

**Review of Ernesto De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: a study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (first published in Italian in 1961 as *La Terra del Rimorso: contributo a una Storia Religiosa del Sud*) translated and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn, with a foreword by Vincent Crapanzano. 332 pp. Free Association Books, London 2005. Website: [www.fabooks.com](http://www.fabooks.com)**

By Stephen Bennetts

Tarantula, tarantella, tarantism, Taranto: this classic anthropological study describes a possession cult and dance practised until recently by peasants in the Taranto region of Southern Italian who believed they were possessed by the *taranta*, or tarantula spider.

[Here, for once, is a new book about Italy in English which transcends the familiar Anglophone clichés of the Tuscan villa (*Under the Tuscan Sun* or Bertolucci's excruciating *Stealing Beauty*), Florence (*Room with a View*), and Dolce Vita Rome (Australian writer Penelope Green's recent *When in Rome*).] The setting for *La Terra del Rimorso* (*The Land Of Remorse*) is [the less fashionable area of] Southern Puglia, in what was once the Kingdom of Naples and where until recently, victims of tarantism would suffer annually recurring psychotic symptoms between June and August after the summer harvest season. These attacks were believed to be caused by the bite of the tarantula, and different *tarante* were thought to have different natures which produced different effects on their victims: some were violent and aggressive, others lascivious, others tearful, and others sleepy. Victims of the spider (the *tarantati*) were cured through a form of music and dance therapy provided by a group of tarantella musicians hired to perform in the victims' homes. The musicians would first carry out a musical diagnosis of the precise nature of the spider which had possessed its victim, before playing the particular style of *tarantella* most suited to purging the venom of that particular spider through dance.

The cult appears to have originated near Taranto some time after the 1100s, but later spread throughout the Kingdom of Naples and even parts of Spain. In a magisterial survey of the historical evidence, De Martino explores the historical continuities between tarantism and the Classical Greek ecstatic cults of Dionysus, the stronghold of which was in this Greek-speaking area of southern Italy, still known to this day as Magna Grecia. Tarantism began its slow and inevitable decline after the sixteenth century Council of Trent, when the Catholic Counter Reformation went on an offensive against popular beliefs seen to deviate from orthodox Christian teaching. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Church was successful in partly Christianising the cult by establishing a Chapel of St Paul in the town of Galatina, with the saint now becoming a major focus of annual cult activity on his feast day of June 29. In an attempt to refocus and disarticulate the cult, the tarantella music and dance therapy was banned from the chapel. The spread of rationalist Enlightenment doctrines from Naples beginning in the late seventeenth century further hastened the decline of tarantism throughout Southern Italy.

First published in 1961, *The Land of Remorse* is a classic of anthropological detective work. Was this bizarre phenomenon really caused by the bite of the tarantula, or was it instead a mere 'superstitious relic', or a localised form of psychosis prevalent among illiterate Southern Italian peasants? Almost sixty years ago, in 1959, a group of scholars arrived in the small town of Galatina to unravel the riddle. They comprised a historian of religion (De Martino), neuropsychiatrist, toxicologist, psychologist, anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, social worker and photographer.

It soon became clear that the research team was documenting the last vestiges of the cult, which by now had retreated to an isolated pocket of peasant society in Salento, the stiletto heel of Southern Italy. Tarantism still persisted in its classical form in the music and dance therapy sessions conducted in the

home, whilst the partly Christianised form of the cult, amputated of its musical and dance component, continued in the grotesque and histrionic displays at the Chapel of St Paul, as possessed *tarantati* arrived for the feast day of Saint Paul to ask the saint for healing.

In De Martino's analysis, the mythology of the *taranta* and the catharsis of the possession state provide a framework in which personal psychological tensions common throughout Southern Italian peasant society could be publicly dramatised. Private sufferings caused by unhappy love, bereavement, sexual frustration, or subaltern social status were transfigured into annually recurring possession states which were culturally determined, rather than being the result of a real spider bite. The ritualised healing through dance and music provided victims with psychological closure and reintegration back into the community, at least until the summer of the following year.

[According to one Salentine authority, the last episode of tarantism involving actual possession took place in 1993, but the last living practitioner died in 2000. Yet 'tarantism' has recently taken on another curious form. The current Southern Italian folk revival and associated *pizzica* dance craze incorporate a grab bag of different impulses: re-emergent Southern regionalism, the reevaluation of a peasant past which is now distant enough for young Southern Italians to romanticise rather than feel ashamed of, and a rejection by the Italian anti-globalisation movement of the television-fixated 'cultural homogenisation' of Berlusconi Italy. De Martino's book has now achieved cult status beyond the academy; go to many folk concerts in Southern Italy today and you will find it on sale alongside tambourines, castanets and other accoutrements of the recently exhumed Southern Italian past. In a process which has been aptly described as 'proletarian exoticisation', De Martino's plain female peasant *tarantate* have given way in contemporary reworkings of the theme to video clips featuring dissociated but picturesque young beauties writhing to the latest tarantella folk hit. Within the current Salentine folk revival, De Martino functions as a kind of symbolic fetish, validating an isolated area of Southern Italy which almost nobody had heard of until the 'rediscovery' of tarantism and tarantella ten years ago suddenly put Salento on the map.]

