

COMMENTS ON “PSYCHOSOCIAL HISTORIES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS,” BY BELINDA MANDELBAUM AND STEPHEN FROSH

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I should begin by explaining that my point of view is somewhat different from the authors'. My tools of analysis are Weberian sociology and Bourdieu's writings on the constitution of the professional and scientific fields, rather than psychosocial studies, with which I have little familiarity.

In their work, Frosh and Mandelbaum discuss how Brazilian psychoanalysis, in a process that could be interpreted as denial, coexisted with the military dictatorship and its whole repressive apparatus without expressing the slightest sign of criticism or opposition to the country's social and political circumstances. It would even be fair to say that psychoanalysis flourished at the height of the dictatorship and was spread as a therapy and world view through the media and the discourse of a captivated intelligentsia.

Frosh and Mandelbaum argue that institutions “have ways of organizing themselves that reflect ‘unconscious’ dynamics, even if what is meant by ‘unconscious’ here is somewhat different from what is meant by the term when applying it to individuals.” According to their proposition, just as the mental space of psychoanalysts

is infiltrated and impacted by unconscious elements, so is the social space of psychoanalytical organizations. They go on to say that, in view of “its ethic and its conceptual and practical armoury, one might hope for it [psychoanalysis] to develop an exemplary approach to its own history.” The practice of psychoanalysis, envisaging as it does a truth-based relationship with oneself (on the part of the individual), presupposes a given ethic, through which it should be possible to overcome denial. In other words, the way the history of psychoanalysis is normally conceptualized does not “use psychoanalysis against itself.”

Mandelbaum and Frosh's arguments include the fact that traumatic events can determine the future development of individuals and cultures as a whole: “without acknowledgement of what has happened and genuine attempts to confront the ‘trauma’, it is likely that the ‘divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses’ will continue to make themselves felt.” In Brazil, they go on, official psychoanalytical societies have denied (or, in the psychoanalytical sense of the term, repressed) the repression imposed on society by the dictatorship. A

denial that extends to covering up the actions of certain psychoanalysts—most notably Amílcar Lobo, in Rio de Janeiro—who placed their professional expertise at the service of the regime while serving in the army.

In my comments, I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of the “traumatic events” experienced by the psychoanalytical movement to which the authors refer in their text.

To start with, I disagree with the way Frosh and Mandelbaum refer to psychoanalysis in the singular, as if there were just one theory and one practice upon which the psychoanalytical movement agrees. I do not think this holds true. Instead, I suggest that the phenomenon of “psychoanalysis” is multifaceted and that its institutional face—which encompasses training institutions, theoretical writings, and clinical practice—is just one of its features. Indeed, even this facet is far from being unified: the way psychoanalysis was and still is institutionalized, the way it is practiced, and the theories articulated with these institutions and practices are, as we well know, very diversified and have led to disaccord and schisms. Furthermore, psychoanalysis should be seen as a kind of world view that has permeated society throughout much of the so-called western world, constituting a kind of common sense wisdom and exerting a strong influence on psychology, the social sciences, and the caring professions (like the social services and pedagogy). This broad social influence has resulted in certain beliefs around childhood education and family life, that are taken for granted. The notion that early childhood and the relationship between parents and children in these formative years are fundamental for the mental health (and even happiness) of the future adult is widely accepted and taken up enthusiastically by those who provide guidance on parenting and run

“progressive” schools and by lay proponents of child psychology, while also appearing as a given in movies, television series, novels, and journalistic writings.

In view of all these considerations, I think it is best to speak of “psychoanalyses” in the plural.

If we consider the plurality inherent to the phenomenon of psychoanalysis, it is hard to state what specific “ethical claim” psychoanalysis could make as an academic discipline and practice. Given the diversity of “schools” and interpretations of the theory, is there really a legitimate canon upon which to base “statements about the ‘good life’ to which they are committed, or more precisely, their foundational notions about ‘how one should live in relation to peculiar human possibility’”? I would suggest there is not. Although the idea that we can only know ourselves partially due to the workings of the unconscious forms the basis of all the different readings and interpretations of the Freudian doctrine, beliefs about the “good life” that should serve as an ethical beacon for the work of analysts could, I believe, be fairly divergent. Even the conception of trauma that the author adopts could be disputed, insofar as when Freud gave up his “seduction theory,” trauma ceased to refer to a real event “outside the individual.” Obviously, there could be disagreements on this topic. My intention is to draw attention to how hard it is to extract any consensual “ethical claim” from the many readings and interpretations that have been made of Freud’s legacy, the very concept of trauma being problematic for sustaining such a claim.

In order to comment on psychoanalysis in Brazil in the 1970s and 80s, I believe it is important to discuss, albeit tentatively, on the links between psychoanalysis and politics: both the politics of psychoanalysis and the political role of psychoanalysis in society.

When it comes to the latter, it is worth remembering that as a world view permeating society, psychoanalysis has had an important modernizing role in changing customs after WWII. How far can this role as a modernizing world view be considered politically relevant? What has the actual contribution of the diffusion of psychoanalytical ideas—whether diluted or not—been in the identification of and struggle against more subtle forms of oppression typical of personal and family relations?

My argument is that depending on how you define “psychoanalysis,” and also how you define “politics,” the political role of psychoanalysis could be the focus of a more refined analysis than is normally done.

