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Psychoanalysis in Argentinean Higher Education, 1976-1999

Summary

This article examines the situation of psychoanalysis in the universities of Argentina since the return of democracy in 1983. A brief reference is made to the process of normalization of the national higher education system which began in 1984 and its influence on the curricula of undergraduate studies.

Faculty interests and academic background are reviewed, as well as the expectations of students, the number of which soared as a consequence of the introduction of a free-admission policy to national universities. Economic and professional changes during the 1983-1999 period are examined in order to provide a proper context to the understanding of the evolution of psychoanalytical practice and discourse.

The contribution of informal education is analyzed, together with the transition to rapidly growing formal postgraduate studies in psychoanalysis. Finally, a global perspective is presented on the present and future of psychoanalysis in academia.

At the time of the *coup d'état* of 1976, the development of psychoanalysis in Argentina was already a four-decade-long process. In order to explain this process, certain key aspects of the political processes in Argentina will be pointed out.

The seizure of power in 1976 was justified by the military as a last resource to protect and safeguard those Christian and Western values they considered to be the pillars of national identity. In their eyes, there was on the one hand a military threat, embodied by the guerrilla movements, and on the other a cultural threat, a fuzzier concept tending to be applied to whatever and whoever were felt to be in opposition to the “philosophy” or general interests of those in power. The theory and practice of psychoanalysis fell into this second category. And the reasons for this were many.

To begin with, since the late '50s a considerable number of the more visible members of the Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina had shown overt sympathy for socialism in general and for the communist regimes of the USSR and Cuba in particular. Some of the most “conservative” members of the APA, such as Ángel Garma, had been trained in the Freudian-Marxist tradition of the Berlin Institute. Others, such as Marie Langer, advocated a strong social and political commitment on the part of psychoanalysts. José Bleger, possibly the best-known analyst in the late '60s, had traveled to the USSR and published his—generally positive—views on the communist system. In the eyes of the military, this was absolutely incompatible with “national values” and warranted the initiation of a “cultural” war, that would follow the general patterns of the “dirty war” (1).

Secondly, psychoanalysis was viewed as a Jewish profession; a large proportion of Argentinean psychoanalysts were in fact Jewish. Not only were the military generally anti-Semitic, they also tended to link being Jewish with being atheist and socialist. Once more, this combination was far from being unusual, José Bleger being a typical example. But what would have guaranteed general distaste and contempt on the part of the Armed Forces in the early '60s was now seen as a concrete, armed threat, that could lead to the killing of comrades-at-arms and the dissolution of the nation.

Thirdly, intellectuals were generally suspected of being Marxists, which, again, was frequently true. Argentinean national universities had been notably autonomous from central power and the Catholic Church since the days of University Reformation, in 1918. When autonomy was re-established in the late '50s, and after a conflictive relationship with President Perón, Socialist ideas became very popular, and the Cuban Revolution was praised by academia. This situation would come to an abrupt end in 1966, when another military government intervened at the University of Buenos Aires. From then on, the military would consider suspect anyone with an intellectual background (2).

The “cultural war” would be waged at the level of universities, schools and the media, its general objective being to cleanse them of the “Marxist germ”. In this crusade, atrocities committed were often accompanied by pathetically funny episodes, one example of which was when a certain military *interventor* prohibited the teaching of modern mathematics — particularly the concept of “vector”—on the grounds of their unequivocal relationship with Marxism (?).

In such a context, psychoanalysis was viewed as a Jewish discipline, linked with sexuality and social revolution, possibly even a subtle form of brainwashing. Consequently, it was removed from all educational programs. Naturally, this was possible only to the extent that it is possible to stem a four-decade-long cultural process. In practice, it meant that the references in the curricula to Freud and his disciples were minimal and in general permitted only if in a critical vein. In any case, the influence of Freudian thought on psychologists and psychiatrists was so widespread that this kind of censorship could have no significant impact. The military were aware of this, and it was at that point that a certain general pronounced his now famous statement: “All psychologists are subversives”.

