Voices from the South: The Making of Subaltern Studies in Italy

David Gutherz

This is a draft of an article that I am hoping to submit to a journal—maybe “Modern Intellectual History,” “Global Intellectual History,” “Critical Historical Studies,” or “History of Humanities”—so I would love some advice about how to make it publishable. In addition, I’m currently working on repurposing the material on Ernesto De Martino (pg 20 or so onward) for the third chapter of my dissertation. Obviously, the argument as a whole matters to me—otherwise I wouldn’t ask you to read it—but, if you’re short on time and need to pick one part to focus on, I’m especially hungry for feedback on that section—e.g. if there were any passages that were particularly confusing or clarifying or issues you’d like to hear more about, etc. Thanks!!

It has been forty years (or is it sixty? or eighty?) since scholars started making waves with subaltern history and it is still a practice capable of generating considerable controversy. As I write this, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, 2000) has, according to GoogleScholar, been cited at least 7,090 times—and that’s not counting the conferences. Vivek Chibber’s Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital (Verso, 2013)—a critique of “subaltern studies as ideology”—provoked alternately furious and laudatory reviews and counter-reviews from esteemed scholars around the world with posts in several disciplines (including Partha Chaterjee, Gayatri Spivak, William Sewell, and Stein Sundstøl Eriksen) and helped turn the author into a hero for the young socialists grouped around Jacobin magazine.1 Chibber and Chakrabarty don’t agree on much. The former sees subaltern studies as typical of a lamentable postmodern ideology that rests on a flawed understanding of European history, celebrates cultural difference as a good-in-itself and tends to ignore the role that capital plays in shaping modern life. While acknowledging that the project had its flaws, Chakrabarty has argued that subalternists should be celebrated for developing

---

1 C.f. Warren, Rosie, The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital (Verso Books, 2016) and “How Does the Subaltern Speak?”, “The Specter of Materialism” and “Why We Still Talk About the Working Class” at https://www.jacobinmag.com/. I would like to thank Andrei Pohorelsky, Carmen Merport, Natasha Piano and Ollie Cussen for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
robust accounts of what happens when capitalism colonizes lifeworlds and thereby helping to deconstruct the Eurocentric historicism that infects even some of the best Marxist writing.²

It is striking, therefore, that—despite such major disagreements about the meaning and value of research into subaltern history—both Provincializing History and Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital tend to reinforce an academic common sense narrative about the history of subaltern studies. For example, both Chibber and Chakrabarty are keen to contrast the sort of “history from below” made famous by Eric Hobsbawm’s Primitive Rebels with the mode of inquiry pioneered by Ranajit Guha in Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India. Both refer to Antonio Gramsci as a founder of subaltern history but have little to say about debates about subalternity in Gramsci’s lifetime or in the decades between the first posthumous publication of extracts from the Prison Notebooks and the post-56 diffusion of Gramscian thought in the Anglophone world.³ This makes it hard to avoid the feeling (shared, apparently, by many of Chibber’s critics and fans) that there are basically two strands of subaltern studies—one rooted in “Little Britain Marxism” and another in “Postcolonial Theory”—and that we have to choose whether to fight under the banner of Hobsbawm or Guha.⁴

What follows is not an attempt to pick sides or to offer a superior alternative. My more modest goal, rather, is to put recent polemics in perspective through an inquiry into what we might call the “pre-history” of subaltern studies in Italy. First, I situate Gramsci’s evolving ideas about subaltern history in the context of debates about the new moral order many Italians hoped would emerge out of the chaos produced by World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. After

³ This neglect of the Italian tradition referred to here is, of course, not unique to these two authors. It is endemic. Even Timothy Brennan, who certainly knows a great deal about Italian intellectual history and post-colonial theory fails to mention the “first wave” of subaltern studies either in his spirited and otherwise informative response to Chibber or Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right (Columbia University Press, 2006).
⁴ “Little Britain Marxism” is a Spivak coinage that has been picked up by Robert Young, among others. C.f. Young, Robert, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West (Psychology Press, 2004).
that, the central section of the essay examines the emergence of a sort of “first wave” of subaltern studies in the early years of the new Italian Republic. Here the focus will be on the work of the socialist historian of religions Ernesto de Martino who, in the late 40’s, scandalized many of his comrades by calling for a new form of history that addressed the commonalities between Italy’s peasants, women, and colonial and semi-colonial populations. De Martino subsequently set about organizing ethnological expeditions to obscure regions of Southern Italy (De Martino himself was from Naples) that, as we shall see in the conclusion, that called into question standard views of Southern backwardness and had an indirect influence on Hobsbawm.5

Throughout the essay, I will be periodically be referring back to arguments by Hobsbawm, Guha and others to clarify the stakes of the intervention. It may help, therefore, to say a few more words about the two divisive works and scholars referred to above so we can all get our bearings before setting sail for what Ernesto de Martino sometimes called, with a wink, le Indie di quaggiù.

From the Outside: Hobsbawm, Guha and Absolute Historicism

In his memoir, Interesting Times, Eric Hobsbawm recalled with fondness the moment when he decided to become a scholar of subaltern history. It was late in the evening, at a dinner party in Rome when his host, Professor Ambrogio Donini, told him about the followers of Davide Lazzarretti. Lazzaretti, self-proclaimed Messiah (is there any other kind?) was shot to death by carabinieri in 1878, after attempting to set up a Republic of God that would “reconcile the church with the Italian people.” [Primitive Rebels, 69] After the death of their Messiah, the Lazzaretists continued to nurse a deep resentment for the police, and, following the attempted assassination of Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti in 1948, remnants of Davide’s flock joined in a spontaneous uprising against the state that was (in their eyes) conspiring once again to delay the

5 For De Martino, it should be noted, “South” was not only a “geographical designation but a political and social one.” Martino, Ernesto de, Magic: A Theory from the South, trans. by Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU, 2015)
coming of the Messianic Age. “Who were these people,” Hobsbawm remembered thinking, “who brought ways of thinking which would have been quite usual in the Middle Ages into mid-twentieth century political movements.”

What went on in their minds? How did they, as distinct from the political movements which drew strength from their support, see the world? Why was so little attention paid to them, except by Italian thinkers such as the extraordinary Antonio Gramsci?

So began the research that led Hobsbawm to Primitive Rebels. In its final form, the book consist of a set of linked studies on a range of apparently diverse phenomena including ‘social banditry’, millennial sects (including the Lazzaretists), urban riots and the Mafia. As the author himself was quick to point out, this work contained little original research, but it did advance the provocative thesis that these movements can be—and indeed, ought to be—studied together because they shed light on a “a sort of ‘pre-historic’ stage of social agitation” that—in the mid-1950’s—was anything but ancient history. Although taking care (perhaps not enough) to stress that “the movements discussed in this book all have a considerable historical evolution behind them,” the Egyptian born, Austrian raised, secular Jewish Briton insisted that they nonetheless offered valuable insight into the way “first-generation immigrants” to modernity adapted to and revolted against the imposition of an economic system that destroyed their old ways of life. Abandoned by their ancient gods and guardians, but as of yet not aided by new priests who could teach them that “specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world” these neophytes remained doomed to “pre-political” forms of agitation and stuck—mentally—in the Middle Ages. “The interesting problem,” according to Hobsbawm, “is how and how far [the] modernization” of popular millenarian movements “takes place.” His answer?

7 Ibid. One of the first entries Gramsci had made in the notebooks he dedicated to the study of the subaltern classes was on the Lazzaretists, in which he criticizes studies that “conceal the causes of the general discontent that existed in Italy by providing narrow, individual, pathological etc. explanations of single explosive incidents.” Gramsci, Antonio, Prison Notebooks: Volume 2, ed. by translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (Columbia University Press, 2011), 18.
8 Hobsbawm, Eric, Primitive Rebels (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 10
9 Ibid.
I suggest it does not take place or takes place only very slowly and incompletely, if the matter is left to the peasants themselves. It takes place most completely and successfully if the millenarian movement is fitted into a framework of organization, theory and programme which comes to the peasants from outside.¹⁰

As Hobsbawm indicates in a preface, the understanding of ritual and rebellion on display in *Primitive Rebels* owes a great deal to the so-called “Manchester School” of anthropology, especially the work of Peter Worsley and Max Gluckman, who invited the historian to give the Simon Lectures the University of Manchester in 1956. Throughout the book that grew out of those lectures, Hobsbawm struggled to ‘resist the temptation’ to compare the European movements he focuses to the African cargo cults made famous by Worsley’s *The Trumpet Shall Sound.*¹¹ Nonetheless, the reader is left with the impression that the logic of rebellion Hobsbawm has identified is (at least potentially) global, and will probably (in the near future) play out the same way in colonized spaces as it did in Italy and Spain.¹² Indeed, this is precisely what made the work a vital political intervention. Unlike many of his friends and colleagues, Hobsbawm did not leave the Communist Party after 1956 and in *Primitive Rebels* he set out to show the New Left why they still needed an organized vanguard party to make a revolution out of the apocalyptic furor of anti-colonial activists.¹³

