

Building a bridge does not mean to pass it. Some reflections on the fate of an anthropological classic: *Il ponte di San Giacomo* (1982)

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1. As important and influential as Luigi Lombardi Satriani's work and personality have been for Italian cultural anthropology, his direct impact abroad is modest in comparison. This also applies to Germany, where a translation of *Il ponte di San Giacomo* (1982) has been available since 1996¹. I will discuss the reasons for this in the following. First, however, I would like to outline the situation in which the book, which was written together with Mariano Meligrana and is still appreciated in Italy far beyond the borders of the discipline, entered.

In sharp contrast to Italy, where the border between cultural anthropology – or philosophically and literarily informed folklore studies – and ethnology, with only the latter including the studies of non-European societies, runs rather as a North-South border, the German-speaking countries know a well established autonomy of the two subjects. There, today's social and cultural anthropology developed from ethnology or "Völkerkunde", which in turn is divided into a branch of research based on fieldwork and into museum anthropology with its interest in historical and material evidence. Anglo-Saxon social anthropology exercised a great influence since the post-war period, but the sociological contributions should not be neglected either – as they were nourished by such diverse authors as Wilhelm E. Mühlmann (Shirokogoroff's interlocutor and a fervent Nazi, particularly present in the writings of Ernesto de Martino and Vittorio Lanternari) or Trutz von Trotha (with his analysis of the connection between colonisation and early state-building in Western Africa). At the same time, philosophical questions or those that must be described as "universalist" remained far more present than in the Anglo-Saxon world, echoing the speculative heritage of its roots in Ger-

¹ Ute Schwab, by then research associate at the University of Messina and well acquainted with Lombardi Satriani's work from the time of his presence there, has fostered and managed the translation.

man Idealism (and, subsequently, in Frobenius' morphology or Father Schmidt's attempt to empirically prove monotheistic faith as the original religion). The recently deceased Fritz W. Kramer with his theory of "passions", but also the ethnologist Thomas Hauschild with his particular interest in the intertwining of power and magic in the Mediterranean belong in this line. The present state, on the other hand, sees an increasingly social-scientific orientation of the subject, which in Germany is becoming less attracted by theoretical *Sonderwege* (special paths).

The other discipline within the field of German Anthropology is European Ethnology, previously known as "folklore studies", respectively "Volkskunde". At first glance, it differs from "normal" ethnology mainly insofar as the methodological king's road of field research, meaning "participant observation", is replaced by philological scholarship or even the methodology of standardised interviews. Apart from the latter, Volkskunde has many more points of contact with Italian "Antropologia culturale" than normal German ethnology does. Folklorists were likewise interested in the oral traditions of a largely illiterate internal population, thus cultivating a cultural historiography from below and for a world before industrialisation. The main focus was on the rural area and its kind of "worldmaking", while urbanity with its microworlds of emerging subcultures were barely discussed until 15-20 years ago. Unlike the Italian "Demologia", however, Volkskunde/European ethnology is not based on a discourse of emancipation, at least not in the sense of Gramsci, whose writings became decisive for many Italian colleagues. German folklorists initially tended to look for answers to universal questions – the *ursprüngliche Sprachform*, the original language form, for instance – or the timeless soul of the German nation which at the moment of its unifications seemed to evaporate. All this was hoped to be found in the simpler conditions prevailing in the countryside. The scholarly approach was often nurturing and preserving. Rarely were the poverty, misery or backwardness of a marginalised population group at the centre of the study. Instead, it was about what Wilhelm Grimm called the "unaltered sense", an eternal treasure that had finally to be lifted for a nation long struggling to find its state form. And which was therefore also apologetically praised in the Third Reich. After the end of the Nazi regime, however, folklore was faced with the question of how to deal with its contribution to the National Socialist practice and ideology. Did the study of folk culture automatically lead to *völkisch* thinking? Was it necessary, in the eyes of some folklorists, to throw the baby out with the bathwater? For many scholars, a successful strategy to avoid the suspicion of intellectual and political backwardness was to focus on the transition from preindustrial to industrial and

