



HISTORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS, HISTORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS. SOME REFLECTIONS ON STEPHEN FROSH AND BELINDA MANDELBAUM'S ARTICLE

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Stephen Frosh and Belinda Mandelbaum start their thought-provoking article by pointing out that it is not “an attempt at writing history,” but an “intervention into the history of psychoanalysis from the point of view of psychosocial studies.” However, in this important piece, the authors address a series of critical issues (some of which have been discussed in previous articles; Frosh and Mandelbaum, 2017; Rubin, Mandelbaum and Frosh, 2016) associated to the problems inherent to writing the history of psychoanalysis. I must confess that I am not really familiar with the field of psychosocial studies, and therefore my comments will be grounded on the point of view of a historian (I am not a psychoanalyst either, as the authors suggest in another piece: cf. Rubin, Mandelbaum, and Frosh, 2016). It seems to me, however, that the purpose of analyzing “the processes of construction of psychoanalysis and [...] [of] understanding the stories it tells itself about that construction” –which according to the authors constitutes the goal of psychosocial studies– is perfectly compatible with what cultural and intellectual historians usually do.

Frosh and Mandelbaum's point of departure appears to be a certain feeling of perplexity originating in two issues: first, the fact that in Brazil psychoanalysis and repression existed alongside during the dictatorship. As the authors point out, not only did the brutal social and political policies implemented by the military not generate any form of criticism on the part of the official psychoanalytic institutions, but there were documented cases of actual connivance between members of those institutions and the regime. This passivity or complicity of the psychoanalytic institutions towards a murderous military regime contradicts, according to the authors, the “progressive” ethical dimension that they attribute to psychoanalysis. Social and political progressivism are “true to the psychoanalytic mission as a whole, as they derive from its conditions of formation in the social revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and also reflect its potential [...] to disturb the comfort of the status quo.” The second cause for the perplexity of the authors is the fact that, even today, Brazilian psychoanalytic institutions –in what the authors cha-



racterize as a “denial” – cannot come to terms with (“work through”) the obscure aspects of their own past.

Rather than discussing the events that evoked the puzzlement of the authors, in what follows I would like to offer some general reflections on how to write the history of psychoanalysis, reflections triggered by Frosh and Mandelbaum’s piece. Let us start from the definition of the object: psychoanalysis itself.

Throughout the article, Frosh and Mandelbaum refer to psychoanalysis in the singular. As Jane Russo points out in her comments on the text, this in itself is a highly problematic issue. I will not reiterate her arguments here, but instead I will focus on the idea, implicit in the article commented, that there is something “special” about psychoanalysis. I do so, prompted by the fact that the authors take me and others to task for not using categories and conceptual frameworks originating in psychoanalysis for writing its history.

Throughout its more than a century of existence (which by no means began with its institutionalization) –and in part as a result of the conditions of its transnational diffusion–, psychoanalysis, like many other systems of thought and beliefs (similarly to Marxism), suffered multiple appropriations, reformulations, and redefinitions. As any historical and social emergent, psychoanalysis has meant (and still means today) very different things to many different people. Freud himself was worried about the possibility of the multiple appropriations that psychoanalysis could suffer, which led him to state that psychoanalysis could not (or, in any case, should not) generate its own *Weltanschauung*, because it was inserted into the *Weltanschauung* of science. Although Freud’s ideas are inserted in a dual heritage: both romantic and enlightened, he emphasized many times that the proper place he envisioned for his discipline was among the *Naturwissenschaften*.

Psychoanalysis, in Freud’s view, could not constitute the basis of a philosophical system, nor was it to become part of “common sense” through its over-popularization; rather psychoanalysis had to be kept within the realm of expert forms of knowledge.

