

POLITICS, SEXUALITY AND THE UNCONSCIOUS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAGMAR HERZOG

Mauro Pasqualini

(CIS-CONICET)

**

Dagmar Herzog is Distinguished Professor of History and Daniel Rose Faculty Scholar at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her work and research interests focus on the history of gender and sexuality, religion and secularization in twentieth-century Europe, Nazism and the Holocaust, social memory in post-1945 Germany, and theoretical and methodological issues regarding social and cultural history. She is the author of many books, articles and collections, including *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (2011); *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics* (2008); *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (2005), *Intimacy and Exclusion: Religious Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Baden* (1996); "What Incredible Yearnings Human Beings Have," *Contemporary European History* 22/2 (May 2013); "Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures," *American Historical Review* 114 (December 2009); and "Sexuality in the Postwar West," *Journal of Modern History* 78 (March 2006). She is currently completing a book entitled *Unlearning Eugenics: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Disability in Post-Nazi Europe* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).



Her new book, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge UP 2017) is one of the first works on the post-1945 history of psychoanalysis from a global perspective. Starting with the golden age of psychoanalysis in the United States during the twenty years after the Second World War, her book also analyzes the enduring persistence of heteronormative assumptions among psychoanalysts and its crisis during the early 1970s; the transnational history of the notion of trauma after 1945; the reception of Kleinian theory in

Germany during the 1980s; the debates around aggression in 1960s Germany; and the impact of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus* immediately after its publication. Richly documented and finely written, *Cold War Freud* provides a fresh perspective on the ideological and political disputes underlying post-war understandings of such concepts as guilt, desire, pleasure, anxiety, aggression or trauma; introduces new relevant authors and topics; and brings new energy to the field of studies on Freud, psychoanalysis, and the social and global circulation of psy theories. That is why we decided to interview Dagmar Herzog for *Praxis y Culturas Psi*.

1. Since your field of research is the history of sexuality, it is expected that you include psychoanalysis among your main interests. And still, your new book *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* constitutes a nice surprise for historians of psychoanalysis. It provides a fresh perspective on the history of psychoanalysis after Freud, and addresses previously unexplored topics. How did you become involved in the history of psychoanalysis? How did the idea of a book project on the issue take shape? In what sense do you think that exploring the history of psychoanalysis can be relevant for a social, cultural, or even political history of the twentieth century?

I was initially drawn to the study of psychoanalysis for two reasons: first, my longstanding interest in the powerful emotional appeal of right-wing political movements, from Nazism and other fascisms of the 1930s-1940s to the Religious Right of the 2000s-2010s – I wanted to learn about what psychoanalytically inspired theorists had proposed on this matter – and secondly, my equally longstanding curiosity about not just the history of sexuality but also, the *politics* of sexuality. By this I mean the frequently contradictory feelings human

beings seem to bring to sex, the ambivalences and vulnerabilities they have, and, relatedly, the question of why it is that people are apparently so easy to manipulate around intimate matters, so easy to rile up for punitive measures towards the freedoms of others – and often even themselves. So: fascism, on the one hand, and people's conflictedness about sex, on the other.

Above all, though, *Cold War Freud* started out as a set of puzzles. I was interested in the impact of history on theory, i.e. the impact of epochal historical transformations of the era – Nazism and the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and decolonization, the sexual revolution and the rise of gay and women's rights – on theories of human nature, especially around the key themes of desire, trauma, anxiety, and aggression.

The book thus turned into an intellectual history, a study of the transatlantic politics of psychoanalysis in the post-World War II period. Freud had died in 1939; this book is about post-Freudian reworkings of Freud. It traces what happened in the psychoanalytic diaspora set in motion by the brutal rise of Nazism and the flight into often vehemently anticommunist nations.