To summarize, the 1976 coup resulted in the exclusion of psychoanalysis from public higher education curricula. Psychoanalytical institutions remained very active, though, and study groups flourished. People ferreted out these alternative ways of learning about psychoanalysis, in their search for training and analysis. The climate of oppression created by the regime transformed psychotherapy into a very special experience, in which one was expected to say whatever came to mind. Although this was risky, given the political situation, and caused serious preoccupation in not a few patients, psychotherapy was seen by many as the last enclave of freedom of speech.

In fact, the military attempt backfired in that it gave psychoanalysis a heroic aura, leading to an identification with Freud in the days of his so-called “splendid isolation”.

This combined with the fact that the historical background of psychoanalysis was taught mainly by analysts with no training in historiography. Hence, they unknowingly sustained the “psychoanalytical legend”—in the terms of Ellenberger and Sulloway—as regards the real nature of Freud’s isolation.

Even today, Argentinean undergraduate students find it hard to believe that psychoanalysis could have been the hegemonic theory in the mental health professions in the United States as early as the 1940s. They tend to conceive psychoanalysis as a discipline actively resisted internationally by the psychiatric establishment particularly, and by the State in general. This misconception about the history of psychoanalysis extends to the present: the current critique of psychoanalysis by mainstream psychiatric discourse is often viewed by Argentine undergraduate students as simply a continuation of the “resistance” begun in Freud’s day.

The “May 1968” spirit of much of Lacan’s work could not fail to be inspirational and appealing for psychoanalysts working under a truly tyrannical regime, and matched perfectly with the idea of psychoanalysis as a discipline sentenced to permanent institutional resistance.

After losing the Malvinas-Falkland War in 1982, the military were forced to concede power. The entire year of 1983 was consecrated to resurrected political activity, and by December a new constitutional government took office.

During 1983, groups of eminent professionals, academics and researchers reunited in a semi-formal way, with an eye to a democratic reorganization of the University. Many intellectuals returned from exile and participated in this process. For the first time in twenty years, university regulations could be fully observed and the *concursos de oposición* began (3).

The teaching of psychoanalysis at the University of Buenos Aires was mainly concentrated in the *Facultad de Psicología* and the *Facultad de Medicina*. Many courses of the schools of Humanities and Social Sciences referred to psychoanalysis, but there was no chair in which psychoanalysis was the main topic.

Analysts at the *Facultad de Medicina* were a majority in the Course of Psychiatry, later re-named Course of Mental Health. Although these professors were highly influential in the domain of national mental health—one of them occupying the highest position in the National Mental Health System—they were by necessity a minority in the *Facultad de Medicina*.

The situation was very different in the public schools of psychology throughout Argentina; almost *all* the members of the groups involved in the reorganization of these schools were psychoanalysts or conducted their work—be it vocational guidance or school psychology—within a psychoanalytical framework. Many were among the first graduates from the Argentinean schools of psychology in the early 1960s, their mentors having been José Bleger, Fernando Ulloa, and Arminda Aberastury, all members of the local psychoanalytical association.

In short, while under the military regime all faculty were appointed because they were *not* psychoanalytically oriented, the advent of democracy resulted in their replacement with legally appointed professors with a psychoanalytical background. In the mid-eighties people were already considering and debating as to whether there were—or should be—schools of psychoanalysis rather than schools of psychology. This would eventually generate resentment and bitter debate on the part of non-psychoanalytically oriented faculty. However, the situation was not homogeneous throughout the country. While in the Schools of Psychology in Buenos Aires and Rosario Lacanian psychoanalysis was predominant, the situation was considerably more balanced in San Luis and Mar del Plata, where there was a relatively large group of cognitive psychologists.

In the early 1990s, the normalization of university life having been achieved, the “pendulum swing” was attenuated, resulting in a more balanced situation. This is partly due to the creation of AUAPSI, an organization integrated in all national universities that offered undergraduate courses in psychology (4).