Because Ranajit Guha’s work is now so closely associated with the political and scholarly movements of the 70’s and 80’s, it is easy to forget that he was only six years younger than Hobsbawm (born 1917 and 1923, respectively). Like the author of *Primitive Rebels,* Guha got involved in Communist politics early on and travelled extensively as a young man but, unlike

¹¹ Ibid., 65. In the preface, Hobsbawm singles out Worsley, Max Gluckman and Norman Cohn as experts in millenarian movements who he discussed his ideas with.
¹² This comes out even more strongly in “Per lo studio delle classi subalterne”, *Societa* (1960). See below, pg. 35
him, Guha left the party in '56. Shortly afterwards, he moved to England and took a position at the University of Manchester, of all places, where he almost certainly would have shared students with Gluckman and Worsley. One wonders if this proximity helped push Guha to familiarize himself with the rival theories of Lévi-Straussian structuralism. By most accounts, however, the real turning point in Guha’s life came with his encounter with the Naxalite movement in 1970-71, after which point he dedicated himself to the study of Gramsci and peasant insurgency.

In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Guha rejects both the idea that subalterns need ideas or organization from the outside to help them act politically and the notion that South Asian subalterns follow a pattern set by European peasants. Interestingly, he does not reject the idea that they are carrying a Medieval mindset into modern movements. If anything, he exaggerates the “archaic” nature of peasant activism by comparing rebels in the 19th century to heroes from early Christian era. For Guha, however, this is not evidence of “backwardness” but of a *resistance to history*, of the sort identified by Lévi-Strauss. Whereas Hobsbawm argues that subaltern activists are ineffective because they are constrained by provincial ideas and identities, Guha comes close to saying that, on the contrary, it is a measure of their autonomy that they subaltern are capable, through insurgency, of resisting ideas from the outside and relying on the elementary structures he identifies. Using structural anthropology also helped Guha distance himself from the rationalist psychology that infuses Hobsbawm’s work. The “peasant consciousness” is not instantiated in the ideas of the peasants but rather encoded in their actions, like Durkheim’s socially constructed fundamental categories. The discovery of this peasant

---

consciousness proved that subalterns already had a “specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world” and did not need to be modernized to act autonomously and coherently. It is precisely this claim that made him, as Chakrabarty argues, a resolute critic not only of stadial theories of development but of historicism tout court.

As others have noted, this is one place Guha departs from Gramsci who, in an entry from the *Prison Notebooks* that Guha knew well, looks forward to a subaltern history that will chronicle how marginalized and fragmented gradually attain autonomy from the “frameworks” [quadri] and “mentality” [mentalità] of their oppressors. Gramsci believed that by documenting this struggle for coherence historians would make a decisive step towards “absolute historicism, the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought.” What did Gramsci mean by “autonomy” and “absolute historicism” and how is subaltern history supposed to accelerate this emancipation?

To answer this we need to examine the development of his views on the man who coined the term “absolute historicism,” Benedetto Croce.

**The Moment of Force: Gramsci, The Great War, and Subalternity**

A native of Sardinia (the source of many of Italy’s most well-loved folk stories) Gramsci studied philology at the University of Turin, where he was subsequently converted to socialism and Crocean philosophy. This was something of a strange blend, though not an uncommon combination at the time. In his youth, Croce had briefly flirted with Marxism, but eventually came to strenuously reject it and devoted himself to the refutation of all materialist philosophies of history. Instead of focusing on the struggle for economic power or control of the state, he argued, historians should seek to understand “ethico-political history,” i.e. “the formation of moral institutions, in the broadest sense of the word, including religious institutions and revolutionary sects, sentiments, customs, fancies and myths that are practical in tendency and content.” As Richard Bellamy has convincingly demonstrated, this vision of history was strongly influenced by Georges Sorel and Gaetano Mosca, who both (for different reasons) sought to prove that “history is essentially made by the political class which represents not economic values
but ideal ones.”18 For Croce, the European bourgeoisie was this class and he sought to demonstrate that the history of its moral institutions could be told as the spread of a religion of liberty.

In Gramsci’s early forays into socialist propaganda, he frequently attempts to demonstrate that the working class is this avatar of Spirit, that the ideal values of the civilization of the future are embodied in working-class institutions. In 1915, for instance, he called the Third International an “act of spirit” that “has as a common goal the substitution in the dynamism of history of the factor of production for the factor of capital, the violent irruption of the proletarian class, up to now without history or with a history that was only potential, into the vast movement which produces the life of the world.”19 A few years later, in the heat of the Factory Council movement that brought Italy to the edge of revolution, Gramsci sounded a similar note, writing that “during the economic and political predominance of the bourgeois class, the actual unfolding of the revolutionary process takes place subterraneously, in the darkness of the factory and in the obscurity of the consciousness of the countless multitudes.” While capitalism is the prime force shaping the multitude, its ‘making’ was neither “controllable and documentable.” But “it will be so in the future when the elements that constitute it (the feelings, the desires, the mores, the germs of initiative and of habit) are developed and purified by the evolution of society and the new place that the working class comes to occupy in the field of production.” 20

Over time, Gramsci became increasingly disenchanted with Crocean philosophy and history, in no small part because he judged that, by directing young radical Southern intellectuals to the study of bourgeois high culture, Croce had siphoned away energy from the socialist movement in Southern Italy and helped pave the way for Mussolini (whom Croce initially helped welcome into power). As a consequence, the masses in Gramsci’s native Sardinia remained “in

20 Gramsci, Antonio, ‘Soviets in Italy’, New Left Review, I, 1968, 32
perpetual ferment” but “incapable of providing a centralized expression of their aspirations and needs.”

These lines come from the last major essay Gramsci wrote before Mussolini had him sent to prison for the rest of his life. As Gayatri Spivak and others have recognized, the unfinished *Notes on The Southern Question* contain the germ of what would become a full-blown inquiry into the history and culture of subalterns. It was only once he was behind bars, however, that Gramsci began referring to “subalterns”—military jargon for officers of inferior rank—rather than simply peasants, producers, or members of the working class.

It is not clear why Gramsci reached for this bit of martial slang. There is a widespread belief that “subaltern” is little more than code for “proletariat,” but this is (as scholars have recently demonstrate) a difficult position to defend. The proletariat appear frequently in the *Notebooks*, called by their own name, while “subaltern” and “subalternity” are repeatedly used in reference to social groups and occasionally individuals that are outside the proletariat (including the bourgeoisie) and, more generally, a state of real and/or imagined inferiority.

My own hypothesis is that this is yet another case of Gramsci seeking to undermine his enemies by appropriating their keywords. It is a testament to how successful he was that we tend to forget that during the interwar period Italy was full of (mostly Right wing) ideologues, like Curzio Malaparte, who “took the hierarchical and corporative army as [a] revolutionary model.”

Recall that the *Grande Guerra* was Italy’s first truly inter-class war. And it was a disaster.

---


Between 1915-1917 at least 800,000 Italians were killed defending about ninety kilometers. At Caporretto alone—a name that has become shorthand for a humiliating defeat—around 40,000 were killed, 91,000 injured 293,000 men were imprisoned for attempting to flee and an estimated 400,000 troops deserted. The commanding officer, Luigi Cadorno, blamed the whole disastrous affair on a “soldiers’ strike” (instigated, of course, by insidious communists) and conservative commentators were constantly bemoaning the low morale of soldiers and their commanders.

After the war, the idea that the nation of Italy was like an army that needed new, properly patriotic leaders to ‘stiffen it up’ was as commonplace as the contemporary bromide that America’s ills can be fixed by good businessmen. What Italy needed, the nationalists and Fascists argued, was warrior subjects who “no longer have a life of their own, they are no longer themselves organisms” but rather miniscule parts of the great national army/organism directed by the “brain of a supreme commander” controlling the “infinite movements” connecting “subaltern to subaltern, like an organ is to organ, arm is to hand, hand is to finger” and so on down to the last soldier.24

A particularly important intervention in this rhetorical field was made by Gaetano Mosca, the same political theorist who shaped Croce’s understanding of ethico-political history. Mosca was born to a well-off family in Palermo in 1858. Readers of Giovanni di Lampedusa’s The Leopard may recall what mass politics looked like in Southern Italy when Gaetano was being initiated into its secrets: lots of parades, broken promises, and plebiscites with pre-ordained outcomes. Starting from this Sicily, Mosca came to believe that the first principle of any positive political theory must be that society is always divided between a ruling class and the ruled. The

24 Corradini, Enrico, La vita nazionale (F. Lumachi, 1907) [Translation mine]. On Corradini’s role in the genesis of Fascism see the Sternhell (above) and Gregor, Anthony James, Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism (University of California Press, 1979)
crucial question, for princes and students of political history, remains the Machiavellian one: how do rulers ‘maintain the state’?25

In his magnum opus Elementi di Scienza Politica (typically rendered in English as The Ruling Class) Mosca advanced the proposition that all “political organisms” must find a balance between democratic and aristocratic tendencies.

