

CHAPTER 15

# MARGINS OF ‘NEOTARANTISM’ IN CONTEMPORARY APULIA

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**arantism is a therapeutic dance carried out in Salento, a strip of land in the province of Lecce, Puglia, 40 km wide and 100 km long, with about one hundred towns and cities within it. Tarantism was historically based on the music of a therapeutic orchestra composed of a violinist, a tambourine player, a guitarist and an accordionist and was famously studied by Ernesto De Martino in 1959, with an ethnographic team that included an ethnomusicologist, Diego Carpitella, an anthropologist, Amalia Signorelli, a psychiatrist, Giovanni Jervis, a psychologist, Letizia Jervis Comba, and a social worker, Vittoria De Palma, alongside other scholars. Coordinated by De Martino, the founding father of Italian anthropology, this research on *tarantismo* is considered a classic of Italian anthropology and Salento one of the dance's places of memory.

In this article I reflect on heritage margins when tarantism, and De Martino himself, are turned into a cultural heritage asset, within the framework of a critical reflection on the heritage of tarantism.

‘Any historical re-enactment of ancient Tarantism is only possible outside’, cautions the new plaque that stands in the chapel of San Paolo in Galatina. The outside to which it refers is ‘outside’ of the small church, which constitutes the much mythologized location of Ernesto De Martino and his team’s observations of tarantism ‘in the chapel’ (De Martino 1961, 2005). The tarantism that took place ‘outside’, in contrast to inside, was painful to watch, practised without the music of the healing *orchestrina*, taken away from the ritual of sounds and from anything that could give it symbolic



**Figure 15.1.** Chapel of San Paolo in Galatina (Lecce). © Massimiliano Marianelli.

effectiveness. A device of pathologizing marginalization, it consumed the figures of the dancers in a manner akin to the gaze of the anthropologist. ‘Outside’, ‘tarantism appeared to recede to the level of a true psychic alteration, having lost any appreciable significance as cultural reintegration’ (De Martino 1961: 57; 2005: 32).

The new plaque echoes the ritual-bureaucratic utterance of ecclesiastical injunctions that once banned the ‘original’, ‘authentic’ tarantism, and that now prohibit its historical ‘re-enactment’. Such commandments did not always succeed against popular resistance, because even in the 1970s and 1980s male relatives of the *tarantate* (the women practitioners) were more effective than ecclesiastical rules in protecting women from the crowds of onlookers who wished to enter the sacred space of the church with cameras.

‘Neotarantism’ is the revitalization of tarantism. At the end of the last century the altar of the church and the well behind it (‘il pozzo di San Paolo’), the ethnographic objects of De Martino’s team, were made the subject of ‘guided tours’, which are conducted on, as it were, the ethnographic traces that they left behind. The chapel of San Paolo is today restored to a splendour it perhaps did not have when De Martino and his original ethnographic team were there in 1959. It is preserved by owners who meritoriously allowed its restoration, but seek to prevent the re-enactments of certain physical actions, such as climbing on the shelf, reaching out a hand towards the picture of St Paul and prostrating oneself on the tabernacle – all gestures of mirroring the saint that characterized tarantism in the chapel of San Paolo.

As in classic anthropological work on ritual space and time, the outside–inside dialectic encapsulated in the sign outside the chapel today captures

a sense of a separation between the sacred and the profane (or profaned) areas. The separation appears recomposed and immune to all confusion, like a sacralized border marking the impossibility of crossing a spatial threshold and welding together heterogeneous moments of history and memory. Indeed, mirroring the apparently sacred and inviolable space of the church, the town of Galatina itself was said by De Martino to possess a 'local immunity' to the bite of the tarantula spider that induced tarantism, to be a sacred space of its own. De Martino writes:

As soon as the team arrived 'in the field,' the first indication to surface was that Galatina enjoyed the privilege of being 'immune' to tarantism, due to the protection St. Paul bestowed upon it together with its 'fiefdom'. Thus, it would have been futile to look for tarantati in Galatina and the surrounding countryside included in the 'fiefdom'. The word 'fiefdom' calls to mind ancient social relations, long gone today; however, in local linguistic usage, the expression 'fiefdom of Galatina' was used above all to indicate a sacred delimitation – an area in which the tarante did not cause harm by concession of the Apostle to the Gentiles, who in Malta had dominated an echidna, a poisonous viper that had freed itself from a bundle of sticks the Saint had thrown to stoke a fire. At one time, there must have been other areas of immunity in the Salento and throughout Apulia, under the protection of one saint or another. (1961: 46; 2005: 23)

