Carole Naggar, Photography Historian

Carlo Levi and Chim: Ethics, Empathy, and Politics – A Journey into the *Mezzogiorno*

“‘Here it is! It’s all written here,’ she said, pulling an already filled out ballot from her pocket, for all the world like a precious talisman. Alas, the old woman was illiterate, and someone had foisted a monarchical ballot upon her. When I explained the trick, she looked at me sorrowfully, and said: ‘Is that why they didn’t teach us to read?’”
– Carlo Levi, “Italy Fights the Battle of Illiteracy” (1949)¹

“No one has come to this land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding.”
– Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1947)²

In the early spring of 1950, Chim, a photographer who had just moved from Paris to Rome, traveled to Southern Italy on a UNESCO assignment to document illiteracy and the new schools where peasants, elderly and children alike, were taught to read and write by local volunteers. Born Dawid Szymin, Chim was the son of a Polish-Jewish publisher. A chess player, an intellectual, and an avid reader, he was especially suited to this mission: books and knowledge had always been central to his life. We don’t know whether Carlo Levi, who had moved to Rome in 1945 and kept a home and studio there, accompanied him on that trip. But for both, the *Mezzogiorno* would prove to be a transformative experience.

At the time illiteracy was a problem that affected as many as 35 percent of Italy’s rural population. The National League for the Struggle Against Illiteracy, a private institution founded in 1948, helped open numerous schools, which by 1950 reached 300,000 adults and children. That same year, the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, a government effort to stimulate growth in Southern Italy, was tasked with coordinating a basic program of public investment for the south. In contrast to northern Italy, which was experiencing rapid progress, the *Mezzogiorno* had not undergone an industrial revolution and had all the characteristics of an underdeveloped region: misery, subsistence agriculture, “latifundia” (landed estates), underemploy-

¹ Carlo Levi, “Italy Fights the Battle of Illiteracy,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1949.

² Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli: The Story of a Year*, trans. Frances Frenaye (1947; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 4.

My warmest thanks go to Giovanna Hendel and Karin Priem: their insights and our discussions greatly helped my writing of this chapter.

ment, illiteracy. The contrast between north and south was unfair at a human level – and politically dangerous.

The photographer and the writer-painter had met and become friends in April 1948 when Chim was covering the Italian elections and especially the campaign of socialist Pietro Nenni. He took a striking photograph of the dense crowd at a Nenni rally on the square in front of the Basilica of Maxentius, an old Roman gathering place. He also took a portrait of a relaxed and smiling Carlo Levi wearing his usual rumpled corduroy suit and sitting in front of a Roman pizzeria. Chim then traveled to Southern Italy as part of his UNICEF–UNESCO assignment “Children of Europe,” which would take him to five European countries to document the fate of displaced, orphaned, and maimed children in the wake of World War II. He photographed street children and orphans in Naples, then explored Basilicata, Bari, and the troglodyte village of Matera, shooting pictures of families that lived together with their animals in dark limestone cave dwellings. Because of that trip, he already knew about the poverty and isolation in Southern Italy.

For Levi, the relationship to the region went way back. In 1934, he had been a young doctor when he was harassed because he was an artist, a Jew, and an anti-Fascist activist. His apartment was searched; he was arrested several times and incarcerated in Turin, then in Rome, and then finally exiled by Mussolini’s government to one of the poorest regions of Italy, the Basilicata, deep down in the south. He spent a year in Grassano and Aliano, which he called Gagliano in the novel he published right after the war with his “dear editor,” Luigi Einaudi: *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*).

The publication of his book had tremendous repercussions way beyond literary circles: thanks to Levi, the *Mezzogiorno* question was finally becoming a key issue in the public debate. In 1946, Carlo Levi returned to Matera, Grassano, and Aliano as a candidate for the Alleanza Repubblicana (Republican Alliance). He also most probably went there in either the spring or the fall of 1949 to prepare two articles for the *New York Times*, the latter on fighting the “battle of illiteracy.”³ He returned in 1953, again for the *New York Times*, and produced a number of paintings that were used to illustrate his article.⁴ In a letter to Carlo Levi dated December 26, 1951, Chim wrote: “The Italian Government finally authorized the distribution of my story about analphabetism in Calabria and I am getting ready to distribute it in the magazines. As you remember, you authorized me to distribute your *New York Times* article with

³ See Carlo Levi, “Eboli Revisited: New Life Stirs,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1949; Levi, “Italy Fights the Battle of Illiteracy.” He had previously written three other articles for the *New York Times*: “Peasants Stir in Groping Italy,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1947; “Is Europe Through? A Decided ‘No,’” *New York Times*, December 7, 1947; and “For Freedom We Must Conquer Fear,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1948.