The term “democratic” seems…suitable for the tendency which aims to replenish the ruling class with elements deriving from the lower classes, and which is always at work openly or latently and with greater or lesser intensity in all political organisms. “Aristocratic” we would call the opposite tendency…which aims to stabilize social control and political power in the descendents of the class that happens to hold possession of it at the given historical moment.26

It follows, Mosca argued, that all liberal societies are, to a certain degree, aristocratic (even if the ruling classes have to constantly deny this fact to maintain legitimacy). Conversely, no autocratic states can stand without allowing for a regular infusions of fresh blood because “even in autocratic systems… the highest stratum of the ruling class” is “not in itself…sufficient for leading and directing the activities of the masses” and must, therefore, rely on a large “second stratum” of elites who may not govern but still rule. “Any intellectual or moral deficiencies in this second stratum,” therefore, “represent a graver danger…than the presence of similar deficiencies in the few dozen persons who control the workings of the state machine.”

In the 1922 edition of Elementi— the one that, in all likelihood, Gramsci had on hand in prison— Mosca added a note to drive his point home.27

Let us take an example that the recent world war has made it easy to understand. It is widely acknowledged now that the solidity [saldezza] of an army depend principally on the intellectual and moral value of the officials who come into direct contact with the troops…If, by some improbable accident, all the generals and staff officers of the army

25 For information on Mosca in his time and in relation to other meridionalisti I have relied primarily on Bellamy, Richard, Modern Italian Social Theory: Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present (John Wiley & Sons, 2015)
27 For an account of Gramsci’s relationship to Mosca, including his prison reading, see Finocchiaro, Maurice A., Beyond Right and Left: Democratic Elitism in Mosca and Gramsci (Yale University Press, 1999).
were to disappear at one stroke, the army would sustain a serious shock, but it would still be on its feet and the lost leaders [gli scomparsi] could be replaced through promotion...But if all the officers who actually lead the soldiers were to disappear the army would dissolve before they could possibly be replaced. The highest stratum in the ruling class corresponds to the generals and staff, the second stratum to the officers who personally lead the soldiers under fire.\(^{28}\)

As left-wing social theorists have subsequently argued, Mosca’s apparently innocuous analogy upended some widely shared assumptions about history and political theory.\(^{29}\) If the maintenance of the state depended on the moral fiber of the subaltern social bloc that stood between the great generals and the mass then it was misleading to write history as if it was made by the few Great Men who had their hands on the levers of government.

Perhaps even more importantly, Mosca’s depiction of ruling class recruitment undercut the vision of revolution the Left had inherited from 18th century radicals. If the real ruling class was not concentrated in the state but dispersed through civil society there was no guarantee that replacing all the upper level ‘generals and staff officers’ currently directing affairs with a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ would lead to a genuinely ‘new order’. If these generals had instilled their subalterns with the right kind of corporate spirit, they would likely remain obedient to the ruling class culture that raised them even after the ruling class’ disappearance. That was the whole point of educating subalterns, according to Mosca. Indeed, since the new rulers governing in the name of the working class would, in all likelihood, be drawn from trade union activists, scholarship kids, party leaders, and members of the ‘labor aristocracy’ who had pushed their way into the “second stratum” prior to the coup and received what the ruling class had called a moral education, there was reason to doubt whether even these self-proclaimed revolutionaries would really upend the social order. Gramsci’s friend and sometimes collaborator, the “liberal

\(^{28}\) Ibid. A few pages later, Mosca compares the members of the second stratum to subalterns.

\(^{29}\) Mills refers to precisely these pages in *The Sociological Imagination* and suggests they were the impetus for his work on the *Power Elite*. It would be interesting to compare the effects of Mosca’s challenge to the myths of Third International Marxism to the impact of Mill’s Mosca-based critique of the “First” New Left’s “labor metaphysic,” which pushed Thompson and his colleagues to refine their vision of history from below.
revolutionary” Piero Gobetti, actually found comfort in this thought; if Mosca was right, Gobetti argued, liberals didn’t need to be so spooked about the Communist specter, since a revolutionary labor movement could unleash ‘new energies’ that, with the proper political leadership, could rejuvenate a moribund ruling class and potentially, ironically, save liberalism.\(^{30}\) Conversely, Mosca’s rhetoric proved useful to intellectuals who were eager to justify the Fascist seizure of power and their subsequent attempt to bind Italian society together through a civil religion that was supposed to create a state of subservient warriors.

The success of the Fascist movement forced Gramsci to directly confront Mosca’s attack on the Marxist theory of revolution. Rather than rejecting the martial rhetoric being mobilized by the Right (as he had as a younger man) the author of the *Prison Notebooks* made a concerted effort to recapture the language of subalternity for the Left.\(^{31}\) Since the bourgeoisie (Croce included) had fallen for “Cadornism”—i.e. authoritarianism—to fend off the coming revolution, Gramsci began to rethink the coming revolution based on what Cadorno had feared most, a general subaltern strike. The key question—the question that the history of the subaltern classes was supposed to help answer—was: Can they be convinced to reject their subalternity and act like commanding officers even before the conquest of the State? How to instill in the subaltern classes a ‘spirit of schism’ instead of the sort of *espirit de corps* that Fascists were fond of?\(^{32}\)

As Gramsci was ready to admit, Marxism had not always been helpful in this regard. The myth of economic determinism that positivists had propagated had once been “like a drug necessitated and historically justified by the ‘subaltern’ [the word appears in the original in scare

---


\(^{31}\) “The proletariat is not an army; it does not have officers, subalterns, corporals and soldiers. Socialists are not officers of the proletarian army, they are part of the proletariat itself, perhaps they are its consciousness, but as the consciousness cannot be divided from an individual, so socialists are not placed in duality with the proletariat. They are one, always one and they do not command but live with the proletariat, just as blood circulates and moves in the veins of a body and it is not possible for it to live and move inside rubber tubes wrapped around a corpse.” Gramsci, Antonio, *La città future: 1917-1918* (edited by Sergio Caprioglio), Turin, 1982.

\(^{32}\) “spirit of schism” is a Sorelian term Gramsci uses frequently in the Prison Notebooks and several times in relation to subaltern history
quotes, as if to say ‘the so-called ‘subaltern’] “character of certain social strata” that find comfort and even “a formidable power of moral resistance” in the thought that “the nature of things is on my side over a long period.” Now that “subalterns” were becoming “leaders,” the time had come to transition from the primitive religion of pseudo-scientific Marxism to an activist “philosophy of praxis” that “is the expression of [the] subaltern classes that want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths,” including the perhaps shameful truth that subalterns were never really “things” being moved from outside by natural or supernatural forces but “historical persons” and that “fatalism has only been a cover by the weak for an active and real will.”

“Absolute historicism” describes this emancipation from fatalism, an emancipation that, Gramsci judged, was being hindered by the influence of Croce who had a habit of (as Peter Thomas puts it) “glossing over or obscuring the true, fractured nature of the present by speculatively sanctifying it as the only possible present.” In a letter that began circulating among Italian leftists in 1946, Gramsci argued that his former maestro overemphasized the importance of serene synthesis and therefore consistently minimized the importance of “the moment of force and struggle” in his narratives. “Is it possible to conceive of a unitary history of Europe that begins with the year 1815?” Gramsci wrote on May 9th, 1932,

If a history of Europe is to be written as the formation of a historic bloc, one cannot leave out the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars….Croce takes the moment following, that in which the forces previously unleashed have attained a state of equilibrium…he makes of this moment a fact in itself and proceeds to construct his historical paradigm.”

---

33 Gramsci, Antonio, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia, di Benedetto Croce* (G. Einaudi, 1964) Both Louis Marks anthology, *The Modern Prince, and Other Writings.* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1957) and Hoare’s now standard *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* (New York: International Publishers Co, 1971) played a crucial role in introducing Gramsci to the British New Left render “subalterno” as “subordinate” here, thus inadvertently concealing the fact that Gramsci seems to be registering a certain discomfort with a terms that would later be so closely associated with him.