Nonetheless, there is also what could be called the politics of psychoanalysis, which has to do with the institutions responsible for its propagation and control and for managing and regulating the clinical practice stemming from it. Such institutions tend to hold a monopoly over the title of psychoanalyst and the legitimate transmission of the doctrine. As I argued above, there is a plethora of institutions that claim to have the monopoly over “true” psychoanalysis, indicating distinct or even divergent understandings of the definition of what “true psychoanalysis” may be.

The proliferation of institutions and divergences goes back to the birth of psychoanalysis as a doctrine and practice, together with the tension ever present between its mode of initiatory or “experiential” transmission—more linked to Weber’s notion of charisma—and the inevitable bureaucratization prompted by the need to shake off accusations of lack of seriousness by introducing some degree of institutionalization (For more on this, see Roudinesco, (1986). While Freud, as a charismatic leader, still dictated the doctrine and how it was disseminated, any divergences led to real schisms,

driving away malcontents from the movement. These people then forged their own movements (e.g., Jung and Reich) or gave up therapeutic practice altogether. As such, psychoanalysis was able to maintain some degree of unity. As the charismatic authority of the founding father ceased to operate as a unifying force—as the number of followers rose and became increasingly dispersed—this was gradually replaced by institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms. The International Psychoanalytical Association and the societies founded under its aegis were the natural outcome of this process.

Tension between institutionalization (with a greater or lesser degree of bureaucratization and standardization of controls) and the charismatic form of transmission of the doctrine and its practice has persisted throughout the whole history of the psychoanalytic movement, even to the present day. This tension is expressed in the emergence of different schools and even splinter groups, forming new lineages associated with charismatic leaders, often resulting in processes akin to excommunication. But unlike what happened in Freud’s day, the new schools or societies lay claim to a psychoanalytical identity. The history of Lacanianism is the most telling example of a concerted effort to breathe new life into, or reinstate the charismatic dimension to psychoanalysis. The “return to Freud” is a return to a charismatic leader, and also to a charismatic mode of transmission. As Lacanians put it, “each analysis should reproduce the original analysis.”

This is how the politics of psychoanalysis has unfolded. As I see it, inside psychoanalysis itself there is something of a clash between two political positions, opposing those that fight against the “oppression” of the bureaucratized institution, and those that fight in favor of institutionalization: a “left wing” that seeks to subvert the status quo and a “right wing” that strives to

maintain it. Both sides claim (more or less vociferously) to be the true heirs of Freud.

It is common amongst a certain strain of the psychoanalytical “left” to see psychoanalysis as an essentially subversive practice and theory, an instrument that challenges more deep-seated beliefs about the “alienated subjects” we are, and that demystifies belief in the ego/self as a free agent in the world, the ego/self being an illusion we must free ourselves of. This is seen as the subversive role of psychoanalysis against a broader social status quo. According to this interpretation, official institutions have deprived psychoanalysis of its subversive nature, stripping it of what makes it truly different from any other therapy and taking it closer to adaptive psychology.

The fact is that “official” societies do tend to be more politically conservative, more aligned with the status quo in society at large, and their members tend to be more formal and “mainstream” in their clinical practice. Meanwhile, “rebel” psychoanalytical institutions tend to be more defiant of societal mores, accepting women or non-medical professionals when official societies do not, accepting homosexual applicants, holding events or debates with figures from outside the field of psychoanalysis, agreeing to discuss subjects regarded as taboos by the “official” societies, etc.

From this perspective, “official” psychoanalysis, represented by the societies affiliated to the International Psychoanalytical Association, also moves towards a more “official” social posture that is more deferent to the status quo. Even if this status quo is a military dictatorship.

It is the history of these societies and the questions surrounding some of their members that Frosh and Mandelbaum discuss. Here, the limitations of the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis for analyzing its own place in society become clear: the theoretical

tools, their meaning, and their use depend on what psychoanalysis (what branch, school, or “master”) one is referring to. Official societies are just one part of the story, and their way of handling and transmitting the doctrine certainly differs greatly from that of other societies, groups, and even isolated individuals, who adopt their own readings and interpretations of Freudian theory (and that of his followers).

Frosh and Mandelbaum are clearly right when they state that official Brazilian psychoanalysis connived with the dictatorship and is tight-lipped about the collaboration of analysts with the military. Likewise, the fact that the psychoanalytical boom coincided with the “years of lead” (the darkest period of the dictatorship) calls for further investigation. As I state in an article from 2012, light needs to be shed on “how ‘official’ psychoanalysis (that of the societies linked to the IPA) became a symbol of political conservatism at a time when psychoanalysis—at its height—was regarded as an instrument of liberation by a good number of its clients” (Russo, 2012, p. 174). As I discuss in the same paper, the years of lead also need to be better understood, including the actions of individuals like Chaim Katz and Kattrin Kemper (who was the analyst of Helio Pellegrino, known for his activism against the military regime, and with whom she created the Social Clinic of Psychoanalysis), the arrival of Argentineans fleeing the dictatorship in their country, the emergence of Lacanianism, and the actions of the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychology (Associação de Psiquiatria e Psicologia da Infância e da Adolescência, APPIA), which invited Franco Basaglia, Felix Guattari, and Erving Goffman to its conference in 1978 and attracted a great number of psychologists to psychoanalysis.

Ultimately, I believe that an examination of the “fringes” of the psychoanalytical movement and its



heyday in the 1970s and 80s, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where the struggle between psychiatrists and psychologists took on the weight of a political agenda, would help to shape a more complex picture of the relations between psychoanalysis/psychoanalysts and the dictatorial regime at that time.

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