A prevalent characteristic of the faculty appointed as of 1984 was that they were mainly famous professionals, who had triumphantly returned to the public cloisters after enduring exile or suffering political exclusion. Although they could be accredited a sound professional training, most of them had been prevented from doing research for more than a decade. In time, this would prove to be a serious problem; policies aimed at tackling this shortcoming had no consensus. In the mid-1990s, pressure by the central government on the university research system generated a search for a rapid solution, which in turn created important disputes among the psychoanalytically oriented faculty.

Those aligned with the International Psychoanalytical Association generally veered towards the application of research methodologies developed by outstanding members of the Society for Psychotherapy Research. This group only met the usual difficulties generated by poor funding, the need to train human resources, and

the obstacles created by a university system that had developed with almost no contact with health and educational institutions. However, this was not so much of a problem for the medical schools, as their professors—most of them heads of sections in mental health structures—would generally conduct their research work in hospitals, not necessarily within the university system.

Lacanian psychoanalysts generally expressed contempt for standard psychological research, until external pressures and incentives led them to establish research lines. Their main difficulties lay in the methodological area. Some of their work has been based on single-subject, clinical models. This raises the question of being able to generalize results, usually deemed impossible by Lacanians. Hence, generalizations are often made in the theoretical context, creating a gap between empirical research and theoretical framework.

Others, often critical about empirical research, have chosen bibliography as their research object. The problems encountered by this group have been twofold. Firstly, this kind of research is probably closer to the history or the epistemology of psychoanalysis rather than psychoanalysis proper. Naturally, its undeniable relevance for psychoanalysis as a discipline can easily be argued. Secondly, these attempts have frequently confused research with study groups, in which a number of people dedicate considerable time to in-depth examination of a psychoanalytical concept, but without generating new knowledge (or, perhaps more significantly, without expecting or attempting to generate new knowledge).

In the post-1983 period, at the beginning of the new democratic process, university life was characterized by optimism and enthusiasm, and psychoanalysis represented no exception. Many analysts held professorships for the first time, and considered this a golden opportunity to create a new, improved curriculum.

We have already mentioned that these changes were less significant in the schools of medicine, due to the nature of their object of study, while they were particularly important in the subjects and courses related to psychoanalysis. This was, in fact, the theoretical framework for the new Chair of Mental Health (5).

But the advent of democracy would bring about another major change in university life: the enforcement of a free-admission policy. There was a long-standing tradition of gratuity in Argentinean higher education, but until the middle of the century this was a way open only to the more affluent members of society.

Beginning in the 1960s, more and more middle-class students would seek higher education as the tool for achieving upward social mobility. Registration numbers soared, soon creating considerable difficulty. As military governments dislike the idea of spending increasing amounts of money on politically active students, the decision was taken to implement admission quotas.

Aspirants increased steadily, leading to mounting political pressure to put an end to the quotas, which became official in 1984. Since then, free admission has been the rule for the vast majority of public universities.

Hence, the newly appointed professors faced not only the challenge of returning to academia after years of absence, they also had to teach large, and rapidly growing, numbers of students. This represented a significant departure from the private study groups, which had been their main teaching experience in the interim.

Classes became massive and professor-student interaction minimal. The direct experience ingredient of the learning process diminished drastically, with most of the emphasis placed on the reading of texts.

After about four years, new strategies were developed to cope with the problems generated by the growing numbers of students. Courses then began to include a number of optional seminars and at the same time professors produced books specifically designed to target certain key points in their subjects. Despite these improvements, clinical experience and exposure to patients remained minimal.

Postgraduate educational opportunities were rare and essentially academic until the late 1980s, when Argentina began to share in the international boom of graduate studies (6).

At that time, a variety of short graduate courses on psychoanalysis formed the bulk of the offer in psychology. Demand for these was high, but difficulties subsequently arose in the organization of specialist and Masters courses in psychoanalysis. The main problem was—and still is—the lack of additional funding from the State for these programs. Tuition fees became their sole income, turning postgraduate education into a sort of joint venture between faculty and university.

