

## **Route of the Tunisian swimmer Oussama Mellouli : an entry by bricolage**

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this article is to show the interest which the concept represents, celebrates since Lévi-Strauss, of bricolage, sociological paradigm which contains a demonstrative opportunity exploited here to analyze the course and success of swimming champion Oussama Mellouli.*

*An interview is devoted to him because he is a special case of success, reflecting the scarcity of global sporting success of Tunisia. The interview is guided by a first dimension relative to the estimate of the importance of individual actions with respect to structures and a second that questions on the part of rational and the subjectivity in determining success.*

*The results indicate a marked course of repeated arrangements, imagined according to the circumstances of the subject and its surroundings, in spite of their dependence structures. They also show the primacy of passion over reason.*

*Interpretations suggest that the seclusion in a system of preparation of the elites preaching rationality any azimuth occults actually the possibility with other logics to be asserted, those in particular founded on a randomly more open dynamics, with uncertainty and sensitive to the complex thought.*

**Keywords:** *Course of life, high level sport, bricolage, rationality, passion.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The article proposes a sociological analysis of the sporting course of the champion Oussama Mellouli having led the Olympic la consecration, with an aim of proposing an explanation different from that which preaches the outrageous rationalization of the procedure processing of the sporting elites.

Thus, the sporting system to which is attached this elite is questioned from the point of view of its fertility and its last and current results, as of the moment when one considers the will of his administrators so that he identifies the world challenges and their determination to make it competitive on the international level. Because, apart from the performances carried out in particular by the runner Mohamed Gammoudi with the Olympic Games of Mexico City in 1968 and, of the decades later, by the judoka Anis Lounifi, world champion in 2001 in Munich and by the swimmer Oussama Mellouli, Olympic champion of the 1500 m freestyle to the last Games of Beijing and recently world champion of the same distance to Rome in August 2009, the world exploits remain extremely rare.

The individual courses subjacent with these single achievements, could they conceal a paradigm being used for better understanding logics of these exceptional successes, and beyond showing the limits of the model in force of preparation of the elites centered mainly on the approach with technical rationality?

New theoretical horizons can indeed take shape starting from analyses which try to retrace the courses of sportsmen lives. The swimmer Oussama Mellouli deserves some attention to the lessons that usually promise such case studies are made profitable to serve "effectively" the Tunisian sport by communication rationality. (Habermas, 1973).

#### **The organizing do-it yourself:**

We chose bricolage as an explanatory paradigm of the career of the swimmer. One should not take here this word in the pejorative sense under the common sense, but the meaning of C. Lévi-Strauss ; the anthropologist considers that the scientific thought and the thought which he calls savage, are also valid, even if the latter proceeds by "intellectual" bricolage (1962, p. 26). Bricolage can thus be an entry in the explanation of social constantly crossed by uncertainty. Bricolage is, for the sociologist C. Javeau (2004) "to arrange, repair somehow in a provisional way" It underlines the idea that "the social manufactures cahin-caha by tests and errors" (p. 3).

The handyman is not acting according to a plan drawn up in advance or by applying a model, he flees instead models because they are not always adjustable to situations encountered.

Even men of science can be regarded as handymen since, epistemologically speaking; they precede face to the encountered contradictions, deconstruction and reconstruction of proven truths.

## **II. Method**

The qualitative aspect of this case study uses the non-directive interview, a technique for gathering information and granting freedom to the subject to express his thoughts and his positions. And is conducted through direct interview, guided by questions that take into account the following objective: to determine the degree of contribution of the subject and his significant others and the official sports institutions, in the determination of the decisive stages of the course having led to the successive consecrations of the champion.

The questions thus insisted on:

- The family structure and the opportunities it had provided for the formation of sporting tastes;
  - Choices undertaken and their renewal and successive readjustments during the career,
  - Programmed or fortuitous meetings and their incidences on the redefinition of "the horizon of waiting" (Koselleck, 1990, P. Ricœur, 1985) of the sportsman.
- then, behind the wording of the questions, the filigree intention to know the course up to what point proves characterized by a rational management or a more open management characterized by incompleteness is woven.

