

## BOOK FORUM

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### Recovering the sense of sight

Berardino Palumbo's vision for Italian anthropology's possible redemption

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Comment on **BERARDINO PALUMBO**, *Lo strabismo della DEA. Antropologia, accademia e società in Italia*, Palermo, Edizioni Museo Pasqualino, 2018, pp. 289.

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It is a rare thing when scholars take on their chosen fields and commit them to unsparing analysis as total social facts. I traffic in an old-fashioned term, “total social fact”, not in homage to Durkheim or his successors, but rather in search of a way of describing the scope of Palumbo’s ambition and achievement. I struggle to nominate other exemplars from analyses of other social sciences that can compare with Palumbo’s remarkable combination of Italian anthropology’s institutional history and its entanglements with the Italian state and civil society, as well as the articulation of its mission and theory in light of the development of the powerful hegemonic anthropologies emanating from the United States, Great Britain, and France. The result is indeed a bracing, comprehensive, and convincing critique of his field, albeit tempered by indications that the Italian path contains some seeds for its own redemption.

Sociocultural anthropology in Italy has entered a period of precipitous slide, its intellectual core in universities and its impact on public life shrinking, a process that Palumbo describes in complete and unblinking detail. In the space provided, this short essay explores important dimensions of his argument. First, Palumbo lays out the historical demography of socio-cultural anthropology in Italy, judiciously noting the shifting geography of

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*Recovering the sense of sight: Berardino Palumbo's vision for Italian anthropology's possible redemption*

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its centers from South to North. Second, he discusses how Italian anthropology's (and Italy's for that matter) unfavorable embedding in the hierarchy of nations and more politically powerful scholarly knowledges has aggravated the internal intellectual tensions of a field already struggling with its vocation in a class-divided, markedly inequitable society. Third, Palumbo points out a possible route to recovery through the rediscovery of Ernesto De Martino's thought and works, noting especially how constituting a dialectical relationship between state and/or civil society and subaltern status can transcend theories that fail to account for a modern Italy characterized simultaneously by bureaucracy *and* magic, religion *and* politics, administrative rationality *and* clientelism, and the extremes of centralization *and* "campanilismo" (Palumbo 2018: 242).

### *The demography of decline*

Beginning in 2008, as Palumbo points out, sociocultural anthropology in terms of university posts began its demographic decline, dropping by 27%, even as the total Italian professorate fell by only 4%. Sociocultural anthropology doctoral programs disappeared or were merged with other subject fields, leaving Milano-Bicocca the only stand-alone degree-granter. It is especially grievous for Palumbo that the South, once the hot springs of anthropology with several training centers, is no longer; what forward momentum the discipline possesses now comes from the North.

The shrunken sociocultural anthropological labor market provides only 23% of the nation's 400 PhDs with academic employment. For the 3,000 additional former students with one or more anthropological degrees, Palumbo is concerned that their fates are joined with the mass of over-qualified and under-employed Italian young adults.

As Palumbo notes, anthropology's fall in the United States and Great Britain began earlier. By way of comparison, a cursory glance at the statistics available suggest that the United States is producing 50% more anthropology PhDs than it did in 1985 (530 in 2014), even as the labor market for anthropology doctorates is just as dismal as that of Italy's – only 21% get tenure-track jobs. Its "market share" of university majors, 11,000 per year, has slumped to 42<sup>nd</sup> in a field of 48, outrunning only music, philosophy, architecture, arts management and agriculture in the contest for the hearts and minds of American college students. (Speakman *et al.* 2018) The number of American anthropologists, 7,600 at last count by the U.S. Labor Department, is expected to grow by only 300 or 4% by 2026. Job growth will be "slower than average", they say. Put a bit less bureaucratically, U.S.

anthropology in terms of its practitioners has entered a period of long-term stagnation, while the overall market for postsecondary teachers, including the professoriate, is expected to grow by 15% over the same period (U.S. Department of Labor 2019).