now postindustrial lifeworlds, to examine social and cultural transformations². The ambivalently oscillating horizon of loss and expectation, liberated from identitarian bias, proved to offer a productive framing and perhaps accounts for most of the appeal of “European Ethnology” in Germany today. At the same time it implies a disappearing independence vis-à-vis social and cultural anthropology, which is more interested in non-European issues. Nowadays, this independence persists primarily in the discipline’s tradition, or more precisely: insofar as scholars decide to embrace this tradition. It is not a very audacious prognosis that, in the long run, the once competing, once complementing anthropological disciplines will probably merge.

Italian anthropology, as represented by Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani over a long period of time, was also strongly involved in national queries. Italy, too, belongs to the “belated nations” (to mention the title of Helmut Plessner’s influential book from 1935) whose cultural unity preceded the political one. In addition, however, there were dichotomies that were fundamentally different from those in Germany: political unification did not take place under the strongest power (as in Germany through Prussia), but rather through a relatively small kingdom that was insignificant in European terms (the Savoy in Piedmont), which tended to promote internal tensions and thus the particularisation of respective agglomerations of folk and high culture. The urban cultures of the Italian north were contrasted with relatively independent pastoral and peasant cultures, which – although this does not correspond to the empirical findings – were passed off as representative of the South. Much less than in Germany, fascism was a *völkisch* movement, much more it considered itself as modernist. This made it relatively easy for dissident intellectuals to identify a haven of innocence and counter-culture in the peasant cultures that were collectively discriminated against by academics, politicians and other modernisers (while peasant culture in Germany became a highly *völkisch* object). That these cultures were hijacked under the signum of “Mezzogiorno” and “meridionalismo” was, however, again a volte-face of the local elites. The intellectual as well as the historical distance that Carlo Levi was able to play out and negotiate in his emblematic work *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945), in view of his encounter with the people of Lucania often collapsed again under the scholarly preoccupations. But this was also due

² An influential book in German folklore studies, Hermann Bausinger’s *Volkskultur in der technischen Welt*, was published in Ernesto de Martino’s most productive period, in 1961. It marks the end of the narration of a folklorical context untouched by technology and modernization and instead focusses on reciprocal practices of appropriation.

to the fact that the focus of interest was no longer on a distant lifeworld – the “Meridione” – as another possibility of life, but as another possibility of oneself, for whose limitation one was as much to blame as a member of the regional elite and as one who remained responsible for its preservation as a cultural resource. Italian anthropologists, insofar as they came from southern Italy or the centre, thus found themselves in a difficult double bind. This, in my view, applies to Ernesto de Martino as well as to Luigi Lombardi Satriani. And it makes their texts problematic from a scholarly perspective, while their literary reading, on the other hand, turns out to be extremely productive.

Although it might sound a little exaggerated, it is a temptation to frame that double bind as scholarly “existentialism” and to link it not only to French, but also to German encounters: like Ernesto de Martino also Lombardi Satriani was familiar with the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) as well as with the German essentialisation of *Heimat* and its two-fold character as the object of destruction and the destructive force as well. This clearly resonates in de Martino’s unfinished project *Fine del mondo* (1977) which, as Francesco Faeta confirms, is lurking in the back of *Il ponte di San Giacomo*.

