2015, n. 2-3. Different insertions of Gramsci into the genealogy of Italian anthropological studies can be found in *Antropologia culturale e analisi della cultura subalterna* (Lombardi Satriani 1974), *Manuale di antropologia culturale: storia e metodo* (Tullio Altan 1971), *Cultura popolare. Dialettica e contestualità* (Bronzini 1980).

In his handbook, Cirese defined the *Observations on Folklore* (the few thick pages of Notebook 27, published in 1950 as a part of *Letteratura e vita nazionale*) as the «theoretical determinant moment» of the post-war season for what Cirese himself would have proposed (and later obtained) to call «demo-ethno-anthropological studies»: the result of the union of the “demological” (or popular traditions, or folklore) studies with the more marginal ethnological studies, in some kind of relationship with and the new cultural anthropology inspired by American influences<sup>3</sup>.

Antonio Gramsci was credited by Cirese with having restored, against idealistic historicism, «the link between cultural facts and social events», reconfiguring “demological” studies through the definition of folklore as the «conception of the world» of the people «understood as “the complex of the subordinate and instrumental classes of any society so far”», thus definitively liquidating «the hybrid romantic inheritance of the notion of “people-soul” or “people-nation”» (Cirese 1982 [1971], p. 218).

Published in 1971 (with 20 reprints in more than 30 years, the last in 2006), the text – which contains in its title an explicit Gramscian reference – was very careful to insert the theoretical renewal promoted by the reading of the *Notebooks* (of the *Observations on Folklore*, in particular) into a longer-term history<sup>4</sup>. Cirese stressed the continuity of Italian demological studies, bridging the gap between scholars active in pre-Fascist era and those who made the post-war renewal (Fanelli 2015, 291), flying over the *Ventennio* and overlooking the discipline’s involvement in the political strategies of the Fascist regime (Cavazza

---

<sup>3</sup> Cirese pointed out the primacy demological research tradition had in Italy over the ethnological one (Cirese 1985, X). Moreover, Giulio Angioni stressed «the attention given [...] to social, political, and cultural issues put by the existence of what from then [the post-war years] was called the “other Italy”», that is the South, the Mezzogiorno (Angioni 1972, 172). For an account of the different traditions and of their institutional history in Italy, see Puccini (1991), Apolito (1994), Federico and Testa (1996). About the origin and reasons of the *demo-ethno-anthropological* label, and about its dual (and not triadic) nature, see Angioni (1994).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the different traditions combined by Cirese to account for the genealogy of Italian anthropology, see Mirizzi (2015).

1987)<sup>5</sup>. Using the conceptual frame proposed by Kuhn to account for the structure of scientific revolutions, Fabio Dei (2008) argued that Cirese managed to validate the new paradigm by making it absorb the previous one. Reduced to the disciplinary field of demology, and thus separated from the political project that inspired it, Gramsci's contribution to anthropology was to be found mainly in his coherent and precise outlining of an object (subaltern cultures) and a perspective: the circulation of cultural events has to be analyzed as an aspect of the relations between classes. Object and perspective which both were used by Cirese to fashion his theory of "dislivelli interni di cultura" (internal cultural gaps).

This particular "foundational" reading of Gramsci, centered on the *Observations* and aimed at circumscribing and defining a scholarly object, in a perspective that Cirese labelled "analitico-parcellare", was soon to confront the complex issues put to demology by the advent of "mass culture", and by the increasing difficulties to think of its object in oppositional terms, as in the substantive interpretation of the hegemonic/subaltern pair. Demology was running the risk to be headed off towards a dead end, condemned to observe the disappearance of its object ("traditional" popular culture) and devoid of the analytical tools that would be necessary to adequately study "mass culture": what different readings of Gramsci could have provided instead (Dei 2007, 2008)<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> An historiography of Italian anthropology during the *Ventennio* is still in large part missing. After the pioneer exploration by Sandra Puccini and Massimo Squillacciotti (1979) not very much has been done, with the exception of Cavazza's works (1987, 1997), till recent times. Alliegro's history of Italian anthropology (2011) is maybe the first to take the *Ventennio* into full account, attempting an historical assessment of the main developments in the "anthropology" of the time, albeit – as underscored by Eugenio Testa (2013, 245) – in such a way that it remains if not «a black-hole, at least a gray zone, out of focus [as] a blurred picture».

<sup>6</sup> It is remarkable that Cirese himself, speaking in Nuoro at a round table organised for the 70th anniversary of Gramsci's death (2007), has proposed an interpretation much in line with Dei's. He reminded of a paper of his about folklore and consumer society presented at the Società Filologica Friulana of Pordenone in 1971, the same year Gramsci's "foundational" reading was to be consecrated by the first publication of his handbook. Cirese argued that he was already aware of the possible faults of his theory, particularly for what concerns the «end of territoriality», that is the exhaustion of popular culture's autonomy, its vanishing as a distinct unity: «I argue, in Pordenone's conference, not against Gramsci, because Gramsci is not absolutely concerned, that has happened

