

# GEOGRAPHIES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

*Encounters between Cultures in Tehran*

edited by

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# CHALK LINES

SILVIA RONCHEY

Les frontières sont des lignes de craie  
sur le sol que nos peurs sacralisent.  
Louise Michel

Fernand Braudel taught us to look at European history, especially at what we call ‘medieval’ history, with the Mediterranean as the central component, and to problematize what he called the Greater Mediterranean, or the “*global* Mediterranean”: the “spatially-dynamic area something like a magnetic or electric force field”, extending to the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean, into which Mediterranean civilisation irradiated, after having been infused and imprinted earlier by cultural irradiation from these same areas. According to Braudel, a civilisation “can be measured by its wider repercussions”, since “its fortunes are often easier to read on its outer margins than at the very heart.”

It is no wonder that Braudel’s Greater Mediterranean coincides with the areas of tension, ethnic conflict, and crises of the twenty-first century. That precisely those areas today represent the greatest problem for present history, of which, as contemporary historians, we cannot but write the “history of events”, what Braudel called the “*histoire evenementielle*”, that of “the single events seen by contemporaries at the pace of their short lives.” A history, then, of small ripples on the surface rather than big waves: a story-history, subject to our contingent vision and philosophy of history, if not to ideology and political propaganda.

If we look at history from this point of view, it is perhaps easier to understand the turbulent beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ancient pre-Roman and pre-Byzantine fault lines began to shift in complex ways the moment the unifying spectre of an empire – Roman, then Byzantine, then Ottoman, on the one hand, and Russian-Soviet, on the other – dissolved, overturning the forced composition of conflicts, primarily ethnic, that for millennia the empires had promoted and ruled over.

We can say, paradoxically (but not that much), that the Roman Empire, in the historical-political sense, fell only in 1989 with the Berlin Wall – or rather in 1991, with Yeltsin’s coup and the official break-up of the USSR. This provoked a massive earthquake in all of the areas affected by the spread of multi-ethnic Greco-Roman, then Byzantine, Ottoman, and Tsarist-Russian or Russian-Soviet civilisation, in all those geographical areas where the succeeding multinational empires had held ethnic conflicts at bay: from Illyria, now the Balkans, to Chersonesus, now Crimea, in the case of the Soviet block, and, for the Ottoman, in the ancient plains of Sogdia and Bactria, which we now call Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq – and Iran.

Right after the disintegration of the last two empires – one at the beginning and the other at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century – of these last strongholds of the ‘imperial Roman’ idea of an “identity that exalted unity over multiplicity”, cutting across the stereotypical division between East and West and even more across the division between religions, the idea of a “clash of civilisations” between Islamic East and Christian West wormed its way into our collective imagination.

When I hear talk of a clash of civilisations, I reach for a pen rather than a revolver, for what it’s worth. There are so many clichés to dispel, originating in neo-puritan theories, that have derived essentially from Samuel Huntington’s book, published in 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, which is in itself much more complex than the *vulgata* it has generated.

On the one hand, there is the religious prejudice that, from Italy riding on the historical amateurism of many neo-converts to theocon Catholicism, has transformed the thousand-year old, multi-faceted Arab experience into a *continuum* of intolerance and fundamentalist  *jihadism*, even to the point of judging Islam to be “intrinsically violent” (cf. Josef Ratzinger at Regensburg in 2006).

It goes without saying that anyone who deals with Islam, even tangentially or marginally as a medieval historian, knows well how proverbial Arab tolerance then was; the respect Islam had for religious plurality. To speak of intrinsic violence, to pinpoint the essence of Islamism in  *jihad* is exactly like identifying  *le génie du Christianisme* – to use Chateaubriand’s expression – in the Crusades: in the armed violence of Christian armies that for the entire Middle Ages and beyond wrecked destruction and mass slaughter in the name of God – “Dieu le veult”.