2. Lombardi Satriani has repeatedly made it clear what the object of his research was: “Cultura popolare” specifically as the culture of the subaltern, the dominated classes. This perspective is undoubtedly directly influenced by the reading of Antonio Gramsci, who in his *Osservazioni sul folklore* nevertheless identifies moments of resistance in subaltern cultures, although these are still interpreted in the sense of the hegemony, for example as signs of religion. On the other hand, as the grandson of the nobleman and folk researcher Raffaele Lombardi Satriani, Luigi Lombardi Satriani may have become acquainted with a mode of collecting ethnographic data which, although carried out with personal sympathy, nevertheless significantly reproduces social distance. Baron Raffaele Lombardi Satriani, at his court, collected the folklore of Calabria in several volumes, mostly through subordinates from his immediate surrounding. Luigi Lombardi Satriani, on the other hand, politically active on the left and also known to be a senator of the Italian Republic for Sinistra Democratica and the reformist socialists of the l’Ulivo, has tried to overcome this power imbalance by his research. However, it does not seem far-fetched to state that hegemonic practices of collecting recur in the practices of academics who were often in long-standing personal dependence of the respective “ordinario”. This is by no means Lombardi Satriani’s problem, but rather one of Italian research organisation in general – in this case, though, also due to Lombardi Satriani’s significant insti-

tutional roles, it touches on an important aspect of his activity. On reading other writings, for example the numerous essays in which Lombardi Satriani deals not least with the history of knowledge of his discipline in an international perspective – for example in *Un ponte dalla materia verso l'eterno* (2021) – a defence of the gentleman collector leaps to the eye. The assumption that material culture assembles the wholeness of life relations, nevertheless, seems in general more nostalgic than progressive, and is therefore perhaps due to the specific situation in which an Italian anthropologist finds himself, who together with the world of the subaltern wants to preserve that of the hegemonic forces as well, especially as it is familiar to him. In other words, precisely because the culture of the subalterns is read as a “culture of contestation” (in Italian: “cultura di contestazione”) and thus remains permanently related to the contested ones, the “cultura dei contestati” is also thematised in the only valid way, namely as a culture and lifework that is equally threatened to disappear, but whose disappearance a progressive intellectual is only allowed to regret within certain parameters. (This bias in my view is extremely intriguing and deserves further research, *sine ira et studio*).

This impression also arises in view of the *opera magistralis*, the study written with Mariano Meligrana *Il ponte di San Giacomo. L'ideologia della morte nella società contadina del Sud* (1982). But first, the great value of this study deserves to be emphasised. It consists neither only in the collected traditions, be it legends, rituals, proverbs, nor does it consist only in the insistence on a dialectic of this world and the beyond, which is made possible by means of the “bridge”, nor does it finally consist merely in the depiction of a peasant other-worldliness (the image of the bridge suggests, after all, that our world can be seen from the other world). The value of this study also lies in the resoluteness with which it examines both the old, traditional form of dealing with death and contemporary forms of using the bridge as a medium. Thus, it is not only the detailed descriptions of the rituals of Nocera Terinese or the analysis of the sections devoted to the dream as an institution for the mutual visitation of the living and the dead that captivate the reader due to their meticulousness and literary quality, but also the detailed chapter on the seer Natuzza Evolo (1924-2009). This woman from the *zona grigia* between the residues of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and what is called popular religious tradition mobilised, like many of her peers, the dead – in that ambivalent way in which the dead signify on the one hand a promise, on the other a threat. And it is precisely this ambivalence that has kept Natuzza Evolo connected beyond her death to discourses of social and/or religious liberation as well as to discourses of order, church and power. Liberation, as the German philosopher Christoph Menke recently pointed out, must be understood as a

dynamic event, as a happening, and to store this eventfulness, to keep it ready as a “dehistoricised” horizon, is the business of religion in the broad sense³.

