

*Interview with Omar Guerrero*

About Charles Melman's lecture "*Is there such a thing as good authority?*"

ALI NOTEBOOKS: We have chosen Charles Melman's presentation at the Study Days in Chambéry entitled "*Is there such a thing as good authority?*" to introduce the second issue of the ALI Notebooks. Our first question will be to ask you how you would define authority today in relation to what Charles Melman said about it in 2012, with the particular difficulty that each member of the ALI may have a different definition of authority...

OMAR GUERRERO: So we could start from there: is there a good definition of authority? I don't know if authority can be consensual. And I found that Melman, in that article, was making a point, because he himself explored the question of authority for several decades, and many of us heard him articulate power and authority in different ways. There was a time, since I am also interested in psychoanalysis with children, when he talked about couples and families, placing power sometimes on the side of the father and authority in the mother, sometimes on the mother's side and authority in the father. So when I say that this article punctuates, it's because for me, it establishes something by taking, as it sometimes used to, a bird's-eye view. He says, based on his career and clinical experience, that what constitutes authority is death. Period. It punctuates because it effectively says something about the very essence of authority. Can authority be good? In the sense that what it confronts us with is something akin to coercion: there is a part of ourselves that we give up, we agree to obey. The etymological origin of obey is *ouir*, which means to listen, to listen to the other or not. And the origin of authority is to be an author. Following Melman and Lacan, I took a few references along the way, such as Hannah Arendt and Kojève in particular. Both ask the question: what is obedience? What makes someone agree to obey? Melman helps us, with this text, to situate ourselves. What is at stake? It is death that makes authority for all of us, he tells us. Then we could elaborate on these different questions. When we obey, is it a form of death for the subject, for example, who accepts that the other person takes the reins? And what is the symbolic apparatus that allows this not to be authoritarian, but rather an authority that comes into play at that moment? With parents, with a father, with a boss, an authority that is indispensable.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: Would a figure of authority, as a limit, protect us from the absolute authority that death would represent?

OMAR GUERRERO: Absolutely. That was the thesis I defended in Clermont-Ferrand last October, during a conference on violence. The title I proposed was "Authority as a bulwark against violence." On this issue, I focused more on Kojève because he was important to Lacan, who quotes him several times. It was thanks to him that Lacan was able to access Hegel and develop the discourse of the master and everything that followed. In his lectures on Hegel, Kojève develops not four discourses, but four pure forms of authority, which, for me, are not very far from the four discourses. I spent two years in seminars trying, not to link them, but to find a connection between them. I will list them in chronological order, because, for Kojève, there is a temporality for each. First, there is the authority of the father, because he was there before. Today, in 2025, we would say rather parents, the authority of parents. Then there is the

authority of the teacher, which is conjugated in the present tense, because you cannot be a teacher by boasting about an achievement from ten years ago. The teacher risks something in the present in order to assert himself. And then there is the authority of the leader, which is a projection. The authority of the leader, which I compare, for example, to academic discourse. A leader is someone to whom this authority has been delegated for a mission that they must accomplish in the future. Someone who receives this authority as a delegation, that is, from someone who may be their equal. It could be in a group of soldiers, someone I designate, who will lead the group to the next stage, and then they become equals again, for example. It's an interesting exercise, by the way, to think about it in terms of discourse, since it forces us, too, with the four discourses, to say that we can embody these types of authority, in turn.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: In this text, Melman talks about the authority of the leader as being linked to efficiency. You relate this to academic discourse. Do you think that, given the times, this leader would now be a business leader?

OMAR GUERRERO: Yes, that's interesting, and it's a point I would have liked to question Melman, namely to develop a little more the tension in which he places the father and the chief in this text. Because it's very different. A father asserts his authority on the basis of having been there before, because he belongs to a previous generation. This is not the case with the chief. That's why I emphasized that when the chief is no longer the chief, he can become a fellow human being again. A father, or parents, can never become equals, whatever the obsessive may think, for whom this will always be the issue, as Melman also says in his seminar on obsessive neurosis. For the obsessive, the father is just a big brother who warms the bed shared with the mother, waiting for his turn to come.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: Which raises a particular question for the obsessive in relation to authority.

OMAR GUERRERO: Yes. And for the hysterical person too, but in a different way, because the hysterical person believes in it, even calls for it, whereas the obsessive person does not believe in it. On the contrary, he is in the process of erasing this radical otherness that must exist on the previous level, so to speak, in the genealogy, in the family organization.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: It's the generational difference.

OMAR GUERRERO: Absolutely, it's on the heterosexual side. And that's where the obsessive will refuse and argue that it's simply on the alter side. That is to say, another who is not me, but who is not sufficiently different.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: This raises questions about positive parenting and the role of paternal authority. The word "no" does not appear in positive parenting. What do you think about this?