(Morin, 1990, Lapassade, 1997). Indeed, even if the dominating model of sportsmen preparation is that which recommends the rationalization and the planning of the course leading to excellence, of less rationalizing logics could be considered, while proving to be effective.

Thus, beyond the reconstruction of the route of the champion Oussama Mellouli, we are trying here to exercise a sociological reading of his declarations to discover a meaning which would go against the generally accepted ideas ordering processes advocating the "scientific whole" such preconceptions attribute the repeated failures of the sporting system to a deficit of rationality which should be filled by a recourse to science; this one, moreover, is already well installed in its more rational and positivist form and informed the Tunisian sporting system since already twenty years. These choices devote to the institutionalization of a universal thought which consists in consolidating the system by the contribution of an instrumental rationality (Habermas, 1973) judged as unavoidable to achieve the required ends.

But, the question is the production of social; can it concern the only prerogative of the scientists and the experts? While this thought is predominant, resulting in strategies increasingly locked scientifically, a second way, more groping and much less disguised in the science dress, remains operative and of an unquestionable fertility because, granting an important place to human creativity, their ability for invention, all in all, to borrow the expression of H. Corbin (1958), with their "creative imagination."

It is this other way which we want to highlight in what follows starting from the course of the sportsman.

## **III. Results**

### **1-Structuring groping of the course in an open environment**

Content analysis of the interview confirms more than one level the existence of an appropriate logic explaining the conditions of the champion's success. It highlights the deployment of the strategy of an action less rational than tinkered.

Passages show indeed that the circumstances in which the swimmer Mellouli had begun the practice, did not fall within the scope of logic immediately careerist which proceeds by planning the specific stages of preparation of a champion, since the discovery of his "talent" until its confirmation.

The champion has not been found therefore after going through the usual procedures for the selection, orientation:

"It was, he says, by preventive precaution that I started to practice swimming. My mother just wanted her children to know how to swim. We live 5 minutes from the beach in La Marsa and we loved going to the sea."

The course is characterized, at its beginnings, by a primarily family intervention where the parents played a part in the consolidation of the practice; they are the main actors, marking out the route:

"My father, declares" he has always taken up us to the training; I remember that he came to awake us at 5:00 am and took us to the trainings in the swimming pool of El Menzah (30 minute drives), waited for us and when we had finished, he drove us to the high school. This was a great sacrifice we owe him [...]"

The role of the mother seems more significant by her continual presence at different times, in particular since the access of the swimmer to professionalism; his insertion in the course was illustrated by endorsing the role of interface between the institutions of supervision (the ministry for youth, sports) and the swimmer, as it became essential to control his international participations and to ensure its smooth running.

"My mother, he says, played a very great part in my career. She is present at all my international competitions and she manages to some extent my professional career. She deals with making synchronization between my preparation and the follow-up which occurs at the ministry and the federation in Tunis. . Somehow she is my spokesman [...]"

Our choice of do-it yourself as an explanatory paradigm of the course is supported by declarations that confirm the course of a career outside the direct institutional action. Indeed, next to the home environment, it is woven in the liking of the circumstances a relational network of actors (relatives and friends of the family) more or less related to the sports world, contributing to maintain swimmer's career. One of them, for example, had maintained with the swimmer ambivalent relations, marked at their beginning by the formulation of a doubt about the chances Oussama Mellouli had to succeed and become one day powerful in the discipline:

"Before 1999, I found him [former technical director and friend of the family] a hard man and my meetings with him, when I was very young, were not ideal, because he criticized on several occasions my morphology (I was thin and small in size...)."

However, the first successful performances of the swimmer at the Arab plan, will reveal the advent of a champion and will bring the dubious to be reconsidered indeed, the swimmer declares,

"After 1999 I believe that he really started to believe in me and from that moment, our relation grew and became very positive. I was selected for the Pan-Arab Games" Amman 99 "I 'was the youngest athlete of the Tunisian delegation [...]."

This assertion indeed illustrates the dominant rational conceptions in the processes of identification of the promising subjects in such sporting discipline. According to standards (generally morpho-functional) established a priori, it is preceded to the disqualification of the subjects who do not respond to these precise standards, considered as not having the necessary predispositions for success.