Investigating into the reasons for the long crisis of Italian demology, in his critical review of its history, Fabio Dei recently wondered whether the post-war Gramscian “revolution” credited by anthropology’s handbooks (and specifically that authoritatively proposed by Cirese) had actually happened, and how it eventually took place. In fact, as Pietro Clemente has rightly observed, the particular presence of Gramsci «in the post-war landscape», which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, stems from the mediation of Cirese’s 1959/60 lecture notes *Orientamenti generali nello studio delle tradizioni popolari*, from which *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne* is derived (Clemente 2008, 338). Even the importance attributed to the “re-foundation” of post-war studies, to the folklore debate, and to Ernesto De Martino, who was its main actor, is ultimately a retrospective product of the seventies; that is of a moment in which the anxiety about Italian anthropology’s identity and perspectives was particularly lively and intense. And it is precisely for this reason that its past was rediscovered and subjected to scrutiny and its genealogy outlined<sup>7</sup>.

2. Leaving the retrospective Gramscian moment of the seventies aside, let us return to the time the thematic Togliatti-Platone edition of the *Notebooks* was published, to try to investigate without those filters (but perhaps with others we are not entirely conscious of), about the presence of Gramsci in the anthropological landscape of the time, that is, on the first reception of his thought by Italian scholars that would have been identified, later, as “anthropologists”.

---

this: first, cultural exclusivism has declined because we have built schools [...]; second, peasants, who were attached to their dialect, now ask “please teach me Italian because I have to migrate and I need a linguistic tool to communicate”, that is: there’s no more resistance to forced acculturation; third, which is the main reason: communication delays are over» (in Deias *et al.* 2008, 349).

<sup>7</sup> Introducing the first and still the most accurate reconstruction of post-war folklore debate, Clemente, Meoni and Squillacciotti (1976, 10) sharply noted that «interest for post-war years» and «interest for a stream of ethno-anthropological studies deeply linked to our cultural and political history, of which De Martino was the emergent leader» was connected to the discipline’s «creeping identity crisis» that followed the importation of «French or Anglo-american models». In the early ’70s, such a crisis «induced many [scholars] to come to terms with [Italian] cultural history, with the history of the labour movement, and with marxism». See also Satta (2017).

Between May 30<sup>th</sup> and June 4<sup>th</sup> 1951, the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci organized at the *Teatro delle arti* in Rome a cycle of debates about *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Gramsci 1950), the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 6 volumes of the *Prison Notebooks* original thematic edition. Published in 1950, it contained the *Observations on folklore*, the notes where Gramsci argued, between other things, the need to divert folklore's studies away from the search for what is odd and picturesque, and to think of it «come una cosa che è molto seria e da prendere sul serio» («as something really serious and to be taken seriously»).

The second of those debates, *Gramsci e il folklore*, featured as its speakers Ernesto De Martino, Vittorio Santoli and Paolo Toschi<sup>8</sup>. It was the last speaker, at the time “professore ordinario” (full professor) of *Storia delle tradizioni popolari* at the University of Rome, who wrote for «Lares», the journal he edited, an account of the debate<sup>9</sup>, particularly interesting for what concerns his own speech, which has not been published one way or another, as the other two have<sup>10</sup>.

Toschi – writing of himself in the third person – affirms that «he has vivaciously presented Gramsci as a passionate gatherer and as a sharp analyzer of popular traditions of his own Sardinia, as we can particularly appreciate in some very beautiful letters from the prison»<sup>11</sup>. He

---

<sup>8</sup> To the official speakers – Toschi relates – joined Emilio Sereni (an important PCI congressman) and Alberto Mario Cirese (at that time a young anthropologist and a socialist activist). The other two debates were about the «carattere non nazionale-popolare delle letterature italiane» (speakers: Carlo Levi, Alberto Moravia, Natalino Sapegno) and «Gramsci e il teatro» (speaker: Giulio Trevisani). See Toschi (1951).

<sup>9</sup> At the previously mentioned round table in Nuoro, Cirese added to Toschi's account some of his personal memories, in a dialog with Giulio Angioni, Pietro Clemente and Eugenio Testa (Deias *et al.* 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The paper by Vittorio Santoli, full professor of Germanic philology in Florence was published soon after by «Società», the cultural journal founded by Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and very close to the PCI (Santoli 1951); De Martino's paper was published in an abridged version by «Mondo operaio» (De Martino 1951), the cultural PSI monthly, and then in a wider and slightly different version some time later by «Il calendario del popolo» (De Martino 1952a), again a socialist periodical publication; Stefania Cannarsa has found inside the Archive of Ernesto De Martino a third version which is presumably closer to the text presented at the *Teatro delle arti*, and she published it in «La ricerca folklorica» together with a set of related notes (De Martino, Cannarsa 1992).