While the politics of austerity may ultimately be the cause of the triage of winner and loser disciplines, in this case in Italy and the United States, they do not explain why sociocultural anthropology is slipping or stagnating in these climes. In Italy, as Palumbo notes, sociocultural anthropology university staffing is falling along with the classic liberal arts fields of history, geography, and philosophy, while pedagogy and psychology have logged increases in university faculty. In the United States, by way of contrast, the disciplinary shifts noted in Italian universities would be attributed to the panicky vocationalism spreading among undergraduate students that are currently abandoning the liberal arts at record rates for degrees in computer science and business. In Italy, the reasons appear more subtle, and one of them, Palumbo reasons, is that sociocultural anthropology had not only lost its historically unique vision of the human condition attributable to the influence of Croce, Gramsci, and De Martino, but it had lost its voice in civic life as it splintered into self-regarding, professionalizing cliques during soul-losing Craxi years.

### *The wars within*

As Italian state patronage of anthropology and of Italian universities grew from the eighties through the 1992 economic crisis, patrimonialism reigned. In anthropology, key anthropologists like tribal chiefs, Palumbo argues with an abundance of supporting data, sought to capture the new positions and academic funds for themselves and their *bravi*, and thus effectively form tribes. Local chiefs even confederated, forming alliances across universities in the South and the North. The politics of positions also affected the growth of the field: analogous to the deleterious gene that is propagated and shapes the genetics of a small group, the chiefs (with a few notable exceptions) were more interested in an anthropology of Italy than one considering the rest of the world, and they bequeathed their preferences to their students. By 2016, half of Italy's anthropologists specialized in Italy, and more than half of the publications of senior professors concerned Italy. Moreover, the chiefs were not especially dedicated to doing empirical or ethnographic research and were satisfied writing in Italian for other Italians.

Generational differences have emerged. Scholars entering the professorate during the nineties worked abroad in greater numbers, were more empirical and more ethnographic in their method. However, the chiefs

had left a legacy in their wake of an inwardly focused anthropology scattered among sub-field interests (kinship and family, medicine, religion, for instance) and practitioners of “Fieldwork Italian Style” that Palumbo considers a pale and in some sense inauthentic copy of what had become the ethnographic standard in the Anglo-American and French traditions.

Anglo-American anthropologists of Italy have not helped matters. Indeed, they have contributed to the absence of Italian anthropological voices in the world anthropological community by systematically ignoring Italian research as well as important Italian theoretical and historical problematics that fruitfully occupied the critical work flowing from the Italian Marxian traditions, including that of De Martino and many others. Instead of tapping the wisdom several generations of Italian scholars possessed of important insights into the work of Gramsci and the copious work done *in situ* by Italian social scientists, the Anglo-Americans produced crude and uninspired versions of his theories and often banal applications of his ideas to their research. For many of them, Italy might well have been just another colony or postcolonial opportunity.

### *Recovery prospects and a personal journey*

Palumbo believes that the path of recovery for Italian sociocultural anthropology passes through a renewed appreciation of the work and thought of Ernesto De Martino. The fundamental reason, it seems to me, is that De Martino accepted that our worlds are composed of the different, often contradictory memories and beliefs that we carry from our pasts and in our presents, and that the resolution in action of our differences in our memories and beliefs is a normal, if freighted human exercise. By accepting the past in our presents as part of the human condition, De Martino rejected the impulse to exoticize or colonize persons whose subaltern status posed risks to their lives and wellbeing. Instead his anthropology sought to understand the predicaments of persons whose status, ideas, and beliefs should not be used to stand in the way of their possession of the full opportunities of citizenship in a modern world. De Martino was a modernist, albeit a critical one, for whom the capitalist state was an historical component of class rule and ruling class ideology a lash upon the backs of society’s subalterns.

To these propositions, Palumbo adds himself, or rather his family and professional histories – and this is the crowning touch of this important book. As much as he has assimilated as his father before him into a state-bureaucratic society, he as a professor of anthropology and his father as a

*carabinieri*, “rational choices” in post-World War II Italy, Palumbo and his family, no less than millions of Italians not born to and part of the ruling class know of other worlds and other beliefs specific to *their* history that speaks along with their experience in civil society and the state through their actions and conditions what they see. If one does anthropology in Italy, or world-wide for that matter, Palumbo, I believe, is saying that an anthropology that recovers the real lives of people without prejudice and underscored by a belief in human equality and dignity can find its place in this odd new world in which we live.

And in this I salute him.

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