⁴ Carlo Levi, “Italy’s Peasants Look at Land Reform,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1953.

the story so I will proceed in this direction.”⁵ Indeed, Chim’s photographs and Carlo Levi’s text together would be distributed by Magnum Photos (the photo agency that Chim had co-founded with Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and George Rodger in 1947) and published in March 1952 by the *UNESCO Courier* and the Dutch magazines *Panorama* and *Katholieke Illustratie*.⁶ Finally, Carlo Levi went back to Southern Italy in 1960 with the photographer Mario Carbone.

For Levi, Southern Italy was both a fundamental tenet of his political work and a magnet for his poetic creativity. Levi belonged to a well-established Jewish-Piedmontese family that boasted among its members one of the founders of Italian socialism, Claudio Treves. Faithful to the family tradition of *impegno* (commitment), Levi himself was intensely involved in the anti-Fascist circles around Piero Gobetti, often writing for journals like *Rivoluzione liberale* (Liberal Revolution) and, later, Carlo Rosselli’s *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty). For Levi and his friends, art was a form of active resistance to the rise of Fascism and its cultural politics. His whole life, Carlo Levi would pursue his political and social activism in defense of the *Mezzogiorno* peasants he had come to love when he lived among them. He became an informal ambassador of the “civiltà contadine,” the peasant civilization – that of the poor, excluded, landless peasants that can be found anywhere on the planet – translating their life and culture for an urban, metropolitan civilization.

The text that Levi wrote for UNESCO and that was distributed together with Chim’s photographs by Magnum Photos employs a strikingly different tone, more factual and analytic, from the descriptive but lyrical style that prevails both in his paintings of Lucania, made during his 1935–36 exile, and his book *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, published in Italy in 1945. He himself explained how, in fact, the text of his novel had been based upon his paintings. In a note to a friend, he wrote that “they [the paintings] were actually the only notes on which years later the book was elaborated and constructed. They are not just illustrations but their authentic interpretation.”⁷ Levi’s paintings of the men, women, and children of Aliano are quite possibly one of the earliest works of Italian Neorealism, a movement that was imbued with a strong poetic accent and that would develop after the war in painting but also in film, photography, and literature.

Because of Levi’s deep, ongoing relationship with the visual world as a painter, we get the feeling that his collaboration with Chim went beyond the text he wrote

5 Chim to Carlo Levi, 26 December 1951, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Archivio Carlo Levi, Corrispondenza 1924–1975, busta 37, fasc. 1306.

6 “Zuid Italië leert het ABC,” *Panorama*, March 21, 1952, 5–7; “Van zes tot zestig,” *Katholieke Illustratie*, March 21, 1952, cover, 2–3.

7 “Furono in verità i soli appunti sui quali anni dopo il libro fu elaborato e costruito. Essi sono non solo illustrazioni, ma la sua interpretazione autentica.” Quoted in Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, “Francesco Rosi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*: Towards a Cinema of Painting,” *Italica* 86, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 272–92, quotation on 272–73.

for the *UNESCO Courier*. It is as if Levi, in his novels, had been searching for a form of expression in which people, places, and objects could become energized and come to life – as if he was trying to abolish the distance between word and image. Chim, an avid reader, had certainly read Carlo Levi's novel. It is also possible that his trip to Southern Italy was in great part inspired by Carlo Levi's 1949 *New York Times* piece on illiteracy. Chim may have visited Levi in his studio before the trip, or already in 1948 when he first met Levi, but he did so for sure after the trip, upon his return to Rome – as is documented in his Magnum contact sheets kept in New York. There are striking similarities between Levi's paintings and Chim's photographs when it comes to faces and everyday gestures, the arid landscapes and steep mountain paths, the small and dark houses that seem to cling to one another, and the presence of animals. When he saw Levi's paintings, Chim must have been struck by how little things had changed in the *Mezzogiorno* between Levi's confinement and his own trip fourteen years later.

