



european cultural foundation



INTERVIEW WITH SOFIANE HADJADJ,

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What made you turn to European financial support to finance your projects?

In 1999-2000, the Algerian state was completing its disengagement from the cultural sphere. It was telling cultural actors: get by on your own, I can only give you occasional support. Its perception of culture, as suggested by this attitude, deserves to be studied. It is essentially a kind of commiseration. In other words, the occasional support that the state proposed to give cultural actors could only be a gesture of generosity, of charity.

Since the end of the 1990s, then, the state has only sporadically financed artistic or editorial projects. This state support is given through the Arts and Letters Fund (part of the Ministry of Culture), or sometimes during major cultural events like “The Year of Algeria in France” (2003) or “Algiers: Capital of Arab Culture” (2007).

The Arts and Letters Fund is very good. The only problem is that it supports writers, artists, etc. as personalities. A cultural actor like Barzakh doesn't have access to its support. “The Year of Algeria in France” was a good vehicle for promoting publishing (and more generally artistic work). The state financed a large book publishing and acquisitions programme. The problem is that similar events are not organized every year and that their effect on the book business can only be sporadic. We remain unfortunately in an event-driven culture, not a visionary one. The book business can only structure itself on the basis of regular local demand, in which certainly buying power and general quality of life have a determining role—that of the public and that of neighbourhood and academic libraries, of youth centres, of cultural centres, etc. We are not there yet.

I would say to sum up that this context of the state's disengagement from the cultural sphere partly explains our decision to turn to foreign financing. But that is not the only explanation. During events like “The Year of Algeria in France”, the state releases a great deal of money for the arts, but attaches to it a certain number of “expectations” or “wishes”. The editors, however, aren't yet in a stable enough position to feel that they can act freely with regard to the state's “expectations”. The fact is that the state expects a certain kind of project from editors because it wants to enhance, nationally or

internationally, not just Algeria's image, but also its own. We are hostage to these expectations from Algerian cultural institutions, at least in the way they work in practice. We cannot propose projects that are a little crazy, a little extravagant; we cannot propose critical projects, etc. But of course one must not make extreme generalizations. In 2005, the Ministry of Culture gave us significant support to publish in one volume Mohammed Dib's Algeria Trilogy.

Can you give us an overview of the projects in which Barzakh was supported by European partners?

When Selma Hellal and I created our publishing house in February 2000, our project—naïve and clumsy in its business plan—was to publish young Algerian writers (novelists, short story writers, poets, etc.), to publish Algerian literature for Algerian readers living in Algeria. We conceived this project in a very particular context: that of Algeria at the end of the 1990s, which I've just described a little. At the end of ten years of political crisis, many Algerian authors had left the country, some to France and others to Arab countries. These authors were no longer published in their own country. Instead, they contributed to the success of European or Middle-Eastern publishers.

Why did I say that our project was naïve and clumsy? Because whoever says publishing says "book business". But, at that time, in 1999-2000, the situation of Algerian publishing was a complete disaster. Barzakh was born just after the bankruptcy of several public book companies as well as their whole network of bookstores. It was the end of a certain state policy in the field of publishing, of an era when the state controlled and generously subsidized the life of a book from beginning to end. But no alternative policy had been put in place. It was a void. The vast majority of Algerian bookstores (state bookstores) were sold or were in the process of being sold. On a more general economic level, there was crisis: Algeria didn't have the financial stability that it has today. There was no room for "cultural consumption" in a situation where the price of a nice book was sometimes a third of the guaranteed minimum wage.

As soon as we published our first titles, we realized that the market was not viable, that it was too unstable and that the cultural environment was not favourable to us (few cultural or literary programmes, near-absent media criticism, etc.). We realized that we were in a completely precarious situation. This forced us to take another look at how we could create, in Algeria, a quality literary publishing house. We began to look into other means of support since we could not count on a strong and coherent books policy, which of course the state would have had to establish. In Algeria, there are two sources of support: it can be institutional (the Arts and Letters Fund) or foreign (the European Union (EU), the French Cultural Centre for Francophone Publishing (CCF)).