<sup>11</sup> It is for me very interesting – for the glimpse it offers on the issue of institutional continuity and discontinuity – to note that, almost sixty years later, in the same «Lares» where Toschi wrote, Pietro Clemente, Toschi's later successor as editor, and Cirese's successor to the chair of

then recognizes Gramsci's «always alerted critical tendency and attitude»; a recognition which actually preludes to a radical dismissal of Gramsci's theoretical contribution to the study of folklore: «the isolation he suffered in his long captivity prevented him [...] from forming a correct opinion about some specific values and issues», taking him to state a critique that resents of the «weak and flawed starting point». He concludes with an invitation to go beyond Gramsci, beyond the «unfortunate terminology» that defines the people (“popolo”) «subaltern classes», making of Gramsci's own writings the target of the very same «critic alert» which remains as the «true lesson» he taught us.

Moreover – Toschi writes as his main critical argument – «Gramsci (as other distinguished scholars) misses what constitutes the unitary element of folklore, the perpetual force of associated groups, which creates, chooses, passes on, innovates the forms of practical and spiritual life which finds necessary, while removes along the way those that are dead and surpassed».

It is not surprising at all that Toschi, who represents the folklore studies tradition radically criticized by Gramsci, claims his scientific competence about the topic to reject Gramsci's criticism as the product of an *amateur* gatherer (albeit “passionate” and “sharp”) of “his own” tradition, who misses the point when it comes to the issues only the professionals (and not even all of them) can understand. He will do this kind of academic boundary patrol again a couple of years later, when – against Ernesto De Martino who was calling for a needed new “methodological foundation” to provide tools to study the cultural life of popular classes – Toschi claims the dignity of Italian demological tradition, which had a centenary history and issued distinguished masters and relevant works (1953)<sup>12</sup>.

---

*Antropologia culturale* at Sapienza University, re-evaluates Gramsci as an acute and passionate observer: «Gramsci for me becomes interesting again – it is not that I don't realize he is anyway – when I read in *Frammenti indigesti*: “when I was a child, I was an indefatigable hunter of lizards and snakes I used to feed a wonderful hawk I tamed”. To me Gramsci reveals himself anew in these details, as if to say: maybe I got the wrong person. It helps me to restart a “fresh” reading of Gramsci» (in Deias *et al.* 2008, 342).

<sup>12</sup> Besides the cultural references issue, which is evident in De Martino's reply to Toschi, where he refers several times to historicism (implicitly opposed to positivism that denotes demological tradition), the controversy about “foundation” (or “re-foundation”) of folklore studies seems al-

It is interesting to highlight the parallelisms and the divergences between Toschi's and Cirese's positions. Some ten years after Toschi, in his lecture notes Cirese (who had been one of Toschi's students at the University of Rome), reads Gramsci's *Observations* in a completely different way. As in a sort of symmetrical inversion game, where Toschi reproached Gramsci for failing to identify an object, for not having understood the «unitary nature of folklore», Cirese praises him for the new and more consistent identification he offers, for his different but more efficient assessment of the «unitary nature of folklore».

Beyond the macroscopic differences, nonetheless, it is possible to discern some convergences. It is as if Toschi's and Cirese's were symmetrical answers to the same questions, produced from a common starting point, and leading, through opposite ways, paradoxically, to a common result: to reaffirm demology's autonomy, reclaiming the heritage of a national tradition of studies. In Toschi's case this happens by rejecting Gramsci's criticisms outside the professional field of demology as the naïve perspective of an *amateur*, in Cirese's by accepting and integrating them – conveniently recast in politically neutral demological terms – inside a new demology that embodies both Gramsci's criticism and the tradition he criticized; by inscribing Gramsci, that is, into the genealogy of Italian anthropological studies.

3. Santoli's speech, albeit interesting, contains only some short final notes on the topics we are analyzing. Much more relevant, for the issues we are addressing here, is Ernesto De Martino's. In his early forties, the first speaker is the younger of the three; he is also, at the time the debate takes place, the only one who is not a university professor:

---

ways to contain a hidden reference – never explicitly expressed – to the very sensible political questions of the relationship with the Fascist regime and of the involvement in its politics, much deeper and more diffused of what post-war accounts pretended (Cavazza 1987). Both Toschi and De Martino had been fascists at some time of their lives. But De Martino could claim to have been a member of Liberation movement during the war and a leader of an anti-Fascist party soon after (see Ciavolella 2016, Charuty 2009, 2010), while Toschi – as university professor already in charge before the war – albeit in a more powerful position, could have some problems with openly claiming continuity.

he had been a high school professor in Bari and in Lucca before and during the war, and from the end of 1947 he is professor at the Liceo Virgilio of Rome<sup>13</sup>. He is already known as the author of *Il mondo magico* (1948a), the book that opened the new Einaudi *Collection of religious, ethnological and psychological studies* edited by Cesare Pavese with the active collaboration of De Martino (later known as “purple collection” for the color of the books’ covers), and his book has raised an animated debate in the Italian intellectual milieu<sup>14</sup>; he has also recently published an essay, *Intorno a una storia del mondo popolare subalterno* (1949), which started on «Società» the “folklore debate”, probably the first moment where *Notebooks* topics entered an anthropological debate (Meoni 1976)<sup>15</sup>.