The device functions as if it were possible to envisage, for example, what an individual will be at eighteen years old from what he is at eight years!\_ A posture which attaches more significance to time and the duration would be more attentive with random, the quota, the sudden appearance of the potentialities, aspects which rationality eludes, because considered as imperfections, waste which it is important to make purification (Arduino, 1990, p.22).

Following the first Olympic games in Sydney, another significant relationship appears to contribute to mark a decisive turn in creating the opportunity for a start towards a pole considered promising for further sporting success. A family friend, journalist and member of the International federation of Swimming Amateur was dispatched by the parents of Mellouli to Marseilles (France), where it prepared his baccalaureate. A significant action has been taken at this time, to contact an academic host institution in the United States, to train at a high level and conduct in parallel with the studies constituting a characteristic which made the reputation of the American universities; this does not have escaped the restricted group taking care of the sportsman's destiny, and their arrangements were crowned by success; speaking about this episode, speaking about this episode, he declares, evoking the journalist close to the family:

"My parents sent him to visit me in Marseilles in 2001; it is at this time that one started to search American Universities because I wanted continue my studies. Operation which succeeded since fortunately I made the right choice and I was able to manage my American experience, something that is not given to everyone and very difficult to achieve."

It is illustrated here the capacity of the subjects implied to adjust their behaviors in a fully open context to individual do-it yourself .clearly, the actions are not conducted in a calculated way as if it were a question of a "plan to be applied", but raise of process obeying the principle of reconstruction of the choices according to opportunities to seize or to create.

This character also counted to perform actions that would, in the required language in sports, a staff survey since they are interventions since they are interventions touching of the aspects relating to the scientific accompaniment of the athletes; thus, does he trust the character:

"[He] always kept me motivated in sharing with me a large number of statistical analyzes and in talking of foreign swimmers, especially those that I should fight... I'm really lucky to have someone like him, so passionate about swimming."

The government department responsible for sport, as an institution whose job it is to provide athletes with the best conditions for success and especially to play the role of First Instance centralizing decisions, monitoring, does not seem to favor the interventionist model management of sporting affairs. In this case, actors directly involved in an ongoing process of reconstruction of the course based on contingencies, stand between the athlete and the institution with its multiple ramifications. This appears in particular with regard to the plan career of the swimmer:

"I manage myself my career and I establish myself my program of competitions and training courses for each season with my trainer of course [...] Since I'm in protracted displacement in the U.S., I do not take part in the meetings, but it is by e-mail where my mother is present in general when it is about a point in my preparation and logistics of my preparation."

It also appears that the mother and the two brothers of the swimmer keep the upper hand on his framing, by their systematic presence in the crucial moments which large appointments of world swimming

constitute; His coaching is a family affair where a mixture made up of approximate and arranged actions and of emotional support is concocted. He declares for example that:

"Family presence is very important for me. One of my brothers does not miss any of my international competitions even if he works in the U.S., The other is my doctor during my travels and my mom is my manager. This is a family affair my competitions and it is a treat for me so this is an important psychological contribution."

What confirms the commitment of the family to support him is the major event which marked its relative course to a control anti-doping in 2007 after which he suspended the competition for nearly two years:

"During this experience, I have been really lucky to have a" support group "as my family, my friends of training and my coach to keep me motivated and attack the Olympic year with a lot of determination and will to win."

The paradigm of bricolage adopted for the reading of the route, connects us directly to an aspect which is complementary for him, corroborating the thesis of the centrality of the subject acting, not always rational and relativizing, as a result, the weight of the structures. The following remarks go in this direction.

## **2- The order of subjectivity: found passion**

Bricolage characterizes the whole course thus and appears clearly by a repairing and manufacturing work; by testifying the declarations in connection with questions which consist in knowing if sporting successes were part of decided objectives at the beginning of the sporting commitment, or if they had appeared as career development, with the liking of the successive successes revealing each time new opportunities to seize and involving consequently a revision of the horizon of waiting. Thus he was not in the forecasts of the swimmer to carry out such a performance, as he declares it by referring to his performances of 2008 and 2009:

"What I achieved was childhood dreams which become have become reality [...] if someone had told me six years ago that I would become an Olympic champion and world champion in swimming, I would have laughed! [...] What I have been able to accomplish has exceeded all my dreams."

