

Conversations with Fethi Benslama

by Maurizio Balsamo

Meanwhile, I'd like to thank Benslama for this text which is full of research paths. Obviously the text is a fragment of his long and important work on psychoanalysis and Islam, which many may not have read and appreciated, first and foremost for a lesson in methodology. For the ability, I would add, re-reading the religiosity of Islam in light of an explicitly analytical question, the force of the repression of the female question and not only, or not at all, of Islam as an example of a phallic patriarchy. As for the attempt to re-investigate the relationship between father, the names of the father and the symbolic sphere, re-opening another course, that, as he writes, "*regarding a spiritual female path which original monotheism glimpses but repudiates*".

I would like to start right from an element of Beslama's text, his definition of *fantomale* applied to the presence of Islam in the analytical dimension before he worked on it or, before he was *forced*, as he wrote, to work on it. Being aware of his theoretical and affective proximity to Derrida, I cannot think that the *fantomale*, here, indicates only an absence or a sporadic apparition which are also, as he writes, elements of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Islam. It seems to me, in fact, that this indicates a removed or concealed in the more general relationship of psychoanalysis with that which is *non-European*.

That which is "non-European" or extra-European, is the title (*Freud et le monde extra européen*) which Said, in 2004, gave to his text: "Freud and the extra-European world", asking himself which implications derived from the lack of this undertaking, in the analytical event, of the non-Grecian/Roman and Western world. Now, it seems to me that Said's answer was essentially the following: in making Moses an Egyptian, a non-Hebrew and the founder of *giudMosesaismo*, Freud demolishes the same concept of identity. In such a way, as he adds "*this identity cannot be made up of, nor imagine itself without this fault or radical imperfection which will not be removed, because Moses was Egyptian...this doubtful, invalidating, destabilizing identity: the same essence of cosmopolitanism, from which there can be no healing, a state of stoic calmness and fulfillment, of utopic reconciliation even within one's self*". In other words, the relationship with the non-European world would be

essential to psychoanalysis in order to deconstruct itself, activating all the capabilities of the *fantomale*, which, at this point, becomes not only the absent element, but the alter ego of an identifying process, the place in which the identity can be interrogated by that which eludes it and makes up an escape route. And whether it is the non-European in itself or a dialectic movement present in every identifying course, which necessarily oscillates between opening up to others and defensive closure, the question of a place-obstacle of analytical thought remains, which, in fact, has remained mute for too long in front of this exchange with the non-Western. As far as I'm concerned, even though this issue is of absolute importance, though, in bending the analytical identity towards the Hebrew one, (or at least in substantially agglutinating Freud around the queries regarding Hebrew identity), Said opens and closes these tracks. He *opens* them, because he re-examines the identifying dimension in his relationship with removed or eliminated, he *closes* them in the moment in which he seems to indicate that the Egyptian must coincide, effectively, with a people or another tradition and not, as one could also say, with the *Egyptian* of thought, that which we, in this manner, end up defining or classifying and which can also have nothing to do with the people who is beside you. Certainly, Said had a strategic reason: that of questioning the dream of self-sufficiency of the State of Israel since the removal of the Palestinian population. However, it seems to me that this position ends up necessarily excluding the dialectic movements present in an ideology or in a representation, (seeing as how the Egyptian is the other). In other words, and to quickly reach the questions asked by Benslama, it seems to me that he moves, differently from Said, the concept of borders, alterity, repression, expulsion and the unsaid, showing, or at least hypothesizing, for example, how that which is removed *par excellence* from Islam is the question of what is female and sexual as connected to it specifically. *The Egyptian*, therefore, is an original movement of thought, before a removal/expulsion/cancelling of another who is physically situated next to us. Would Benslama agree with this different observation with regards to Said's interpretation?