OMAR GUERRERO: It's a problem. With "no," we come back to the question of authority. What constitutes authority? It is death that says no to us, even when we want to continue. However, when we do not exercise authority over children, and we see this in all contexts, family, school,

or otherwise, when we do not say no to a child, we confront them with a form of anxiety that is difficult for them to bear and overcome. The image I sometimes give to parents is that you need a load-bearing wall. Without a load-bearing wall, the child continues to break down partitions, with increasing anxiety, because it disorients them not to know where their load-bearing wall is. Of course, this does not mean being violent towards them. Psychoanalysis does not condone violence towards children, not at all. Psychoanalysis advocates, and this is why, for me, the question of authority is essential to our discipline, psychoanalysis simply reminds us of the existence of a disparity of places. So, when we say no to a child, we take on the role of parent or adult, or possibly teacher, we are the guarantor of a space, of the maintenance of that space, and we remind them that there are conditions. And conditions, for me, is a topological term. It is a term that cuts, that conditions. It is the migration we all have to make, from the unconditional with a mother, which is relatively ephemeral, so to speak, to a transition to the social, which is conditioned, very quickly conditioned, whose ambassador is the father, or the person who acts as a father, whether it be the biological father, the stepfather, or the other mother, it doesn't matter, or the photo of the grandfather on the mantelpiece that is used for this purpose. The fourth type of authority in Kojève's work is the one that concerns us most: the authority of the judge. And the judge's decision is not based on the past, the present, or the future. It is timeless. It applies continuously.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: When we talk about the authority of the judge, are we talking about legal law or symbolic law?

OMAR GUERRERO: It is symbolic. The authority of the judge is the term used by Kojève in 1942, when he fled the war and Russia. Today, we could say the authority of a shaman, a member of the family during a family council, or a psychoanalyst, that is, someone who will make a decision and who will not enjoy that decision. It is a form of authority, that of the judge, who, like the analyst, confronts the other with reality. It is the articulation of the real and the symbolic. It is not an erasure, as science allows, for example.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: In this text, Melman tells us that Oedipus won, that he succeeded in erasing the traces of his father. But then, couldn't we draw a parallel here with this modern tendency to try to erase everything that appears to be a mistake? And has scientific discourse changed anything in terms of the order of signifiers? Melman refers to Lacan, who indicates that the Oedipus complex is the only way for a speaking being to find some bearings in what moves them at the level of the order of signifiers. Is this still the only way today?

OMAR GUERRERO: It's a way of navigating the social world of young people. It's interesting to think of it that way. Today, we're dealing with young people who have managed to escape this reality. Reality today is treated as a contingency, as an accident that can be corrected. Whether in surgical, educational, or other issues, the list could be very long. Sometimes I hear patients who move us with impossible requests to correct something that has happened. How, for example, could we erase the assault suffered by a patient who has been the victim of sexual assault? No, it is not a question of diminishing or qualifying, but, as Pierra Aulagnier said when she spoke at Lacan's seminar, when we talk about trauma, we are always dealing with the

aftermath. When I say, "This or that happened to me," I am already telling a story; we are already wrapping this reality in symbolism, trying to weave something together to make sense of it.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: Yes, this text also addresses the question of the unraveling of the real and the symbolic. If they are knotted together, otherness can take hold. If they are unraveled, we slide into a paranoid context. In the Borromean knot, we find phallic jouissance between the real and the symbolic. Have there also been changes in our society today in this regard, in terms of jouissance, particularly phallic jouissance, with effects on this untying?