We sought these different kinds of support to publish our books and organize our events. The first event we organized as a result of this support was an exhibit of the paintings of Azouaou Mameri (December 2000). This exhibit was funded by the EU. The first funding the CCF granted us was in the shape of buying sets of our books for use by associations of Algerian French language teachers. That was in 2001.

The support of the CCF was very important for us. It provided our business with an injection of money that we used to finance other publishing projects. But this support had an obvious limit. It could only be sporadic, and from this perspective, it did not allow us to structure our publishing house. A publishing house is 60 to 70% structured by the

market even if—one can never repeat this enough—the book economy is unique. Even while it is governed by general economic logic, it also has unique characteristics as a result of the intervention of state and other cultural actors (foreign cultural institutions, private national or foreign sponsors).

Very quickly then, the assistance of European partners went in two directions: training, and financing the acquisition of authors' copyrights. I myself took part in a CCF-funded training in Paris. Selma Hellal took part in a training in Frankfurt funded by the Goethe Institute. These trainings enabled us to become better informed about the workings of the book business in European countries. This was very useful to us even if there is no comparison between the European book business and its Algerian counterpart. It also allowed us useful access to other experiences. . . .

What do you mean by financing the acquisition of authors' copyrights?

The other direction in which European support went is, as I was saying, financing the purchase of copyrights. Local book production is weak and, for many Algerian authors, the French market is more attractive than the national market. The best of francophone Algerian book publishing happens in France; in Algeria, these books are offered to the public at inaccessible prices. The solution—how to make available to the national market francophone Algerian literature appearing in France—was clear: to buy copyrights from French editors. To prevent the cost of these copyrights from being reflected in the sale price, the books office of the French Embassy in Algiers undertook to acquire the rights for the benefit of Algerian publishers. This support enabled Barzakh to make affordable a certain number of works by Algerian authors or concerning Algeria that had appeared only in France and that Algerian readers were being denied.

Another example of cooperation is our collaboration with the Swiss foundation Pro-Helvetia in the context of a project called "The Other Mediterranean". This project was articulated around the question of cultural exchange between the two sides of the Mediterranean: how to develop them? How to help south-Mediterranean artists work in better conditions, etc.? We organized a certain number of events with Pro-Helvetia, like the conference on literary translation and bilingualism (Algiers 2002). We also participated in the grand adventure that was the work *Mediterranean Territory* (2003). This book summarized the experience of the "Other Mediterranean" project, a summary that "problematized" the project in order to understand what had worked, the gaps, etc. We asked ourselves pertinent questions: is the financing of an artist's work by a European institution felt at the level of the work of that artist? What is the real influence of cultural exchanges on the perception that each side of the Mediterranean has of the other? Etc. Etc.

What is your assessment of all these experiences? What did Barzakh gain from them?

First, a clear economic profit! When we receive the support of others, we work in more comfortable conditions. This allows us to realize projects that we "feel like" taking on. What is not explained enough is that a publisher doesn't just publish books that "work", but also books she "loves". At Barzakh, we don't just want to publish books that meet the public's supposed expectations. This public, we want to surprise it, to make it discover other things, other authors. If we were only able to publish books that corresponded to the public's presumed expectations, we would only publish history books, textbooks and

cookbooks! Without even mentioning religious books, which would need a separate description. . . . I speak of the “supposed expectations of the public” because until now no poll, no serious study has allowed us to develop a precise idea of the Algerian readership, of what it likes or doesn’t like, in which language it reads this or that kind of book (because there is a real linguistic particularism in Algeria), of the degree of literacy, At Barzakh, we think it’s necessary to publish actual literature, especially in a country where, because of the years of political crisis and the decline in purchasing power, it can seem like a luxury good. And it’s for this reason that we do everything (including accepting foreign financial support) to ensure that literary work is accessible to the largest possible public.

The inherent risk in this kind of financial support is this: it makes us more economically comfortable and, as a result, we risk turning away from the principal objective of any publisher—reaching a precise readership, helping to develop it, developing public reading, the national book business, etc. The risk is of doing only books that we love but that don’t correspond to any public expectation—real or imagined. The whole difficulty is to balance oneself in the exact centre: doing books one loves but in order to offer them to a real public.