Unlike Toschi, who focuses on a scholarly reading of Gramsci – both as an observer and gatherer, and as a *naïf* (even flawed) theoretician – De Martino frames the issue of folklore in Gramsci in wider and sharply political terms. Gramsci’s interest for the folklore issue, De

---

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to the Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale dated May 15<sup>th</sup> 1945, cited by Valerio Severino (2004, 21), De Martino so summarizes his professional history as a teacher: «From 1936 to 1942 the undersigned has been in charge at the R. Liceo Scientifico “Scacchi” of Bari. In 1942 he has been transferred to Lucca for having taken part to the liberal-socialist clandestine movement. After asking for a leave of absence, he retired with his family to Cotignola, in the Ravenna province, where he continued his anti-fascist activity. After July 25<sup>th</sup> he has been transferred, during the Severi Ministry, to Roma, at the Liceo classico “Virgilio”. However, because of military and political intervening complications he couldn’t reach his new seat, and he has been temporarily assigned to the Provveditorato of Ravenna, where he still is. Freed Cotignola, and rejoined his family, he had to leave because he was wanted by the SS, the undersigned wishes now to reach his seat in Rome».

<sup>14</sup> About the book’s reception soon after publication see the detailed reconstruction by Valerio Severino (2012). On the Purple collection see the correspondence Pavese-De Martino edited by Pietro Angelini (Pavese, De Martino 1991).

<sup>15</sup> The “folklore debate” has been the object of several reconstructions, most of them concentrated in a short span of time in the seventies. See Cirese (ed.) (1972); Clemente, Meoni, Squillacciotti (eds.) (1976); Rauty (ed.) (1976); Cirese (1976); Pasquinelli (ed.) (1977); Angelini (ed.) (1977); Lombardi Satriani (1974); Feixa Pàmols (2008). On the relationship between anthropology and marxism see the notes by Pasquinelli (1974) and Squillacciotti (1975) about the round table organized by the Istituto Gramsci in Florence in 1974, and the two issues of «Problemi del socialismo», the journal founded by Lelio Basso, which were a point of reference on the topic: *Orientamenti marxisti e studi antropologici italiani. Problemi e dibattiti (I)*, «Problemi del socialismo», 15, 1979, pp. 1-222; «Studi antropologici italiani e rapporti di classe. Dal positivismo al dibattito attuale» (II), «Problemi del socialismo», 16, 1979, pp. 1-186. The issues were later re-published in the collection «Quaderni di Problemi del socialismo», Milano, F. Angeli, 1980, with some additions.

Martino argues, stems from the political concerns of a working class activist, who confronts the «task of the cultural unification of the world, of the creation of a new intellectuals-people unity», which has to be realized not «in abstract cosmopolitan terms, but in the variety of national situations». Knowledge of folklore («an historical knowledge of the material to be transformed») has an important operative value in the perspective of establishing «an inventory of the obstacles to the unification task». It is, in fact, «as an obstacle that Gramsci takes into account folklore, as an obstacle to be removed» (De Martino 1951)<sup>16</sup>.

De Martino's reading of Gramsci's *Observations* is very one-sided. It is not unfounded: it is true that Gramsci stresses the fragmentary and inconsistent nature of folklore, or that he argues the necessity to “substitute” folklore's conservative and archaic knowledge with others «considered superior». But it is also a very partial reading, and it is a very troubling one for De Martino himself as a scholar. In the previous years, De Martino wrote in several occasions about the “popular culture” issue, arguing the need to conceive the relationship with intellectuals' high culture (“alta cultura”) as a two way exchange, and not only as a pedagogic effort to raise the people to the *élite's* cultural level.

In a review of a Raffaele Pettazzoni's book, published in the cultural page of the socialist newspaper «Avanti!» in July 1948, he wrote – for instance – that «“popular culture” doesn't mean only to bring popular classes to culture, but also to let the interests, needs, and experiences of the world that (to use Levi's favored image) “lives beyond Eboli” penetrate culture in a controlled way, accepting them in the light of explanation» (De Martino 1948b). And one year later, in the essay *Intorno alla storia del mondo popolare subalterno* (1949), repeated the concept by proposing the «barbarization of culture» thesis, which was one of

---

<sup>16</sup> In the notes published by Cannarsa (De Martino, Cannarsa 1992) the assessment attributed to Gramsci about folklore looks less definitive, more nuanced, while it looks very similar in the other published text (1952a) where De Martino affirms that for Gramsci «traditional cultural life» represents «an obstacle to remove», whose «study has *the only value* of facilitating transformative action» (my emphasis).

the major reasons for «Società» editorial board *caveat* which preceded the essay in the journal pages<sup>17</sup>.

It is for this reason that De Martino writes that Gramsci's thought about folklore needs to be «svolto e integrato» («amended and complemented»); he thinks that it is useful «in so far as the cultural life of popular masses is backwardness, superstition, the legacy of outdated ideologies», but it is insufficient to account for folklore in its overall complexity. De Martino asks:

is it folklore just this? Cultural traditional life of popular masses is just backwardness, superstition, et cetera, or has it some products still acceptable, mostly in the sphere of artistic and literary expressions? Is folklore just fall, debasement of *élite* products, or is it that even accepting and readapting those products shows sometimes an active intervention, an elaboration skill rich of human meanings? Besides the fall, from high culture to the people, is it not discernible also an inverse process, that is, an ascending process? And finally: beyond cultural traditional life of popular masses, beyond folklore in the strict sens of the term, is it not also discernible a cultural life that breaks more or less definitely with tradition, and that resonates as the “resounding voice of the present”, as the reflection and expression of new experiences under way?

