

BOOK REVIEW: THE END OF THE WORLD:
CULTURAL APOCALYPSE AND TRANSCENDENCE

De Martino, Ernesto. 2023. *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, translated by Dorothy Louise Zinn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 352 pages.

Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) was a Neapolitan anthropologist and philosopher with a keen interest in religion. Dorothy Zinn's translation of de Martino's *Nachlass* on cultural apocalypses is part of a European reissue movement of the work that began in 2016. Throughout his career, de Martino approached the study of superstitions, myths, and ritual practices still prevalent in southern Italy from a historical-religious perspective. His notable works include *Morte e pianto rituale* (1958) which focuses on mourning rituals; *La terra del rimorso* (1961), which explores the mythology of taranta and was translated by Zinn as *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (2005); and *Sud e magia* (1959) also translated by Zinn as *Magic: A Theory from the South* (2015), which examines the persistence of magical practices in the rural world of southern Italy. Additionally, de Martino devoted a substantial part of his research to the subject of cultural apocalypses.

The text *The End of the World: A Contribution to the Analysis of Cultural Apocalypses* (*La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi della apocalissi culturali*), in fact, has a peculiar history. It was born as an ambitious project by de Martino, who had begun to think about the cultural forms of the apocalypse, such as myths and legends, but also religious or para-religious rites and practices that dealt with the theme of the end of the world, and at the same time proposed strategies to overcome collective fears. In line with de Martino's anthropological approach, the project involved comparing documents from different contexts on the subject of the end of

the world, particularly cultural apocalypses. Throughout history, each group developed a unique relationship with the theme of the end of their cultural world, organising myths and rituals essential for overcoming crises and re-establishing the centrality of human history. De Martino's ambition was to reconstruct this material and use it to find constants in the formation of humanity's cultural systems. The project was largely successful but remained incomplete due to the anthropologist's untimely death.

After his death, his student Clara Gallini edited the materials and notes that de Martino had written for the project. A vast amount of material, challenging to rearrange, was first presented to the Italian public in 1977, helping to highlight appropriately de Martino's philosophical elaboration. The publication of his *Nachlass* shed new light on the important works published during his lifetime and deepened the understanding of a profound reflection that reshaped 20th-century Italian philosophy. The volume was then reissued in 2002, edited by Gallini and Marcello Massenzio, with a new introduction but the same content. The Italian reader who approached the book encountered a challenging read because, in addition to the more structured passages, it presented with great philological care all of de Martino's archival notes, including the multiple drafts of many texts that had followed one another over time. It was a way of proposing the elaboration in its becoming, as if *The End of the World* were an open work inviting the community of scholars to develop further de Martino's original ideas.

However, starting from the second edition of the text in 2002 a different story begins, ending in 2016. During these years, Massenzio, Gallini (who sadly passed away in 2017), Giordana Chartuy, and Daniel Fabre worked on reconstructing de Martino's posthumous opus, while preparing the French translation of the text. This translation certainly enhanced de Martino's dialogue with European philosophy and anthropology, as it selected from the variants of his notes those where the author's thought appears more complete and philologically precise. The following year (2017) this edition, though with a different introduction, was also republished in Italy. *The End of the World* now appears as a complete work, perhaps unfinished, but organised and coherent. It is no longer a laboratory, but a systematic text that effectively presents de Martino's accomplished reflection.

The translation edited by Zinn follows this approach and presents de Martino's text to English-speaking audiences, as reconstructed by his direct students, Massenzio and Gallini. This publication is part of an endeavour worthy of gratitude: to enhance the international significance of the Italian anthropologist's reflection, especially in such a decidedly particular moment, when wars and the climate crisis make the theme of apocalypse even more present. Indeed, it is not only the form of the work that is valued, but also the content. It is not only a matter of reiterating the profound relationship between de Martino and European philosophy (mainly German and French) but also of presenting the content of a philosophical, anthropological, and historiographical elaboration that is relevant to our era and projects itself into the future. De Martino addresses the theme of cultural apocalypse from different perspectives. However, the one that appears most important is the apocalypse of Western civilisation in contemporary times. De Martino is one of the Italian authors, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini or Cesare Pavese, who share a strong cri-

tique of capitalist civilisation. However, the anthropologist never succumbs to nostalgia for the ancestral or the 'primitive', even as he acknowledges the ability of previous eras to develop ideologies and cultural contexts that enabled humanity and peoples to write their own history. Capitalist civilisation can no longer construct myths about its own 'end' and can only conceive of the apocalypse as the complete end of humankind – that is, as the end of the world *tout court* – due to objective and external causes. In short, according to de Martino (1977), contemporary civilisation is unable to produce a mythological elaboration of its end, revealing a profound crisis.

In her introductory essay, Zinn rightly emphasises this theme and notes how de Martino's reflection, along with the intellectual context surrounding him, allows us to reflect on the possibilities for overcoming a cultural, social, and human crisis. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the increasingly frequent environmental catastrophes make us aware of the possibility of humanity's end. However, in the absence of appropriate cultural tools, they also risk leaving us without solutions. Zinn appropriately cites movements like Fridays for Future and considers them among the few remaining chances for collective processing of the ongoing crisis and for imagining a future for humankind.

The brief commentary on the translation also deserves attention. Zinn expresses (p. 9) the challenges of translating de Martino's own translations of foreign philosophers and attempts to reconcile the variations present in the Italian editions of the works of European philosophers with whom he engages in a complex dialogue. Particularly commendable is the choice to update de Martino's language in those passages that do not reflect gender equality, such as replacing "man" with "mankind" or "humanity". The work is further enhanced by a relevant glossary that helps the English reader to navigate in de Martino's language.

Zinn, already esteemed as a commentator and scholar of de Martino, thus accomplishes a courageous task: restoring the most recent editions of *The End of the World* in one of the most widely spoken languages. This difficult yet important endeavour completes the promotion of de Martino's thinking in a global context, allowing him to contribute to debates – such as surrounding the crisis of Western civilisation – that are more relevant than ever.

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