

# Ernesto De Martino: The Reform of Ethnological Studies

Aurelia Săbiescu

*Ph.D. Student, University of Craiova, Craiova, Romania, aura79sabee@yahoo.com*

**ABSTRACT:** De Martino's work and his way of thinking gather together the innovative force of a scholar who has managed, without any doubt, to bring about a revolution in the ways of ethnological and anthropological research. Initially disputed, De Martino was later rediscovered due to some favorable trends of cultural interest. He is, therefore, responsible for creating a complex mechanism of thorough study, analysis, understanding and valorification of the traditional social frameworks which are, after all, the origins of European culture. In fact, the capacity of traditional societies to stand up to the ordinary, to confront the present and the ways they have secured their constant presence throughout generations isn't only through the systematic and sometimes agonizing effort of subsisting, but also due to the existence of those cultural frameworks which represent the means of survival when it comes to mentalities, social rapports and psychological representations. In De Martino's understanding of the myth, which he designates as the symbolic substance of cultural rite and an instrument used for transcending the limit: „namely, a critical moment for the existence on which weighs the extreme risk of the collapse of the ethos of transcendence and, therefore, that of presence”, and will „also reveal the horizon that recovers this risk, a conversion of the annihilation of presence and its reintegration into simply being”, such we may understand how it actually presents a double transcendence where the rite alters the cultural norm, expressing a „history of origins” related to the moment of crisis.

**KEYWORDS:** revaluation, continuity, research, motives, philosophy

## Introduction

In De Martino's terms, “each moment from the day to day life, from birth and until death and in every civilization, is a critical moment from an abstract point of view”. Therefore, the cultural norm encompasses the entire human existence, during which the critical moments can be distinguished, so called “fundamental elements” that De Martino relates to the entire moment of becoming: „there is the possibility of a radical crisis, and this fatal existential misery can manifest itself by dragging us into nothingness even before physical death reaches us, and that misery is a much greater catastrophe than death”.

Being, as shown, substantially related to the very structure of being, the myth can be accessed via the mythical narrative. There can be found multiple aspects pertaining to human life and, therefore, of nature, aspects that most often remain hidden from a normal glance. De Martino remarks this concept's significance, especially in terms of the most important function that the myth brings around: a link between divinity and man as a constitutive factor of a community's ethos. As such, a community is the place where traditions and rituals develop in a way that can tell us a lot about the structure of the human unconscious. Moreover, the myth becomes an important factor in the discovery of human aspirations in various fields such as art, literature, music, rituals. This furthermore proves why De Martino recognizes its universality, even in light of its multiple forms and, later on, metamorphoses. The myth presents both the cultural rituals and the tools used for overcoming existential and natural limits, especially when used with the precise function of breaking down cultural norms in history.

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De Martino wishes to secure a certainty of permanence in his works, and therefore concludes: “The study aims to reconsider, through a more mature perspective, the *Il mondo magico* theme

(the risk of non-existence, from a cultural aspect or otherwise), a *Morte e pianto ritualico nel mondo antico* themes (the crisis of mourning pertaining to the ancient world or to the Christian civilization), the ethnographic research in Southern Italy (the unexpected return of the painful past in *Il mondo del rimorso* and the overcoming of limits with which Christ went beyond Eboli in *Sud e magia*)”.

Besides the aforementioned, some motives from *Naturalismo e storicismo in etnologia* can also be identified within this work, especially regarding the issue of an ethnology that analyzes Western civilization and which, therefore, is guided by the fundamental criterion of critical ethnocentrism (De Martino 2002, 5-6).

He re-evaluates and reinterprets his own work, being truly fastidious about it: not only a re-examination of his studies, *La fine del mondo* proves to be an assessment rising to the level of his previous ones. Said work had given him an analysis also found in other works such as *Apocalissi culturali e apocalissi psicopatologiche* (De Martino 1964, 105-141).