## MARGINS

Galatina as a sacred space was the oasis of an *immunitas* that at the same time marked the boundaries of a *communitas*, as the Neapolitan philosopher Roberto Esposito (1998, 2002, 2010) argues with his evocative metaphors of *immunitas* and *communitas* at the conclusion of his itinerary of Italian thought (destined, however, not to reach De Martino's texts), between biopolitics and the concept of 'community'. Yet, observed today with the ethnographer's eye, these boundaries between sacred and profane appear uncertain and blurred, and no claim that comes 'from above', as authoritarian prescription, or 'from below', as a scatological claim, is able to separate clearly the space that unites them (Palumbo 2003; Collins 2008). After all, the frontier, the edge, the border, the margin, are 'hinges' rather than 'barriers'. Their definition is in the eye of the beholder, and in the power of the classifier (Das and Poole 2004).

As a smaller team than that of De Martino, with me as coordinator alongside Andrea F. Ravenda, Elisa Pasquarelli and Raffaele Gallo, we went to Galatina, the heart of *tarantismo*, to celebrate in 2009 the fiftieth anniversary of De Martino's research, conducted in 1959 and published in 1961 as the famous volume *The Land of Remorse: Contribution to a Religious History of the South*. We arrived on the evening of 28 June and found the chapel barred



**Figure 15.2.** Chapel of San Paolo in Galatina. © Raffaele Gallo.

and undergoing restoration. On the central part of the wooden scaffolding, someone had written the following in red paint: ‘APRITE LA CHIESA . . . BASTARDI’ (‘open the church . . . bastards’), which we did not photograph, planning to do so at dawn on the 29th. Surprised by the rain, we took refuge for dinner in the pub *Il Covo della Taranta* (‘The Lair of the Spider’), located near the chapel of San Paolo. Transformed into sepia-tinted blow-ups, Franco Pinna’s photographs, which accompanied De Martino’s 1961 book, looked down on us from the pub’s walls. The next day we found only a halo of red paint on the scaffolding, a remnant of the inscription washed away by the rain. But shortly thereafter we discovered that a hand, insistent and discreet, had rewritten the phrase in smaller characters, in marker pen, on the right-hand corner of the structure.

A year later, in May 2010, Andrea F. Ravenda began a new ethnography of the ‘No-Coal’ social movement that was developing in Brindisi, beyond the Salento area of the province of Lecce. That movement stood against the pathogenic pollution produced by the thermal power plant in Cerano (Brindisi), one of the largest in Europe (Ravenda 2014, 2018). At that time, Salento’s administrative frontiers were being widened; a ‘Greater Salento’ was entering the borders of Brindisi and Taranto. One of the concertmasters of the well-known tarantist festival *La Notte della Taranta* in Lecce, who had by then founded his own touring folk orchestra, had accepted an invitation from the main Italian energy company to an ‘energy festival’ financed by multinationals in the industry, including those who owned the Brindisi power plant (Spada 2010; Ravenda 2018: 160–67). Held in Piazza Sant’Oronzo in Lecce, the festival had chosen Salento folk music, which had emerged from *La Notte della Taranta*, as a vehicle for the commercial advertisement of sustainable energy, a brand that once again was based on the peasant ‘roots’ of the *pizzica* (the name of the dance in the tarantella).

With a banner reading 'NO AL CARBONE' ('no coal') acting as a shield, protesters were also present at the concert, and were supported by the more radical musicians. They were united by a movement that goes by the name 'Biocontestiamo' and were performing a sort of folkloric populism, treating popular music as a sure ally of their militant antagonism in defence of citizens exposed to the risk of cancer. In the clashes that followed, police were deployed to mark the boundary between the two kinds of spider songs and dances based around the music of the *pizzica*: a pre-existing conflict in the Salento heritage, musical and political field was now made physically visible, polarized in the confrontation in the square between two different groups of tambourines and batons.

