

RESPONSE TO STEPHEN FROSH AND BELINDA MANDELBAUM'S ARTICLE, "PSYCHOSOCIAL HISTORIES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS"

Mauro Pasqualini
CIS-CONICET/IDES, Buenos Aires
mpasqu2@gmail.com

The history of psychoanalysis elicits the combination of multiple approaches and methodologies. Over the last decades, the historians of psychoanalysis' multiple lives have carried out close readings of crucial texts, biographical reconstructions, global approaches to the psychoanalytic movement, and histories of the origins and implantation of psychoanalysis in one country, to mention just a few. In addition, many scholars have also framed their research as a contribution to understanding other issues, such as the history of cultural modernization, the transnational circulation of knowledge, the intellectual history of the twentieth century, gender and sexuality, Jewish history, and the history of professions. Because of all these reasons, the historiography of psychoanalysis is a vital and rich body of work, with a highly interdisciplinary profile. A list of recent or classic influential names writing on the history of psychoanalysis can tell us quite vividly about their diverse backgrounds, including psychoanalytically-oriented psychiatrists or psychologists (George Makari, Elizabeth Roudinesco, Stephen Frosh); sociologists (Eli Zaretsky, Edith Kurzweil); scholars from

language departments (Veronika Fuechtner, Rubén Gallo); social workers (Elizabeth Danto); and, of course, historians (Mariano Plotkin, Dagmar Herzog, Nathan Hale, Jane Russo, John Forrester).

In their article on "Psychosocial Histories of Psychoanalysis," Belinda Mandelbaum and Stephen Frosh contribute with an enriching and fruitful "intervention into the history of psychoanalysis" from the perspective of the field of "psychosocial studies." (1) The authors assert that this field draws heavily from psychoanalysis, since it seeks to understand how institutions organize themselves according to unconscious dynamics, such as mechanisms of protection from anxiety, or denial, underlying organizational life. In addition, a psychosocial studies approach makes two further assertions. First, it argues that all "knowledge professions" –apparently the academic disciplines– make ethical claims, which are related to a certain idea of the "good life." In the case of psychoanalysis, this idea of a good life has to do with "developing and being allowed to use the capacity to understand one's internal and external situation without constraint and, to the

degree that it is possible, truthfully; and to make that the basis for the relationships one forms with others.” (2). Second, psychosocial studies are deeply connected to reflexivity. This means a particular interest in the “feedback loop” between knowledge practices and the people undertaking them. Or, in other words, to move to the foreground the mode in which “disciplines that give rise to those knowledge practices are themselves liable to subjection to them.” (2)

As an emergent field, the psychosocial studies approach seems a promising and inspiring body of knowledge, with many possible applications. For the purposes of the history of psychoanalysis, it seems to me that its main contribution lies in how it can deepen our understanding on institutional and organizational dynamics. By so doing, it can certainly help to add one more determinant to the many forces shaping the social life of psychoanalysis. Along with the long-term trends in cultural or intellectual history, individual agency, professional pressures, and other social conditionings, we can add a better understanding of the ways in which institutions frame their members’ behavior and thinking. If organizations have a life of their own, and apparently a very complex one according to psychosocial studies, then we can approach the often tumultuous history of psychoanalytic societies from a better perspective. Expanding our array of terms and concepts that deal with the functioning of institutional life, and paying attention to issues such as denial, strategies to avoid anxiety, and the many “conscious cover-ups and less conscious refusals to acknowledge the truth from the past” (1) can certainly contribute to the history of psychoanalysis.

However important this contribution can be, we could also ask about how to take profit of this insight. In other words: what can we know through a psychosocial approach that we do not already know through

other means? Frosh and Mandelbaum’s paper seems transparent on this issue. After mentioning the merits of Kate Schechter’s work on the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute, they make the point that “most of the methodology that Schechter draws on derives its critical force from cognate disciplines, especially anthropology and social history.” (3) It seems therefore that insightful approaches to institutional dynamics are already available from other fields of knowledge. We can conclude something similar from the horrendous histories that Frosh and Mandelbaum describe about psychoanalysis in Brazil. Most of their analysis is based on general social history approaches that show how psychoanalysis in Brazil became popular under authoritarian conditions and among elite and conservative groups with rather conformist attitudes toward the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1964 and 1985. When focusing on the more specific institutional aspects of post-dictatorial psychoanalysis, Mandelbaum and Frosh register episodes of explicit censorship and silencing regarding the past. This way of avoiding the uncomfortable aspects of the institution is so explicit that we could legitimately ask: do we need a psychoanalytic-inspired approach to account for such evident modes of censorship?