This is a vision, though, that has become widespread. Osama Bin Laden suggested it explicitly when in 2001, a few days before September 11, he launched his historic appeal “against the American crusaders” via Al-Ja-

zeera, defining then-president George W. Bush “the biggest crusader under the banner of the Cross.” That wasn’t a bad thing. In little more than a decade, after the semantic twists and turns spread *urbi et orbi* by the then-leader of international terrorism, medievalists worldwide had to explain to the public (and political leaders, evermore ignorant of history) with a clarity never used before what the crusades actually were. Historical studies and popular texts multiplied, the old papal conspiracy of silence of continental Europeans and the epic rhetoric of the Anglo-Saxons, tinged with New Age esotericism, burst open, revealing exact data on the bloody medieval Christian *jihad*, its political and economic motives, its brutal ideology.

Just as Islam has no historical monopoly on *jihad*, so the Orient has no monopoly on the waves of religious fundamentalism that have washed over our world since the disintegration of the centuries-old faiths of earthly salvation, such as revolutionary Marxism, at the end of the 1970s. This is a contemporary phenomenon in our West and in our East. Karol Wojtyła’s ascent to the papacy dates from October 1978. From this moment on, the fundamentalist rebirth marks a parallel path in the western and eastern quadrants of our civilisation. The ecclesiastical government of John Paul II, the “geopolitical pope”, reintroduces the seat of Peter as protagonist of the West’s international politics and, moreover, uses the other churches – protestant and Anglican – to help organise and finance, beginning in Poland, the strategy that will lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall. We cannot speak of theocracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran without doing the same for the western Christian theocratic revival since 1978, moving from the assassination attempt by Ali Agca 1981 to the end of the USSR exactly ten years later.

The following decade of Wojtyła’s pontificate, between 1979 and 1989, saw an increase in religious fundamentalism in several societies. Wojtyła’s entire pontificate, in its reactionary reformulation of the social doctrine of the Church, entrusted to the vision of then-cardinal Ratzinger, and then the pontificate of Ratzinger himself as Benedict XVI, have witnessed an *escalation* in the *diktats* of the Church to the State and civil society on the same points. In the succession of encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, and “letters to the bishops of the Catholic Church”, we saw a mind-boggling regression in the vision of the social *status* of women and the notion of sexual equality:<sup>1</sup> just as in the question of common-law relationships and

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1 Cf. for ex. the *Lettera ai vescovi della chiesa cattolica sulla collaborazione dell’uomo e della donna nella chiesa e nel mondo*, from 2004, in which the freedom for the male or female part of oneself to take precedence in one’s life

homosexuality, relations between church and science, and the discussion on genetics, contraception, and abortion. To say nothing of the contemporary and even more extreme fundamentalist burst of American churches.

The fundamentalist evolution historically shared by Asia and Europe, Islam and Christianity – and Judaism, by the way – between the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the new millennium is if anything, therefore, a rerun of the continuity, and certainly not of the clash, between civilisations.

To belie the idea or dialectical fantasy of the dualistic antinomy, of the clash between two givens, there is even more obvious evidence that draws on the past, and also for this – because digging into the past, the individual or civilisations, is not an activity politicians like – it seems to be ignored or censured or suppressed by the contemporary *vulgata*, by the *textus receptus* of our civilisation.

First of all, in order for there to be a clash, there needs to be two distinct civilisations. And looking at the past, this isn't the case. As witnessed by the first Western historian, Herodotus, history itself, the word itself that defines history, 'istoria' – 'search' in Greek – comes from Asia: from the very Asia Minor, where the so-called Greek miracle was born of the interpenetration of Greek and Persian cultures. We are born of the Persian Empire when we say we are born of Greece: the Greeks knew this well and not only in political terms. Freud and his disturbance on the Acropolis, Freud and his collection of ancient statuettes that the cat would glide among nonchalantly. Freud and his passion for Greek tragedy. But Greek tragedy didn't produce just *Oedipus Rex*: the question of the unfathomability of choice is already there, perhaps even more forcefully, in *The Persians*.