Looking at Chim's reportage on illiteracy, I was amazed at the similarity of style and point of view to those in his photographs of children in 1948. The latter were victims of World War II, but when Chim visited schools in Hungary, Poland, or Austria, he saw the children hard at work, trying to catch up on the learning they had missed during the war years. The children's postures, hunched over their text- or notebooks or poring over maps, the paucity of learning materials, the improvised surroundings and furniture – child-sized tables, chairs, and benches – and the home-made classroom materials shown in his 1950 reportage all recall the 1948 photographs.⁸ Chim thus seemed to suggest that the people in the *Mezzogiorno* were also oppressed victims of a war of sorts, waged not through weapons but through politics, which had created the huge disparity between north and south. The people in Southern Italy had been forgotten by progress. They seemed to live in an enclave where time had stopped, while the rest of the country advanced in big strides in the 1950s and 1960s – a period that has been called the “Italian economic miracle.”

Chim's reportage functions as a classic series, telling a story sequentially. But if we focus on individual pictures, it becomes a very different matter. Chim worked with close-ups inside peasants' homes, old mills, disused barns, and cellars that served as classrooms. He used the poor lighting to create strong, dramatic, chiaroscuro effects. The individual photographs seem to expand into contemplative moments. It seems as if Chim, like Carlo Levi when he had lived there in exile, had been able to leave behind the accelerated rhythm of urban life and had started to share in the slow, almost immobile sense of time that was part of his subjects' lives. Back in Rome, Chim in 1950 photographed Carlo Levi in his studio, and made wonderful portraits of his owl, Graziadio, which Levi often painted. The “*Gufo*” story, as they called it, would be published together with Chim's photographs in the *UNESCO*

⁸ Carole Naggari, *Chim's Children of War* (New York: Umbrage Editions, 2013).

Courier in 1957.⁹ As Levi specified, the owl, an ancient animal that plays a role in peasant animistic cults, was connected to the question of time and crucial for the construction of his novel, *L'orologio* (*The Watch*), which was published in the same year.¹⁰ In the novel, the vision of an archaic temporality, embodied by the owl, merges with the clock, symbol of a modern, rushing time. In Lucania, time was definitely on the side of the owl, and not yet determined by the clock.

In his 1950 story, Chim did not limit himself to the mere fight against illiteracy: as he had done in his 1948 UNICEF–UNESCO reportage *Children of Europe*, he went beyond the assignment, seeking to paint a broader picture of the peasants' life: exploring the streets, he took portraits of girls walking barefoot or in makeshift shoes along the village's muddy paths, wrapped in wool shawls against the cold, sitting in a doorframe, doing homework; of women and even children carrying huge loads of furniture or firewood on their heads; of a young boy with his dog and a young shepherd; of a woman crowned with a nest of dried flowers or vegetables; of peasants occupying the land, the *braccianti*, and tilling the dry fields; of a village teacher on his motorcycle. He also expanded his view to include the unforgiving landscape of steep mountains and narrow, twisting paths and the barren fields dotted with few trees. It is a journey into nature, depicting the humble objects of everyday life, light, shadows, and animals, as if the photographer was traveling into the mind and consciousness of the people he photographed. His photographs are not merely anthropological: they have a sense of depth and radiate poetry. They are deeply personal and imbued with empathy and emotion. All in all, Chim created a lyrical portrait of a fragile society on the brink of change.

While especially powerful, the pairing of Chim's photographs and Levi's text was in no way unique. As of the early 1940s, the relationship between writers and photographers or filmmakers underwent a profound change. The still and moving images were no longer considered a simple illustration of words. In 1942, Elio Vittorini, influenced by Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1939), edited the anthol-

9 "As yet, I have no news from New York about publication of our 'Gufo' story. I only know that Mrs. Snow couldn't publish it because they are filled up with the Raadkais [sic] Italian material. HOLIDAY is considering it, but I have no final decisions. You know that Mondadori will use it in EPOCA, and also it will appear in ILLUSTRATED in London." Chim to Carlo Levi, 2 October 1950, Archivio dello Stato, Archivio Carlo Levi, Corrispondenza 1924–1975, busta 37, fasc. 1306. The story was eventually published in a special issue of the *UNESCO Courier* entitled "Famous Authors as Artists." Introduced by a brief essay on Carlo Levi that was illustrated with Levi's own paintings, "The Owl" was illustrated with photographs by David Seymour. See "Carlo Levi: Artist by Day, Author by Night," *UNESCO Courier* 10, no. 8 (August 1957): 25; and Carlo Levi, "The Owl," *ibid.*, 26–27.