With “dehistoricisation” (*destorificazione*) we would also have arrived at the mythical machine that Ernesto de Martino – perhaps the most important founding figure of Italian cultural and social anthropology after the Second World War – identified as the formal condition of everything religious. Luigi Lombardi Satriani has acknowledged his debt to de Martino on several occasions. This applies to de Martino’s studies on *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria* (1958) and especially on the “lamento funebre”, in which the author meticulously analyses the transformation of lamentation into hope for the hereafter, that is, the disciplining of mourning as a moment of mastery as well as of Christian civilisation, whereby the negative, the abysmal nature of loss, remains present in the rituals of the peasant population like in a filmstill from the past, revealing a pagan trajectory of the unconsolated. Mourning, as de Martino puts it, bears an inherently effervescent energy that both Christianity and today’s bourgeois world fears. The constitutive ambivalence, the condensation of fear, wrath and terror in peasant ritualization as spatially and temporally limited valves of effervescence become primarily dialectical moments in the view of Lombardi Satriani. In this sense he even seems more “demartiniano” than the master himself. In *Il ponte di San Giacomo*, the authors particularly emphasise the gain of control over the return of the dead by granting them circumstances of appearance. In this way, the reader often has the impression that the subaltern world of Lombardi Satriani is essentially a functioning world, not that different from the works of the Anglo-Saxon structural functionalists. But why then did it perish? Only because of the dominance of the rulers, their capitalist logic applied to the feudal order? And not because there was something in the feudal order itself that at least provided, if not a home for this logic, an access to it and was able

³ Despite the fact that it might seem ungrateful I would like to remind Lombardi Satriani’s readers that the *Ponte di San Giacomo* also omits certain cults which likewise would have fit in its research focus and which certainly were cults both authors had an at least indirect knowledge about. For instance cults of dead whose return to the world of the living took the forms of a millenarian movement, as the devotion for “Glorioso Alberto”. These cults contributed to shifts in tradition patron-client-relations – especially in the late 1960s – but are barely discussed as such. The millenarian character of this and other cults would have needed to be compared with what happened in the decolonizing world outside of Europe (the only scholar who looked for that path is Vittorio Lanternari, 1960). So this part of the “Ponte” remains a “road not taken”, to put it in terms of an American poet.

to merge with it? One would have liked to ask Lombardi Satriani these questions, certainly in the expectation of detailed and instructive, sometimes polarizing answers. Lombardi Satriani noted in the preface of the book that the examination of the peasant world and above all of its limits, as they are ideally worked through with the theme of death, has a non-negotiable personal aspect: “l’interrogazione sulla morte non può prescindere da quella sulla propria esperienza”, and: “one does not touch the theme of death with impunity”. This statement refers not least to the long and complicated debate of Italian intellectuals on the subject of death, as present in Mario Praz and Ernesto de Martino. *Il ponte di San Giacomo* is their poetic-empirical application.

3. Finally, I would like to try answering why this compendium, for all its documentary skill and linguistic brilliance, remained an Italian book that did not cross a certain threshold in reception. At least not the one towards the north, which I deeply regret. Ernesto de Martino virtually anticipated a blueprint of this response, albeit from the Italian side, as a mimicry: In an essay in his *Furore Simbolo Valore* (1962), he sketches a bourgeois situation in his home at Monteverde Vecchio in Rome, engrossed in reading Benedetto Croce’s *Storia d’Europa nel secolo decimonono* (1933), when a ringing at the door startles him. Johann Kruse, a teacher and activist in the movement against witchcraft from Hamburg, is waiting for him outside. He asks him to assist him in an expert opinion against the belief in witches. Kruse’s insistence and his apparently fanatical speech earn him the epithet of the “SS of Enlightenment” from de Martino’s side. This is not entirely fair, if only because accusations of witchcraft are common in a society of limited goods characterised by mistrust; with regard to Hamburg, which had just been destroyed in the Second World War, when the German drive for great power turned against itself, they are even less surprising⁴. De Martino rebukes a certain German intemperance, which at one time appears in the intention to conquer, at another time in the insistent request for help.

What one understands from this description in *Furore Simbolo Valore* is that the German dissolution of the boundaries – or, should one rather say, its collapse

⁴ Accusations of witchcraft did not confine to Germany as the shameful losers of the War (see Monica Black, *A Demon Haunted Land*, 2020). Also in Italy those accusations occurred, especially in contexts where the “hidden civil war” between Fascists and Partisans had had an impact on kinship lines and village structures. Cases are known from Tuscany and Abruzzo, for instance. Strangely enough – or understandably – these topics remain untouched by de Martino and most Italian anthropologists.