I would not like to sound discouraging about the productive possibilities of a psychosocial approach. Yet I think that a conversation between the social sciences or the humanities and psychoanalysis is (or should be) part of the academic and intellectual stock of all disciplines. As Mandelbaum and Frosh correctly contend, psychoanalysis is a permeating cultural influence in the West. Any conception of the social, in addition, assumes a specific psychological conception, even when it remains non-explicit. As a result, historians, anthropologists, or sociologists who approach the history of psychoanalysis, or any other discipline, can certainly register the



hidden anxieties, exclusions, desires, or silences that permeate the history of institutions. In addition, when using psychoanalytic insights to register the “institutional unconscious” in the history of psychoanalysis, we could also wonder to what extent this is something that operates only in extraordinary cases (such as in involvement with state terrorism) or in certain moments of the psychoanalytic movement (such as in the splits and polemics pervading its history). Frosh and Mandelbaum’s perplexity regarding the difficulties of a Brazilian psychoanalytic institution to come to terms with the dictatorial past should therefore be contrasted with other cases from different settings. Perhaps the superficiality and lack of criticism of the “family album” historiographic approach is not a specifically Brazilian peculiarity, but rather a more extended, self-complacent attitude common to most professional institutions, including the psychoanalytic ones.

If we proceed in this direction, then we could consider the fruitfulness of the “ethical claim” through which, according to psychosocial studies, we should understand psychoanalysis. The authors argue that this claim takes the form of a commitment to the “good life” described in the terms I mentioned above, which have to do with improving the conditions for achieving self-knowledge. As I understand the implications of this perspective, we should therefore consider an intrinsic, essentially progressive, emancipatory or liberating goal in psychoanalysis, which becomes corrupted or dishonored because of compromises with authoritarian practices, governments, or cultural atmospheres. If this is the idea, I see three basic problems for future research. First, I fail to grasp the empirical status of such commitment to the good life. Is it an explicit program that we can detect in different authors or institutions? Or is it, as I think it is, an underlying assumption intrinsic to the

therapeutic practice? In case it is the former, then we should document the cases in which such commitment took place and how it impregnated actual practices. In case it is about the latter, then there is a risk of incurring in a rather counterintuitive attitude, by which we attribute an intrinsic progressiveness to people or institutions which might be doing totally non-progressive things. This leads me to the second issue: the aprioristic definitions of an essence, or of something intrinsically ethical in psychoanalysis, might be quite defensive. They tend to reinforce the impression that psychoanalysis is always on the right side, and that all the wrongs come from the outside, often as a result of accidental reasons. This procedure also tends to highlight only the progressive features at the origins of psychoanalysis, and to undermine other aspects which appear as less coherent with a progressive tradition –such as the notion of the primary aggressiveness in human beings; the assertion that the disagreements with Freudian teachings are due to neurotic resistances; or the belief that civilization is always repressive.

Finally, and I think most importantly, the ethical approach seems a one-sided way of framing a very complex and interesting issue in the history of psychoanalysis and mental health more generally. That is, the fact that we should account for the possibility of the coexistence, within the same discipline, of normative assumptions and social control purposes along with more liberating aspects that improve self-knowledge and help deal with demanding mandates. Scholars have approached to this “coexistence” through different perspectives. Perhaps, the most famous “pessimist” perspective is Michel Foucault’s, who in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* identifies psychoanalysis as the ultimate version of a long-term history of increasingly invasive mechanisms of social control. Carl Schorske’s

thesis of the “retreat from politics” could be considered as a similarly pessimist perspective although from a very different approach. It pointed to Freud’s detachments from liberal progressive politics during Fin de siècle Vienna as psychoanalysis’ founding gesture. Other authors underline other specific issues, such as Elizabeth Danto’s analysis of how psychoanalysts’ migration from Central Europe to Cold War US enforced their abandonment of social and political commitment. Sociologists are also divided on this issue. Whereas Anthony Giddens reacts to Foucault’s pessimism endorsing psychoanalysis’ contribution to modern reflexivity, Eva Ilouz underlines how the “psychotherapeutic ethos” disguises actual social conditionings by focusing on individual problems.

As this brief list shows, we already have a good deal of approaches that have made different interventions on what I would call the conversation on whether psychoanalysis endorses social control or helps to achieve emancipatory self-knowledge. A psychosocial approach can definitively contribute and enrich this conversation, but I think that in order to do that, it should avoid incurring in aprioristic or essentialist assumptions about psychoanalysis intrinsic progressiveness. In my opinion, perspectives such as Dagmar Herzog’s assertion about the heterogeneity of psychoanalysis and its variety and diversity throughout history are more productive. Her observation that “there has never been an essential, self-evident content to the ideas that traveled into new contexts” seems a good methodological departing point to avoid one-sidedness regarding the history of psychoanalysis and its changing scenarios, status, and meanings. Such insight could help us to try to understand the many institutional, social, and cultural forces determining the use and the effects of psychoanalytic notions and practices. Otherwise, we would incur in

constant repetition of perplexity and surprise whenever we learn about psychoanalytic experiences which do not correspond to our aprioristic definition.

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