However, since the 1910s, psychoanalysis was simultaneously or alternatively understood –at least in Latin America– as a therapeutic technique and an instrument for the renovation of psychiatry, as an essential component of modernity, as an intellectual instrument to be pitted against positivism, as a set of ideas that confirmed evolutionary theories (both in their Darwinian or Lamarckian version), as an instrument for social control used by criminologists and pedagogues, as an emancipatory doctrine, as a theory that promoted sexual liberation, as part of “the world taken for granted,”... and I could continue. Since ideas and social practices (and psychoanalysis counts as both) are socially and historically situated, it does not make much sense to ask what is “real” psychoanalysis. I believe, as I have written elsewhere (Damousi and Plotkin, 2009) that the history of a system of ideas and beliefs must extend to the history of its multiple appropriations. Unless we profess that there is “one” specific form of “true” psychoanalysis –as claimed by members of the different factions in which psychoanalysis had split up–, that is, a yardstick against which all other forms and interpretations of psychoanalysis can be measured, then we have to admit that there are as many conceptions of psychoanalyses as there are people who claim to uphold a Freudian heritage (once again, something similar could be said about Marxism). If our purpose is to understand the social and cultural impact of psychoanalysis in a given cultural space, beyond the history of ideas, then analyzing the work of multiple commentators and the process of popular diffusion is as important as making

the exegesis of Freud's complete works. Most of the diffusion of psychoanalysis has taken place outside the psychoanalytic institutions (and in the case of Brazil, much earlier than they were even established). If what has been said so far is plausible, then, perhaps, the complicity of some psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic institutions with the military regime, which, to different degrees, also happened in Argentina and Chile (Plotkin, 2012; Vetö, 2013), turns out to be less puzzling than it originally looked. There is nothing inherently progressive in really existent psychoanalysis.

Frosh and Mandelbaum also sustain that the history of psychoanalysis should be written utilizing categories provided by psychoanalysis, a claim that also proves to be very problematic. The main question here is within which conceptual universe should the multiple conceptions of psychoanalyses be framed. One of the problems confronting the social or historical study of psychoanalysis (particularly in its multiple institutionalized versions) is, in the words of Peter Berger and later of Robert Castel, its pretention of "extraterritoriality." This claim to extraterritoriality manifests itself in two dimensions that have probably less to do with the epistemological foundations of the discipline than with specific strategies of legitimation and construction of regimes of authority within different sectors of the professional community. The first dimension of extraterritoriality has to do with the eccentric position in which many psychoanalysts place Freud's discipline in relation to science (in spite of Freud's own efforts). For many, psychoanalysis is as unique a form of knowledge as is its object of study: the unconscious. Therefore, psychoanalysis is seen as a form of knowledge that is irreducible to any other. According to this view, psychoanalytic experience –which is the foundation of psychoanalytic knowledge– is incommeasurable. This is

why psychoanalysis is conceived by many as impervious to any form of criticism generated from without. External criticism is interpreted away, in the best of cases, as a form of resistance and, in the worst, as the result of ill-solved neuroses on the part of those who formulate it.

The second aspect of psychoanalysis' claim to extraterritoriality has deeper consequences. As a result of its supposed specificities, psychoanalysis is placed outside of the "rules of the game" that define social and human practices and, therefore, not only is it different from any other form of knowledge or social practice, but it is also impossible to understand it using the usual conceptual instruments of social sciences. This view implies a denial of the social dimension of the psychoanalytic practice and its institutionalization. Partially following Pierre Bourdieu, by social dimension of a given practice I mean the set of particular forms of social interaction that take place within a specific field, defined by its own "rules of the game" and its struggle for the accumulation of symbolic (and not only symbolic, as it is clearly the case for psychoanalysis) forms of capital. Therefore, according to many psychoanalysts, psychoanalysis can only be analyzed using theoretical categories and concepts originating within it. Nonetheless, Bourdieu has demonstrated the fallacy of this claim to extraterritoriality even for sociology itself (Bourdieu, 1987). Specifically, he argued that any form of social interaction grounded in a system of thought and beliefs can, insofar as they are social and historical experiences, be analyzed using historical or sociological methodologies. Of course, there is nothing wrong in using psychoanalytic concepts and theories to analyze social issues, as long as those concepts and theories are submitted to the same critical examination that the sociologist or historian exercise over their own analytic tools. Thus, it is not enough to postulate the existence



of an “institutional unconscious,” or assume that the process of transference is also present at the institutional level. Rather, in order to render these (and other) concepts analytically useful, they need to be submitted to empirical proof or, at least, to critical examination with analytical tools originating outside psychoanalytic theory. That is, psychoanalytic concepts cannot be taken for granted any more than any other theoretical instruments.