Benslama supposes that a reason for the complications regarding the "Islam" phenomenon is due to that lack of an Islamic and Muslim world, of a translational/deconstructive apparatus which is capable of secularizing thought, which is closely connected, as he observes, with the difficulties in accessing psychoanalysis and of psychoanalysis itself in this field. The second point is the lack of undertaking any modifying the traditional apparatus as to family relationships and religious and social foundation. The state is not something which replaces, but is rather something that inserts itself, takes root, and is, itself, strongly contaminated by a religious sphere who, however, has become something different than what he was, because he has been modified and transformed by the processes of

secularization. There is, basically, a decomposition of the religious sphere and his re-composition, through science and technology. This identifying loss of confidence and that of translational apparatuses accounts for the necessity to resort to patterns, models which are relevant to a religious sphere who is so modified but which allow for the resolution, somehow, of the identifying anxiety. Clinical observations show, Benslama observes, that the difficulty and the guilt felt by the patients as to the possibility of translating religious interdictions in secular interdictions, alleviating the weight of the interdiction, liberating the subjective space of what has already been given, written and thought. In short, the socio-political conditions and those regarding scientific development must be determined so that the common space opens itself up to individual translational possibility.

An excess of commonality blocked in time, in a delusion of origin, as he writes in his book, in a techno/religious neo-foundationalism which blocks space for private comments and autonomy. Analogously, Chebell speaks, in his text (*L'imaginaire arabe-musulmane*), to an emptiness of the subject in Islam, of the construction of a *believing being*, rather than one of *conscience*. Absence of democracy and human rights, hegemony of religious issues, repression of the female question, the role of therapeutic, religious or expulsive practices end up defining a space which is reluctant to analytical exploration. In this sense, Benslama underlines the specific relationship between the political possibility and the analytical one.

One could ask, though, if this archaic mix of theology, scientism and populism is not, in some way, under different forms, but not for this reason less significant, something which also is part of the West *tout court*. In other words, the crisis of the subject, the presence of neo-religious waves, fundamentalist structures, tangled complexes between a hyper-technologization of human beings (see: abolition of psychotherapy in public services, resorting in an increasing manner to drugs, the destruction of intimacy, conflict with culture, the return to archaic forms of medicine which are alternative to scientific thought, the refusal in various forms of alterity, both racial and religious), if, all of this is, I repeat, in forms obviously different from those explored by Benslama in his research on Islam, it should not end up defining a common area of problems, a common need for reflection on the current ways in which the crisis of the subject is established. Even though speaking about the crisis of the subject is clearly different from that of the absent subject (Chebel) or, as Homayounpour had write about the different relationship between subject and community in the West and in the East (“The unbearable heaviness of being would correspond to the Western lightness of being”), my question regards the possibility that deep waves of destruction or refusal of the conditions of exercising the analytical experience and freedom of speech are found more or less everywhere. Roudinesco writes

that psychoanalysis can be established on where there is previous psychiatric knowledge (which moves the issue of the illness from another person's guilt to subjective issues) but in Italy, and not only, we increasingly witness an extreme divarication between psychiatry (biologized, behavioral, technologized) and the freedom to listen and of speech. Monosemy, the reduction of alterity, the good functioning of a citizen in a social context, the reduction of behavior to correct, the refusal of sexuality itself (several years ago, Green asked himself, in a controversial article, if sexuality still had something to do with psychoanalysis, given its conceptual disappearance) are, therefore, transversal elements. However, Benslama's "démarche" proposes some general issues which I would include, to be brief, in several formulas.