There is no question that psychoanalysis was central to twentieth-century history. It was huge in the West in the era of the Cold War – inflecting all other thought-systems, from the social science disciplines and the major religious traditions to popular advice literature and radical protest movements. In fact, it was such a powerful cultural force across the West during the Cold War that the Soviet Union kept Freud's books under lock and key, and forced medical professionals across Eastern bloc nations formally to renounce and denounce Freud, but also put experts to work to refute Freud (or what they took Freud to mean) and to elaborate detailed criticisms.



2. One of your book's major topics is the relationship between psychoanalysis and, broadly speaking, the sexual revolution. How could you describe the impact that late-twentieth-century changes in sexuality had on psychoanalysis? What kinds of relationships did you find between feminism and gay activists and psychoanalysis in the different scenarios that you explored? Do you think that the "sexual revolution" was a blow to psychoanalysis or rather that it opened new possibilities?

One riddle I immediately confronted when I began my research was the – to me – repellent sexual politics of psychoanalysis in the postwar US. Nowhere was Freudian psychoanalysis more successful, and psychiatry more psychoanalytic, than in America in the first two Cold War decades: 1949-1969. This was *the* "golden age" of psychoanalysis, the time and place in which it gained the greatest traction within medicine and mass culture alike. This was also a time and place when psychoanalysis was intensely conservative – unquestionably misogynist and homophobic. Two decades in, its cultural and medical authority collapsed, nearly completely, under the dual impact of impassioned women's and gay rights and New Left activism and the renewed ascendance of biomedical psychiatry as well as popular self-help. The hostility, or condescension, or incomprehension, that to this day is provoked by the word "Freud" has, I submit, a great deal to do with the fact that many of the histories we have center on this postwar US story. I am acutely aware that these days, psychoanalysis often has an embarrassing reputation. But – I argue – the psychoanalysis that so many people now love to hate is only *one* kind of psychoanalysis.

More importantly, I discovered, although psychoanalysis was in decline in the US in the late 1960s, this was just the moment when the fortunes of psychoa-

nalyses were rising dramatically elsewhere. Eventually I realized – and this became one of my core overall points – there was a *second* "golden age" of psychoanalysis, running from 1969-1989, but this one in Central and Western Europe and (despite disruptions and complications under Cold War dictatorships) also in Latin America. Remarkably, this golden age was carried precisely by those New Left and feminist and gay movements that had crushed the conservative version of psychoanalysis in the US. It was, in short, a totally different interpretation of Freud that was ascendant – not least, in Europe, as part of the New Left's efforts to recover the radical Jewish heritage of the early twentieth century that had been banished by the Nazis.

In Central and Western Europe, the sexual revolution was a major factor in fueling growing interest in psychoanalysis. Especially in post-Nazi German lands, gay rights activists wanted *more* Freud, rather than less. Interestingly, the most creative psychoanalytic anti-homophobes of the 1970s-1980s – Robert Stoller in Los Angeles, Kenneth Lewes in Detroit, Fritz Morgenthaler in Zurich – used very different aspects of Freud's work to develop their sex-friendly arguments. Indeed, it gradually dawned on me: there were dozens, if not hundreds, of different "Freuds" circulating in the Cold War era.

Moreover, what makes probing the history of psychoanalysis such an interesting problem also for historians of sexuality is the fact that psychoanalysis, like the many schools of thought which borrowed from it, did not only theorize sex *per se*, but continually wrestled with the riddle of the relationships between sexual desire and other aspects of human motivation – from anaclitic, nonsexual longings for interpersonal connection to anxiety, aggression, and ambition. For some psychoanalytic commentators, sex – desires or troubles – explained just about everything. For others,



the causation was completely reversed: sex was about everything *but* itself; nonsexual issues – including, precisely, ambition, aggression, anxiety, or anaclitic longings – were continually being worked through in the realm of sex.

The puzzle of how to make sense of such matters as the sexualization of nonsexual impulses exercised analysts who were otherwise politically divergent. The question of what exactly people sought in sex – much of which may not, in its origins, have been sexual at all – helped some analysts to develop entirely new frames for analytic thinking. The insistence that the sexual and the economic realms were simply not categorically distinct, for instance, provided grounds for others for retheorizing the emotional pulls by which all politics functioned. And a fascination with how hetero- and homosexuals alike reworked early traumas in order to turn them into sexual excitement helped yet others to facilitate empathy with sexual minorities and make a mockery of those of their peers who persisted in clinging to prejudicial views.

