

Dialogue with Livio Boni

by Daniela Scotto di Fasano

I find Livio Boni's work interesting and I would like to thank him for it. Indeed, it intrigues me right from the title, which I'd like to use to make my first point about his paper.

It is entitled *Dalla psicoanalisi all'India, e ritorno. Forme e ragioni della rivalutazione del femminile nella modernità indiana*, which literally translates as *From psychoanalysis to India, and back. Forms and reasons for the revaluation of the feminine in Indian modernity*. I would, though, like to turn it around: *Forms and reasons for the revaluation of the feminine in Indian modernity. From psychoanalysis to India, and back*, to ask him if it seems he 'used' psychoanalysis to go to India, and India to return to psychoanalysis. Just the same, starting from an assessment of feminine, had India to move away to rediscover its value, before returning to reassess and give it new value?

This question also relates to clinical practice. Does an object we love exceedingly have to be rejected before we can return to love it again? Moving on to migration, I wonder - and this is a question for Livio Boni - if it just might be necessary to take a step back from one's home country, reject it, so to speak, before feeling the need, the call to love it again...

Let me, though, move on. I found Livio Boni's work extremely interesting because of the stratifications or layers he used to base and broaden his work on the nexus between psychoanalysis and India.

Let us start with the first layer, that is, *the presence of India and the Indian world in Freud*. As we heard, Freud had little interest in India. His approach was rather *blasé*, as is clear from the reasons he used to justify his own reluctance to "penetrate the Hindu jungle".

As you will recall, Freud's reasons are his "Greek taste for balance" (*sophrosyne*), his "middle class mentality", with its lack of inclination towards adventure, and his "prosaic Jewish nature". Here, I believe there is once again a question that relates to everyone in contact with the unknown. Does 'too much' of the unknown drive one to take refuge in the *plenty of the known*? The middle class mentality, the prosaic Jewish nature...

Freud's bias against India is also clear in another instance. After meeting the poet Rabindranath Tagore in Vienna, in 1926, he wrote a comment to Anna von Vest that Boni defined as sarcastic and I would simply call rude: "He really looks like we imagined the Lord God looks, but only about 10,000 years older than the way Michelangelo painted him in the Sistine!". In the

same letter, referring to the philosopher Das Gupta he added, “my quota of Indians has now been filled for quite a long time”.

So here is my question for Boni. In Europe, emerging from the catastrophe of World War One, Freud’s attitude might have been caused by a need he felt to distance himself from the all encompassing grief he feared would engulf him if he failed to oppose measure and prosaicness. This could also have been caused by his attitude to delegate to female psychoanalysts the understanding of what was, to him, the dark continent of femininity...

In addition, since Freud largely saw Hindu civilisation as based on *Urmutter*, The Mother Goddess, this question leads to another one, that in turn leads Freud to process further grief. I’m referring to the broken relationship with Jung, who he lost as a friend and as a support of the psychoanalytical cause, especially among the medical class and the non-Jews.

Like Chinese boxes or matryoshkas, this brings to light Freud’s need to distance himself from Jung’s theories. Rodrigué stressed, for example, that the first page of *The Wolfman* seeks to combat the *Umdeutungen* (distorted interpretations) of Jung and Adler.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Allow me to digress briefly by saying that the title of this work - *Beyond* - suggests Freud is more of an explorer than someone who is prosaic and conservative by nature, so much so that the hypothesis of a *death drive* would cause psychoanalyst to put up a defensive resistance (that is still clearly evident).

Returning to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in this work, in 1920, Freud mentions the Nirvana principle and Livio Boni sees, I believe correctly, this as a connection between Indian philosophy - Buddhism in this case - and Freudianism.

In addition, as we heard, in a footnote added to the second edition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud, referring to Plato’s *Myth of the Androgyne*, admitted the myth might have Indian origins.

If I understood correctly, Livio Boni also sees this admission by Freud as contributing to his speculative extension and expansion in which the issue of the origin and of the (death) drive become indistinguishable.

Let me use an anecdote from the world of art to show the extent to which the drive for life and for death go hand in hand - almost overlap - in the constant cross-fertilisation that is so vital to the thought process.

When Marc Chagall, in 1954, saw the famous fresco of Piero della Francesca, the *Madonna del Parto* (Madonna of Parturition), in Monterchi, in the chapel next to the cemetery, “he was surprised. Then, upon learning that Piero della Francesca’s mother had been born in Monterchi and that the painter had painted this Virgin Mary for the Monterchi cemetery chapel, he commented:

«Now I understand. It is life that is being brought to life from the maternal womb in a place of death. This is an immense idea!»“ (Walter I., 1996).