De Martino's concern about cultural circulation “from below” is at the roots of his concept of “folklore progressivo” (progressive folklore) by which he tries to offer a temporary answer to the dilemma about the cultural value of folklore. If not all folklore is fall of degraded materials from dominant classes, archaism and backwardness; if a part of it expresses subaltern classes' protest, their will to be historical subjects, their vision of the world and of society, then it is necessary to discern. This last part of folklore, which contributes to the new protagonism of subaltern classes put in motion by the national Liberation war against nazi-fascism, is to accepted and promoted, as the so-

---

<sup>17</sup> As is widely known, the first essay submitted by De Martino to «Società» has been published with a preceding *caveat*: «Even if we cannot share some of the theses and interpretations here argued by Ernesto De Martino (which we intend to discuss and that we invite to discuss) we believe this essay to be of great interest for our readers, because it addresses one of the most pressing problems that Marxist culture has to deal with». On the matter see the retrospective reflections by Cesare Luporini (1993).

viet folklore scholars do<sup>18</sup>. De Martino tried to show that this kind of study, even if not explicitly imagined by Gramsci (who died as a prisoner long before the Liberation), is not only compatible with his views, but also necessary to realize his political program of an unification between people and intellectuals; but he ultimately failed to convince the guardians of communist orthodoxy.

If “progressive folklore” represents for De Martino a very important strategic invention, it is not only this kind of folklore he cares of. Just two months after the paper where he asked his rhetoric questions about folklore, De Martino (1952b) publishes in the same *Calendario del popolo* a new paper where, after restating that «folklore is not just degraded culture, and popular cultural life is not just the voice of the past, heritage of ancient eras, living prehistory», he introduces a new argument:

Even in the more servile expressions of culture, as praying in an unknown language, a germ of liberty and a rescue attempt sometimes leaven. Even more can be said of less servile cultural expressions, those that are more authentically popular. In rites and customs that mark a peasant life from cradle to grave, in the cycle of calendar feasts, resounds at times the mighty voice of human emotions linked to the real life conditions of the peasant world. From traditional “maggiolate” to the labor day of May 1st, the ideal bow of popular cultural life deploys itself as a movement, as a search for cultural unity, as a humanism in his way.

What is at stake here is not discerning («separating dead from alive», as Mario Alicata will write [1954] a couple of years later<sup>19</sup>), nor it is isolating a “progressive folklore” (to be assimilated) from a field full of archaisms and backward costumes to be fought and removed; what De Martino praises is to recognize *in folklore as a whole*, even in its more “traditional” expressions, the forms of subaltern classes’ subjectivity. It is a perspective very far from the position De Martino, probably following official PCI interpretations, attributed to Gramsci in the previ-

---

<sup>18</sup> On the topic of Liberation fight’s relevance for De Martino’s political and intellectual training see the very well documented essay by Riccardo Ciavolella (2016).

<sup>19</sup> A prominent PCI politician, Alicata was soon to become, in 1955, the head of the Party’s Cultural Commission.

ous paper. Here folklore represents a value in itself, and its knowledge is not *only* appreciable as something that prepares «transformative action»<sup>20</sup>.

De Martino is at this time already committed to the organization of his first “Lucania expedition”, on the traces of Carlo Levi, for his projected study about «the anguish of history» (Gallini 1996)<sup>21</sup>. The “religious history” project he carries on for the rest of the fifties, till his last monographic work, *La terra del rimorso* (1961), is in fact devoted to the study of the more traditional aspects of popular culture: «bassa magia cerimoniale» (low ceremonial magic), ritual funerary weeping, tarantism.

Explicit references to Gramsci thin out in De Martino’s writings, to disappear almost completely in the second half of the fifties (Satta 2016)<sup>22</sup>. It doesn’t necessarily mean Gramsci has been forgotten. In the introduction to *La terra del rimorso*, for instance, Gramsci is credited by De Martino to be one of the main influences for his long term “religious history of the South” research project, because he has pointed to the relevance of popular catholicism and folklore as sociological dimensions necessary for an historical understanding of Italian catholicism<sup>23</sup>. Here the role of Gramsci, by the way, has changed: it is not that of somebody who has defined and legitimized an object, folklore or popular culture, endowed with autonomy. To the contrary, what De Martino takes from Gramsci seems to be skepticism about folklore as an autonomous object: the idea of the impossibility to conceive it out-

---

<sup>20</sup> Soon after WW II, De Martino had been a local leader of PSI in Apulia, and a member of the political group led by Lelio Basso. After the resignation of the latter from the party’s leadership, he gradually came closer to the PCI. He asked to be admitted in 1950, but – as he had been a leader of a different party – obtained admission just three years later, in 1953. From 1957 he didn’t renew. See Severino (2003).