The Peloponnesian war is as much a 'Persian war' as the Persian wars. Xenophon, Socrates' most brilliant student, fights in the service of the Persian King Cyrus. Not only does Alexander the Great's expedition permeate the above-mentioned ancient plains of Sogdia and Bactria that now we call Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, but in that same crucial geographical area the fate of the Roman empire was played out, and not only the fate of its political strategy, but also and especially that of its cultural avant gardes. When in the 6<sup>th</sup> century Justinian closed the philosophical schools of Athens, the philosophers migrated to the Persian court of Cosroe and there

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choices, apart from one's sex, is contrasted by Ratzinger to a deterministic bias in the role of women. Providing that they enjoy equal dignity, women's primary vocation is the family, with unacceptable consequences: "Women cannot make the same choices as men."

Greek Platonic philosophy continued its speculations, only to return via the Byzantine Empire to our so-called 'European' Renaissance.

Greco-Roman civilisation, which had been shaped by those areas of dissemination and hybridisation and along those routes of exchange, continued to develop along the same paths in what medieval historians have called, as we have seen above, the Greater Mediterranean: the "spatially-dynamic area something like a magnetic or electric force fields", extending to the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean where Mediterranean civilisation irradiated outward, after having been infused and imprinted earlier by cultural irradiation from these same areas. There is no distinction between Asia and Europe, if we look at origins, the infancy – as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian philosopher Giovan Battista Vico would say – of our culture and civilisation.

Let's consider the first and now most turbulent geo-strategic quadrant of the larger conflict that opened the third millennium – the area encompassing Asia Minor, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia – the one in which Western strategy has exercised 'pre-emptive war' the most, or where ethnic clashes have become inflamed, fuelled, in a post-colonial geography, by the consequences of the break-up of the two 19<sup>th</sup> century empires: Soviet and Ottoman.

At the foundation of the baffling, reductive, and tranquilising interpretation of the traumatic beginning of the third millennium as "a clash of civilisations" is *denial* of what the ancient Greek historian Thucydides called "the primary causes" that have unleashed the multiple conflicts we often describe by this single phrase. A *denial* or a collective negation or repression of the complexity of conflicts between ethnicities, the transversality of fronts, the multiplicity and complexity of oppositions, a *denial* of their resistance to being reduced to dualistic opposition.

It seems as if it is almost to exorcise the seismic clustering of conflicts that have opened our century – the continual asymmetrical drawing of new fault lines – that the Western psyche tries to interpret it as 'one, discrete' head-on collision: "The West and the Rest", to cite the title of Niall Ferguson's 2011 book.

It is as if Western memory were precluded from understanding the real, multiple nature of conflict and its initial causes by the re-emergence of old complexes or collective trauma: feelings of guilt over colonialism, certainly, but still earlier contradictions and violence inherent in the shaping of national identities, and even earlier than this, the 'child-like' memory of lost multi-ethnicity with its ancient taboos, frictions over complex and multiple tribal identities long buried. Of course, multi-ethnicity is continu-

ous conflict. But isn't this also the case in a healthy psyche? Isn't health perhaps tempered conflict?

And isn't this what psychoanalysis deals with: the historical reconstruction of the multiplicity of conflicts? The co-existence with conflict? History is therapy: anamnesis, diagnosis, prognosis, to cite again terms invented by Thucydides, who deliberately used medical terminology that had only recently been created in Greek culture. Society can be in therapy only if it digs into the past, as in individual analysis. But the exploration of inner as of external history is both vertical and horizontal: 'vertical' reconstruction of the 'horizontal' multiplicity of conflicts and coexistence with conflict. If true history is above all history of conflict, history speaks, necessarily, of geography. If digging into the past – of the individual as of civilisations – requires assistance and method, the vigilant attention of psychoanalysts, contemporary psychoanalysis should provide its own geography, and investigate not only the centre but also the outer limits of collective psyche: the spatially-dynamic area, as Braudel taught us, of global psyche, in space and in time.

We have said that the entire contemporary world, in its North, South, East, and West, is steeped in forms of religious fundamentalism that originate in the end of the 1970s and have manifested their tangible effects on the global equilibriums between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Precisely for this reason it is important to point out the effect of religion, or actually the effect of theological structures – or of their deep structures – in the psyche of believers or, at any rate, of those who are 'permeated' by them. And the more so, the less conscious one is.

