

## RESPONSE TO COMMENTARIES ON PSYCHOSOCIAL HISTORIES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Stephen Frosh (\*) y Belinda Mandelbaum (\*\*)

(\*) Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, UK.  
s.frosh@bbk.ac.uk

(\*\*) Laboratório de Estudos da Família, Relações de Gênero e Sexualidade, Departamento de Psicologia Social e do Trabalho,  
Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil.  
belmande@usp.br

We are very grateful for the close attention paid to our paper *Psychosocial Histories of Psychoanalysis* by Mariano Ben Plotkin, Jane Russo and Mauro Pasqualini. It is a privilege to have one's work taken seriously by such distinguished historians of psychoanalysis, and to be able to participate in constructive debate with them. We are pleased that all three seem to have found points of interest in our article, even though they also have important differences from us. In the space we have available here for a response, we will focus on some of these differences and try to explore how our views might be reconciled, or at least maintained in the kind of productive tension that can advance our understanding of the Brazilian psychoanalytic situation during the 1964-1985 dictatorship, and perhaps of the question of psychoanalysis' institutional response to authoritarianism more generally.

There are many points of basic agreement between ourselves and our three commentators, for example the importance of writing histories of psychoanalysis that attend to its complexity and of situating psychoanalysis in its broader social context. We are also well

aware of how the events in Brazil are not unique, either in Latin America (as Professor Plotkin for one has demonstrated) or elsewhere – indeed, we explicitly mention 'the corruption of German psychoanalysis during the Nazi period' in our paper, and one of us has written quite extensively on this (Frosh 2005). Brazilian psychoanalysis happens to be one striking instance of the broader phenomenon that Professor Pasqualini describes, in which 'official' institutions of psychoanalysis – as of other professions – tend to be conservative and to accommodate themselves to the surrounding sociopolitical realities. One of our points is that when these realities are authoritarian and even militaristic, we have seen the conservative tendency of these official institutions drift into collaboration with an ethos that seems to contradict the principles that psychoanalysts usually commit themselves to; and we are interested in how this happens and how the story of what happened is often obscured. This seems compatible with much that is argued by the commentators; indeed, our work draws significantly on that of Professors Plotkin and Russo, and we also agree that studying 'the "fringes"



of the psychoanalytical movement,' as Jane Russo suggests, is a useful approach to offering a fuller picture (see Hollander 2010 for an account of this kind, which we have referenced in previous work). We should also make it clear that our 'psychosocial' approach, to which we return below, does not claim somehow to replace the kinds of sophisticated historical work that our interlocutors themselves have carried out; and we are certainly not so arrogant as to 'take to task' Professor Plotkin for research that has influenced us hugely!

In the small space available here, we will focus on some of the points of difference that seem most important and try to explain our own ideas in at least a slightly clearer way.

#### **THE SPECIFICITY OF OUR APPROACH: PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDIES AND REFLEXIVITY:**

Two of the commentaries explicitly challenge the idea that our 'psychosocial' approach to reading the history of psychoanalysis adds substantively to the methods already available to 'historians, anthropologists, or sociologists who approach the history of psychoanalysis, or any other discipline,' (Pasqualini) and who 'can certainly register the hidden anxieties, exclusions, desires, or silences that permeate the history of institutions.' Professor Pasqualini correctly notes that most of our documentation comes from social historians, whilst Professor Plotkin states that, '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.' There is a lot of truth in this, and obviously if we thought the work of members of other disciplines – especially, here, historians – was seriously flawed, we would

be much warier of using it than we are. Our point is rather different, and relates to the emergence of psychosocial studies as a distinct area of work in the United Kingdom (see the special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* introduced by Walkerdine 2008 for some background on this). Amongst the principles that are gradually coming to constitute this type of work is reflexivity. Our reference to this in our article is not to suggest that it is unique to the study of psychoanalysis, but that it is characteristic of the investigative practice of psychosocial studies. In relation to psychoanalysis, we completely accept the point that psychoanalytic understanding needs to be challenged and 'triangulated' by other evidence – that is, we accept the argument against psychoanalysis' 'extraterritoriality', and indeed share in the criticism of its common practice of interpreting dissent as 'resistance', which has plagued psychoanalysis virtually from the start. But we also argue that psychoanalysis so powerfully saturates the space of personal and social self-understanding, especially amongst those who explicitly devote themselves to it, that it has become a 'lived reality' of its own institutions. Psychoanalysts use psychoanalysis to help understand what happens between them; in so doing, they construct their organisations on psychoanalytically-infected lines. In addition to this, psychoanalysis has provided a fertile set of ideas to help understand organisational dynamics and it is only reasonable that just as we use historical understanding to throw light on the work of psychoanalytic institutions (the 'social histories' referred to above), so we should use psychoanalytic ideas as well.