<sup>21</sup> De Martino (1996, 11). The text opens the collection of documents related to the “ethnological expedition in Lucania” of September-October 1952. See also Satta (2015).

<sup>22</sup> For two different readings of Gramsci’s presence in De Martino’s late writings see Signorelli (2015) and Pizza (2016).

<sup>23</sup> «It is necessary to wait for Gramsci to find suggestions and hints, if not for a religious history of the South as a new dimension of the southern question, at least for an assessment of catholicism that would take into account its sociological dimension, and that would include into its documents – as far as Italian society is concerned – popular catholicism and folklore».

side the relationships of hegemony and domination that not only cross every aspect of folklore, but are constitutive of it. This point is explicitly made by De Martino in several excerpts of his “trilogia meridionalista” (the three monographic works related to his “religious history of the South” project: 1958, 1959, 1961), and in other texts published along the same time span<sup>24</sup>. In a polemic exchange with the historian Giuseppe Giarrizzo, De Martino (1954) argues that «a history of European ritual funerary weeping is certainly impossible if we take that institute in its isolation, or if we limit to connect it with other more or less archaic institutes, ignoring the religious civilization that has fought it and rejected it»<sup>25</sup>. Arriving finally, in *La terra del rimorso*, to the complete denial of object’s autonomy, to its substantial dissolution: «If we ignore that dynamic, if we leave aside the circuit which links the high and the low of cultural life, we don’t get (as we can imagine) “tarantism in itself”, but an unthinkable nothing that only the abstracting and isolating fiction of intellect can persist to believe to be something». Tarantism doesn’t exist outside the hegemonic processes that historically shape it.

4. Gradually disappeared from Ernesto De Martino’s texts by the end of the fifties, Gramsci reappears in the seventies in a new context, that of the debate about post-war Marxism and the historical peculiarities of Italian anthropology; debate which preludes to its redefinition and new institutionalization as a single academic file.

As the mythic fifties of the folklore debate were getting farther away, and their historiographic reprise of the seventies was fading away, post-war landscape was getting more and more blurred, to the point that – in a auto-ironic reflection about the past, memory and university lecturing – Clara Gallini was to bitterly note that – at the be-

---

<sup>24</sup> For a critical assessment of the legacies of De Martino’s “religious history of the South” project into Italian ethnographic works in the South, see Faeta (2005).

<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to the second part of *Sud e magia* (1959), De Martino argues that it is necessary to «surpass the totally artificial isolation of data concerning “lucan magic”», derived from «ethnographic abstraction», re-integrating the data «into the concrete and into his dynamic».

ginning of the '80s – Antonio Gramsci had become just a name, one of the many «to memorize, as those of Pettazzoni and De Martino, all brothers, all together in a foggy past» (1983, 28).

The return of Gramsci into contemporary Italian anthropological landscape follows other routes, which pass away from those followed in the aftermath of WWII<sup>26</sup>. Paradoxically, they come mostly from afar, inverting the “autarkic tendencies” once denounced by Remotti, and configuring perhaps the opposite risk of the provincial import of cultural trends from the contemporary hegemonic centers of cultural production. Certainly, the important social theorist who contributed to an analysis of the relationship between politics and culture, is different from the character we found in our handbooks. Gramsci’s thought, freed from the ideological struggle that revolved around it and that contributed to cage it inside too close readings (by those Carlo Levi ironically defined, paraphrasing a famous Gramscian expression, «i nipotini di Gramsci»), is read in many and new different ways (often through the post-structuralist lenses of *Cultural Studies*, as Riccardo Ciavolella has shown).

Maybe the limited exploration undertaken in these pages is not enough to cast a new light about Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* reception by folklorists and anthropologists at the beginning of the fifties, at the time they were first published. But certainly, it makes the glorious “Gramscian revolution” credited by the handbooks appear as something more complex and controversial, if not a retrospective myth of the seventies. It is anyway interesting to record the different “presences” of Gramsci in that cultural landscape, the interpretations they support, the different actors and times of their elaboration, the political positioning that motivate them, the continuities and discontinuities they show in the history of Italian anthropological studies.

---

<sup>26</sup> For a reflection about Gramsci’s return from afar, see Palumbo (2008).

*Bibliography*

Alicata M. 1954, *Il meridionalismo non si può fermare ad Eboli*, «Cronache meridionali», 1, n. 9, pp. 585-603.

Alliegro E. V. 2011, *Antropologia italiana. Storia e storiografia 1869-1975*, Firenze, Seid.

Angelini P. (ed.) 1977, *Dibattito sulla cultura delle classi subalterne: 1949-1950*, Roma, Savelli.

Angioni G. 1972, *Alcuni aspetti della ricerca demologica in Italia nell'ultimo decennio*, in A. M. Cirese, *Folklore e antropologia tra storicismo e marxismo*, Palermo, Palumbo, pp. 171-195.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1994, *Une démo-ethno-anthropologie? Des pères fondateurs aux problèmes actuels*, «Ethnologie française», 24, n. 3, *ITALIA. Regards d'anthropologues*, pp. 475-483.

