

# *Geographies of Psychoanalysis: Introduction*

by Fausto Petrella

I would like to express my gratitude for having been assigned the role of chairman for this conference, which is due to the far-sighted cultural openness of Lorena Preta and the passionate psychoanalytic interests of Marco and Dana Francesconi.

I have no special expertise as a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst to make statements about the complex culture and society of India and Islam. I am not even in a good position to make pronouncements about Judeo-Christian culture, of which I could be called an involuntary exponent. Nonetheless, I have always paid close attention to the ideological and cultural aspects of psychiatry and its institutions, as well as the influence of such external factors on clinical work, both in psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

In Italy, the link between psychopathology and cultural anthropology can trace its origins to Ernesto De Martino's extraordinary work and, in Pavia, it is a connection that has influenced psychoanalysis and psychiatry since the 1970s. This is, of course, long before the flow of immigrants from Africa and Asian countries forced psychiatry and psychoanalysis - in recent years - to commence a transcultural and socio-anthropological investigation of themselves and their work

How can one engage in dialogue with foreigners who are no longer strangers but neighbours? This is a central issue for us and something that has to be specifically dealt with in clinical practice because it does entail specific issues.

In late 2000, I was invited to speak on the "finality of psychoanalysis" at a conference where, to my dismay, I was scheduled to be part of a section on the "eschatological outlook" for the great historical religions. I was placed with a Catholic bishop, a Rabbi, an expert in Sufism and an academic specialising in Buddhism! I feel it is fair to say the gathering was a missed opportunity for a fight, or even for a discussion, which proved impossible. There was no exchange and everyone expressed their faith with conviction. Everyone just trumpeted their own positions, without any openness. Dogmatic positions are a reassuring refuge in the face of the precariousness not only of the ultimate purposes expressed by the various eschatological positions, but also the ones closer to us. Divisions and the related isolation of the individual ideologies and beliefs safeguard from the fear of mixing and from chaotic confusion. Approaching different ideas and faiths can lead to a problematical tolerance. It is impossible to know to what degree tolerance can stand proximity and what makes possible the required tolerance.

New opportunities for dialogue arise from the entry of psychoanalysis into cultures outside of the western tradition, which is where psychoanalysis found fertile terrain to develop and spread.

Psychoanalysis is periodically accused of having been born in a specific, limited culture sphere, namely Jewish Vienna in the Victorian age. It did, though, produce general models of how the human psyche works that are based on the minimum recognition of universal functions that represent indispensable conditions for the psyche to work, moments that lie at the basis of every development and that we find (variously) engrained, transformed and interpreted to differing degrees in all social and institutional organisations.

Today, we find psychoanalysts practising in far-off countries. They test psychoanalytic models and methods to understand cultures and patients that the West struggles to comprehend. We can say that all types of exchange are commencing, where Mohammed goes to the mountain and the mountain goes to Mohammed. Today, psychoanalysis has the unavoidable task of comparing its practices, conceptions and models with symbolic functions, languages and ideological organisations that are profoundly different to western ones, which are themselves far from homogeneous and contain enormous internal variety.

There are some specific points that I am really looking forward to hearing in today's speeches and discussion. It will be interesting to see how gender and social class differences are dealt with and what consideration has been given to "being an alien", that is, the cultural anomaly of madness. I'm interested in learning how good and bad, positive and negative are organised in India, Africa and Islamic countries, as well as how languages are used to define the space between these opposites. This space recalls the idea of cultural boundaries, the prescriptive conceptions of law, the management of what is lawful and what is not, and the idea of subjectivity implicit in all of this. I am keen to understand the myths and rites that found and "govern" sociality everywhere and the balance allowed between *fantasieren* and practical, oriented thinking, that is, the socially accepted balance between primary and secondary processes, as defined by psychoanalysis.