At the time of the war in Kosovo, Julia Kristeva published an article in *Le Monde* on April 20, 1999 in which she explained, as a psychoanalyst and philosopher, what was happening in the Balkans in what we could call "Byzantine" terms. The roots of the military conflict were to be sought, she maintained, in the deeper conflict of a psychological-theological nature. These roots were buried in the collective psyche of Orthodox man, a psyche shaped by the thousand-year old theological difference synthesised by the Trinity dispute regarding the "procession" of the Holy Spirit: the so-called *filioque* question, the official platform of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox churches in 1054.

Julia Kristeva was essentially correct, and her reasons should have been clear to everyone. For example, to that television journalist who, during his program on prime-time TV, invited his already disoriented viewers "not to muddle your ideas with history and lose sight of reality" and "not to Balkanise your brain" with the irritating complexities of the Balkan peoples:



geography and their eternal, exasperating, and seemingly unfathomable conflicts.

As if reality were not in itself historical: the reality of peoples like the reality of each individual. As if, in order to understand this collective or individual history, we shouldn't try 'to Balkanise' our brains as much as possible: or 'to geographise' it, open it up to conflict, to experience conflict, by rendering thought pluralising and conflictual, and from there, judgment, and the same disposition toward what the ancients called 'animus', predisposing it to a different, non-linear, narration, as in Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain*, the Macedonian film initially famous only for Tarantino's plagiarism of its spiral structure in *Pulp Fiction*.

The effect of thousand-year old religious structures, even buried and forgotten – on the contrary, all the more active since they have been guarded deep down, no longer as conscious visions of the world nor as irrational beliefs but as 'instincts,' 'traces,' 'mental scars', to use Denis de Rougemont's words – on the psychology of individuals and peoples should be considered by historians of the past as well as the present. This is what anthropology has taught history, and it was the school of Louis Gernet, the founder of what we call historical psychology of the ancient world, then developed by Vernant, Detienne, Vidal-Nacquet, to apply this method as a discipline in reading the past.

Naturally, we have to be wary of the risks of determinism, or worse psychological racism, when considering the 'geographies' of psychology or psychological 'nations', the 'nationalities' of the collective psyche of peoples. This was the weak point in Julia Kristeva's reading: it worked when it highlighted diversity, a different way of interpreting, a plurality, a complexity – certainly not as it presupposed homogeneity or implied determinism in the actions of a religious structure in the mentality of a people. We cannot talk of an absolute 'Orthodox man'; but it is important to note the presence of 'Orthodox man' in us, Westerners, the hybridisation of what Kristeva calls "the psychic nature of religious Orthodox man", in the culture we call European and, therefore, in its politics. Consider the conflict that this creates in the macro-geography of geopolitics as well as in the psyche; welcome conflict in both arenas.

Julia Kristeva's experiment can be applied to other wars and other conflicts, other religions and other scars in the psychology of peoples. It is an example of how to get in touch with what Lorena Preta has called "the patrimony of experience and knowledge that distant cultures and different religions have developed over the course of centuries and that are crucial still today in that they continue to nourish the currents of thought in

those countries, their beliefs and behaviour, with their specific image of humankind and the world”: the task being “to translate” and “deconstruct” the dominate interpretations of phenomena. We are interested in the *pars destruens*, the dismantling of habitual readings, and verification of the plurality of the upper reaches of anthropology, not the hurried construction of new categories or of new “verified maps”.

“Les frontières sont des lignes de craie sur le sol que nos peurs sacralisent” (“Borders are chalk lines in the earth hallowed by our fears”) wrote the 19<sup>th</sup> century French revolutionary Louise Michel. This “de-sacralisation of frontiers”, this geographical, deconstructive approach to the history of conflict is a way to avoid “muddling our ideas with history and losing sight of reality” and “Balkanising our brain”. A way to clarify, quite the opposite, our ideas about the past, healing the fracture – caused perhaps by repression, perhaps by censorship – between this ‘present’ – a ‘becoming’ hanging in the balance between past and future – and the equally terrible events that produced it. A mechanism that is common to collective and individual history.