Indeed, there is much that we still need to mull about the possible impact of the sexual revolution as a factor in the decline of psychoanalysis' cachet in the USA in the later 1960s and 1970s – exactly the years when psychoanalysis' fortunes were rising again elsewhere. Especially where and when sexual mores relaxed, increasing numbers of commentators claimed that it no longer made sense to assume that sexual repression was a key source of human problems. And yet over and over, in culture after culture, as conflicts over sexuality returned in new forms, perceptive observers and impassioned activists alike found that psychoanalytic concepts, however necessarily adapted, remained indispensable for making sense of human dreams and difficulties at the intersections of sexuality and the rest of life. To be sure, "repression" might

long since no longer be the best way to think about the relationship between "the sexual" and other realms of existence. But psychoanalytic concepts would continue to be crucial references for grappling with matters as diverse as: the utter inextricability of social context and psychic interiority; the place of ambivalence and the meaning of conflict in intimate relationships; the apparent complexity – even inscrutability – of the relationships between excitement and satisfaction; and the extraordinary power of the unconscious in fantasies and behaviors alike.

3. Your book shows that many debates on issues which were supposed to be strictly clinical or psychological, were a sort of displaced site for ideological and political contests. As you say, in many occasions the psychoanalytic profession tried to "leave the world outside" even when it kept on coming back. What can we learn from studying how psychoanalysis relates to politics? Do you think there is a clear political stance in psychoanalysis, or that its main notions and concepts have multiple and contradictory ideological destinies? Which is the relationship between some political or ideological contexts and the production or reception of psychoanalytic theories?

The history of psychoanalysis in general, it seems, has been one of countless delayed- reaction receptions, unplanned repurposings, and an ever-evolving reshaping of the meanings of texts and concepts. Cultural context matters greatly – it impinges on psyches, and it affects the content and uses of psychoanalytic concepts. But I discovered that there is never any self-evident connection between a particular concept and the uses to which it can be put. Each and every notion in the Freudian and post-Freudian edifice (from drive to object, from trauma to transference, from ego to unconscious)



can be, and has been, used both for malicious and for generous purposes.

4. Your book proceeds through specific cases and very detailed descriptions on particular authors. This left me curious about your thoughts on more panoramic approaches to the history of psychoanalysis or the “psy disciplines.” Sociologists such as Philip Rieff, Peter Berger and Anthony Giddens, for instance, have provided master narratives to explain the “triumph of the therapeutic,” and how the transformations around intimacy and romance, or the increasing division of realms of experience in modern society elicit the spread of psychological discourses. We also have Michel Foucault’s perceptions about the links between psychoanalysis and power relations, especially his ideas around the repressive hypothesis, or the deployment of sexuality. And more recently people such as Eva Illouz have also related the therapeutic ethics and the psy discourses to the dynamics of late capitalism. Are you familiar with these approaches? To what extent do you think they provide fruitful conversations for research on the history of psychoanalysis? Is there any other theory or general approach that you consider productive to grasp the complex relationships between psyche and society?

I am familiar with and have learned from all of these works. Indeed I quote Philip Rieff – and arguably, my entire book can be read as a Foucauldian history of Freudianism. But all of the books you name were concerned, as you say, with the “triumph of the therapeutic” and, although that theme intrigues me, it was not what I was trying so hard to understand. What I was grappling with was the opacity of historical causation in the realm of battles over meaning. Almost all the chapters engage the puzzle of major paradigm shifts in areas consequential for law, policy, and/or cultural