More specifically, the insistence on using categories originating in psychoanalysis to study its history has had, in many instances, jeopardized the possibility of understanding it historically. Let us take, for instance, the idea of resistance. According to psychoanalytic theory, the generation of resistance is inherent to the psychoanalytic process. By extension, it has been postulated that psychoanalysis must generate resistances in the societies in which it is implanted. Many histories of psychoanalysis are conceived of as histories of the struggle to establish psychoanalysis’ truths in the face of social and cultural resistances. However, if one takes some analytical (not psychoanalytical) distance from our object of study, the history looks very different. If there is anything striking about the development of psychoanalysis, it is its fast and successful integration into different cultures, to the point of becoming –as it was mentioned above– part of the “world taken for granted” for broad sectors of different societies. If we consider that psychoanalysis was the result of the research of a relatively marginal doctor working in the capital of a decadent European empire at the turn of the 20th century, what is really surprising is the fact that in less than twenty years it became (Freud’s preoccupations notwithstanding) a “world view” in parts of the Western world, that it developed a transnational institutional organization with branches in at least three continents, and that it percolated into popular culture (from film to

comics to popular fiction) in many societies. Of course, resistances to psychoanalysis can be documented. Most times, when a new system of thought emerges that challenges scientific and professional hierarchies, it evokes resistances among those who feel their previous position threatened. However, this is not specific to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis’ level of success during the 20th century could be compared, once again, to that of Marxism.

To be true, there were some successful attempts to write a psychoanalytic history of psychoanalysis, particularly, as the authors point out, in the biographies of prominent psychoanalysts, including that of Freud. Such is the case of the seminal and already classic article by Carl Schorske (Schorske, 1981). That piece is relevant for the topic of Frosh and Mandelbaum’s text because Schorske shows that Freud substituted internal subversion for political activism when the possibilities of the latter became closed to him. Similar arguments were made –at the social level– for the diffusion of psychoanalysis in different Latin American countries living under conditions of political authoritarianism. However, Schorske uses psychoanalysis against psychoanalysis. In other words, he submits the biographical dimension of the history of psychoanalysis to a kind of psychoanalytic analysis, instead of using a-critically psychoanalytic concepts to explain history.

Finally, there remains the issue of the impossibility of the Brazilian psychoanalytic institutions to come to terms with their own past. Although psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic and historical discipline, its relation to history has been complex from its origins (Plotkin, 2013). Freud and his closest collaborators considered writing the history of psychoanalysis as a crucial instrument of struggle against resistances (Plotkin and Ruperthuz, 2017). Freud’s own history of psychoanalysis is a mix-

ture of historical facts and myths. As Karl Abraham recognized in a letter to Freud on April 2, 1914: "I have read many times [On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement] and each time I appreciate more and more the importance it has as a weapon" (Freud and Abraham, 2001, p. 238). Psychoanalysis is presented as the result of the works of a lonely genius who had to struggle alone against the resistances evoked by his thinking. For decades (many decades, indeed) this has been the official history of psychoanalysis, and even today it is repeated within most psychoanalytic institutions where the development of a vigorous, methodologically sophisticated and always growing historiography elaborated outside the psychoanalytic community has been, generally speaking, all but ignored (at least this is the case in Argentina). Moreover, there have always been problems (exceptions notwithstanding) in gaining access to psychoanalytic archives. The most notorious case is that of the Sigmund Freud Archives at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., where large portions of its holdings have been out of the reach of researchers until very recently (and some still are). In this sense, the experiences that the authors have had in Rio de Janeiro is not any different from the experience that most scholars working on the history of psychoanalysis worldwide usually have when they try to use archival material from psychoanalytic institutions. (In the early 1990s I tried to gain access to the IPA archive and had no better luck than Frosh and Mandelbaum had in Rio de Janeiro.) It seems that, historically, psychoanalysis has had serious problems in historicizing itself.

Summing up, what I have tried to say so far is that we have a lot to gain and little to lose if we analyze psychoanalysis and its institutions using the same analytic tools and methodologies that we would use to study any other system of thought or social practice. In other

words, I believe that psychoanalysis should be "normalized," distinguishing between a normative approach to it (what psychoanalysis "should be" according to us) and a critical and analytic approach of the "real-life psychoanalysis." By this, I mean a system of thought and a professional discipline of multiple and sometimes divergent characteristics, firmly rooted in a wide variety of cultural and social spaces, and which means, at the same time, very different things for very different people.

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