This also makes me think of the grief migrants are forced into for their language (mother tongue!), their ties, habits, tastes... Yet, it is unavoidable that in that mental space taken up by death, there is room for the new thought to be born.

Livio Boni also raised the possibility to re-think, through Gandhi's prism, the question of the violence of the drive. While exploring its meaning, Livio Boni connects to the thought of Gandhi and to the concept of *Satyâgraha* or literally “insistence on truth”. Livio Boni showed us that from the time of non-collaboration and passive resistance in South Africa, Gandhi conceived *Satyâgraha* - “insistence on truth” - as a technique and an economy that imply *passing through violence* and not simply removing it.

The question, says Livio Boni, in these terms does not concern only the violence of Ego drives (self-preservation, aggressiveness), but *the violence of the drive as such*. Hence the fact that the practice of *Satyâgraha* merges with *Brahmacharya* - sexual abstinence -, a more traditional practice in Hindu asceticism that Gandhi advocated from 1906 on.

Gandhi's solution to use his abstinent body as a support for the creation of a trans-individual communion that could overcome drives and hence, sexuation itself, is for Livio Boni the “deconstruction of virile sexuality”, a way to oppose colonial rule.

Could it be - and this is also my question - a way to carry out an individuation/separation process that enables the evolution of an identity *other* than a cumbersome, hefty father figure? In this sense, Livio Boni places “the question of what we might call *colonial subjectivity*” at the centre of his thinking. In this regard, it would be interesting - picking up on the ideas in the issue of *Psiche* on *The Geographies of Psychoanalysis* - to think in terms of long-term effects, which can certainly be defined as unforeseeable and uncontrollable, of the colonial legacy left to the generations born of parents influenced by a colonial subjectivity.

This then calls into question “the issue of the deconstruction of what Livio Boni defines as *colonial subjectivity*”.

This also has to do with the collective sphere, the opportunities offered to colonised peoples - *I identify myself with the other side* - when symmetrical opposition is avoided or cannot be adopted. In individual terms, the question posed by Livio Boni opens an interesting evolutive defensive hypothesis in the case of people who had parental figures, especially fathers, who were, in turn, too cumbersome and hefty.

On this front, I wonder and I ask Livio Boni what influence and what fantasies could be produced by India having had to adopt English - i.e. the language of the colonialists - as their national language...

Moreover, I'd like to lay another question for Livio Boni regarding the collective sphere. I wonder whether he believes the road Gandhi took found fertile ground in the cultural and religious tradition that Gandhi himself was born into and raised in.

Livio Boni has already tabled a theory on this, although he pins it on the culture of the Indian renaissance between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries. But, what is the role played by the culture that was there before the mid-18th-century? We know that the unconscious moves slowly, far more slowly than the conscious level. Hence, I believe it is necessary to study this aspect further, especially if we take into account psychoanalytic considerations on trans-generational transmission.

About the concept of feminine as eviration, which Livio Boni defines as *typical of the "false conscience" brought about by the colonial ideological construct*, my question is whether it is possible to narrow the field of feminine subjectification exclusively to the *colonial ideological construct*. Where then do you place the key issue of penis envy in female development? What should be made of the scary fantasies tied to the phantasmal problems of castration anxiety?

Moreover - and my question is not only for Livio Boni but also the other speakers - is it possible to interpret this as a "reactive idealisation of the Mother violated by the invader, and her children, to preserve her integrity, must be prepared to make any type of sacrifice, for themselves and others" as "typical [only] of early 20th-century Indian nationalism" or is it historically broader than this? I have in mind Japanese kamikaze pilots, Palestinians, the Viet Cong and so on... So, it is about making the question solely intraphysical, before it is cultural.

I think Livio Boni's contribution is especially interesting when it comes to the "unusual history of Indian psychoanalysis, in the *third layer*, that could be defined as *ideological and post-colonial*".

In this conversation of mine with Livio Boni, I shall not go into the detail of the opposition between Owen Berkley-Hill and Girindrashekar Bose, because I don't want to eat up time for the debate as I think my colleagues will also wish to discuss these issues with him.

Before concluding, I would like to take up the interesting and unavoidable "review of the sequences of the reception, in India, of psychoanalysis and Freudianism from a post-colonial perspective", and to ask Livio Boni for his opinion in relation to the "psychoanalysis/ideology nexus for India", considering how psychoanalysis might have become, *unwittingly*, an accomplice of the colonialist ideology. This is an especially pertinent topic for the areas covered by *The Geographies of Psychoanalysis*, as well as being intriguing and necessary in the field of pathologies concerning

identification with the aggressor. I am thinking, for instance, of Etty Hillesum, whose diary, in more than one point, made me think of a manic denial of hatred for her aggressors. I also have in mind the issues that are at play in Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter*, to limit myself to just the odd example.