OMAR GUERRERO: It is true that we previously had religions that allowed for an organizer, an anchor. There is a small reference that is useful to me for this, which is lesson X of the seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In this lesson, Lacan talks about the three ways of dealing with the void, but we can also understand the real. The first, the most traditional, was religion, which said that this void was occupied, that there is God. For death, we have an explanation. The union between a man and a woman, there is a ceremony, we make them hold on to that. There is something that religion comes to fill, and that is this void. There is a second way of describing this void, mentioned by Lacan, which is Science. Science, and we are right in the middle of it, science ignores this void. When something is impossible, science simply moves it, pushes it back, ignores it. We find examples of this every day, whether in relation to interventions concerning gender issues, procreation, there are many. Previously, human beings found more or less shaky solutions. Humanity, for millennia, made do with that. But science comes along and tells us that it can erase this reality that it ignores. And there is a third way, which is art. For me, psychoanalysis is more on the side of art because art, reality, this void, art does not seek to erase it, to evacuate it, to fill it. Art takes it into account. Art composes. Art turns it into poems, plays, songs, paintings. And for me, psychoanalysis goes in that direction, saying that there is a reality and that we have to deal with it. Regarding authority, I agree with the latest Melman. Like him, I place authority on the side of the mother, on the side of S2, and power on the side of the father. Why authority on the side of the mother? We can find this in law, with the establishment of Roman law in any case. With a mother who was certain. Today, science tries to capture this reality with DNA tests to tell us who the father is. But we don't know this right away, even if we are dealing with the biological father, we don't know if he will be the father. But let's go back to *mater certissima*, as the law says, it is she who tells the child to whom she will delegate (and this may be why Melman hesitated between leader and father because of this delegation), the mother delegates and tells the child who has the right to set limits for her, who brings the One into existence. And that can be the biological parent, it can be the other mother, it can be the stepfather, it can be a godfather or other figures who come to be linked to her. And I think that this reading allows us, even at the social or institutional level, to understand the essential link between power and authority. Authority being on the S2 side for me, it is the people who have authority and who delegate it to a president whom the people will choose for a five-year term, who will occupy this S1 but only because we have put him there. And he must then give way to the next one we choose. It is reassuring to tell ourselves that this will change and that the person who exercises power does so in a specific position. It is the position of president, for example, but we emphasize the signifier "president." Whereas if this person remains in power

for thirty years, there is a whole generation that grows up confused between the person and the position occupied by the person. Take the example of the dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s, but we could also think of Africa, with presidents who have been in power for decades, or countries such as Russia or others where there is a false alternation of power. This leads us into the illusion that the progenitor is automatically the father, for example, whereas father is a function.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: "What we criticize about authority is that it is not total," says Charles Melman, "that it is not totalitarian, either." In *Les nouvelles études sur l'hystérie* (*New Studies on Hysteria*), Melman discussed the difficulty women have in dealing with the phallic not-all, with that part of themselves that opens up to infinity, as representatives of the big Other. How could this part that escapes authority have an effect on authority itself, and under what conditions would it protect us from totalitarianism?

OMAR GUERRERO: I would place the not-all on the side of otherness, and totalitarian regimes do not like otherness very much. Totalitarian regimes seek to erase, to wipe out all traces of otherness. I have seen this up close with patients I have followed in a center for more than fifteen years, and I still see some of them, patients who come from several countries where they were persecuted because of their sexual orientation, political affiliation, or ethnicity, which posed a problem for the ruling power, that is, an ethnicity that represented a form of otherness, a religion or other factor that was intolerable in the eyes of that authoritarian regime. This allows us to return to the difference between authority and authoritarianism. What I distinguish between authority and authoritarianism is this: when there is no legitimacy, it is authoritarianism.

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: You talk about the relationship between roles and what gives legitimacy to the speaker. For children, when there is a good relationship between their father and mother, between S1 and S2, they understand this perfectly. And the father, if we place him on the side of power legitimized by the mother, we can see that it is necessary for this position to be validated by the mother, and we also see that this plays out under certain conditions set by her, the mother. What plays out between the father and the mother is very subtle, and currently it plays out less often.

OMAR GUERRERO: Absolutely, I would even go further because there are many households with mothers raising children alone, and yet these children are no more psychotic. It is because the mother has internalized the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father that she can say to this child: "Your math teacher is right, the method he is teaching you is very good, and you had better do your homework."

ALI'S NOTEBOOKS: In this text, Melman tells us that what commands us comes from the Other, from a text, and depending on the culture, this text is not always easy to dialectize, to translate into speech. Do we have difficulties?

in terms of expression, particularly with young people today who struggle to find direction, to find meaning in their lives, to speak from a position of self-awareness that takes into account at least this written? Doesn't this stem from changes in the relationship with authority?

OMAR GUERRERO: If death is the authority and if this death was contained by religions, what contains it today? How can we dialecticize? How can we make sense of it? There is a lot of talk about suicides among young people and even children, or practices involving the body, which are sometimes "uprooted." We had a text which, because it was religious in nature, fulfilled the role of the Big Other, but which allowed us to contain something. We feel liberated from religions and very quickly, since Descartes, who began to empty the sky, if the sky is empty now, was humanity ready to move so quickly? Or are we experiencing a kind of adolescence of humanity that is going through this anxiety of realizing that, if the sky is empty, there is a responsibility as a subject. For us as psychoanalysts, this is a moment that can be troubling but also very interesting. This question also concerns us with regard to the end of an analysis: What is the end of an analysis? What do I allow myself? Is it an attitude emancipated from religion or a text that would allow anything? How can we keep a group together based on each subject's responsibility? This is a very important question. What can we say to young people today? There are effects of avoiding responsibility today with a use of language that sweeps away this seriousness, as if we were speaking a foreign language, which avoids castration and thus brushes aside the seriousness of our actions.