At no time, the swimmer had the certainty that one day he would get this far, all he hoped to achieve a more global performance; of course he was conscious that rivalry is hard on this level of the competition and the exercise was imposed on him as an inescapable need; only, expressions such as "hope", "dreams" are often taken again in his declarations and return like a leitmotif:

"Knowing, he affirms, the level of world swimming [...] I could only work hard and hope for best. I always believed in myself but what I succeeded to achieve exceeded all my dreams."

These expressions are in direct connection with passion, as showed by Smells (1991); this one, contrary to Descartes who postulates the supremacy of reason on passion, defends that reason is controlled by passion.

The sociology of bricolage joined this way while insisting on an important fact. "It is the passion, which returns to the action, of which it is the necessary complement", (Sand-bank, 2004, p. 77). The analyzed speech reveals, indeed, that the force which animates the champion is his leaning for this sport which is swimming; from an early age,

"Passion for swimming, he says, is rooted in a very profound way in my heart and in the hearts of all members of my family;"

That still corroborates the thesis of bricolage by the coexistence of the duality "pathos-logos" (Javeau, 2004, p. 76); passions intervene to relativize the weight of the objective explanation of the behavior; they are, according to Duvignaud "lines without finality" (1990, p. 208), but transgressive lines dreaded by the social order. The passionate, indeed, gets busy "to face the impossible, to wish objects whose idea does not exist yet.

And, that, out of standards, of the institutions, the rules" (p. 209). Passion is "an aspiration towards the non-given, the not-yet-lived, the" realm of the possible ""(p. 210).

The role of the institutional framework, it must be noted in this case, is to respond to this range of possibilities created by the actors; this reaction might be an adhesion; that was the case as of when the department of supervision had endorsed certain anticipations of the actor, as that which had consisted in guaranteeing his departure towards France. :

"Without the supervision I could never have made the trip in France. The supervision bet on me by 1999 and I estimate to have been lucky to profit from this opportunity."

These precise details want to grant the right place to the auxiliary actions of the institutional framework, constantly concerned, however, by the ordering of its sporting policy with its objectives, its plannings... Indeed, this framework does not itself determine the fate of singular routes. To explain, it would be necessary to resort to a design of conceived reality as being the result of actions whose engine is passion and made possible by an order which leaves room for chance and uncertainty. From this point of view, the disorder becomes organizer and order, rough and precarious, since constantly challenged by the players still willing to negotiate their life course. Ultimately, "the social one constitutes a place of permanent disorder, framed with its margins by thin layers of order." (Javeau, 2004 ,p. 80).

As G. Balandier shows, "Order and disorder are inseparable regardless of the path that leads from one to the other (1988, p 43.), they are virtually inherent in the social order. It is still seen that "the structuring is not a harmonious process, and not more a univocal process. It is the expression of the ceaseless groping to which deliver themselves the social actors to write a story which they are seldom able to predict, or even read afterwards "(Javeau, 2004, p. 69).

#### **IV. Discussion**

Our analyses suggested that the production of social by the actors does not obey a canonical order, a sovereign order which, according to the Durkheimian tradition, transcends the individual and exists "outside him" (Durkheim, 1973: 4) to ensure the homogeneity. It is known that the project of this sociologist was "to extend to human control scientific rationalism [...] reducible with causes and effect relations" (Durkheim, 1973, foreword, p. IX). A countdown of the static conception of social reality, other analyses plead for heterogeneity, a plural of heterogeneity according to the expression of J. Ardoino (1999, p. 63) and grant a place to individual variations and subjectivity. The social order appears as the result of a tentative structure, the "product of constant work of attempts and errors, led by actors with an incomplete stock of knowledge, misinformed about the intentions their partners [...] and incapable to correctly measure and predict the consequences of their acts "(C. Javeau, 2004, p. 225).