34 Ibid.

35 Gramsci, excerpts from “Science and Society,” 1946, pg 288-289. For examples of the Crocean celebration of serenity see Croce, Benedetto, *History as the Story of Liberty* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000)
The point is not only that Croce’s constructions are flawed, that they leave out certain crucial episodes in the history of Europe. Gramsci’s larger point is that these exclusions are the direct consequence of a certain conception of the historical art and, furthermore, the presentation of consensus without the chaos that goes beforehand serves conservative ends and, *ex post facto*, renders the subalterns more inchoate than they were.

Some variation on this claim is central to all forms of “history from below” along with its corollary: scholars who wish to serve the subalterns will recover the struggles their predecessors papered over. Indeed, I am tempted to say that, in practice, “subaltern” connotes a conjunction of social and epistemological inferiority. To make subaltern history you need to find groups who are not only oppressed but also invisible.\(^{36}\) The big question remains: how is this supposed to help subalterns? Are the revolutionaries of the future strengthened when scholars “fill in the gaps” produced by elite historiography?\(^{37}\) Or is this all just prepolitical activity, a ritualized rebellion that ultimately serves to stabilize the social order?

---

It should be noted that a few lines down in the same letter, Gramsci argues that Croce’s misunderstanding of the nature of historical movement has lead him to challenge what we would now call Croce’s Eurocentrism and Orientalism. “If all history is the history of liberty, or of the spirit that creates itself….why should European history of the nineteenth century alone be the history of liberty…..History was liberty even under the oriental satrapies, since even there, there was historic “movement” and those satrapies crumbled.” As we will see below, De Martino advanced a similar immanent critique of Carlo Levi’s tendency to present the peasant institutions as “immobile” when they are, in fact, the product of continuous struggle. It should be said, however, that neither Gramsci nor De Martino freed themselves from Eurocentrism. For a critical assessment of the latter’s view on this issue, see “Critical Ethnocentrism.”\(^{36}\) Perhaps this may help explain why historians who spend a great deal of time trying to squeeze some particularity out of the archives of repression have so frequently been drawn into (often very abstract) debates about the nature of historical knowledge. On the other hand, the search for invisibles (especially when combined with the academic imperative to produce “original” research) can lead scholars down ever more narrow niches in search of ever more marginal figure and (as Sumit Sarkar has noted) tends to encourage subalternists to paint their predecessors as more blinkered than they were.

For Hobsbawm, it has always been a question of wringing some wisdom out of the experience of defeat.\textsuperscript{38} While Guha rejected Hobsbawm’s conclusions, it is surely significant that the Subaltern studies collective crystallized in the aftermath of brutal repression of the Naxalites and Indira Gandhi’s declaration of a state of emergency.\textsuperscript{39} When Gramsci’s writings first began to circulate in post-war Italy, however, the ‘wind from the North’ (that is to say, from the Resistance) was still blowing, Southern peasants were seizing land, and there was a widespread feeling (shared by many in Moscow and Washington D.C.) that Italy might be on the cusp of revolution. This anticipation affected the way Gramsci’s first interpreters understood the battles that needed to be fought via subaltern history.

\textit{Chronicles and Commitment in Postwar Italy}

When Gramsci’s writings from prison first started making the rounds in post-war Italy, Croce was still the Master to be overturned. This is one reason why the first selection of the \textit{Quaderni del Carcere}, published by Einaudi under the watchful eye of Felice Platone and Palmiro Togliatti, was dedicated to \textit{Il Materialismo Storico e la Filosofia di Benedetto Croce}. For some reason, this collection did not contain many of the notes about subaltern history that enflamed the minds of subalternists in the 70’s and 80’s, after being published by Hoare and Smith under the heading “Notes on Italian History.” Those were placed at the back of the volume of Gramsci’s writings on the Risorgimento. \textit{Il Materialismo Storico} did, however, contain several provocative references to subaltern culture and “common sense”: including the passages cited above where Gramsci contrasts mechanistic Marxism (which he calls a “religion” of the subalterns), hegemonic to the “philosophy of praxis” that is the expression of the subaltern will.

\textsuperscript{38} He states this most clearly in \textit{Per Lo Studio} (see below, pg 35) but, as Perry Anderson has shown, the idea that “in the long run gains in historical understanding have come from the defeated” suffuses his celebrated tetralogy on the birth of the modern world. Perry Anderson, ‘Confronting Defeat’, \textit{London Review of Books}, 17 October 2002, pp. 10–17

\textsuperscript{39} Once again Perry Anderson, ever sensitive to effects of left wing melancholia, draws attention to this in ‘The Heirs of Gramsci’, \textit{New Left Review}, II, 2016, 71–9
In addition, Togliatti and the Giulio Einaudi allowed a few intellectuals to peruse the *Prison Notebooks* before they were published.

One of these lucky scholars was Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli. Before impressing the leader of the Communist party’s with his work on this journal, Bandinelli’s work for a Crocean journal *La Critica d’Arte* apparently made a significant impression on someone in Mussolini’s cabinet because when Hitler came to Rome in 1938, Bandinelli (an archeologist by training) was chosen to give the Fuhrer a tour through the history of Italian art.

![Figure 1: Mussolini, Hitler and Bandinelli](image)

Over the next few years, however, Bandinelli began to question his twin commitment to Fascism and Idealism and, after the coup of Sept. 8, 1943, enrolled in a clandestine, militant anti-fascist organization in Tuscany. After a local partisan, Bruno Fanciullaci, tracked down and shot Croce’s longtime rival for the title of Italy’s greatest philosopher, Giovanni Gentile on April 15, 1944—“I am not killing a man, but his ideas,” he reportedly said—Hitler’s former tour guide was suspected of having ordered the attack, and was briefly detained. The following year he joined the Communist party and founded a journal called *Societa*. 
The relation between the *Societa* and the PCI was fraught and complex.\textsuperscript{40} Like Vittorini and the collaborators at *Politecnico*, Bandinelli and his colleagues strove to walk a fine line between supporting the PCI personally while making claims for free, critical inquiry through their publications. Sometime towards the end of 1946, Togliatti privately insisted that they practice their free public inquiry in a more Marxist manner and then, to encourage this development, gave Bandinelli access to Gramsci’s unpublished corpus. This lead to the publication of two extended extracts from the *Prison Notebooks* and an important essay by Bandinelli on the celebrated Communist martyr, in which he declared that although Croce had been an important guide for intellectuals of his generation, leading them a long way towards “another world…the world of tomorrow,” the time had come to turn to Gramsci to help them break down the door to politics that remained closed to all who adopted a Crocean perspective.\textsuperscript{41} The animating theme of Gramsci’s philosophy, Bandinelli argued, was a heroic attempt to “clarify the real relations between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and investigate the grounds [motivi] for the creation of modern culture” and do what all hitherto existing immantistic philosophers had not known how to “create an ideological unity between high and low, between the ‘simple ones’ and the intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{42}

It was in the name of this future ideological unification that the editors published a range of “documents” from the partisan war and defended the legitimacy of resistance chronicles. According to Don Benedetto, chroniclers were basically immature historians who (because they were too close to the material they wrote about) could not synthesize. In the age of neorealism, very few people had time for such sentiments and Croce was widely mocked for remaining locked in a comfortable library instead of fully committing himself to the struggle against Fascism. The editors of *Societa* tried to go further, to offer a robust defense the chronicle as a legitimate form, indeed the only legitimate form of history writing in troubled times.

---

\textsuperscript{40} Ajello, Nello, *Intellettuali e PCI 1944-1958* (Laterza, 1979)
\textsuperscript{41} Bandinelli, *Diario del Borghese* [Translation mine]
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
Since, there was no way to make sense of the crisis Italy was still living through from on high, they argued, writers would have to consciously remain close to “things as they happen.” Someday in the future, they suggested, in a truly democratic culture where the division between low and high had been sublated, a true historian would be able to sift through the various testimonies to construct a history of the formation of the new historical bloc. Until that day, the most engaged intellectuals could do was try to assemble a chorus composed the testimonies of the best chroniclers. As Lucia Re has pointed out, by defending the chronicle in this way the intellectuals grouped around Societa did not completely abandon the Crocean ideal of synthesis, but rather deferred it. In other words, despite or perhaps even thanks to Gramsci the Societa historians remained orthodox devotees to Crocean historicism.

The limited nature of these defenses of chroniclers comes through clearly when contrasted with the subtle yet devastating attack on Croce launched by Carlo Levi in the conclusion to Christ Stopped at Eboli. Since this is one of the most famous (and difficult to categorize) works of 20th century Italian literature, I will not waste your time summarize it. At the most basic level, Christ Stopped at Eboli is a record of the time that Levi spent as in ‘exile’ in a province of Southern Italy, called by its antique name “Lucania,” which Levi presents as a meditation on “peasant civilization.” From the first page onwards, the Torinese exile goes out of his way to stress that the place he spent time in was an “other world, hedged in by custom and sorrow, cut off from History and the State…where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization.”

If that was all there was to the book, it would scarcely be worth a re-reading, and it probably wouldn’t have helped spark a historiographical revolution. What made and makes the work such a source of fascination for students of subaltern classes is that the world Levi depicts is

43 Things as they happen is a Zavattini phrase.
anything but motionless. These peasants leave for America, go to war, fight with their master for access to healthcare, mix up love potions, and perform plays by D’Annunzio. They are clearly—and consciously—acting in history even while defining themselves against the changes brought by representatives of Progress. In a pivotal chapter, Levi recounts the peasants’ reaction to the declaration of war in Abyssinia. Levi’s peasants greet this announcement with resignation and indifference because, he tells us, “the only wars that touch their hearts are those in which they have fought to defend themselves against that civilization, against History and Government, Theocracy and the Army.” {138} To illustrate the point, he tells the story of an old man who can barely remember when WWI happened but can recall in precise detail the career of the local 19th century bandits. How, Levi wonders aloud, should we make sense of this man who spoke as if he was still that brigands contemporary? What is the meaning of the poor Southerner’s love of bandits? “I do not mean to extol the brigands, as is the fashion among certain aesthetes,” Levi writes. “From an historical point of view….there is no defense for brigandage” since it amounted to little more than “a last gasp of the past…a wild and baneful…threat to liberty and to civilized institutions.” Yes, he continues “If we look at it from a strictly historical point of view we shall not only find it indefensible, but we shall fail to understand it at all.” What we need to make sense of the experience of the aged storyteller’s experience of brigandage is, he says, “a history outside the framework of time, confining itself to that which is changeless and eternal, in other words, a mythology.” Only a “mythological history” infused with this deep sense of timelessness could put the brigand war (and the peasant’s views of brigandage) in perspective, because it would reveal what 19th century politicians called “war against brigandage” to be the fourth “national war” that the peasants have fought against the “religion of the state.”

---

This assertion, as David Ward has stressed, attacks the first principle of Crocean historicism, namely, that because humans create history all human activities are historical. This may be true logically, Levi suggested, but in practice this sort of historicism tends to make the people who have been “left behind” by the march of History seem stupid and even sub-human. And lo and behold in 1949, as if to prove Levi right, Croce published *Filosofia and Storiografia*, in which he claimed that the difference between modern and primitive society is “the distinction between men who are actors in history and men who stand passively within history…men capable of development and men incapable of development; and towards the second class of beings, which zoologically but not historically are human.” The former may try to “domesticate and train” the latter but, if “we” fail it is because it is difficult—if not impossible—to “share common memories and sentiments with [those] who obstinately refuse to enter into history.”

**Socialism and Barbarism: De Martino’s Intervention**

1949 was a watershed year for subaltern studies in Italy. In 1949 Einaudi released three volumes of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (including the one on the Risorgimento referred to above). That same year, Societa published an article by Ernesto de Martino entitled *Towards a History of the Subaltern Popular World*. On one level, the essay was an attempt to draw out the political implications of *The Magical World*, a book De Martino had published a year earlier.

The central question of that book can be state quite simply: are magical powers real? This is a question, De Martino acknowledges, that students of “primitive society” have been asking themselves for some time. They have not been able to answer it, however, because they have largely proceeded as if reality was simply a given thing, a world existing *out there* apart from any human intervention. But this is a false dualism, because humans have to fight, throughout their

---


whole lives, to maintain our “presence,” our sense of being in the world. Drawing on a wide range of anthropological material, De Martino goes on to argue that all human societies are perpetually exposed to “crises of presence” and it is only thanks to certain cultural techniques that—when faced of death, disease, war, perpetual poverty, heartbreak and loss—we don’t all lose our grip on reality. The difference between “civilized” and “primitive” societies, therefore, is not—as Croce claimed—between people who are capable of development and those who are stuck in the past but rather between those who use history to maintain their presence and those who rely on magical techniques of “dehistorification” to keep from losing their minds and worlds.

*Mondo Magico* was published, as I mentioned, in 1948 but it was composed, like *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, largely during 1944 when the author—who was active in a local anti-fascist organization—had good reason to fear for his life. The delay was due to two factors: first, between 1945-1948, De Martino threw himself into the politics of the socialist party in Southern Italy, helping to organize land occupations and inquiries into the living conditions of the poor Southern peasantry. This was a period of extraordinary militancy among Southern subalterns—and intense infighting among Socialists. Secondly, in his down time, De Martino was working with the novelist Cesare Pavese to organize a series on “psychology, ethnology, and religion” for Einaudi, which would become known as the *Collana Viola* or “Purple Series” (because of the cover color) Pavese and De Martino were united by a shared interest in antiquity, magic and *The Golden Bowl*, but they butted heads constantly over how to manage the series. The main point of contention was over the introductions to works by authors like Carl Jung and Levy-Bruhl who were not exactly known as men of the left. De Martino wanted the books to be prefaced with elaborate “instructions for use” to make sure readers were not seduced by the more dangerous ideas these authors espoused, while Pavese (who may have been seduced by some of these ideas) figured it was best to release the material and let the readers decide.  

---

48 La Collana Viola. Lettere 1945-1950 - Cesare Pavese - Ernesto De Martino - Libro - Bollati Boringhieri -
When the first works in the *Collana Viola* were released—beginning with *Mondo Magico*—they were met with almost uniform hostility from the Left. Some critics took to calling it the *Collana Nera*, or “Black Series” and accusing Pavese and De Martino of spreading Fascist scholarship. With *Towards a History of the Subaltern Popular World*, De Martino set out to show them how wrong they were. The essay begins with an attack on ethnology as colonizing science. “The naturalism of European-Western ethnological research reflects, at a scientific level, the naturalness with which the subaltern popular world has been treated by the bourgeois civilization at a practical-political level.”

Insofar as this world, for bourgeois society, constitutes an issue almost exclusively…for conquerors, agents of commerce and colonial officials, for prefects and police officials; insofar as, in this domain, the practical problem of order holds a preeminent place, the cultural forms of this world have been configured essentially as material to be ordered into a natural science of man, as a complex of technical problems for well-trained philologists.

The experience of being constantly ‘ordered around’, De Martino seemed to suggest, only exacerbated the “radical alienation” of subalterns who, over time, internalized the “accumulated pain of this dejection” and were, therefore, all the more tempted to detach themselves from the world and slip into debilitating melancholy and/or seek consolation in “otherworldly ideologies.” The practical-political domination of the impoverished masses, colonial and semi-colonial peoples and women had the effect, in other words, of apparently verifying the pseudo-scientific picture of a society of subalterns submerged in a culture with “a possible history that leaves no actual trace in the historiographer’s memory.”

History, however, was having its revenge. Now that the “the popular masses are fighting to enter history [per entrare nella storia] and overthrow the order that keeps them subaltern,” the limitations of bourgeois society and the pseudo-science that supported it were in turmoil. And

---


50 Ibid. Note the similarity with the early Gramsci essay quoted above. I have not been able to verify whether or not De Martino had access to this essay, but since he was an active Socialist party member in these years he certainly had access to individuals with old copies of *Avanti!*
these “popular masses” were not coming empty-handed, begging for scraps of what the humanists called culture. On the contrary “as they burst into history, these masses carry with them their own cultural habits, their unique way of facing the world, their naive millenarian faith, their mythologism, and some magical beliefs.” Like Hobsbawm, De Martino was concerned with what happens to subaltern who have to “break into” modernity, with those who are not “born into the world of capitalism as a Tyneside engineer, with four generations of trade unionism at his back.” And like the British historian, he thought that Marxists had something to offer these “first generation immigrants,” namely a history of these of these cultural habits and access to new tools for preserving presence. But he also acknowledged (as Hobsbawm was loathe to) that this cannot be a one-way exchange.

There is, he insisted, no way to avoid a certain “barbarization” of culture while supporting the subalterns challenge to bourgeois hegemony. To invite subalterns to enter history but leave behind all their cultural cargo before the conquest of the state was tantamount to inviting to leap into an abyss. As the self-appointed leaders of the subaltern masses, Marxists had better start taking stock of the “cultural traditions of the subaltern popular world” and figuring out how to “make use of them in a progressive manner.”

Because if they didn’t, De Martino reminded his readers, someone else would. The “primitive and popular ways of confronting the world represent an immense potential of energies that the dominant classes can use productively, in an openly reactionary sense,” by, for example, celebrating a “tribal mysticism of race and blood.” To neutralize the threat of any future “Odinic Neopaganism,” De Martino encouraged his fellow socialists to take serious Gramsci’s proposition that, to achieve the “absolute secularization and earthliness of thought” Marxism in Italy might have to spread the way the Protestant Reformation did, by absorbing into itself and ‘reshaping’ some of the cultural forms of the converted masses. This might make Italy more barbaric temporarily but, in the long run, the synthesis of ‘modern ideologies’ with ‘medieval culture’ (the

---

51 Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*...
terms are Gramsci’s) was essential for overcoming the limitations of the current humanism, which remained pristine at the cost of leaving half of humanity suffering beyond Eboli.

**The Devil Wears Primitive: Backlash**

In De Martino’s essay, we may detect a significant shift in the portrayal of the subaltern condition, the beginning of a drift (which continues to this day) towards equating subalternity with extreme abjection. Mosca all-but identified the “second stratum” with the “middle classes”; Gramsci frequently used the term “subaltern” to refer to the medieval bourgeoisie who invented the civilization of the Renaissance; De Martino defines the subaltern condition by exclusion from this civilization, either by force or neglect. The sense that subalterns are (or could be) actively involved in directing the social army accordingly begins to disappear. Indeed, one gets the sense that, for De Martino, subaltern is not a metaphor at all. The people he calls subalterns live in a world where the army is not a model of their own society but the only aspect of a foreign society they are ever exposed to. To be subaltern, by De Martino’s definition, is to be *ordered around*.

Before we conclude, as many of his contemporaries did, that De Martino was simply a romantic populist, let us recall that De Martino’s essay was composed and published in the shadow of the electoral campaign of 1948. This was an election that was preceded by a “miracle boom” in which an extraordinary number of Italians reported sightings of the Virgin Mary (leading some commentators to speculate that the Christian Democrats themselves were cooking up these spectacles). This was an election in which Italy emerged as a major front in an international battle between Communism and Capitalism. An election that, as its leading historian

---

52 No doubt to help squash the rumor that “subaltern=proletariat” translators of the new edition of the *Prison Notebooks* go so far as to render a phrase from the text known as “Notes on Italian History” as if it referred to “the history of the bourgeoisie as a subaltern class” whereas Gramsci refers to the “new forces,” possibly echoing Gobetti.

has commented, was more about identity than issues, in which both sides claimed to be the true representatives of Italian nation and its people.  

In this context, the awkward phrase “subaltern popular” expressed more than ambivalence or vague populism on De Martino’s part. It was also, I would suggest, chosen as an alternative to the false images of Italy circulating on all sides, but especially to register his dissatisfaction with the parochialism of those in the neorealist movement and Popular Front, who spoke in loud tones about Gramsci and “national popular culture” but spent precious little time studying the people of the nation, let alone the world.  

By equating the customs of working class socialists with popular culture these so-called progressives had ceded control of the ‘superstitious masses’ and, therefore, the State to Christian Democrats.  

Leaning on Carlo Levi, De Martino’s essay enjoined them to look beyond this narrow definition of the people to discover the subaltern world that lay beneath and beyond the borders of the imagined community of most leftist intellectuals.

This was not a message many Italian Marxists at the time were ready to hear. De Martino’s stood accused (as supporters of Subaltern studies continue to be) of encouraging relativism, falling prey to the primitivism, populism and precisely the sort of Fascist irrationalism his essay purported to oppose.  

Predictably, much of the debate centered around the language of “barbarization” and the suggestion that the subalterns were somehow “outside history.” In a polemic entitled, “The Devil Knows How to Dress Up as a Primitive,” Fortini forcefully rejected

54 Ventresca, Robert, From Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Election of 1948 (University of Toronto Press, 2004)  
56 De Martino’s frustrations with the Socialist party are recorded in the letters he sent to Pavese from this period, collected in Pavese, Cesare, La Collana Viola: Lettere 1945-1950 / (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991) [accessed 9 June 2016]  
57 Il Dibattito Sul Folklore in Italia / (Milano: Edizioni di cultura popolare, 1976) [accessed 9 June 2016]
the apparent equation between the culture of the proletariat and the culture of “illiterate” and “archaic” colonial masses. For Fortini, socialism was at its core an Enlightenment philosophy rooted in the most progressive, advanced sector of society, the proletariat. The road to totalitarian hell was paved by intellectuals like Curzio Malaparte who praised “Italy’s barbarians, the creative and free spirits of the peasantry who have remained loyal to their traditions and customs.”

Some of the most pointed criticisms came from the editors of Societa. Bandinelli (who a few years earlier had looked forward to cultural redemption via the “eruption” of the masses) argued that by suggesting that the “popular masses passage from object to subject of history entails as a necessary consequence the inevitable lowering of the cultural level” De Martino had shown himself to be a typical bourgeois intellectual who “judges as inferior everything that is exterior.” Another of the journal’s founders, Cesare Luporini, granted that this may not have been De Martino’s intention, but insisted that the Socialist deputy had not done enough to distance himself from reactionary conventional wisdom according to which socialism = mass civilization = barbarism. But what Luporini really objected to was the idea that “subaltern popular world” was somehow outside of history.

What does it mean to say that the “subaltern popular world” has entered or irrupted into history. The expression is suggestive, but cannot but have a metaphorical significance. The popular masses have never been outside of history. This would entail imagining a moment outside of the process of production and reproduction of material life…and this is manifestly absurd.

By de-emphasizing the importance of the “development of productive forces on whose basis we are able to draw structural periodization between different epochs of humanity,” De Martino had (in Luporini’s judgment) placed himself outside the ken of “scientific historiography.” As a consequence, despite all the lip service paid to Soviets and their

58 Malaparte, Italia Barbara quoted in “Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture.” Malaparte’s book was, curiously enough published by Gobetti, who called him “Fascisms’s best pen.”
59 Il Dibattito Sul Folklore in Italia, 85.
60 Ibid. 87-8
ethnography, he also underestimated the global cultural significance of the foundation of a “worker’s state” in Russia: “a decisive event not only for the soviets but for all humankind.”

Luporini rejected, moreover, the rigid distinction De Martino seemed to draw between subaltern culture and high culture. By posing matters this way, he risked “projecting backwards, as a constant feature of human history, the acute contrast between the currently decomposing bourgeois culture…and the new, vital energies bursting from the people.” Whereas, in fact, “whenever a ruling class is replaced, as a whole or in part, the dominant culture receives injections of cultural elements, traditions, and customs” from the subaltern classes which transform the superstructure, even if, later, the “new ruling classes” appropriate these elements and turn them into “tools to oppress and dominate the base.” (Note the echoes of Mosca.) For Luporini, then, the subaltern had never been outside of history because the essence of history is labor and it was impossible to draw a hard and fast distinction between subaltern culture and traditional culture because the ruling classes had always appropriated the fruits of subaltern culture just as they had appropriated their labor.

Towards the Outside: Reclaiming Prehistory

De Martino’s initial response to Luporini’s challenge was dismissive and misleading. “Obviously, what I meant by “irruption of the subaltern popular word into history….” His fuller response came over the span of the next twenty years in the trilogy of works on “Southern magic,” composed on the basis of fieldwork conducted with the help of inter-disciplinary teams. In these books, De Martino developed a unique approach to the problem of the antique-in-the-modern that continues to trouble subaltern studies.

61 Ibid. The entire last section of De Martino’s essay is dedicated to Soviet ethnology.
62 Several of De Martino’s collaborators went on to produce important work independently. In addition to Franco Cagnetta, discussed below, we may mention the involvement of Diego Carpitella—Italy’s premier ethnomusicologist and Alan Lomax’s tour guide in Southern Italy—Franco Pinna, who became Fellini’s go-to cinematographer, two psychologists, Giovanni Jervis and Letizia Jervis-Comba, that subsequently played a vital role in the anti-psychiatry movement in Italy and Amelia Signorelli, a student of De Martino’s, who continues to produce important work on migration, gender and modernization.
In Hobsbawm’s early work, as indicated above, the survival of Medieval ideas is explained as a symptom of the backwardness of societies that are only beginning to modernize. Although he didn’t begin to really pursue this idea until Captain Swing and later, more famously and thoroughly, in *The Invention of Tradition*, already in *Primitive Rebels* there are hints of the idea that the “catastrophic” experience of the arrival of capitalism may, in fact, generate nostalgia for “the good old days” that strengthens the pull of ancient ideas. Here we can detect the ongoing influence of Victorian tradition of evolutionary anthropology, which De Martino criticized so harshly, refracted through the work of the Manchester School.

Drawing on the resources provided by French anthropology, Guha rejected this explanation and encouraged his colleagues to look beneath the apparently contradictory jumble of medieval and modern ideas and study the autonomous insurgent mentality—what Sumit Sarkar called a “perhaps largely unconscious logical system lying beneath the surface of myths, beliefs, values and activities”—that organized these ideas. In recent years, this has mutated into an

---

63 See, on this, Michael Lowry’s Löwy, Michael, and Michael Löwy, ‘From Captain Swing to Pancho Villa. Instances of Peasant Resistance in the Historiography of Eric Hobsbawm’, *Diogenes*, 48 (2000), 3–10. Note that the coming of capitalism need not be catastrophic (as measured by some objective statistic) but only be experienced as such. On this score, Hobsbawm is close to E.P. Thompson, who draws on his work in the central section of *The Making of the English Working Class*. That said, we should be careful not to over-stress the similarity between these two heroes of English ‘history from below’. Thompson’s analysis of the relationship between subalterns and intellectuals is closer, in many ways, to De Martino’s than Hobsbawm’s, which may have something to do with his experience in Italy, during WWII and—immediately afterward—working on the Yugoslav Youth Railway. The theme of Thompson’s book on the subject is summed up in the words of a song, “We build the railway, the railway builds us.” Thompson, E. P. Youth Railway, Sumac-Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction*, First Edition edition (British-Yugoslav Association, 1948)

64 My understanding of the Victorian tradition is indebted to George Stocking’s Jr, George W. Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). For a potent illustration about how the perception of catastrophic change can produce militants fighting, in Hobsbawm’s words, “for the past against the future” the reader need look no further than Vivek Chibber’s functionalist incantations about of the importance of “biological needs” and his resistance to the suggestion that culture can generate resources for rebellion—an absurd proposition in his eyes since “every culture tries to normalize domination, every culture tries to justify exploitation, to show it as not only natural but also legitimate. If agents were simply the creations of their cultures, agents would internalize fully and successfully, the normalization of their condition, but they don’t.” [The “Marxist” solution? They are driven by “their interests, their needs,” of course. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbM8HJrsJ4]

65 Sumit Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c. 1905-22” in Guha, Ranajit, ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Vol. 3* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pg. 277. This subject has been much discussed and I will not try to cite all the relevant literature here. Instead allow me to direct the reader to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s
analysis of what Partha Chaterjee calls “the lived presence of historicality in everyday practice,” or—in Guha’s own words an analysis of how “temporal particularity mediates the everyday being-together-in-the-world of all who have time for one another.”

For readers of De Martino, this Heideggerian language (often presented as a foreign graft on a pristine Marxist tradition) will sound oddly familiar. In the Southern trilogy, the Neapolitan scholar rejects what Luporini called a “scientific” periodization based on the development of productive forces in favor of an analysis of various “regimes of existence,” in which the “crises of presence” that are a constant part of the drama of being in the world manifest themselves—and get managed—in certain culturally determined ways. The “immediate reply” he offers in Sud e Magia to the question of why “an archaic ideology still survives in present-day Lucania” is that “even today an archaic regime of existence involves a broad segment of social strata in Lucania.”

As residents of the modern world they are thrown [gettato] into a “society that “must” be made by man and reserved for man” and set apart from a “nature that must be ceaselessly humanized by the demiurgic work of culture.” However, the combination of this imperative with the “the precariousness of life’s elementary goods, the uncertainty of prospects for the

lecture “In Retrospect: Subaltern Studies and Futures Past” at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEW-jVr4fJU and Veena Das’ a prescient analysis of the problems attendant to a the hypothesis of “a categorizing system unconnected with a thinking subject” in “Subaltern as Perspective” in Guha, Ranajit, ed., Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society, Vol. 6 (Oxford University Press, 1996).


67 This is not say that he rejected any use of periodization based on the forces of production. In “The Crisis of Presence and Religious Reintegration,” for example, we read that De while all human societies are exposed to crises of presence “a people who live by hunting and gathering…does not have the same crisis moments as a society founded on cultivation by the hoe…or one which may have passed through the various stages of industrial evolution up to the invention of machinery.” [Farinetti and Stewart 442-443]

68 Martino, Ernesto de, Magic: A Theory from the South, trans. by Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU, 2015), 85.

future, the pressure exercised on individuals by uncontrollable natural and social factors” creates a situation of “psychological misery” that, thus far, subalterns have only been able to remedy magically. If beings thrown into this regime of existence turned to magic it is not because they were nostalgic for the past or stuck in some kind of “primitive mentality,” but because they were consciously choosing the best means at their disposal for dealing with “psychological misery.”

While noting that subalterns around the globe have recourse to analogous techniques, De Martino cautioned against imagining that the rituals he studied were like “archeological remains that survive in a state of absolute isolation.” As De Martino knew from experience, the abstract comparison of magical techniques from around the globe and across expanses of time may give scholars the impression that subalterns are stuck in an earlier stage of human evolution. Instead of proceeding in this manner, De Martino urged his colleagues to situate popular practices within a global civilization dynamic that continues to shape the development of both local elite cultures and distant subaltern worlds.

Throughout his career, De Martino was dogged by some version of the accusation we saw Luporini making above, namely that he made it seem as though the elites and subalterns have, for the greater part of human history, been segregated culturally and politically. This is a proposition that many in subaltern studies have happily accepted. De Martino could not, however, make peace with the idea of “history in fragments.” In the introduction to his final monograph La Terra di Rimorso (the title is a nod to Tristes Tropiques) he explicitly sought to distance himself from the so-called “two histories” hypothesis, which he associated with the 19th century folklorist

---

70 De Martino frequently tried to distinguish his understanding of psychological misery (a term he took from the French psychologist Pierre Janet) from Levy-Bruhls theses. In an extended footnote from Sud e Magia, he argues that “any human society belongs to history to the extend that it activates rational behaviors” and…it opens itself to decisions that are realistically oriented…Magical behaviors do not at all document another logic but the adaptation of man’s technical coherence to that particular end that is the protection of individual presence from the risk of losing itself.” Subaltern culture (and maybe culture more generally), as De Martino defined it, was an assemblage of instruments for keeping the world present-at-hand; subaltern history, as De Martino practiced it, was supposed to help us understand how these tools were forged and function.

71 Ibid. xv.
Giuseppe Pitre. In light of the controversy generated by Chakrabarty’s recent work on “minority histories, subaltern pasts,” it may be worth quoting these lines at some length.

Pitre maintained that there were two histories, that of the dominators and that of the dominated and that the latter must not be confused with the former; thus the time had come to save the memories of the dominated—that is “the people”—which did not coincide with the memories of the dominators. In actual fact, the memories of the dominated in the sphere of religious life were nothing more—and Pitre acknowledges it incessantly—than “echoes of ancient civilization,” “archaeological monuments of thought,” “relics of the past” and “geological strata revealing various epochs.” This is tantamount to saying that, as current facts, they were non-history, both a negative of modern civilization and a marker of a limit to its power.  

This approach, De Martino argues, artificially isolates two traditions that have, in fact, always been part of a single cultural dynamic.

The wreckage of the past and the burden of delayed mental formations, and in particular the prominence held by magical techniques all call into judgment precisely what is highest among hegemonic forms of culture. They invite us to verify pretensions to hegemony and truth and to coherence and expanding, unifying force. 

The guilt that elites are liable to feel when this judgment is pronounced on them and their ancestors tends to generate the Romantic desire to “save the memory of the dominated” or “lower the arms of criticism in the face of the ‘sacred’ and to renounce finding the men and human motivations which have, each in their own time, generated it in the concreteness of diverse cultural situations.” Alternately, the recognition of the limitations of humanism may inspire elites to try to eliminate this “non-history” once and for all by draining the swamps and letting the prehistoric beliefs that breed there ‘die on their own.’

Neither approach, De Martino argued, is much help for subalterns for whom magical amulets are not aesthetic objects or ancient trinkets but real means of fighting off the “immense power of the negative.” “What is at stake,” De Martino writes, “is not only the trifling local

---

question of eliminating” or preserving popular customs but of devising an “intervention not only in the economic social order, but also in the sphere of moral life and custom where another psychological ‘misery’ is lurking.” Without this intervention, subalterns might actually be left more exposed to crises rooted in the feeling of being-acted-upon by foreign forces. Stuck in this situation, subalterns were apt to feel develop a “fear of losing one’s heritage” that produced a “spirit of schism” that, instead of turning subalterns classes against their generals, set them against one another.75

In fascinating piece entitled Lucanian Notes, which Societa published as a kind of post-script to the debate prompted by Intorno a, De Martino laid out his ideas for how subaltern history might help subalterns “abandon the sterile embrace of the corpses of their history and open themselves to a heroic destiny.”76 It consists largely of field notes from his first scientific expedition in the land made famous by Christ Stopped at Eboli. At the outset, he takes pains to point out that the world he found was not (as readers of Levi might have imagined) static, backward, or trapped in the past but, on the contrary, full of people who live in the present and struggle to maintain their sense of presence. A number of these people are named and quoted at length. Towards the middle of the piece, De Martino turns to discuss a bit of a song his team recorded called the “Canzone di Rabata,” which he describes as an “anonymous literary testament of pain and rebellion” that was “born one evening in a group farmers, among whom were Rocco Tammone, Giuseppe Cêtari, Giuseppe Paradiso, in the presence of Rocco Scotellaro (who, however, played a relatively modest part in the elaboration of the song).”77 The song recounts the

75 Pier Paolo Pasolini, a dedicated reader of De Martino, made this point forcefully in a number of places. American readers might be particularly interested in his application of this dynamic to racism in this country, in “Civil War” In Danger: A Pasolini Anthology, ed. by Jack Hirschman (San Francisco, Calif: City Lights Publishers, 2010). On Pasolini and De Martino, see Maggi, Armando, The Resurrection of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini from Saint Paul to Sade by Armando Maggi (University Of Chicago Press, 1703)
76 Ibid. 188
77 Lucanian Notes. [Translation mine} Scotelarao was a poet and the socialist mayor of the town of Tricarico, who also served as a ‘native informant’ for both Carlo Levi and De Martino and later published a kind of oral history of his home region (see below).
injuries suffered by the poor people of Rabata, the false promises of self-appointed saviors, and insults distributed by the Signori, who

Call us Zulus and Bedouin
Cause we eat alongside the hens

This particular passage, De Martino comments, lets us hear the singers’ “consciousness of the irreducible oppositions between the *mondo contadino* and *mondo padronale*.” It also, not incidentally, establishes that the categories De Martino deployed in his initial brief for subaltern history were closer to *emic* categories than they may have seemed. By lumping together Southern peasants and Zulus, De Martino (who would have heard similar insults muttered many times) was merely hurling the bosses’ insults back at them. The song goes on:

You who feign intelligence
Understand nothing at all
If it weren’t for the peasants
You’d be eating your own balls.

“I believe,” De Martino writes directly after citing these lines, “that the *canzone della Rabata* is an eloquent document of the people of Rabata’s ‘will’ to history.” During his time in the area, the Gramscian ethnologist reports that the men and women whom he met were constantly begging him “di dire, di raccontare, di rendere pubblica la storia dei lori patimenti e della loro fermentante ribellione” [to speak, to tell the story of, to make public the story of their trials and of their resolute rebellion]. Is this not evidence, he writes, that they want enter history not only in the sense of seizing control of the State and becoming the protagonists of civilization, but also in the sense that […] the world will take note of the days they have spent without light, covered in the filth picked up between the tomb, the cave, and the barn, and that—with the help of newspapers, the radio and books—their stories will acquire a public character and supply material for tradition and history.

Here, the phrases “eruption into history” and “barbarization” are given a more precise meaning. The subaltern “invasion” of history is not a leap from eternity into time. It signifies, rather, the birth of an (apparently newfound) will to be historicized and thus recognized as human, a desire to see and hear the stories of the people the *Padroni* call barbarians recorded and
recounted outside of the confines of the province where they spend their supposedly
unremarkable lives. The line between history and progressive folklore, at this point, becomes
quite blurred. De Martino believed that, for the sake of subalterns, historians needed to converse
and collaborate more with poets, filmmakers, novelists, musicians and really anyone who could
help them “supply material for tradition and history” that, on the day after tomorrow, the
subalterns could assemble themselves. Years later, the oral historian Alessandro Portelli—who
has frequently written of his debt to De Martino—would express the ideal this way. “The real
service I think we can provide to communities, movements, or individuals is to amplify their
voices by taking them outside, to break their sense of isolation and powerlessness by allowing
their discourse to reach other people and communities.” 78

That this exercise in amplification can have practical political consequences was proven
in 1954 when Alberto Moravia’s journal *Nuovi Argomenti* released a special issue dedicated to
Franco Cagnetta’s *Inchiesta Su Orgosolo*, a study of the living conditions, religious traditions and
‘ways of struggle’ of the people of Orgosolo, a region in Sardinia famous for its bandits. De
Martino and Cagnetta were old friends and working partners; the former is quoted extensively in
the article. The work is divided into the three parts “Ancient Orgosolo,” “Orgosolo and The
State” and “Modern Orgosolo.” Although Cagnetta stresses the antique origins of many of the
people’s cultural practices, he repeatedly stressed that Orgosolo has never “in all of its history,
and much less today, been a truly isolated world: it is an error to think of its as closed off in
itself.” 79 If it appears to be “backwards” or “frozen in time,” Cagnetta argues, this is because for
the past “three thousand years it has been in a state of permanent military occupation.”
Consequently, like Carlo Levi’s *contadini* and other members of the subaltern popular world who
have been subjected to similar “colonial, racist” policies under the banner of civilization, the

78 Portelli as cited in Yow, Valerie Raleigh, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and
Social Sciences* (Rowman Altamira, 2005), 136. See also http://www.amplifyvoices.org/
79 Cagnetta, *Banditi a Orgosolo* (Nuovi Argomenti)
Orgolesi have a deep suspicion of the state and state-based definitions of history and progress. And they are also outside of history in the sense that “until today Italians have spoken about the Orgoselesi but never, except in criminal courts and a few Sardinian newspapers, have the Orgoselesi been allowed to speak for themselves.” {154}

To help break the sense of powerlessness (and the cycle of useless violence that feeds off this sense of powerlessness) Cagnetta tried to “help their stories will acquire a public character” by publishing the autobiographies of three Orgolesi, one between each chapter. As if to prove Cagnetta’s point about the authoritarian character of the Italian state, the architect of the republic’s police force Mario Scelba denounced Cagnetta and the editors of *Nuovi Argomenti* of “insulting the armed forces” and conspiring to incite violence against them and demanded the immediate seizure of the journal. The case was debated in parliament, where Pietro Nenni (the leader of the Socialist Party) declared it to be “the most terrific study published in the last sixty years.” Eventually the courts ruled in Moravia and Cagnetta’s favor and the ensuing controversy may have strengthened the hand of left-wingers within the Christian Democrats and lead to the formation of a more centrist government—still, Cagnetta’s article was not released in book form in Italian until 1975 (fifteen years after Vittorio De Seta used it as the basis for his award winning film of the same name).

The controversy may have helped bring Cagnetta’s work to the attention of a contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement*, who published an article entitled “Voices from the South” highlighting Cagnetta’s work (alongside Rocco Scotellaro’s *Contadini Del Sud*) on October 21, 1955. The reviewer praises Cagnetta’s skill for weaving together interviews, observation and analysis that, despite or perhaps thanks to a certain lack of sociological rigor, “for almost the first time, gives us direct access to the South.” The critic seems particularly drawn to Cagnetta’s analysis of what happens when a community with a penchant for “primitive form[s] of social protest” is confronted with “the immense spiritual power of almost the first movement in history which has spoken to poor Southerners of the modern world in terms which made sense to
them,”—that is to say: to Communism. “For anyone who wishes to understand the political problems of the mid-twentieth century,” he writes, “the third part of Dr. Cagnetta’s study is absolutely indispensable.” The author refrains from saying what particular political problems Inchiesta su Orgosolo sheds such light on, though we may surmise it has something to do with the issue that he asserts “haunts” all the new “Meridionalisti” like Cagnetta and Scottelaro (and, we might add —since he is not mentioned—De Martino), “the problem of transforming the South without losing its old virtues.”

And yet five years later, when the editors of Societa invited the same TLS reviewer to publish a discourse on method to accompany his celebrated study Primitive Rebels, he chose not to mention any of these new students of Sud-alternity. Instead, in this essay—whose title “Per lo studio delle classi subalterne” reminded at least one reader (Carlo Ginzburg) of De Martino—Hobsbawm argues that, after Gramsci, the most important contributors to subaltern history are the students of the crowd in the French Revolution and anthropologists working in tribal rebellion. In a curious twist, with Primitive Rebels, Hobsbawm carried the voice of the bandit Pasquale Tanteddu out into the wide, Anglophone world, but left behind the scholars who first tried to make sense of his testimony. Henceforth, beyond Italy, their work could only appear as a pre-history in hindsight, a history that was only potential. Perhaps it is time we start actualizing it.

80 Hobsbawm, Per lo studio delle classi subalterne, (Societa, 1960). Hobsbawm’s main French references are to Mathiez, Labrousse, and Lefèbvre. The key anthropologists he refers to are Gluckman, Worsley and George Shepperson and Thomas Price, authors of Independent Africa: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising 1915. Carlo Ginzburg alluded to Hobsbawm and De Martino’s influence on him in the 2013 preface to The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (JHU Press, 2013) and later in private conversations we had during his stay at the University of Chicago last year. The idea for this essay arose during those conversations and I would like to take this moment to express my gratitude to Ginzburg for his time and encouragement—and to the organizers of his visit to this institution, who made our meetings possible.