By 1990, a specialist course was available in clinical psychology with a psychoanalytical orientation at the University of Buenos Aires. The University of San Luis followed suit, creating a Masters course in Psychoanalysis. In 1995, a Buenos Aires private institute for higher education instituted a Masters course in Psychoanalysis. At the same time, both local IPA psychoanalytical associations (7) opened negotiations with the University of Buenos Aires for the purpose of obtaining university accreditation for their training programs. Negotiations stalled and both societies eventually decided to pursue official accreditation as *institutos universitarios*. By 2000, the University of Buenos Aires will offer a Master course in Lacanian-oriented Psychoanalysis. Some 70 Ph.D. candidates at the Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Buenos Aires, are currently doing research on psychoanalysis or related topics.

There can be no doubt that psychoanalysis has secured an important role in Argentinean cultural and university life. As mentioned above, the number of those studying or doing research in the field is impressive, even as compared to Europe or the United States.

However, it is my personal opinion that the star of the Argentinean psychoanalytical movement is on the wane. The installation of managed care, together with the economic decline of the middle classes, have inflicted a severe blow to long-term treatment. Rising unemployment and demands for rapid therapeutic results have accelerated the process. Furthermore, the systemic and cognitive paradigms have successfully challenged the *pax psychoanalytica*.

The proliferation of increasingly smaller and short-lived psychoanalytical societies suggests that a certain conception of the field and practice is repeated mechanically and *ad nauseam*, revealing an inability to process the new variables at play in the wider context.

Psychoanalysis no longer has the “heroic” aura it had for the generations educated under military rule. The psychoanalytical Utopia, the *Weltanschauung* rejected by Freud, has shared the same destiny of all other utopias in post-modern culture.

We may be witnessing the usual process of boom, decline and fall of a theory. After yielding its best fruits, and advancing human knowledge, theories whither away. Yet the core of their well-established findings remains forever as a permanent conquest of the human intellect.

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Notes:

(1) Dirty war is the name given to the systematic repression directed at urban guerrilla movements, that resulted in the imprisonment of many and the disappearance of at least 8,000 people between 1976 and 1983. Human rights organizations have always questioned the use of the term “war”, describing the whole process as a case of State terrorism. The 1985 trial of the military Commanders resulted in a sentence that dismisses the notion of the existence of a war and sustained the State terrorism thesis. Most of the Commanders were found guilty of a variety of charges and subsequently imprisoned.

(2) On reporting a lost check at a police station, the author of this article replied “university professor” when asked about his profession. He was then kindly asked if he taught Marxism. For this low-rank police officer, one necessarily went with the other.

(3) These are the public procedures by which professors are appointed. Candidates must have relevant expertise and training and are subject to an examination, an interview and a dissertation.

(4) AUAPsi stands for Asociación de Unidades Académicas de Psicología. Since 1987 members have held quarterly meetings in which efforts have been mostly directed at the harmonization of undergraduate curricula. Members include the schools of psychology of Buenos Aires, Rosario, Córdoba, San Luis, La Plata, Tucumán, Mar del Plata and also the Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay. Although these are other undergraduate programs in psychology, AUAPsi members account for around 90% of the students in Argentina and Uruguay.

(5) Known as the Chair of Psychiatry up to 1983. The inclusion of cultural and social issues in the curriculum and the change from “Psychiatry” to “Mental Health” are the most remarkable of those changes.

(6) The “traditional” disciplines-law, medicine, economics, humanities, natural sciences, mathematics-had had prestigious Ph.D. programs for decades. Ph.D. candidates were small in number, since these degrees had almost no practical value, sometimes even within the higher education system.

(7) The Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina-APA-and the Asociación de Psicoanálisis de Buenos Aires-APdeBA.

(8) An instituto universitario-university institute-is a higher education institution with all the attributes of a university that conducts research and offers education in just one discipline, instead of the “universe” of knowledge.