We published, a year ago, a book called *Algiers 51*. It’s a collection of photographs taken in Algeria in the 1950s by Etienne Sved, a Jewish-Hungarian photographer. We accompanied these photographs with texts written by three different authors: the historian Benjamin Stora, the poet and expert in colonial photography Malek Alloula, and the novelist Maïssa Bey. The support we received from the CCF enabled *Alger 1951 (Algiers 51)*, a beautiful book, to be sold for only 1,500 dinars. This price is clearly high compared to average purchasing power, but without the support of the CCF, it would have been even more. *Algiers 1951* was, for us, an editorial success but also a success at the sales level. We should probably have thought, however, to edit a parallel version that would have been cheaper, less elegant, so that it could have been sold at, say, 400 dinars and could thereby have been accessible to a broader public.

Can you tell us if Barzakh (or another cultural actor in Algeria) has fallen into this trap you describe, that of producing works that are completely disconnected from the presumed expectations and tastes of the public?

It’s difficult to answer this question. What is certain is that we ask ourselves the same question every day: how do we reconcile the things we “fall for”, our preferences, with that which the market demands of us? The publication of literary works is the *raison d’être* of Barzakh, even if we have developed other products (history, essays, art books, etc.). The double rule that we try to apply is this: to publish books that we love but that also describe Algeria in one way or another. Sometimes, obviously, we publish works that we as amateurs of literature don’t adore, but which, in our opinion, describe a certain reality, say something about the country that is Algeria.

At the same time, I must say that the support and help our partners give us on certain particular projects sometimes allows us to do books that we would like to do without asking ourselves about their “salability”.

One might point out that, despite all these projects of partnership with European institutions, the situation of Algerian publishing and of the book business has not really evolved. . .

Has this cooperation been useful? My answer to this question, at one point, was entirely categorical: yes, it was useful, it allowed us to be in a continuous exchange with the other and, as a result, to nuance the superficial perspective we could have of him, etc.; it permitted cultural actors to have more room to manoeuvre, for publishers, for example, to publish books they dream of publishing, etc.

After a while, I realized that these arguments could easily be taken apart by an analysis that lined up the numbers to prove that literary publishing in Algeria has not really evolved despite this cooperation with European institutions, that the book business is still not well structured, that the financial situation of publishing houses that publish literature remains precarious, etc. The logic of numbers is pernicious. It could drive us to utter despair.

What we can use to rebut that kind of pessimistic analysis is a simple question: if these partnership projects had not existed, what would be the situation today? I constantly ask myself: if Barzakh or another publisher, Casbah, didn't exist, what would the real situation of Algerian publishing be? I answer this question by affirming, despite the logic of numbers, that the existence of Barzakh has been useful. If Barzakh didn't exist, there would be something missing. Similarly, if cultural cooperation with European institutions didn't exist, there would be something missing. The situation of Algerian publishing would not be quite the same. Barzakh and other publishers wouldn't have the visibility they have today. Barzakh is today more visible than it was seven years ago, its work is more consistent and its identity better established. Today everyone knows who we are, what kinds of books we publish. Everyone recognizes our role as a link between different generations of artists, different artistic genres and different languages of production.

Don't you think that frequently turning to foreign support could distract the attention of cultural actors from a legitimate demand, that of more important cultural subsidies by the state?

I don't believe so. Through the publishers' unions we always demand the same thing: a national book policy that helps to structure the Algerian book business because we—the publishers' guild—we know very well that without a books policy we will not survive long, or we will always be dependent on outside help (necessarily sporadic and selective) or on the necessity of publishing mainly textbooks. A books policy supposes, on the one hand, in-depth reflection on public reading (a library network, specific orders, support for writing or publishing, . . .) and, on the other hand, putting in place legal and financial measures that would help guarantee the continuity of our work through framework legislation on the book (eliminating taxes on inputs like paper and ink, reducing expenses, facilitating access to investment credit, . . .). None of this exists, which means that there is a great deal to do and that it would be a good idea to take advantage of Algeria's financial upturn to begin this work.