What kind of boundary separated the two phenomena? The 'no coal' social movement naturally opposed the use of tarantist music in support of exploitative energy companies, but in a sense the two factions drew schizophrenically, or 'schizophonically' as music anthropologist Steven Feld might put it, taking up an expression of Murray Schafer (Feld 1995; Cestellini and Pizza 2004), on a single matrix. And what of the boundaries around the new 'Greater Salento'? It appeared on the geopolitical and cultural scene through interprovincial agreement, considered a part of the broader European border constituted by the south-eastern Italian frontier, the heel of our Italic boot.

This territorial interweaving (more or less institutional, more or less politically agentic) constitutes one of the possible examples that show here how radically conflicting dialectics can flourish around certain borders: (1) The sacred–profane threshold of access to the chapel; (2) The border between Lecce and Brindisi; (3) The border between uses and abuses of tarantism; (4) The slippage between connivance and popular struggle; (5) The clash between post-industrialism and the claim of the right to health.

These dialectics are sometimes a war of confrontation, sometimes one of position, with trenches historically marked by tactical expectations and strategic advances, webs of conflict woven by the spider of the *taranta*, conflict that has always spread from the geopolitical margins of Puglia to the heart of the Italian nation state.

In Salento, the field of communitizing practices and discourses, taking on the guise of the process of patrimonialization, has always been animated, in its most intense moments, by a visibly evident conflictual pluralism, played out in the public arena and aimed at extending the spaces of democratic participation (Pizza 2015). Over time, the capacity of this field to construct frames for making the conflict explicit, to act as a laboratory, came to a halt, suspending itself after reaching its peak in the political campaign for the Puglia region's election of left-wing president Nichi Vendola and in the effects of his first presidential term (2005–10). The word 'narrative' was launched as an innovation of political communication from Salento and Puglia in their

guise as political laboratories. Suddenly everyone wanted to come to Puglia. The notion of 'narrative' appeared in the Italian public sphere in connection with sentimental popular enthusiasm for new forms of popular political participation organized in the 'Nichi factories' (the name given to the propaganda centres of the future president of the region). It was thought capable of going beyond representation and delegation, only to be abandoned today to populism and advertising.

Moreover, the passionate force of the word 'identity' quickly waned, not so much under the blows of critical anthropology as through the failures of eponymous councils and departments ('assessorati all'identità culturale'). Today it seeks to find its communicative force in the performative and emotional values of the word 'community': thus a concept long since deconstructed in the social sciences (Busino 1978) reappears in the institutional field of heritage in theoretically and politically controversial forms (Adell et al. 2015). Once again, the emotional and political power of words finds itself expropriated if, for example, processes of community inclusion are not considered subjects for an examination that could reveal their movement from the outside in, from the centre to the margins: to what networks are actors who intend to foster popular community participation connected, and by what values are they oriented? Critical ethnography examines such patrimonial processes and tries to answer such questions by showing, particularly in Italy, how the boundaries, thresholds and margins of the 'patrimonial community', such as the Italian 'cultural district', are far from being clear and defined (Palumbo 2003, 2006, 2010, 2013; Noyes 2006; Harrison 2013; Rozental et al. 2016). Even the notion of 'community of practice' becomes a tool of populist discourse if it does not reveal the economic-financial matrix that originates it as a matter of concrete stakeholders who drive the legitimization of 'peripheral participation' through the manipulation of broader political-economic and financial networks. These conceptual-verbal metamorphoses, in which memory is lost in the timeless discursiveness of an eternal present, only revive the need for a true anthropological observatory on the current enthusiasm for the patrimonialization of living culture, which, in many cases, is associated with political appropriation (Giguère 2006: 126).