10 Carlo Levi, *L'orologio* (Milan: Einaudi, 1950). An English translation, *The Watch*, was published by Farrar Straus & Young in 1951.

ogy *Americana*, a collection of short stories illustrated by photographs.¹¹ In 1950, he and the photographer Luigi Crocenzi made a trip to Sicily where Crocenzi took 1,600 photographs for a new edition of Vittorini's 1941 *Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversations in Sicily*), which would be published by Bompiani in 1953.

Chim's photographs have a lot in common with those by the post-war Italian Neorealist photographers.¹² In the 1950s, Enzo Sellerio, Mario de Biasi, and Fulvio Roiter worked in Sicily, Ando Gilardi photographed the land strikes of Emilia Romagna peasants, Aldo Beltrame shot Friuli peasants, Arturo Zavattini photographed Lucania, Nino Migliori created his series *People of the South*, and Tino Petrelli focused on village schools in Calabria. Mario Giacomelli worked in Apulia, Mario Cattaneo in the streets of Naples, and many others contributed to what has been called "lyrical realism." Foreign photographers, such as Paul Strand in his famous series *Un Paese*, also worked in that style and, like Chim, used a medium-format camera.¹³ The magazine *Cinema Nuovo* published photographic reportages on specific people or regions to be used as story lines or inspiration for potential film productions.

The discovery of the south was also the leitmotif of ethnographic missions at the time. Franco Pinna, Arturo Zavattini, and Ando Gilardi were working with noted anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, who documented his journeys into the underdeveloped regions of Italy. In 1950, de Martino became a member of the Communist Party. During a period of intense engagement with the rural populations of the south, he met Carlo Levi and discovered the universe of the peasantry. In his research on the world of magic and religious rituals, he stressed the dialectics between archaic elements and the peasants' resistance to the cultural colonization from the industrial north. His point of view is strikingly similar to that of Levi and Chim. He once said:

I have personal experience of the Lucania peasants, I know many of them by name and surname, and I know their life stories; I stayed with them for a long time, I visited their homes, I ate and drank with them ... Society had thrown them into misery, had denied them the two most important means of culture, reading and writing, but as whole persons they had never resigned to recite the role of the uncultured in the world, and through the pressure of the critical events of life, birth, food, fatigue, love, and death, they had built a system of responses, that is, a cultural life, thus building, against the written tradition of hegemonic culture, the

¹¹ *Americana*, first published in 1942, was reissued in July 2015 by Bompiani, Milan.

¹² These Italian Neorealists were recently featured in an exhibition and a book; see Enrica Vigano, ed., *NeoRealismo: The New Image in Italy 1932–1960* (Milan: Admira Edizioni; Munich: Prestel; London and New York: Delmonico Books, 2018). The exhibition took place at the Grey Art Gallery, New York, from September 6 to December 8, 2018.

¹³ Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini, *Un Paese* (Milan: Einaudi, 1955). An English edition, *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village*, was published in 1997 by Aperture.

oral tradition of their knowledge ... Nobody has written this dramatic history of the oppressed, but someone must do it.¹⁴

Carlo Levi's work on the south has found a continuing echo ever since. Michele Gandin's film *Cristo non si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Did Not Stop at Eboli), produced with help from the National League for the Struggle Against Illiteracy, won the Golden Lion for best documentary at the 13th Venice Film Festival in 1952. Narrated by a school teacher, it documents his daily life in the village of Salvia as he teaches peasants to read and write. The 1959 short film *Non basta soltanto l'alfabeto* (The Alphabet Is Not Enough), also by Gandin, gives voice to the peasants. There, one of them says: "I come to the Center not for the stuff they give me but to be fully human."¹⁵

In 1960, Carlo Levi went back to Lucania with the photographer Mario Carbone, who would later publish the book *In Lucania con Carlo Levi* (In Lucania with Carlo Levi).¹⁶ Levi's goal was to revisit the places of his 1935–36 *confino*, and the book is meant as a travel diary of sorts. But other than the newspaper headlines that are reproduced in the book and that boast about Italy's economic boom, there is little visible difference between Carbone's photographs and those taken by Chim in 1950. In his text, Carlo Levi, writing as if he was addressing Carbone in a letter, explains that his quest was motivated by nostalgia:

Now, returning from a brief trip to Puglia and Lucania, many of your images overlap and merge with those fixed in my memory, provoking further chronological uncertainties. Certainly, many things have changed, are perhaps profoundly transformed, maybe these changes didn't even enter your lens, and my field of vision today. ... And so we, both I and you, have unconsciously searched in Lucania for what was still the same and what we could recognize. But perhaps it is, as I said, an impression of mine. Maybe Christ has started again on his path and this time around, is the president of a cooperative even further south.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ernesto de Martino, *Panorama e spedizioni: le trasmissioni radiofoniche 1953–1954* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), 34. Unless otherwise note, all translations are the author's.

