



In these pages...

TRAUMA AND SUBJECTIVITY: A SOUTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Is there South American psychoanalysis?

I believe that it would be too simplistic to qualify the diversity in the field of psychoanalysis on a purely geographical basis, considering the frontiers of each continent or each country. Nevertheless, one can identify differences in the reception, the inflection, and in the privileged aspects of the theory and analytical practice in distinct regions of the world. There are basic concepts and principles in psychoanalysis, but they acquire individual characteristics upon landing in each place.

What causes these differences? In order to explain them—especially considering the Latin American region—Jacques Derrida proposed the term *Geo-psychoanalysis*. With it he intended to refer to the many areas of psychoanalysis, that is, the diverse configurations that the Freudian theory presents in the planet. These configurations do not distinguish themselves because of the mentalities of each country or continent, and not even to their linguistic and cultural peculiarities. What established the differences between them was the dynamic that was used when psychoanalysis was implanted and grew in each region. This dynamic involves the interlacing of historical, cultural, social and political factors, opening different pathways to the introduction and the dissemination of psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Thus, while in the United States psychoanalysis found an entrance through psychiatry, gaining power in its relation with health and welfare, in France there were conditions for it to penetrate, from the start, in several sectors of cultural life. And while in the United States it was able to expand, more recently, in the setting of counter-culture movements (such as the claims of feminists and homosexuals, among other minorities), in Germany

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it suffered some retraction movements—the first during Nazism, and the second with the integration, since the 90s, of East Germany, a region where psychoanalysis was almost nonexistent. And in South American countries, how did the development of psychoanalytic theory and practice develop?

Certainly South America is far from constituting a univocal block. During the colonial period Portugal and Spain were cruel to the people they colonized, but each in their own way; additionally, Spanish power also extended with a different history and manner in each Latin American country. Regardless of all this diversity, a common characteristic marked most South American countries during the second half of the 20th century: civil-military dictatorships. Curiously they were more prevailing and powerful mainly in the countries that experienced a greater development of psychoanalytic theory and practice—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.

Perhaps it is not coincidental. It is a fact that before the military dictatorship in Argentina (1966–1973), psychoanalysis was already prevalent in the country; during this period in addition to Marxists, psychoanalysts were also persecuted, and many of them, like the Jews during Nazism, migrated to all four corners of the world. The persecution of psychoanalysts also occurred in Uruguay during the dictatorship that lasted from 1973 to 1985. Nevertheless, in both countries psychoanalysis endured, though privately and silently, gaining more notoriety with the end of military rule. Dictatorships in Brazil (1964–1985) and Chile (1973–1990) did not antagonize psychoanalysts directly. Regardless, by the end of the 20th century psychoanalysis had expanded in these four countries, extending from private clinics to universities and cultural life. This happened not because psychoanalysis adapts well to dictatorships, but quite the opposite because it was able to participate and strengthen the movements of resistance to them. Even though some psychoanalysts and institutions—especially in Brazil and Chile—preferred to remain silent during the dark years, defending the separation between their private clinics and the political situation in their countries, a large part engaged in practices of resistance to authoritarianism and the military oppression using a psychoanalytic arsenal. This may have been exactly how psychoanalysis found the power and means to become implanted in South America: by being able to relate clinical listening to political listening.

By the end of the 1970s South America was ready to become the continent with the largest penetration of psychoanalysis in the world (Roudinesco, 1997, p. 35). During this period, at the Thirtieth Congress in Jerusalem, 1977 the board of IPA proposed dividing the psychoanalytic world into three curious regions: (1) North America to the border of Mexico; (2) Mexico and the rest of Central and South America; and (3) the rest of the world.

It was precisely due to this geographical division presented by the IPA that Derrida propositioned, in his *Geopsychoanalysis*, a fourth area, inserting Latin America in a different category of the world: the torture zone. “What I shall from now on call the Latin America of psychoanalysis is the only area in the world where there is coexistence, whether actively adversarial or not, between a strong psychoanalytic institution on the one hand and a society on the other (civil society or State) that engages in torture on a scale and of a kind far surpassing the crude traditional forms familiar everywhere” (Derrida, 1998, p. 88).

As a matter of fact this odd combination cannot be seen anywhere else in the world—a psychoanalytic culture growing at the same time that both brutal military and police were in control? This paradoxical development happened because ideas, concepts and practices are not usually produced by the social or intellectual development of a people, but occur mostly as a result of problems that arise at certain moments, which demand specific solutions or, at least some working-through. This demand for a working-through—a work that is enacted after a trauma—has been a constant in the majority of South-American countries. These countries have experienced, upon their constitution, two fundamental traumas: the first is associated with the violence in exploitation colonies, while the second is linked to the cruelty inherent in slavery. These two traumas are not exclusive to Latin America, though, as colonization and slavery also happened in other regions. What happened specifically in the South American zone was that these constitutive traumas were reenacted during the rule of military dictatorships which were authoritarian and had no qualms about neutralizing divergent individuals and groups through repression, intimidation, torture, or death.