commonsense – as well as some of the frequent unintended side-effects of such shifts. So my questions were: How do some ideas triumph and take enduring hold, while others are defeated or lost from view? And how do we explain the fact – as noted above – that very similar, even identical, concepts could be put to use for quite opposite agendas? How was it that a passionate investment in the notion of drives, for instance, could coexist with culturally conservative, with tolerantly liberal, or with subversive- transgressive political visions? How could a belief in inner chaos animate avowedly apolitical and ardently anarcho-politically engaged projects alike? Simultaneously, and conversely, how was it that individuals working from utterly irreconcilable models of human motivation – for example, analysts convinced of the universality of the Oedipus complex and analysts who found the notion beyond preposterous – could nonetheless find themselves on the same side of a contested political divide? My aim throughout was to relocate each eventual paradigm shift in the complexity of its originating historical context, to show how terms got set and why – and with what often counterintuitive results. But another aim was to explore what happened when theories traveled and when concepts floated loose from their original moorings.

5. You argue that “the New Left was, simply, the major motor for the restoration and cultural consolidation of psychoanalysis in Western and Central Europe and for the further development of psychoanalysis in Latin America as well.” (p. 7). But you also contend that, during the 1940 and 1980s, there was not only one Freud circulating, “but rather hundreds.” So, why was the New Left appropriation of Freud more interesting, influential, or relevant than the other many possible Freuds?



Conservative versions of Freudianism were certainly successful in the postwar US and they are also interesting to me – I document them in the first two chapters of *Cold War Freud*. And in Chapter 3 I even discuss ex-Nazis who invoked Freud in order to deny acknowledgment of devastating harm to Holocaust survivors! Also in Chapter 4 – about the return of psychoanalysis to post-Nazi Germany – an ex-Nazi engages with Freud. And I do not want to deny that there were conservative versions that were influential in Latin America and in Western and Central Europe as well. (When Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari derided the “Oedipalized” form of psychoanalysis, they were above all attacking its postwar French incarnation.) And of course, apolitical versions still exist everywhere.

But psychoanalysis as an enterprise would not have survived – and thrived as much as it had and has – if the “generation of 1968” had not rediscovered it as a resource for socially critical purposes. Numerous scholars have rehearsed the defeat of left-leaning psychoanalysis in the 1940s, including not just the expulsion of Wilhelm Reich from the official fold but also the plethora of inducements to self-censorship – in the USA, the UK, France, and Latin America – that help to explain why so much of the profession remained politically quiescent, if not, on many issues, reactionary. Rereading the work of individuals like the left-liberal Alexander Mitscherlich or the more anarchist Paul Parin and Fritz Morgenthaler or, for example in Italy, Elvio Fachinelli – and the many young people they inspired – should change the way we write the history of psychoanalysis and the Left. That history was not over in the 1940s.

However, I also want to emphasize that I was no less invested in rescuing from oblivion some wonderful writings by older ethically engaged analysts – from Kurt Eissler’s brilliant rebuffing of the contempt for

survivors in the debates over post-Holocaust trauma to Hans Keilson’s study of sequential traumatization in his work with Jewish children in hiding in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands.

6. Since you are an American historian working on Western Europe, it is expected that you focus mainly on Northern countries. Yet you do mention Latin America in a couple of crucial occasions in your book, such as when you refer to the *Plataforma* group created in the aftermath of the heated 1969 IPA Congress and, more centrally, in your global approach to the post-1945 history of the notion of trauma. I am therefore curious about your thoughts on the role of Latin American countries in the late twentieth-century history of psychoanalysis, and how do you imagine a global map of psychoanalysis including Latin American countries.

There are fascinating books on psychoanalysis in Argentina in particular – all very different – Mariano Ben Plotkin’s *Freud in the Pampas*, Andrew Lakoff’s *The Lacan Ward*, and Nancy Caro Hollander’s *Love in a Time of Hate*, as well as Rachel Greenspan’s important forthcoming dissertation, “Dreaming Woman: Argentine Modernity and the Psychoanalytic Diaspora.” I learned a great deal from these. I also wish there was more written on Heinrich Racker and his significant work on countertransference. Given the questions I was asking about politics and theory, the Latin Americans that I was most drawn to were Suely Rolnik in Brazil – a close friend of Félix Guattari’s and coauthor with him of *Micropolítica: Cartografías del deseo* – and above all the amazing Elizabeth Lira in Chile, who worked with torture survivors and family members of the disappeared with extraordinary bravery – and who is now very involved in Truth Commissions and attempts to bring some measure of justice and care to survivors.