De Martino's intellectual pedigree was unusual. His interest in Southern Italian peasant culture grew out of his political engagement with the Italian Socialist Party and later the Communist Party, which led him to party activism among southern Italian peasants from the 1940s on. For anthropologist and de Martino collaborator Clara Gallini, he was characteristic of that familiar type of post-war Italian life; the politically engaged left wing intellectual 'equally committed to research and to the attempt to link research to political praxis'.<sup>1</sup> De Martino's earlier work however, was heavily marked by the idealism of Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce, a figure so dominant within early twentieth century Italian intellectual life that his influence is even perceptible in a Marxist like Antonio Gramsci, whose characteristic preoccupation with ideology has a distinctively Crocean flavour. The gradual publication after 1948 of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* had a huge impact on Italian left wing intellectuals,<sup>2</sup> and in De Martino's case provided a stimulus for the anthropological investigation of the culture and ideology of the Southern Italian 'subaltern classes', particularly as embodied in peasant folklore. But De Martino also drew inspiration from other more cosmopolitan currents from outside Italy, including psychoanalysis and the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre. American anthropologist George Saunders has commented that in *The Land of Remorse*, de Martino seemed to be attempting something

very akin to what Foucault did a few years later with *Madness and Civilisation* (1973): an analysis of the discourse about tarantism aimed at exposing relations of power, the tensions of cultural change and the redefinition of the Other through the control of culture by the elite.<sup>3</sup>

This study will be of interest to scholars across a wide range of disciplines, including historical and psychological anthropology, psychiatry, ethnomusicology, the history and anthropology of religion, shamanism and ethnographic methodology.

Although De Martino is today widely celebrated as the father of Italian anthropology, and his 1961 study of tarantism is certainly the most influential work ever written by an Italian anthropologist, the book has been unavailable to non-Italian readers until now, apart from a 1966 French edition.<sup>4</sup> His American translator, Dorothy Zinn, is an anthropologist at the University of Basilicata in the heart of Lucania, the focus for so much of De Martino's research. Any non-Italian who has ever struggled through the at times dense original text will appreciate the difficulties of bringing this book to an English-speaking audience. Zinn's judicious notes contextualise a wealth of references which will be obscure to most non-Italian readers, while Vincent Crapanzano's brilliant opening essay provides a fitting induction for this important anthropological thinker into the wider context of world anthropology.

## Notes

1 Interview published in Santoro, V & Torsello S (eds.) 2002, *Il Ritmo Meridiano. La Pizzica e le Identità Danzanti del Salento*, Edizioni Aramire, Lecce, pp 157-166.

2 Gundle, S (1995) 'The Legacy of the Prison Notebooks: Gramsci, the PCI and Italian Culture in the Cold War Period' in Duggan, C. & Wagstaff, C (eds) *Italy in the Cold War: politics, culture, and society, 1948-1958*

3 Saunders deserves full credit for his long battle to achieve recognition for De Martino's work outside Italy. See especially his pioneering articles: 'Contemporary Italian Cultural Anthropology' *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1984) (13) 447-66 and "'Critical ethnocentrism" and the Ethnology of Ernesto De Martino', *American Anthropologist* (1993) 95 (4): 875-893.

4 *Il Mondo Magico*, Turin Boringhieri 1973, was first published in English by an obscure Australian publisher as *Primitive Magic: The Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers* (Bay Books Sydney 1972). Other notable works by De Martino include: *Sud e Magia* (Southern Italy and Magic: Feltrinelli, Milan 1987), an ethnographic study of popular magical practises in post-war rural Southern Italy, *Morte e Pianto Rituale* (Death and the Mourning Ritual: Turin Einaudi 1975) and *La fine del Mondo: Contributo all'Analisi delle Apocalissi Culturali* (The End of the World; a contribution to the analysis of cultural apocalypses: Turin Einaudi 1977). See also Gallini, C & Faeta, F (1999) *I Viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto de Martino*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1999, which features the superb fieldwork photos of Sandro Pinna, who accompanied De Martino on almost all of his ethnographic trips in Southern Italy.



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