Therefore, de Martino is verifying his research to see its contribution in his actual project. He's interested in the theme of the wandering self and the world's domesticity from *Il mondo magico* (De Martino 1948) translated into reality from potential risk. Another theme: that of the painfulness of passing time and a past returned in an encoded form can be discovered by re-examining “The land of remorse” (De Martino 1961), then, by an eloquent reading of *Sud e Magia* (De Martino 1959), where the city Eboli separates two different realities (being the place where the Occidental culture ends and another one begins, one that left many unanswered questions, these empty spaces being filled by Magism). Concerning the forming of Europe's identity, the South of Italy contributed mildly to the cultural processes that took place over the years. So, from de Martino's point of view, the distancing of the south from the Occident's history has had the effect of reducing the Occidental civilisation's ways of parting, that which have their place on the bourgeoisie's apocalypse. Having a dialogue with himself, de Martino is reappraising his work by looking into the past and finding an internal cohesion of substance coming from his intellectual path, the result of a cognitive research. Just like in the process of assembling a puzzle, every examined essay has its own contribution, *La fine del mondo* being remade piece by piece. Stains of the end appear all over, either under the threat of “no compensation” that leads to the finishing point of cultural order, either a risk that, thanks to the mythic and ritualic strategies, can be re-established. The text *Morte e pianto ritualico* (De Martino 1958) focuses on the theme of the crisis of mourning that contains the biggest risk of “dying with the one who has already died”.

It is to be observed the complexity of the methodological and technical apparatus used as a comparison criterion between the hours of the past and the unfinished project, *La fine del mondo*, clearly noting the distance that separates them. The meaning of his works is re-identified through this more detailed, mature research, even if his past essays had not dealt with the issue of the apocalypse. Thus, de Martino wishes to innovate and advance in the field while researching the apocalypse and retrospectively examining his works.

In order to establish a balance, to place the discontinuity in continuity, he foresaw the importance of his research process, namely an awareness of the fact that a change was needed in the ways he perceived the self, or, at least, in his portrayal of the self.

*Naturalismo e storicismo in etnologia* (De Martino 1941) represents the work where de Martino recognizes the core of epistemological reflection, which makes of ethnology an instrument through which he understands the other and re-understands himself in relation to such otherness. He chooses, as the object of comparative analysis, the apocalyptic dimension in all its forms, or the “acute feeling of the end”.

By questioning the internal coherence of his work, de Martino seems to have anticipated what discussions might have taken place around his unfinished work, thus wishing to make a “contribution to the critique of his own work”. The unity of his thinking process was questioned after the publication of *La fine del mondo* in 1977. Therefore, according to Lanternari, de

Martino's posthumous work represents a not exactly positive turning point, even if it is to be appreciated that it develops a wider and deeper historical-cultural comparativism. Vitorio Lanternari's views are expressed in the 1978 essay, *History and Ontology. On "The End of the World"* (Lanternari 1978, 187-200). A plan to find a way to confront the critical nodes of contemporary bourgeois society was in the making, all with the help of ethnographic humanism. De Martino's project is not entirely convincing, so he closes up onto his most successful work, *The Great Triad on Southern Italy*: "Morte e pianto italico", "Sud e magia" and "La terra del rimorso". Lanternari finds a moment of substantial discontinuity in *La fine del mondo*. As such, the work represents an opportunity to reconsider the theoretical, excessively psychological formulations of *Il mondo magico*. He notices another side of de Martino's here, a duller one at that, yet acknowledges certain merits. He does not stop at identifying the formulative break from other research projects of the 50s and 60s and describes the structure of *La fine del mondo* as not convincing enough.

De Martino's dialogue with the most important representatives of contemporary culture is very suggestive, but he does not acknowledge the errors of his "constitutive ambiguity". Lanternari observes the work's imperfect internal coherence generated by an epistemological incongruity identifies a clear limit of the work in it and makes him refer to a "conscious irrationalism". These aspects would have forced absolute historicism to almost annul it in an impossible synthesis with the universalizing ontologism or existentialist psychologism that thematizes the constitutive precariousness of the human presence, all in a precarious balance between the risk of extinction and the possibility of reaffirmation.

