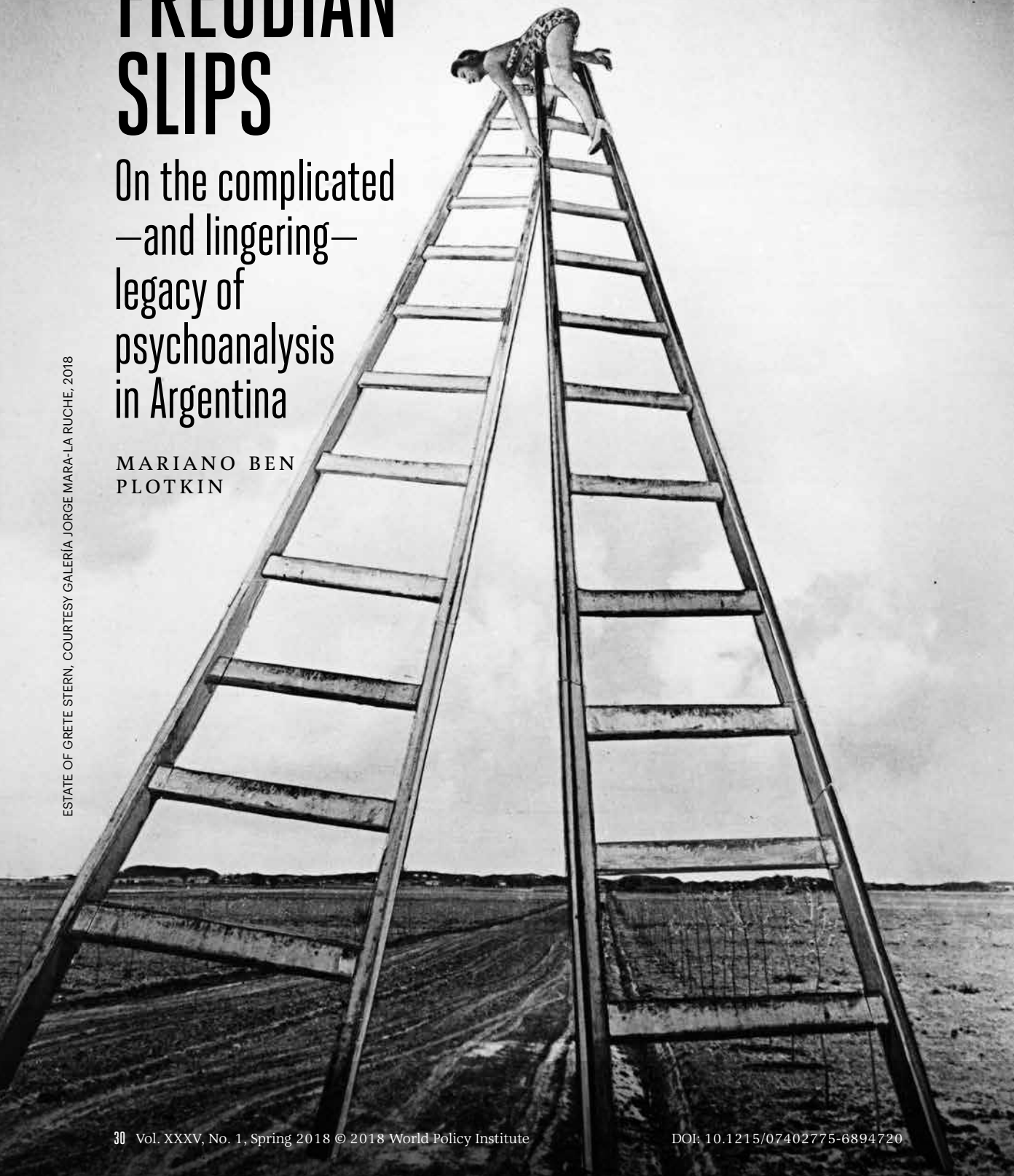


FREUDIAN SLIPS

On the complicated
—and lingering—
legacy of
psychoanalysis
in Argentina

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In 2016, Jorge Ahumada, a 76-year-old psychologist in the city of Buenos Aires, suddenly became famous: His photograph was featured on the covers of popular magazines and he was interviewed in newspapers. His celebrity came about after President Mauricio Macri, who had been inaugurated in December 2015, revealed that he had been undergoing psychoanalytic treatment for the last 25 years with Ahumada. Macri had started analysis in 1991 when, as a young entrepreneur and a member of one of Argentina's wealthiest industrialist families, he was kidnapped. Traumatized by this experience, Macri started twice-a-week "ultra-Freudian" psychoanalytic therapy, an approach that focuses on sexuality and the unconscious. After his patient became the president of Argentina (Macri had previously been chief of the government of Buenos Aires), Ahumada decided that their routine should proceed as usual. He refused to hold sessions in the presidential mansion, so Macri continued his treatment at the psychoanalyst's office.

Of course, Macri is not the only famous Argentine who is or has been in psychotherapy. A few months ago, Pope Francis vented in an interview with a French sociologist that when he was in his early 40s he sought the services of a female psychoanalyst in order "to clarify certain things." (He declined to make her name public, though he did say that she was Jewish.) