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BUBANDT, NILS

The empty seashell:

Witchcraft and doubt on an Indonesian island.

x, 261pp., bibliog. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. £17.95 (paper)

DE MARTINO, ERNESTO

Magic: A Theory from the South.

Translated and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn.

x, 194pp., bibliog. Chicago: HAU Books, 2015. £26.50 (paper)

LA FONTAINE, JEAN

Witches and demons:

A comparative perspective on witchcraft and satanism.

x, 145pp., bibliog. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016. £19.00 (paper)

It is difficult, at times even for anthropologists, to fathom that witchcraft continues to exist as an operative force in the world. The tradition of framing witchcraft as an analytically significant error has been hardwired into the discipline since the time of Tylor. This safely rationalist position, however, is hard to maintain at present, with the rise of myriad new forms of ‘witchcraft’ – as symbol, as symptom, as New Age religion, or even as a form of therapeutics rooted in modern identity politics.

All of these forms indicate interesting and significant social phenomena that invoke the name of the witch, but often do not themselves seem to directly bear this name. The kitsch of Californian wiccans appearing on Fox News in the United States to explain why they perform monthly spells to ‘bind’ the current American president is much more commonly associated nowadays with ‘the

witch' given the play that mass and social media gives to such 'kooky' stories.ⁱ Yet even the well-intentioned wiccans who try to bewitch Donald Trump allow us glimpses into how witchcraft might still exist as more than just one of many choices available on a personal empowerment 'menu'. Significantly, they seek to *bind* a dangerously narcissistic leader, gaining purchase on 'a world where everything goes wrong'.

The quotation rounding off the paragraph above is cited from the recently released, and long overdue, translation of Ernesto de Martino's *Magic: A theory from the South*. Originally published in 1959 as *Sud e magia* and ably translated from the original Italian by Dorothy Louise Zinn, his book is primarily concerned with the question of how rituals pertaining to magic came to be understood as a problem of knowledge, a framing that clearly signals the work's relevance to contemporary approaches to the issue. Ethnographically focused on what de Martino calls 'low ceremonial magic' in Lucania (an archaic term for an area comprised of most of the Basilicata region as well as parts of the Cosenza and Salerno provinces in Southern Italy), the book is divided into two parts, with a dense yet engaging presentation of the ethnographic evidence in Part One and an extended theoretical discussion of the larger themes that thread through this close evidence forming Part Two. It takes some patience to reach de Martino's larger points; although the author does consistently foreshadow his broader argument from the very beginning, he does not explicitly express the larger stakes of the argument until the opening pages of the second part, well into the middle of the book.

The one concept that does emerge from the dense ethnographic descriptions found in Part One is the notion of 'binding'. Specifically, de Martino links the wide variety of magical practices he observed in Lucania to a great, if subterranean, need to 'bind' forces that would otherwise exert themselves with impunity and without any greater explanation or meaning upon the Italian

peasants who served as his interlocutors. The author clearly and carefully takes the reader through a wide variety of examples to demonstrate the centrality of this practical aspiration. Pierre Janet's (1937) notion of 'being-acted-upon' is referenced early on as an intolerable psychological condition that necessitates the practical use of magic in conditions that, as de Martino dryly makes clear, are themselves baffling and intolerable in their poverty and hardship. In short, magic binds forces that would otherwise overflow life. This relatively straightforward observation – something that de Martino himself notes can be discerned in magical rituals since Greek antiquity – resonates strongly with contemporary magical practices and forms of witchcraft, as observed even in the explanation offered to the obnoxiously incredulous Fox News host by the wiccan in the above anecdote.

The wider stakes for de Martino are very clearly, if somewhat belatedly, expressed in Part Two of *Magic*. In essence, the anthropologist argues that the ritual power of magic produces 'a protected regime of existence' (p. 94) in the face of the otherwise intolerable 'frailness of presence' (p. 87). Ritual magic therefore protects individuals from 'the power of everyday negativity' (p. 85) by enacting a 'de-historification' of a form of life that would otherwise be overwhelmed by the brutal timeliness of historical being (p. 92). Janet's relation to the material is elaborated at this stage, as de Martino demonstrates how ritual absorbs the grinding misfortune of everyday life for Southern Italian peasants into a zone of 'metahistorical sameness' (p. 105) that presents what appears (to the victim, at least) to be a practical set of responses to the negativity and risk that characterizes life-as-such in the region. The close alliance between Catholicism and magic is also explained by de Martino at this juncture as the most effective vehicle by which this necessary metahistorical sameness can be forged, as there is nothing more 'beyond' the time of humans than the power of Christ and the saints (p. 105). Southern Italian Catholicism for de Martino thus

logically exists as the mediator of Christian and magical values, making it clear that typically held view that magic and the Church stand as competitors and opposites is simply not a claim that can be empirically supported.

All nervously defensive annotations from translator Zinn aside (see Footnote 1, pg. xii), de Martino explicitly expresses the details of his ethnographic evidence as facts indicating the spectral presence of *survivals* within the terrain of modern Italian life. Zinn correctly states that de Martino did not subscribe to a Tylorian evolutionary framework, but this clarification hardly vanquishes the spectre of ritual magic as a persistently surviving element of human social life as such. I would argue that the demand to face ritual magic as a form of practice that carves out a space for our survival in the face of ‘a world where everything goes wrong’ constitutes the genius of the work and speaks to its persistent relevance to anthropological research on witchcraft, sorcery, and ritual magic in the present. As de Martino clearly demonstrates, making the precarity of our presence an object of knowledge has hardly served to ameliorate that foundational fragility in any fundamental sense. The belated contribution de Martino makes to debates today is not an answer to the question ‘why do people still believe in ritual magic?’, but rather ‘why do people believe in modernity?’

De Martino’s seemingly perverse inversion of lamenting and by-now-clichéd rationalist questions regarding the persistence of religion and the survival of ‘irrational belief’ has a strongly generalizable relevance. For example, near the end of *The empty seashell*,ⁱⁱ Nils Bubandt takes up precisely the same question, asking: ‘Why do people in Buli believe in modernity in times of witchcraft?’ (p. 239). Taking an approach both historical and ethnographic, Bubandt tackles this seemingly ‘inverted’ question by deftly describing the persistence of witchcraft in the everyday lives of the Buli, a predominantly Christian group of approximately three thousand people who live on Halmahera, the largest island in North Maluku, Indonesia. Drawing from ethnographic

material obtained over twenty years of sustained contact with the community, Bubandt asserts that for the Buli witchcraft remains startlingly close as an imperceptible, aporetic power. Witchcraft in Buli does not attain the status of a locatable, singular object of belief and, without sensationalizing or normalizing the phenomenon, Bubandt stresses that it is local *doubt* rather than firm, unquestioning belief, that sustains witchcraft as a force in Buli.

Bubandt utilizes Jacques Derrida's theory of aporia in order to convey how something can be concurrently inexplicable and real (pp. 35-38). Referring to Meno's paradox about how the known also contains that which is unknowable, he associates the conundrum of magic's aporetic nature with age-old questions that have been posed in Western philosophical theory (pp. 60-61). Submitting the claim that witchcraft cannot, and has never, functioned as an object of belief for the Buli requires considerable ethnographic evidence, and Bubandt's subtle reasoning grounds his theoretical statements within data that helps the reader to grasp this point. He therefore avoids the common mistake of conjoining Continental philosophy with anthropology, which often makes such connections unclear, and successfully demonstrates how the problems that 'the witch' presents to our aspirations to know the world can hardly be quarantined within the world of 'others'.

Bubandt astutely presents historical evidence to position his broader ethnographic statements. His description of the Buli's abrupt conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century is especially compelling, as this eventually served as a strategy to, finally, abolish the *gua* (witch) from the community. Guiding us through the correspondences between customary Buli cosmology and Christian missionaries' promises, the rationality of Buli conversion as a cure for witchcraft's venom is apparent. Since the departed did not return to life and the witch appeared to gain power in the absence of the old rites and tributes, the Buli's resultant doubting of Christian

teaching also seems logical. Bubandt establishes that, for the Buli, Christianity itself came to mimic the witch with its ‘deception,’ proliferating the sense of peril and uncertainty that had led them to initially convert.

Bubandt ultimately moves to demonstrating how a repetition of this cycle of ardent faith followed by extreme scepticism continued during Suharto’s New Order, in this instance ‘modernity’ became the object of belief and subsequent doubt. In light of the regime’s own version of ‘development,’ this facet of the Buli’s history seeps into the neoliberal, developmentalist contemporary era, which is what Bubandt goes on to explore. Today, the noise (*ramai*, lit. busy) of ‘entrepreneurial’ forms of living overpowers the squawking of the witches in their bird form; however the Buli remain uncertain and the witches endure (p. 213). Their precarity in the face of the radical negativity of the *gua* is palpable in Bubandt’s rendering, allowing the reader to enter the de-historicised space (striking similar to the de-historicised space of the Italian peasants described by de Martino) where the beleaguered Buli face off with a persistent, seemingly eternal, spectral threat.

While I do not wish to exaggerate the correspondence, the resonance between Bubandt’s recent writing and some of the ideas found in de Martino’s older work is striking. This is not to say, however, that these resonances extend to most contemporary social scientific research regarding witchcraft and magic. If anything, the ‘mainstream’ of such social science labours to institute safely impermeable divisions between witchcraft and science, between fact and belief, that would serve to make our own forms of knowledge immune to the proliferating, viral doubt that constantly threatens to erupt from the fragility of our own being in the present. Jean La Fontaine’s *Witches and demons* stands as an exemplar of this defensive, ‘mainstream’ approach.

In all fairness, it should be said that *Witches and demons* provides an interesting account of how anthropological knowledge of witchcraft can be put to some practical use, primarily in the solving of illegal activities that arise out of techniques of alternately summoning or repelling the witch. Having said this, however, it is quite clear that La Fontaine advances a version of witchcraft which is quite opposed to those versions one finds in de Martino and Bubandt. In La Fontaine's version, witchcraft and 'Satanism' are carefully opposed not only to evidence-based science, but also to a secularised version of religion that 'behaves itself' in the contemporary world, coming into view for the reader as merely an anachronistic glitch in the program of the present age.

In short, La Fontaine is interested in witchcraft as *crime*. The category of crime is articulated in two distinctive ways in the book, one explicit and another implicit. The explicit version of witchcraft as crime is the most interesting element of the book. Reading a bit like a serviceable *policier*, the reader gains a valuable understanding of the complexity faced by police in the United Kingdom in investigating and prosecuting violent crimes arising out of ritual activities associated with witchcraft. The examples La Fontaine explores are primarily drawn from two notorious phenomena where the witch has recently come into public view in the UK: so-called 'Satanic' child abuse cases and ritual murders traced back to recent immigrant communities from various parts of sub-Saharan Africa. As La Fontaine's book is published as part of Berghahn's 'Studies in Public and Applied Anthropology' series, the focus is primarily on how anthropological knowledge served as a resource for investigators seeking to unravel a series of high-profile 'witchcraft' or 'satanic' cases in recent times. Possessing a deep understanding of cultural context and a factual mastery of ritual practices coming from 'elsewhere' (in time, in space), the anthropologist in La Fontaine's account is *useful* to the police in that they simply possess better facts that can be put to more effective use in solving the horrific crimes the author recounts. In a

time when the ‘employability’ of the anthropologist is a nagging concern, *Witches and Demons* gives us a happy ending of sorts.

The mastery of what is ‘really’ going on that makes La Fontaine’s happy ending possible is haunted, however, by the very precarity highlighted by de Martino and Bubandt. Quite unconvincingly, *Witches and demons* seeks to articulate a historical version of witchcraft that can be safely contained within the ‘rational’ knowledge that tries (and fails) to assuage the precariousness of presence that de Martino argues survives in spite of all scientific attempts to effect a risk management of the soul. Thus, the implicit version of witchcraft as crime in La Fontaine’s book emerges as an unconvincing attempt to disassociate a concern with evidence and ‘the real’ from active forms of engagement with the witch (p. 5). We are dealing with credulous ‘believers’ in *Witches and demons*, beings ensnared by dogma, unconcerned with cause and effect, and somewhat bafflingly (unless one has the ‘right’ expertise) impervious to the way things ‘really are’ in their motivations. The overarching crime, the implicit conspiracy that La Fontaine seeks to also unravel, is witchcraft’s assault on rationality itself. How can scientists dominate the ‘nonsense’ that witchcraft represents? La Fontaine, via a register of ‘cultural sensitivity’ and ‘expertise’, seeks to fine-tune the techniques of an epistemological border police and put this ‘nonsense’ in its proper (outside) place. To the contrary, de Martino and Bubandt, strangely like the wiccans we started with, seem to demonstrate that efforts to institute such boundaries, virtual or material, only serve to make our precarity all the more apparent.

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Janet, P. 1937. Psychological strength and weakness in mental diseases. *Factors determining human behavior* (ed) R. K. Menton, 64-106. CUP

ⁱ For a summary of the interview referred to here, see Jarrett Lyons. 20 September 2017. Watch a witch fully dismantle Tucker Carlson on his own show. *Salon.com* (available online: <https://www.salon.com/2017/09/20/tucker-carlson-show-witch-amanda-yates-garcia/>, accessed 7 November 2017).

ⁱⁱ I have previously published an extended single review of *The empty seashell*, however this section of the article is an entirely new and more succinct version of my thoughts on the book. See Richard Baxstrom. 2016. Review of *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island* by Nils Bubandt. *American Anthropologist* **118:1**, 185-186.