Apolito P. 1994, *La communauté des ethno-anthropologues italiens: Situation et perspectives*, «Ethnologie française», 24, n. 3, *ITALIA. Regards d'anthropologues*, pp. 455-474.

Boninelli G. M. 2007, *Frammenti indigesti. Temi folclorici negli scritti di Antonio Gramsci*, Roma, Carocci.

Borofsky R. (ed.) 2000, *L'antropologia culturale oggi*, Roma, Meltemi.

Bronzini G. B. 1980, *Cultura popolare. Dialettica e contestualità*, Bari, Dedalo.

Cavazza S. 1987, *La folkloristica italiana e il fascismo. Il Comitato Nazionale per le Arti Popolari*, «La Ricerca Folklorica», n. 15, pp. 109-122.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1997, *Piccole patrie. Feste popolari tra regione e nazione durante il fascismo*, Bologna, il Mulino.

Charuty G. 2009, *Ernesto De Martino: les vies antérieures d'un anthropologue*, Marseille, Parenthèses/MMSH.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2010, *Le moment néoréaliste de l'anthropologie démartinienne*, «L'Homme», n. 195-196, pp. 247-281.

Cirese A. M. 1971, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, Palermo, Palumbo.

\_\_\_\_\_ (ed.) 1972, *Folklore e antropologia tra storicismo e marxismo*, Palermo, Palumbo.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1976, *Intellettuali, folklore, istinto di classe*, Torino, Einaudi.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1985, *Sulla storiografia demo-etno-antropologica italiana*, in P. Clemente *et al.*, *L'antropologia italiana. Un secolo di storia*, Bari, Laterza, pp. IX-XVI.

Clemente P., Meoni M. L., Squillacioti M. (eds.) 1976, *Il dibattito sul folklore in Italia*, Milano, Edizioni di cultura popolare.

Clemente P. *et al.* 1985, *L'antropologia italiana. Un secolo di storia*, Bari, Laterza.

Dei F. 2007, *Beethoven e le mondine*, Roma, Meltemi.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2008, *Un museo di frammenti. Ripensare la rivoluzione gramsciana negli studi folklorici*, «Lares», 74, n. 2, pp. 443-464.

Deias A., Boninelli G. M., Testa E. (eds.) 2008, *Gramsci ritrovato. Tra cultural studies e antropologia*, «Lares», 74, n. 2.

De Martino E. 1948a, *Il mondo magico*, Torino, Einaudi.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1948b, *Recensione a "Miti e leggende" di Raffaele Pettazzoni*, «Avanti!», 52, n. 157, 4 luglio, p. 3.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1949, *Intorno a una storia del mondo popolare subalterno*, «Società», 5, n. 3, pp. 411-435.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1951, *Gramsci e il folklore nella cultura italiana*, «Mondo operaio», 3, n. 133, p. 12.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1952a, *Gramsci e il folklore*, «Il calendario del popolo», 8, aprile, p. 1109.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1952b, *Il latino della Chiesa nelle storpiature popolari*, «Il calendario del popolo», 8, giugno, p. 1156.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1953, *Mondo popolare e cultura nazionale*, «La lapa», 1, n. 1, p. 3.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1954, *Storia e folklore*, «Società», 10, n. 5, pp. 940-944.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1958, *Morte e pianto rituale*, Torino, Einaudi.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1959, *Sud e magia*, Milano, Feltrinelli.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1961, *La terra del rimorso*, Milano, Il Saggiatore.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1995, *Note di campo*, ed. by C. Gallini, Lecce, Argo.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1996, *L'opera a cui lavoro*, ed. by C. Gallini, Lecce, Argo.

De Martino E., Cannarsa S. 1992, *Due inediti su Gramsci: "Postille a Gramsci" e "Gramsci e il Folklore"*, «La Ricerca Folklorica», n. 25, pp. 73-79.

Ciavolella R. 2016, *L'intellettuale e il popolo: dalla crisi morale al riscatto socialista. Ernesto De Martino in Romagna durante la guerra (1943-1945)*, «nostos», Vol. 1, n. 1, pp. 151-330.

Faeta F. 2005, *Questioni italiane: demologia, antropologia, critica culturale*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.

Fanelli A. 2015, *Il canto sociale come "folklore contemporaneo" tra demologia, operaismo e storia sociale*, «Lares», 81, n. 2-3, pp. 291-317.

Federico M., Testa E. 1996, *La présence des études de folklore, d'ethnologie et d'anthropologie dans l'enseignement universitaire italien: éléments pour une histoire*, «Acta Ethnographica Hungarica», 40, n. 3-4, *Le folklore: ses rapports à l'ethnologie européenne et à l'histoire dans l'enseignement supérieur en Europe*, pp. 403-408.

Feixa Pàmpol C. 2008, *Más allá de Éboli: Gramsci, De Martino y el debate sobre la cultura subalterna en Italia*, in E. De Martino, *El folklore progresivo y otros ensayos*, Barcelona UAB, pp. 13-66.