¹⁵ "Io vengo al Centro non per la roba ma per essere uomini giustamente." Like Gandin's earlier film, *Non basta soltanto l'alfabeto* was also produced with help from the National League for the Struggle Against Illiteracy.

¹⁶ *In Lucania con Carlo Levi*, photographs by Mario Carbone, commentary by Gino Melchiorre, text by Carlo Levi (Cosenza: Edistampa, Edizione Lerici, 1980).

¹⁷ "Ora, di ritorno da un breve viaggio in Puglia e in Lucania, molte delle tue immagini si sovrappongono e si confondono con quelle fissate dalla mia memoria, procurandomi ulteriori incertezze cronologiche. Certo, molte delle cose cambiate, forse profondamente trasformate, magari non sono entrate allora nel tuo obbiettivo e oggi in mio campo visivo. [...] E cioè, sia io che te, abbiamo inconsciamente cercato in Lucania solo ciò che era rimasto uguale e che potevamo riconoscere. Ma forse si tratta, come dicevo, di una mia impressione. Magari Cristo ha ripreso il suo cammino e a quest'ora è presidente di una cooperativa molto più al Sud." Cited in *In Lucania con Carlo Levi*, n.p.

Francesco Rosi's film *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, which he had planned with Levi but was not able to shoot until 1978, uses Aliano's peasants as actors alongside *Cinecittà* stars Gian Maria Volonté, Lea Massari, Irene Papas, and the French actor Alain Cuny. Closely modeled on Levi's novel and his paintings, its lyrical visuals also show a village that has undergone few changes since the 1930s.

While Fascist propaganda had used photography and words as tools to show the "New Italy," these very weapons were turned around by Chim and Levi, revealing the Italy that had been denied by Fascism: the poor, archaic Italy that did not trust, or care about, governmental promises. Poverty, hunger, the lack of access to land and education – the daily life of the peasants – are never shown in propaganda photographs.

Chim's photographic style closely aligns with that of the Italian-born Neorealist photographers who worked after the Second World War. A Polish Jew, he liked to call himself "a Mediterranean." As for Carlo Levi, his biographers dubbed him "*un torinese del Sud*."¹⁸ Both men, though outsiders, managed to penetrate a civilization and a people they did not belong to. They did not keep their distance but sought to be witnesses and protagonists at the same time.

For Chim, most probably guided by Carlo Levi's writings, the journey gave him both a sense of reconnecting with his political past and a creative direction for the future: the photo reportages and texts he created between 1950 and 1956 of religious and pagan rituals in the Italian south – in places such as Caltanissetta, Piana dei Greci, Cagliari, Isnello, Capobasso, San Fratello, and Cocullo – were a follow-up to the 1950 illiteracy trip.

What the two men had in common was a Jewish tradition of ethics embodied in the concept of "*tikkun olam*" (repairing the world) – a phrase that has come to embody the concept of social justice. Both of their lives had been deeply affected by the Holocaust, as evidenced, for instance, by Levi's novel *The Watch*. Chim had lost most of his family and friends to the Nazis. They also shared their political engagement and a belief in the value of the individual over the system. They both recognized the immense importance of each lived experience and made human beings the center and subjects of their stories and of history, firmly siding with the most vulnerable members of society. Their ideology and their aesthetics are deeply intertwined. Their ethical values informed their life's work and their meeting was a meeting of minds.

Carlo Levi kept the promise he had made to the Basilicata peasants that he would be back. He was buried in Aliano, Lucania, where he had spent one of the most important years of his life.

¹⁸ Gigliola de Donato and Sergio d'Amaro, *Un torinese del Sud: Carlo Levi: Una biografia* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 2001).

Fig. 3.11 Carlo Levi's portrait of David "Chim" Seymour (1950s) / Portrait de David « Chim » Seymour par Carlo Levi (années 1950) © Carlo Levi, courtesy Mattia Acetoso.