The national cultural institutions, when they support you, convey a certain number of "expectations" and "wishes". What about foreign backers?

The expectations of foreign backers depend on the image they have of Algeria. In the 1990s, they focused on the question of women, of threatened individual liberties, etc. A little later, with the evolution of the political context, they focused on the question of freedom of expression, of the battle against censorship: they supported artists who had

been muzzled, whose speech had been restricted, etc. They offered residencies and writing fellowships, etc.

Today, as the political situation evolves, the expectations of European backers are changing. One can, as a result, finance other types of projects today. Our leitmotif for years has been that things are more complex than they appear. We have often told our partners: it's interesting to finance the work of this or that artist or writer even if it doesn't address terrorism or women's rights.

As independent cultural actors, we belong to what is called "civil society". What interests foreign partners is to help develop this civil society, to give it the means for real independence. The question, for us, is how this can happen so that this civil society is not held hostage by one group or another and remains representative of the society from which it came.

What "benefit" were your foreign partners able to achieve through their cooperation with you or with other cultural actors in Algeria?

I don't know if it's up to me to answer that question. In any case, the benefit is clear for the French cultural institutions at least (CCF, the Ministry of Culture, francophone associations, particular foundations, local or regional associations, etc.), which are interested in developing and promoting francophone culture. What interests these organizations in financing the writing fellowship of an author is to preserve the presence of the French language in Algeria. The benefits are less concrete, less quantifiable, for other European institutions when they finance a sculptor's exhibit, an artist's installation, etc. What they expect of us, in my opinion, is for our work to become sustainable.

Have these cooperation projects helped Barzakh to better structure itself and to make its work sustainable?

As I was saying earlier, the financial support that we have received has allowed us to accomplish the projects we wanted to accomplish. It allowed us to realize them in more comfortable financial conditions.

Our participation in cultural partnerships with European institutions, the travel that we have done in this context, etc., all of this has been very useful to us. Taking part in international book fairs allows us not just to understand the global book industry, but also to discover that the problems faced by literary publishing in Algeria are not unique in the world, that they are similar to those of Turkish, Egyptian or Bosnian publishing. . . . It thus allows an opening of the spirit towards the rest of the world and, naturally, the ability to see that everything is relative.

These partnerships allow us to engage in a constant examination of our work.

If they didn't exist, we would certainly ask ourselves questions about our work, but we would ask them differently, and the answers would definitely be simpler. We would certainly ask ourselves the question of which books to publish, but we would invariably answer: memoirs, history books, textbooks. Thanks to these partnerships, our room to manoeuvre has widened and we can rephrase the question of our editorial choices. We can publish books we love, which is not nothing. We can offer them to readers at more affordable prices than if we were not subsidized. The support of our partners allows us to

make art books, produced to universal standards. It allows us, in two words, to improve constantly.

Cultural cooperation with European institutions is taking place within particular global conditions, characterized by growing political and “cultural” tensions between the West and the Arab-Muslim world. Has this permitted, in your opinion, greater mutual understanding between Europeans and the Arab-Muslim world?

Two parts to answer this question. On the one hand, it is the artists—in the widest sense of the term—who push things forward, who allow one to reflect, to be moved or to become aware. It is they who increase our knowledge of this or that human geography in the world. It is through philosophy, literature or film that we better apprehend the world, provided that these works are aesthetically strong; if they are also radical, coherent and belong to a specific place, they are an even better way of opening oneself up to the world. Nothing equals a great novel or a great film to change somewhat the prevailing mentalities and prejudices. But, on the other hand, these works have to circulate, to be seen, read by the largest number of people or for there to be at least some impact in the media. And there “cultural cooperation” can do a great deal to destroy mental, economic or police barriers! All this in a context of American domination. The Arab World Institute in Paris is invaluable in this context, and one must always ask oneself the question in the sense: what would there be if it didn't exist? Maybe nothing, and it's terrifying to think so. . . . Clearly volunteerism is necessary, generosity is necessary, because the work is endless when it comes to spreading knowledge, publishing, translation, financing large projects (film, music or theatre), generating media coverage. . . .

Yassin Tamlali, January 2007

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