Today, we are going to see the traditional characteristics of the psychoanalytic technique extended by cultural comparison. The suitability of psychoanalysis in other cultural contexts has to be debated when even our habitual forms of mental content and relations are presented in new and unusual forms.

In the speeches I read as chairman of this conference I noticed that none of the speakers gave into the temptation to engage in exoticism, a type of conduct that often characterises the West's approach to the East. Take, for example, the words of Klingsor put to music by Ravel in 1903 in *Shéhérazade*, where an idealized, highly eroticized and sensual exoticism is evident. I know that Freud, in the face of such attitudes, was suspicious and nourished a certain "ethnocentrism", which was different to Jung or, to pick an author, Herman Hesse. Thomas Mann might have been driven by polymorphous interests (see his delving into Judaism in *Joseph and his Brothers* or Hinduism in *Transposed Head: A Legend of India*), but he maintains an ironical-critical distance from the Orient, without ever being confused by diversity, as for example in *Transposed Head: A Legend of India*. We are faced with the problem of examining psychoanalysis as it meets other cultures, where the need to maintain critical distance comes hand in hand with understanding what psychoanalysis is when practised in a distant land. I believe - and here I agree with Lorena Preta - that psychoanalysis has to "tough it out" not necessarily sticking to its conceptions, which might

change, but to its method. It must not forgo empirical observation that takes into account unconscious mechanisms. Such functioning is uncovered in what we observe and what we can only observe because we adopt certain observational attitudes that prevent us from being drawn into the symbolic system being presented to us.

The telling of myths is extremely important to understand the societies that feed off their foundational myths and in which the distortions and past traumas that might have been suffered, will inevitably have an impact later on the entire social and cultural apparatus ensuing from them. If one establishes a tight parallel between the way a society looks and the mythical foundation that influences how it works, then one is bound to ask "what's the story with us"? What are our foundational myths? What are they in our society, in which we have May devotions and where we know, for those who believe, that there were mystical pregnancies, that the Holy Spirit, God, became involved in the genesis of the son of man...

I think we should consider such aspects, which are fundamental when comparing ourselves to other cultures, because we are used to focusing on seeing the ethical folds of our actions independently of their mythical structure.

In clinical practice I believe the stories that characterize us are very important. I mean our personal myth and our personal story, which are of great interest to us in order to understand something about our being and our personal psychopathology. And the same holds for the collective. The collective can also be investigated in the same way, although changing collective myths is extremely difficult, as it is collective myths that change us and it is really hard for us to modify them.

I believe, though, that this opens up exceptionally interesting possibilities because, ultimately, as interesting as Islam is, I really want to understand what is happening at home, where the truth is there has never been sufficient reflection on the connection between us, society and our psychopathology.

Comparison with other cultures importantly leads, through the discourse of the foreigner, our own image to emerge and this is what really interests us, to understand ourselves.

We will also hear about analytical work done in specific conditions, in time of war. In a state of war, one is faced with the problem of what happens "outside" of the clinical setting, on one hand, and to know, on the other, who the analyst is and what side he or she is on. Such a setting problematizes the required "neutrality" of the analyst and this causes major, specific problems.

Psychiatry that is oriented towards psychoanalysis, as practised for decades, has enabled me to verify that the Unconscious is strictly connected to Society. If society has the characteristics of the unconscious, then we have to face the problem of also understanding our society, its social fantasies and the unconscious conditioning of society on individuals. This is an absolutely fundamental point, a prerequisite for being able to perform analysis. Yet, it is an aspect that has hardly been looked at and remains as such because an analyst dangerously believes that, in a calm, peaceful setting, it is possible to isolate his or her "case" from everything else. This results in the fundamental linguistic pacts being overlooked or lost, but these still link one subject to another and

condition real life, having an impact on the ghosts in a relationship. This link between relationships and their all-embracing and all-conditioning effect on society is a fundamental part of social exchange both for clinical practice and theory.

I hope that today, as we listen to these leading authors, we will all have - myself included - fruitful and meaningful exchange.