## CONCLUSION

*Scazzicare* is a word used in various forms, as De Martino says. Let us follow him and read what he writes about this local verb:

this verb has a varied semantic use in the Salento: it indicates an action of lifting or removing a material weight or compact mass (for example, moving a straw mattress),

and in the psychic and psychosomatic framework, it denotes an abnormal and irresistible stimulation of sentiments and bodily needs, their indomitable pricking and unleashing. Thus, for example, infants *si scazzicano* when they cry desperately; hunger which appears suddenly and without restraint *si scazzica*; and of someone compellingly taken by emotion, it is said *li scazzicano li passioni*. (De Martino 1961: 64; 2005: 37)

In contemporary Salento, patrimonial enthusiasm is almost an anxiety: everything happens as if a sacred and at the same time democratic *taranta* makes the new 'heritage believers' *scazzicare* (Brumann 2014). That is, one is constantly striving towards a specific goal that, however, is difficult to reach. It is a sometimes spasmodic expectation of a kind of messiah who has never arrived, and perhaps will never arrive, but who *is always coming*. This surreal waiting for a heritage Godot increasingly resembles a treasure hunt. Galatina's UNESCO clubs organized a travelling theatrical re-enactment in 2015 (a re-enactment that no doubt resulted in the affixing of the new prohibition plaque on the chapel): young women on old carriages, dressed in snowy white, accompanied by carters dressed and with double-cut hair à la Dolce & Gabbana (a look already familiar to us, at least from early tarantism-inspired contemporary cinematography), performed in the area in front of the chapel a 'historical re-enactment' of tarantism under the gaze of citizens, tourists, scholars and students, armed with iPads and iPhones and enveloped in rather conflicting emotions.

In fact, the next day, familiar conflict burst forth in the ensuing controversy on local television stations, in Salento newspapers and on the social networks: is it respectful to contaminate the sacred area of the anthropological monument to suffering with a travelling theatrical event read as folkloric, and therefore as a spectacular 'clowning around'? The controversy evoked the intricate sequence of mutual attacks in the late twentieth century that constituted the public dimension of the conflict between 'purists' and 'contaminators' that marked La Notte della Taranta festival at its inception (Pizza 2015: 57–62). Again, the two positions appeared to elide each other: on the one hand the supporters of the re-enactment were able to escape the risk of violating the margins sacred to the memory of the place; on the other hand, the detractors seemed to draw on an idea of dehumanized monumentality by claiming respect for it, that is, removing it from the physical, noisy, chaotic and passionate forms of contemporary Salento cultural life.

What I mean is that that the young women re-enactors in 2015 were certainly far removed from the mournful physiognomies of old *tarantate*, and even their bodies were different from the embodied presences of avant-garde Salento theatre, but they certainly had more to do with the political forms of neotarantism than might appear to the anthropologist-censor's eye. They seemed determined to show tarantism publicly on St Paul's Day.

Their performance resulted from collective training, the outcome of local workshops on the meaning of women's bodies in the public space of contemporary Salento. The theatrical re-enactments were kitsch and may have taken perturbing forms, but they intended to allude to a possible embodied critique of commodification (as heritagization shows itself to be sometimes, as in 'merci-patrimonializzazione', as Berardino Palumbo has called it (making a sort of 'crasis', a fusion between the word commodification – which in Italian is 'mercificazione' – and the word heritagization – which is in Italian 'patrimonializzazione', as in Italian heritage is 'patrimonio': Palumbo 2013: 136, 144). The subjectivity of the women involved, explored ethnographically, had to reveal itself as parallel to women's anti-violence associationism. It defined, by dancing the *pizzica*, the boundaries of a new community that danced entirely 'on the margins of the state' (Goldstein 2008; Pizza 2015). Going beyond the superficial scandal, it could perhaps reveal contacts with the musical choreographic exorcism it re-enacted, at least insofar as, by producing the conflict of interpretations, it appeared capable of laying bare the violent roots of historical and contemporary tarantist representation that manipulated women's bodies in an incessant rhetoric of margin-making.