The phenomenon O. Mellouli is, just partly, the product of a training policy of the elites by the instituted structures which take care of the destinies of sport and sportsmen. It is especially the product of the instituting capacities (Sallabery, 2003, p. 79) and creative of the subject himself, those of his immediate and close entourage, marked seal of bricolage.

One can agree following J. Ardoino, that his case illustrates the dialectical one of the established and one of instituting (1980, p. 151). He is consequently the revelation of an approach characterized by "the mobilization of the imaginary [...] the sole source of radical creation" (Ardoino, 1980, p. 146); we have deal with a subject who, in spite of his dependences with regard to the institution, keeps a margin of autonomy and a power of action.

The undertaken reading has thus outlined, starting from this singular case of sporting success, the contours of an atypical model of analysis which can be used as possible alternative to the gripping of the formation system of the sporting elites; as a system, in essence, complex (Morin, 1990), it cannot avoid being open to major and interrelated issues:

- That of the subject and the structure; the centrality of the subject tinkering in the construction of his course relativizes the options which plead in favour of the structuring power of structures by the interiorization of the externality (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 92). In the same sense, determinism gives way to a largely undetermined social; the analyses indeed permit to measure the interest which represents an open rationality and its fertility at the expense of rationalities applied in the sporting field, preferring the plannings and the preestablished models and by consequent more willing, to be hermetic with uncertainty and the contingent, because concerning universalizing logics.

- That, related to the preceding one, relating to the part of rational in the training programs of the elites. On the one hand, it proves that passion, crosses right through the course and leaves little place to the reason in the determination of the career. On the other hand, it also appears that rationality is limited because there is no on one side, those who know and hold the truth (scientists and experts) and other (secular), navigating and adopting for constructing reality, incompatible modes with the formal rationality of science. It was attempted here to show that is within the do-it yourself subjects that appear human creativity and his power of invention.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Which "practical" horizons could be released from this case study? The analyses taking bricolage for explanatory model clarify the field of the Tunisian sport of elite, starting from the studied typical case. To approach the possible development without systematically calling on the standard models of science. This field, in its bad results, is crossed by recurring crises that the various legal reforms, the recovery packages, the adopted successive models, the deployed strategies, and all the rationalizations put in place; do not manage to reabsorb for just over two decades. These devices remain relatively ineffective because the sporting system does not manage to integrate the lessons which suggest its own moments of disorder, by making some spearhead of a dynamics of change.

To soften the system or to deaden its crises, does not arrange the sports affairs: it is preceded by systematically concealing its vacuum passages through the exploitation of rare realized sporting performances.

Recovery mechanisms are put in place by the political and media device, designating these achievements as arguments to the relevance of the choice and the accuracy of the models of formation of the elite, thus creating pretence of order. In short, these rare successes suggest the metaphor of the tree that hides the forest and we would agree with Sartre, quoted by Brohm (2006, p. 89) to say that their recovery is an action aimed at restoring "social order [and] based on the mystification of conscience."

Such analyses give the opportunity of setting a critical perspective of the current system which functions rationally according to the slogan of the "scientific whole". The prevailing scientific absolutism, of positivist flavor intends to found the dictate of the "technical" rationality, criticized by Habermas, which is designed as an action using means appropriate to the ends, with the intention to increase "our power to dispose things technically" (1973, p. 102). This sociologist calls for the establishment of a "practical" rationality controlled by a communicative interest seeking to establish a dialogue between acting subjects to decide, by common agreement, to undertake societal choice. It is only to discuss for proof the regrettable division between "hard science" and "soft sciences", the first, comfortably, structurally and humanely installed in the field of sport (Hentati, 1999) continue to be systematically adopted as paradigms par excellence of success and contribute, without wanting it, to consolidate this schism. A necessary complementarity is to be planned to restore to this field all complexity.

At this stage of the analysis, we only skimmed over the issues that derive their relevance from what precedes, that we consider liable to a thorough development in the context of this paper, we dedicate to them the following draft.

These questions call for a device in which the concept of complexity occupies a central position. This one is founded on the principle of open system which draws its "energy in its environment" (Morin, 1982, p.