Such an effort or attempt at synthesis has a negative future effect, consisting in a methodological distortion coming from a not exactly rigorous distinction of the "Erleben" and "Verstehen" plans, namely between the contents of the research phenomenon and the research principles and methodology, according to Lanternari. Over time, such valuable judgments have conditioned the approach to de Martino's philosophy and works, obstructing the re-edition of the work *La fine del mondo*, as being expressed by the greatest critics.

However, the posthumous work arouses more and more the interest of the public, more exactly researchers, students, the author being the subject of an important research that resized his image and allowed the understanding of his thinking and work.

The publication of special theoretical texts in *Storia e metastoria*, Gennaro Sasso's book *Ernesto de Martino between religion and philosophy*, the republishing of the volume *Furore simbolo valore*, as well as the 1995 conference in Rome and Naples entitled "Ernesto de Martino in European culture" constitute other very meaningful moments. Worth to be mentioned is the republishing of the work *La fine del mondo*, which arouses our curiosity to know the philosophy of the great researcher. Reread 25 years after its publication, the work relates it to all the artistic, literary, philosophical currents of twentieth-century Europe, as Marcello Massenzio notes in the introduction to the chapter written with the help of Clara Gallini.

The author is reflecting upon the meaning which he follows to attribute to the rapport between psychology, the history of religions and psychopathology. In Massenzio's analysis there are two important aspects to be noticed: the identification of a substantial continuity of his entire creation and also, the thematization of conceptual coherency in "La fine del mondo". He notices an unprecedented conceptual cohesion in most artworks, excepting the ones left unfinished. The variety of artworks represent important pieces of a rigorously assembled picture which compose the entirety of his writings, and by no means loose fragments, the premise being represented by the new implementing of the comparative method and the final aim being that of identification. This allows the author to notice the diverse relationships between materials that originate from not at all heterogeneous mediums, restructuring them in a speech with an engrossing subject and a quite wide variety. The method used by the researcher, as stated by Massenzio, is *La fine del mondo's* factor of unity, an element which attributes continuity to this

demartinian intellectual alignment, but also discontinuity. This “comparative method” has also piqued the interest of Raffaele Pettazzoni, historical comparativism becoming, in his vision, the nucleus of self-founded historical and religious discipline. De Martino subsequently adopted it, with his poignant essay “Storicismo e irrazionalismo nella storia delle religioni” which enlarges the comparative field to information offered by psychopathology, the goal being the amendment of the process of sacral genesis.

While for Lanternari the elements of continuity come second vis-à-vis the revealed aspects of discontinuity, for Massenzio, the present moments of discontinuity do not alter that unity of the Demartinian intellectual path in the hypostasis of enlarging the research horizon.

The idea of reevaluation, re-examination of the work, representing the beginning of the present analysis, despite the fact that he examined autonomous writings, finds a supporter in the result presented by Massenzio as a result of his own research.

## Conclusion

De Martino’s most important field research was made on the subject of tarantism in the region of Salento, Lecce, which bore the volume *La terra del rimorso*. The team chosen by De Martino includes specialists from various fields, and with the research time being quite limited, the team starts by documenting the time and place of the first descent into the field, namely, the chapel in Galatina. The subjects and the informants are identified they are visited in order to obtain their and their family’s consent, the research in Salento representing a framework drawn precisely and professionally.

Another research, this one on magic and witchcraft, gave rise to the volume *Sud e Magia*, the result of the same research carried out by De Martino and his team in Lucania. The study of magic begins in 1950, the texts are collected in 1952 and the field research extends over a period of more than 11 years. In addition to important research conducted in southern Italy there is also interest in the Emilia Romagna region, De Martino conducts short-term research in Ravenna, Reggio Emilia and Conselice, these having as a theme the workers’ songs of social nature, having as a result the article “Il folklore progressivo Emiliano” (theory of the use of oral sources in historiography).

In de Martino’s works it is to be noticed a clear evolution of concepts, as he initially dismantled various theories belonging to the myth, theories that he later reinterpreted. Thus, while dealing with myths that are part of the Italian cultural heritage and national identity, de Martino discovers the sacred, but also the persistence of the European ancient culture.

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