Gallini C. 1983, *Dimenticare Fanon*, «La Ricerca Folklorica», n. 7, *Cultura popolare e cultura di massa*, pp. 27-34.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1995, *La ricerca, la scrittura*, in E. De Martino, *Note di campo*, ed. by C. Gallini, Lecce, Argo, pp. 9-74.

Lombardi Satriani L. M. 1974, *Antropologia culturale e analisi della cultura subalterna*, Firenze, Guaraldi.

Luporini C. 1993, *Da "Società" alla polemica sullo storicismo*, «Critica marxista», n. 6, pp. 5-35.

Meoni M. L. 1976, *Sul "mondo popolare subalterno"*, in P. Clemente, M. L. Meoni, M. Squillacciotti (eds), *Il dibattito sul folklore in Italia*, Milano, Edizioni di cultura popolare, pp. 39-62.

Mirizzi F. 2015, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne e le eredità degli studi demologici otto e novecenteschi*, «Lares», 81, n. 2-3, pp. 263-289.

Palumbo B. 2008, *Ragtime e gramscianesimo di ritorno*, in A. Deias, G. Boninelli, E. Testa (eds), *Gramsci ritrovato. Tra cultural studies e antropologia*, «Lares», 74, n. 2, pp. 303-309.

Parisi D. 1980, *Ancora su antropologia, culturologia e marxismo*, «Rassegna italiana di sociologia», 21, n. 3, pp. 471-476.

Pasquinelli C. 1974, *L'antropologia culturale e il marxismo*, «Rinascita», 31, pp. 18-19.

\_\_\_\_\_ (ed.) 1977, *Antropologia culturale e questione meridionale: Ernesto De Martino e il dibattito sul mondo popolare subalterno negli anni 1948-1955*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia.

Pavese C., De Martino E. 1991, *La collana viola. Lettere 1945-1950*, ed. by P. Angelini, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.

Pizza G. 2016, *Il tarantismo oggi: antropologia, politica, cultura*, Roma, Carocci.

Puccini S., Squillacciotti M. 1979, *Per una prima ricostruzione critico-bibliografica degli studi demo-etno-antropologici italiani nel periodo tra le due guerre*, «Problemi del socialismo», 22, n. 16, pp. 67-93.

Puccini S. 1991, *L'uomo e gli uomini. Scritti di antropologi italiani dell'ottocento*, Roma, C.I.S.U.

Rauty R. (ed.) 1976, *Cultura popolare e marxismo*, Roma, Editori Riuniti.

Remotti F. 1978, *Tendenze autarchiche nell'antropologia culturale italiana*, «Rassegna italiana di sociologia», 19, n. 2, pp. 183-226.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1985, *Quale senso per l'antropologia culturale*, «Rassegna italiana di sociologia», 26, n. 2, pp. 261-306.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1986, *Antenati e antagonisti: consensi e dissensi in antropologia culturale*, Bologna, il Mulino.

Santoli V. 1951, *Tre osservazioni su Gramsci e il folklore*, «Società», 7, pp. 389-397.

Satta G. 2015, «*Fra una raffica e l'altra*». *Il regno della miseria e la vita culturale degli oppressi*, «Aut Aut», n. 366, pp. 185-196.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2016, *Etnografia e politica*, «nostos», Vol 1, n. 1, 2016, pp. 377-396.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2017, *La antropología italiana y el descubrimiento de la cultura de los campesinos meridionales*, in S. Misiani, C. Gómez Benito (eds.), *Construyendo la nación: reforma agraria y modernización rural en la Italia del siglo XX*, Zaragoza, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, pp. 305-333.

Severino V. 2003, *Ernesto de Martino nel Pci degli anni Cinquanta, tra religione e politica culturale*, «Studi storici», 44, n. 2, pp. 527-553.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2004, *Italia religiosa. Percorsi nella vita di Ernesto de Martino*, Tesi di dottorato in Storia religiosa, Università di Roma La Sapienza.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2012, *Cronaca della prima ricezione de "Il mondo magico" (Italia, 1948-1955)*, «Quaderni di "Storia, antropologia e scienze del linguaggio" e "Territori e culture"», n. 14, pp. 167-204.

Signorelli A. 1980, *Antropologia, culturologia, marxismo*, «Rassegna italiana di sociologia», 21, n. 1, pp. 97-116.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2015, *Ernesto De Martino: teoria antropologica e metodologia della ricerca*, Roma, L'asino d'oro.

Squillacciotti M. 1975, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, «Etnologia - Antropologia Culturale», 2, pp. 78-85.

Tentori T. 1984, *Sull'antropologia culturale e le scienze antropologiche*, «Rassegna italiana di sociologia», 25, n. 4, pp. 607-661.

Testa E. 2013, *Centouno, e più di mille. Storia e storiografia dell'antropologia italiana*, «L'Uomo», n. 1-2, pp. 239-251.

Toschi P. 1951, *Dibattito su Gramsci e il Folklore*, «Lares», 18, pp. 153-154.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1953, *Sugli studi di folklore in Italia*, «La lapa», 1, n. 2, pp. 23-24.

Tullio Altan C. 1971, *Manuale di antropologia culturale: storia e metodo*, Milano, Bompiani.