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By Ernesto de Martino.
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Magic: A Theory from the South is a new translation of one of the most important books of Ernesto de Martino, originally published in Italian in 1959 (entitled *Sud e magia*). This translation is an important contribution to increasing the international visibility of this prominent historian of religions and ethnologist, whose work had been mainly restricted to the Italian language. The translation allows the English-speaking scholarly world to become acquainted with a classic relatively unknown outside of Italy until now.

Based on the author's ethnographic investigations in rural Southern Italy (following in some way the frequent opposition between a Northern "modern" Italy and a Southern "traditional" one) between 1950 and 1957, this book is divided in two parts. The first one is dedicated to specific practices (such as binding, treatment of illness, and avoidance of storms, among others) from a specific region (Lucania, today called Basilicata) not far from Naples, which de Martino defines as "magic." The second part discusses the relationships of the latter with Catholicism and with what the author calls "High Culture".

In the first section, the book states that "[t]he fundamental theme of low ceremonial magic in Lucania is binding (in dialect: *fascinatura* or *affascino*)" (3). In the very first pages of his book, de Martino defines magic

as “a psychic condition of impediment or inhibition, and at the same time a sense of domination, a being acted upon by a force” (*ibid.*).

This definition mirrors the frequent allusions to psychology that appear throughout this book. Notions such as repression or an oneiric state are quite present in the argumentations of de Martino: “Hostile drives that are repressed during waking hours are partially or symbolically acted upon during the night in an oneiric event” (65). In various chapters (in particular those more dedicated to ethnographic descriptions) the author also appeals, for example, to “the demand for psychological protection” (xii) or to “unclear psychosomatic mechanisms” (64).

This relationship between magic and the need for “psychological protection” indeed seems to complement another concern of the author; in different parts of the book, de Martino highlights the social and material conditions of the people he finds during his fieldwork. Allusions to hunger, illness (93), and “terrible health and hygiene conditions” (71) are not difficult to find. He typically argues that “psychosomatic mechanisms” emerge from certain “terrible” conditions, such as the fact that “several people sleep in the same room and sometimes in the same bed” (65).

Nevertheless, he is cautious enough to realise that “this relationship between the existential regime [marked by “traumas, checks, frustrations”] and magic remains generic and obvious” (85). According to the author, “psychological meaning sheds light on a much more serious negativity… the risk that the individual presence itself gets lost as a center for decision and choice” (86-87).

In any case, the protective aspect of magic (which helps deal with uncertainty) is based on a double equation, entirely unexotic in anthropology: “the myth as an effectual *exemplum* of happening and ritual as repetition of the myth” (101).

The same prudence which appears in the case of the “material conditions” is also found in de Martino’s use of evolutionists concepts such as “relic” (xv) and “survival” (xvi). However, his arguments are indeed much less those of an evolutionist than of a functionalist: “The ‘survivals’ of Lucanian magic… do in fact ‘live’ in some fashion and absolve, in their societies, a function of their own” (120). De Martino is actually openly critical of the common romantic nostalgia in Anthropology when it comes to folklore: “From a historiographic point of view religious-folkloric material remains a sort of no man’s land, where collectors of folk traditions can continue to exert themselves industriously and those who are nostalgic for lost paradises can find something upon to latch their romantic impulses” (xv).

The second part of the book explores a dualism that de Martino highlights in the preface: “The choice between ‘magic’ and ‘rationality’ is one of the great themes that gave rise to modern civilization” (xi). What interests him about this debate is the “underlying antimagic polemic that runs through the entire course of Western civilization” (xi). What Lucania seems to offer for him is precisely an opportunity to study and criticise this dualism through what he considers “the particular magical tone of Southern Catholicism” (xiv). Far from the “romantic impulses” mentioned above, de Martino explicitly states that “magical behaviors do not at all document another logic, but only the adaptation of man’s technical coherence to that particular end that is the protection of the individual presence from the risk of losing itself” (93).

What interests de Martino are the “links, passages, syncretisms, and compromises that connect extracanonical low magic with the modes of popular devotion and the liturgy’s own official forms” (xii). Rather than radical opposition, he is interested in subtle continuities and connections. Again, his criticism of those whom we would nowadays accuse of exoticism

continues: “All of these writers more or less perceived that they were dealing with a local custom, though they did not successfully identify its origin and character, and they ended up connecting it to its ‘pagan’ antecedents” (174).

To the contrary, this book relies on “ethnographic analysis” in order to articulate magic “in connections and intermediate formations that involve folk Catholicism… even reaching the heart of the Catholic cult itself” (185). Thus de Martino does not pit magic against religion, but rather connects the so-called superstition to a social reality that is fully contemporary and historical.

In particular, de Martino focuses in the so-called *jettatura*, which he defines as “a form of jinx borne by the glance” (xiii). *Jettatura* is not pagan, is not a relic of the past. It is instead an ideology produced by a combination of “the ancient magical binding with Enlightenment rationalism” (175) that took place around the end of the eighteenth century. This Neapolitan intermediate formation lies, according to de Martino, somewhere in between “cultured scepticism and plebeian credulousness” (*ibid.*).

Finally, although some of his fieldwork stays would today be considered rather short—he himself mentions, for instance, a “twelve-day field stay” (55)—the organization of his ethnography on Lucanian magic (considered a trailblazer when published) leaves space for mystery. This is precisely the case in his references of a *Masciaro* called *zio* Giuseppe, a rather self-isolated man reputed for curing certain illnesses. At one point, De Martino highlights his “pronounced eroticism”: *Zio* Giuseppe “proposes to the peasant women to have themselves ‘X-rayed,’ which consists in reflecting their most private parts in a mirror” (71).

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