171) sensitive to the random factors, pleads for heterogeneity, multireferentiality (Ardoino, 1988) and the irreducibility of the phenomena, whether are biological or social, to simple and linear explanations where transparency, purity and order reign. The other concept that complexity calls is thus disorder, object of a "permanent repression in the history of the thought and human society." (Morin, 1982, p. 196). In fact, even if order there is (indeed, this one is inseparable from disorder, as Morin suggests, 1982, p. 193), it must randomly give way and to uncertainty; disorder can indeed be a creator (Prigogine, 1997). Only, the idea of institution mingles with these considerations to mean it is working, in an instituting logic, to guarantee the transparency and stability and to maintain order, precisely by the recourse to rationalization. What characterizes the latter; is the rejection of any contradictory argument, as showed by Popper (1985) through the criterion of refutability of the theories. To associate the rational with bricolage (Sand-bank, 2004), passion (Duvignaud, 1990), intervenes to relativize the idea according to which is scientific only what is formalized, and to give back subjectivity the place it deserves. This one is not by a tare; on the contrary, its catch in consideration constitutes, "the royal roads towards objectivity" (Devereux, 1980, p. 227). As a result, the tendency consisting in considering the phenomena only in the point of view of their universality, which is the corollary of objectivity, is to be reconsidered since it occults the particular and the singular moments stated by the Hegelian dialect.

This outlined conceptual horizon could be retained to be useful, in a forthcoming article, in the framework of the analysis of the high level Tunisian sporting system.

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Guide interview carried out with the Olympic medalist and world champion of swimming Oussama Mellouli  
Family entourage:

- Tell us about your childhood and your family?

Meeting with the practice:

- When and under what circumstances did you start swimming?
- What was the role of your family?
- Did you have, at the beginning of your course, the taste for competition?
- Were you convinced, at the beginning that one day you could get this far in success?
- In addition to your family members, are there significant characters (club, federation, Ministry), who played a decisive role at different times in your career?
- Can you indicate some names?

Education and sport practice:

- What are the measures taken by and for you in order to reconcile sport and education?
- Describe the course of a day as a confirmed sportsman? First in Tunisia and, then, in France, and the United States?

The passage of amateurism to professionalism:

- Tell me about your departure to France and then to the U.S.
- What was the role of the supervision department in the concretization of this new departure towards professionalism? A career plan, was it traced for you?
- How do you deal with this professionalism?

Consecration:

- What was your first major international result? Was it part of your expectations and those of the coaching staff?
- Have you encountered vacuum passages, moments of doubt? And when is that?

The Olympiad and the world:

- When your preparation of first Olympiad did start? At which age?
- How long did it last? And on a worldwide scale?
- What do you think of the Tunisian "model" of preparation of the sportsmen, compared to that of the other countries?
- Who manages your "plan" career? The objectives, were they negotiated? Do you participate in meetings of clarification?
- Who are your companions? Who are the "fetishes" and bringing good luck? What do they give you more?

Private life and leisure:

- In addition to training and education do you have any other occupation?
- What is your favorite pastime?
- Is it preferable that leisure activities be related or unrelated to the sport?

Media:

- From your point of view, the influence of the media, what is its contribution in your career?
- What reactions the media had after your suspension in 2007?
- Journalists or other characters, have they been critical or unpleasant towards you?
- Are you pessimistic about your possible return on the international scene?

Motivation and sense of belonging:

- What mobiles push you towards success? Is it patriotism or the confirmation of oneself? Oussama or Tunisia?
- The patriotism that you evoke, it is rooted in you by your family upbringing or is it imposed (such as a national duty) as in the course of your career and your successive successes?
- For you, is the weight of the responsibility to represent the flag of Tunisia handicapping and inhibitor in itself?
- Do you consider that you are lucky rather than qualified or vice versa?
- What image(s) do you have in your mind at the time of the "departure" of an important international race?
- What sensations, feelings do you have, when you think that you are among the rare Tunisians, with Gammoudi, to have succeeded universally?

Opinion on the Tunisian sport system:

- The international sports results (global) of Tunisians, are they up to the achievements granted in terms of infrastructure and credit on sport for decades?
- As a sportsman with a "world high level" experience, what criticism and propositions do you formulate with regard to the Tunisian sport?