The English historian David Forgacs dedicated a chapter of his book *Italy's Margins* (Cambridge, 2014, translated into Italian in 2015) to a critical reading of Ernesto De Martino that includes *The Land of Remorse* (Forgacs 2014: 139–96). He has pointed out how the 'founding father' of our studies, perhaps more than the famous artist and writer Carlo Levi, was aware of the risks of paternalist populism in the construction of 'marginal' subjectivities and spaces, inherent even in the practices of ethnographic description. This is similar to the heritage discourse that today would like to turn De Martino into a ghost in the Salentine 'heritage machine'. In fact it has the same risk: precisely of obscuring De Martino's attempt 'to to build into his ethnographic practice a critical awareness of the power relations that this activity involved' (Forgacs 2014: 294). In his later, aborted, project of a religious history of the South, to be understood as a new cognitive dimension of the so-called Southern Question, De Martino (1961: 24) considered the 'marginality' of the South intimately connected with the rest of Italy. As Forgacs shows, the margin is certainly not a natural essence nor an essential quality, but an image projected by the state, and the 'South' was created as a margin in the process of Italy's formation as a nation state. The well-known 'peripherality' of the anthropology of De Martino and his disciples in relation to the international mainstream reflected that critical approach, including De Martino's missing conceptualization of 'the state'. In social historiography the term 'marginality' originated as a metaphor or 'image-concept' (Geremek 1979: 750). Instead, from its earliest days, the anthropology of the state has shown how in a national context the 'marginality' of anthropology mirrors



the 'marginality' of the nation state in the international community (Herzfeld 1987). More recently, it has become apparent that the margins are not only the peripheries or territories where the state 'has not yet arrived'. It is precisely the perception of the uncertainty and blurring of rule and law experienced in such places that has led to the realization that 'The entirety of the state is a margin' (Asad 2004: 279–87).

Gramsci, writing his twenty-fifth notebook in 1934 on the history of subaltern social groups, entitled it *At the Margins of History* (Gramsci 1975: 2277). To see in Gramsci's definition of subaltern an essential idea of marginality would be a mistake. Hegemony and subalternity are two inseparable moments of a single dialectic that Gramsci explored in his writings through a molecular analysis of the bodily life of the state (Pizza 2020). The essentialization of power and force relations is thus a paradoxical risk residing on both sides of the conflict between high and low. It is a risk fostered by heritage processes if these are not subjected to critical and reflexive ethnographic scrutiny.

Ten years ago, the US folklorist Dorothy Noyes, dealing with analogous issues, subjected the emotional and political force of the idea of 'community' to critical analysis, defining it as so powerful on the symbolic level that it can hardly be evaluated on the empirical one (Noyes 2006: 27). One can assess how true this statement is by leafing through the May 2016 issue of the monthly magazine *quiSalento*, entitled: 'The Beauty of Community in the Salento of Tourism' (Guido 2016). It is interesting to notice that a popular, important magazine with a large circulation, read by tourists and citizens of Salento with great consensus, employs the term 'community' as a choice of value: 'While in the metropolises the thread of humanity has been lost, in Salento the beauty of community is found again', the editorial concludes. An enthralling portrayal, which, like the sun in *Salento 1959*, envelops us in a ray of fascinating seduction in the face of the undoubted promise of beauty in a Salentine sea- and windswept summer. Nevertheless, when it is projected onto the politics of heritage, the emotional power of the word 'community', like a dazzling light, runs the risk of technicalizing the notion and concealing the dynamics that underlie it or that it triggers.

The point is not so much that we should anthropologically 'apply' in local contexts the awareness that emerges from the critical analysis of the complexity of cultural heritage processes, but that we should prevent the expropriation of cultural heritage in the name of democratic participation. We must avoid the possibility that in the name of communal heritage the living dimension of conflict and the democratic and innovative effect that derives from it are defused. Conflicts should not be eclipsed by a rhetoric projecting the ancient fetishism of the commodity into a new morality totally averse to critical confrontation.

The public anthropology I have practised in Salento, even challenging its academic legitimacy in my writings, has always intended to escape the teratological, parascientific metamorphosis that exalts the commodification of culture and of the person. It still does not give up the search for new dialogues and creative engagement. It is willing to analyse the real obstacles standing in the way of an insurgent democracy.

In this chapter I have sought to reflect on the margins of heritage and to critique the concept of community, beginning with the transformation of tarantism and De Martino's study of it into cultural heritage. The anthropology of historical metamorphoses in a place of memory such as Apulia can reconstruct the genesis of the territory, radical conflicts and traces of dialogue, contributing to the production of new forms of social knowledge and democratic citizenship. If we read the phenomenon of tarantism ethnographically through its margins, it unveils a complex strategy of cultural heritage politics that involves in its network institutions, anthropology, local culture and social memory of De Martino's own anthropological research on the south-eastern margins of Italy.

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