It is probable—and this is the hypothesis we raise—that the need to react to, elaborate upon, and eliminate this sequence of traumas has placed psychoanalysis in a different therapeutic and cultural context in South America. During the second half of the 20th century psychoanalysis continued to thrive in Latin America, although by then violence and torture were regularly taking place. The point is that psychoanalysis could provide theoretical and clinical means to the elaboration of traumatic situations that were enforced by authoritarian governments, and this is probably what expanded its power. Here we arrive at the peculiar façade of psychoanalytic critical thought gained in the South American continent: by strengthening movements of resistance to oppression and elaboration of trauma, psychoanalysis became inexorably linked to politics. In no other part of the world this articulation happened so strongly and so clearly explicit.

This relationship between psychoanalysis and politics, triggered by the confrontation with the traumatic, is the theme of the five articles featured in

this special issue, written by authors from Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay.

The paper by Argentinian Juan Carlos Volnovich (2017) presents a brief history of the psychoanalytic movement in his country, since its first appearance in the late 30s—including the constitution and separation of *Grupo Plataforma*—until the present time. From this historical viewpoint, he shows how collective trauma created during the exercise of dictatorial governments impacted psychoanalytic practice in Argentina, forcing professionals to consider the direct and indirect psychological effects of State terrorism upon a society as a whole. Confronted with an excessive reality, psychoanalysts were taken to the depths of analytical theory, in order to respond to the demands of a heterodox clinic. In Argentina, the dictatorship period was exceptionally violent, with thousands of “missing” people and hundreds of babies being stolen from their mothers. Volnovich specifically highlights psychoanalysts’ intervention on the trauma caused by stealing babies and discusses their participation in the elaborative process that presently engages Argentinean society as a whole.

Juan Flores (2017), from Chile, also presents a brief historical review of psychoanalysis and its institutions in his country, questioning the conformism of psychoanalysts that intend to keep their private clinic apart from their political life. Flores criticizes the dichotomy between the individual and society, public and private, and emphasizes how much the psychoanalytic experience is anchored by historical and social conditions. These same conditions cross over, and constitute both the subjectivity of patients, expressing themselves through their symptoms and conflicts and the subjectivity of the analyst. Social contradiction is often experienced in the body as a subjective pain. This is why the analyst must take into account the social dimension while listening, understanding and intervening in the suffering of patients, without reducing them to mere fantasies or projections. By highlighting symptoms as having social causes in addition to internal ones, Flores shows the importance of the dialogue between psychoanalysis and other scholarly studies of wisdom and new possibilities in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

The Uruguayan psychoanalyst, Marcelo Viñar (2017), is world renown for his clinical experiences with victims of torture. During the dictatorship he was arrested and exiled, and subsequently dedicated his life, both during his exile in France and on his return to Uruguay, to investigate the possibilities of psychoanalysis during extreme situations, such as social violence, marginalized and/or criminalized childhood, intolerance and xenophobia. Viñar starts his paper bringing to light the psychoanalytic notion of trauma and stressing its differences both in relation to the psychiatric notion of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and of resilience

which, according to him, possesses a normalizing function. What makes psychoanalytic notions of trauma specific is how it is inscribed in culture and history. And this is what gives it a creative destination instead of a place in psychopathologic speech. Based on the differences of these three notions of trauma, Viñar suggests approaching extreme trauma and its effects, emphasizing situations of political violence (tortured, missing, war and genocide) and those which he calls cold genocide, meaning the marginalization and exclusion that are frequent in some Latin American countries. To him, trauma and exclusion do not indicate pathologies of the psychological apparatus, but pathologies of social bond.

The papers by the two Brazilian psychoanalysts, Eliana Schuler Reis and Jô Gondar, approach the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics from another angle. Brazil is a country with less homogenous identity, more characterized by the mixture of peoples and races than its neighbors in South America. This mixture is also associated with power and violence, but in a more diversified manner. Consistent with this idea, both papers focus on micro-politics, looking into the relationships of power that cross not only State or institutional lines but also, perhaps primarily, family, therapeutic and love relationships. What is in question is always how much and how the desire to be able to express oneself facing the injunctions of subjecting. In this line of thinking, Jô Gondar (2017) examines the task of the analyst in the treatment of trauma survivors, describing in which aspects her listening differs from the listening of the Truth Commissions that were constituted after the fall of dictatorships because the incentive of the commissions was the narrative detail of traumatic events. Eliana Schuler Reis (2017) looks into the management of acting in the therapeutic relationship, discussing ways of thinking, the affective meeting, and the power games with patients who confront the analyst with questions, actions, and untimely gestures.

Psychoanalysis remains alive in South America. It is possible that, due to the experience with dictatorships and their traumatic effects, analysts were forced to create more malleable tactics, involving not only a broader relationship in the social field, but also to connect with other ways of thinking. It is not without interest to realize that where it has been showing more openness to interaction with the environment—social, political, cultural—psychoanalysis has been more powerful.

NOTE

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