#### **MULTIPLE PSYCHOANALYSES AND THE QUESTION OF AN ETHICAL CORE:**

Professors Plotkin and Russo both emphasise the multiplicity of different types of psychoanalysis,

arguing that this makes it difficult to support the kinds of universalising claims we seem to make about its ethics. Again, this account of psychoanalysis is clearly true: it started in one place at a particular time, and has developed in multiple sites, each with its specific history and characteristics, influenced by its local situation as well as by the international flows that have so strongly marked psychoanalytic history (for instance, the movement of Jewish psychoanalysts from Europe before, during and after the Second World War). Generalising about all forms of psychoanalysis is then a hazardous procedure. On the other hand, Professor Russo herself notes that, '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, such as about childhood education and family life, being taken for granted...' This suggests that there is something shared in psychoanalysis that makes it possible to talk about it as a sort of distinctive 'world view', however much Freud (1933) might have protested against it inhabiting its own Weltanschauung. The question here is whether this shared perspective includes what we claim as an ethical core of psychoanalysis (to take up the second focus of psychosocial studies that we identify in our article) that is accepted across different psychoanalytic schools in their different locations, in the same way that we might agree that an affiliation to the idea of a dynamic 'unconscious' (the exact nature of which might be debated) constitutes a core assumption of all psychoanalysts.

Here we deliberately make a statement at a high level of generality: the shared ethical core of psychoa-

nalisis is its commitment to a 'good life' defined as one that 'involves 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.' We are making an empirical as well as a logical claim, as Professor Pasqualini notices, but we are not limiting it to psychotherapeutic practice, which might or might not act in accordance with this principle and which certainly contains the kinds of contradictions that he identifies. Importantly, we are viewing psychoanalysis as a cultural phenomenon and not merely as a psychotherapeutic approach. It is certainly the case that we can see all sorts of normative assumptions in operation in the practice of psychoanalytic therapy. Our claim rather refers to the way in which we might conceptualise the distinct contribution that psychoanalysis makes to what might be thought of as the 'philosophy' of ethics; and it deliberately states it as a provocation in order to make it possible to examine the degree to which psychoanalysis in its different forms and practices adheres to, or departs from, some kind of communally established ideal.

#### **THE POLITICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS:**

This brings us to the related point of our claim about the inherently 'critical' nature of psychoanalysis itself. All three of our interlocutors challenge our assumption of what Professor Plotkin calls the 'inherently progressive' nature of 'really existing psychoanalysis.' In fact, we have no such assumption about 'really existing psychoanalysis' and in a previous publication (Frosh and Mandelbaum 2017) we have briefly articulated both the 'radical' and the 'conservative' sides of psychoanalytic development since Freud, before examining

the actually-existing conservatism of the Brazilian Psychoanalytic Society of São Paulo. One striking impression we have from our material (which consists mostly of interviews with psychoanalysts who lived through the dictatorship period) is that there are times when psychoanalysis adapts so fully to the surrounding social context that its constraints may not even be felt as a threat. What Professor Pasqualini terms, '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' is a real phenomenon, and one our article is an attempt to address.

Nevertheless, our claim, whilst it admittedly suggests that psychoanalysis is intrinsically 'progressive' even if it has often been characterised by conservative thought and practice (one only has to consider the attitude of American psychoanalysis to the depathologising of homosexuality to see this), is founded on the ethical argument outlined above. The fact that psychoanalysis has often been politically conservative, and that its official institutions are geared, like most bureaucratic institutions, to managing relations with authority in a cautious way, raises a question about limits. At what point does conformity with an external social reality that is opposed to the possibility of using 'the capacity to understand one's internal and external situation without constraint and, to the degree that it is possible, truthfully' become an abrogation of the critical perspective intrinsic to psychoanalysis' espousal of exactly that ethical stance? Our argument is that this boundary was crossed by the official institutions of psychoanalysis in Brazil during the dictatorship; that it is not difficult to see that this happened and also to observe a process of denial occurring within the movement, albeit broken by many important psychoanalysts as well as by historians

of psychoanalysis (including our commentators); and that understanding how this occurred is an important strand of work that can be enhanced by the psychosocial approach we have tried to take in our article.



## REFERENCES:

- Freud, S. (1933). New Introductory Lectures On Psycho-Analysis. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII (1932-1936): New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*. Londres, Inglaterra: Hogarth Press.
- Frosh, S. (2005). *Hate and the Jewish Science: Anti-Semitism, Nazism and Psychoanalysis*. Londres, Inglaterra: Palgrave.
- Frosh, S. y Mandelbaum, B. (2017). Like kings in their kingdoms: Conservatism in Brazilian Psychoanalysis during the Dictatorship. *Political Psychology*, 38 (4): 591-604.
- Hollander, N. (2010). *Uprooted minds: Surviving the politics of terror in the Americas*. Londres, Inglaterra: Routledge.
- Walkerdine, V. (2008). Contextualizing Debates about Psychosocial Studies. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 13 (4): 341-345. \*\*