1. Benslama proposes the thesis of a female spiritual founding sphere in Islam which was then removed (I am specifically referring to the episode of Agar and the salvation of the son). Benslama writes that Islam proceeds from this spiritual *ressort* which founds another dimension of religiosity and gives, evidently, in a theological sense, another space to the female sphere. However, this initial path has some relation – in terms of contrast – with the thesis which states that the female issue in Islam, could the question of women's place and rights be another process of colonial irruption imposed upon Islam? (I am thinking, for example, about the thesis of a rather traditionalist Tunisian thinker, like Bouhdiba, according to whom family space is the space in which one hides as it is the only space saved from colonialism and therefore the male power used on the female sphere is, deep down, both a defense against colonial democracy, as well as a place where Islam rediscovers its identity). It seems to me that, in this manner, Benslama lays claim to another type of answer which introduces the *original worm*. At the beginning it was another story. The traces of this story have been lost, but it is this story (which is established around the gaze of the mother as a response to the infantile suffering and inferiority) which needs to be examined in order to resume a path which allows to re-think the religious sphere itself. It is an anthropologically complex operation. We are not, that is, comparing the defects of the Other which an illuminated thought should remedy, nor is it cultural relativism which leaves each person prisoner of his points of view. On the contrary, it regards the multiplication of the points of view present in the point of view of the explored subject, creating the history of this representation, showing its dialectics, that which is not said, in the hypothesis that each anthropological theory possesses, within itself, in a phase which precedes the arrival of the colonizer, a series of variations.

2. If things are this way, can one say that Benslama's proposal aims to engage in a dialogue with the religious community or with the religious sphere *tout court*, showing how it, in itself, is the result of barriers, censures, gaps, translations, misrepresentations, repressions? How can the religious sphere be analytically interpreted while, at the same time, respecting all of its complexity and its right to exist? Is Benslama proposing the possibility that in the hypothesis of a lack of secular translational codes in those societies, it is possible to compensate, complexing the existing religious codes, *trying to make the explode from the inside*? Or, instead, is his gesture absolutely secular, like that of Rushdie, that is, a gesture which shows the fiction at the origin, of the origin?
3. At the same time, though, can the question of the female sphere and its marginalization in said societies be thought solely starting from a *textual repression*? Benslama also hypothesizes that an initial overestimation of the female sphere is followed by a refusal. But under what historical conditions would this phenomenon occur and why? Or is it an anthropological movement, in the sense of a fundamental anthropology of the human being? Perhaps impossible questions, but solicited by Benslama's research itself.

I would like to add another line of research. Deep down, the religious sphere, as many researchers in biology and neuroscience have underlined, or as, for example, Pievani wrote in "nati per credere", is the result of a fundamental need of the human being, that of believing, to win the finitude and the nonsensical, that of building narratives which are adequate to the search for sense, stories about the origin, and therefore of death and the afterlife, instituting goals and objectives, allowing forms of possible cooperation. There are, therefore, occurrences throughout evolutionary history, amongst which "religious belief" which shows the paradoxical adaptive advantages. Obviously, no biological need pushes towards belief, towards the immortality of paradise rather than towards the acceptance of the radical finitude of the human being, but undoubtedly some beliefs work better narratively. In these terms, the religious sphere becomes an attractive founding pole of permanence in front of the subjectual and identity deconstruction not only proposed by psychoanalysis or by modernity and its historical acceleration, but by symbolic changes *tout court* or the risk of their wavering. Put in these terms, this dimension goes beyond the truth of a text or the repression of a text and takes into account how a human subject behaves when faced with change, the sexual sphere, the encounter with alterity in terms of a necessary and transhistorical resistance to these. Would Islam, then, be one of the ways in which the preservation of the origin shows itself? It is for this reason, therefore, that Benslama debunks this

myth of the origin, highlighting another origin, another history within it? But, and this is the last question I would like to ask Benslama, how can we break, in real life, this ideological, historical, emotional, social and political bond? What can we do as psychoanalysts? Or must we think that our activity, in itself, can erode the walls of fanaticism and of identity beliefs?

Thank you again, Fethi, and it is not by chance that we are on a first name basis at the end of this journey, because it is exactly within it that I learned to read you, singularize you, and have the possibility to examine what (actually very little) I knew about Islam, thanking you, therefore, for having given us all of these research paths and these instruments to interpret such important issues.