When I imagine a global map, one of the areas I am most concerned to bring in to view in the future is the Middle East and North Africa, and indeed – together with Omnia El Shakry and Sara Pursley, I am working to bring out a special issue of *Psychoanalysis and History* that will include essays on Freud in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Iran, and Palestine/Israel.

7. Your book offers new perspectives on important and well-known authors, and also introduces generally overlooked authors and scenarios –such as Robert J. Stoller, the “Swiss trio” composed by Paul Parin, Goldy Parin-Matthèy and Fritz Morgenthaler, or David Becker. But when looking at the big picture, it is hard not to notice a significant absence: Jacques Lacan. I wonder to what extent this absence is not a result of the strange status of Lacan in the United States. He is read and respected in language departments in the universities, yet seems to be ignored for psychotherapy. How could we account for this phenomenon? Why do you think that even discontent and innovative psychoanalysts in the United States remained unrelated to Lacan’s re-reading of Freud?

Lacan is extremely significant for thinking about ambiguities and instabilities of meaning, and in this sense he is present in the background throughout the book. And of course he is there, palpably, through his influence on Guattari. But you will note that the British clinical greats – Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein – are not very much in evidence either. Klein, too, is there primarily in mediated form – as, for very specific historical reasons, a much-delayed latecomer to German psychoanalysis (filtered, each in their own way, by Hanna Segal, Herbert Rosenfeld, and Otto Kernberg) and, again, in Guattari (blended there with Wilhelm Reich and Frantz Fanon).

But yes, I admit that I emphasized the German-speaking world (also Switzerland) at the expense of the more familiar French and British stories. It’s my area of expertise, but that’s not the only reason. It’s also urgent, I think, to bring the Central European stories into view because they should be better known and, after all, German is the language and the world Freud came from and from which he and his followers – whether loyal or dissenting – were driven out.

8. Your book shows how heterogeneous psychoanalysis can be. Throughout the twentieth-century people recognizing themselves as psychoanalysts provided very different readings of the same texts, embraced diverse modes of understanding their profession, and provided dissimilar and even contradictory responses to crucial issues such as sexuality, politics, or religion. How did you deal with such diversity of meanings under a same label? Can we still use notions like orthodoxy, heterodoxy, or dissidence to refer to the various psychoanalytic currents? To what extent are we studying a same social and cultural phenomenon when we find so many different experiences?

One of the characters I reconsider in *Cold War Freud* is the neo-Freudian Karen Horney. Some people say that what she was doing was not even psychoanalysis anymore. I think that kind of boundary-drawing is revelatory – not because those who say so are correct, but because in making that assertion they show how much is felt to be at stake in clarifying who is in and who is out. Yet when you read the texts by some of the men who pushed her out of the profession, you realize just how muddled and absurd many of them were. She once, in the 1930s, made the remark that “just as ‘all is not gold that glitters,’” so also “‘all is not sexuality that looks like it.’” That idea would not get put forward again until

the sexual revolution exploded in the 1970s (and then by psychoanalysts with quite other agendas). She thought a lot about both sex and aggression, but she questioned the idea of drives, and wondered whether the search for safety in an overwhelming and competitive world might not be a major human motivation. I have no investment in adjudicating her relationship to orthodoxy. Rather, I remain most struck by the prompts her comments provide for us all as intellectual historians to ponder more frequently: how better to theorize intimate matters; how to make clearer sense of how human beings have categorized reality in general; and how to express the direction of causation in dealing with topics that involve bodies and emotions and the politics that can be made of these.