– of high and popular culture, of religion and superstition as a historical result is warded off by the reference to orderly, upper-middle-class literature, which in Croce's case nevertheless allows a twinkling eye to the life of the "popolino", often portrayed as picturesque. De Martino himself was well aware of the coincidence of the two spheres, as his reflection on the occasion of *Il mondo magico* attests. In view of this, the dissolution in the philosophical synthesis seems like a defensive spell. The Germans, on the other hand, do not know how to distance themselves from their current situation under the pressure of the present. Or rather, their distancing will not consist in a performance of synthesis, as the ideal-typical Italian undertakes, but in the splitting up into separated fields of knowledge. This splitting is also a way of evading reality and one's own role in it. It is, to put it in de Martino's famous words, a fragile technique to fight the collapse of presence.

The reason why such a well-crafted book like *Il ponte di San Giacomo* has not received the appreciation it deserves, despite being translated – albeit by a rather academic publisher and not, as one would have wished, by a publisher for the general public – is possibly due to its synthetic character. Philosophical, historical, but also theological backgrounds and allusions, such as those gained here in the discussion of "folklore", were not acceptable to German folklore studies, or at most would only have been if the theme of social transition, of the passage from a preindustrial to a postindustrial society, had been addressed here. Lombardi Satriani, however, takes a different path: the rites and ideas of the peasant world of the South are not considered with a view to their dissolution, but are ennobled by comparing them with rites and ideas from antiquity and distant cultures (in this way he differs from de Martino who in 1958 argued almost like an evolutionist that comparison should merely take place within a context of a common "scelta culturale"). Subsequently, for example in the chapter on blood as a death and life-giving symbol, the focus is on the universality of the peasant world – and this universalisation is the nobilisation, not the proof of its age or its ability to allow "sunken cultural goods" to live on. The authors Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana maintain a strictly humanistic interest. For this reason, they refer, for example, to James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), which appears in other contexts as an evolutionist godsend. This too may have complicated the reception of the book elsewhere. The relatively late translation in 1996 certainly did the rest.

However, for anthropologists who have devoted themselves to southern Italy, the work is of lasting importance: this is true of Thomas Hauschild, whose *Power and Magic in Italy* (2011) draws on the folklorical compendium of Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana as much as on Luigi Di Gianni's cinematic representa-

tion and appropriation of religious rites. In my book *Napoli sepolta* (2020), I tried to trace the ways in which the dead return in life, or more profoundly, how the ambivalence of emotions that Sigmund Freud (1913) writes about in relation to our dealings with the dead can be shaped and made politically productive in postmodern Naples. And by rereading parts of it at this and other occasions I realize my debt to the *Bridge of San Giacomo* in the hope that it will hold and that ritualised encounters between the living and the dead, like those between Lombardi Satriani and his friends, colleagues and students, will continue to be possible. This explicitly includes being surprised by the dead and their advices.

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Abstract

This short essay tries to elucidate the fate of L.M. Lombardi Satriani's and M. Meligrana's seminal work in Germany arguing that the lack of reception was strongly influenced by the divergent paths the anthropological disciplines had taken.

Il breve saggio si pone la domanda su quali siano stati i fattori per cui l'opera seminale di L.M. Lombardi Satriani e M. Meligrana abbia trovato solo poche ripercussioni nell'antropologia germanofona, nonostante la sua traduzione in lingua tedesca. Per questo vengono delineate alcune differenze disciplinari e culturali per poi concludere in chiave demartiniana.

Key words: Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, anthropology of death, folklore studies, history of anthropological theory and methods.

Parole chiave: Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, antropologia della morte, studi di folklore, storia dell'antropologia.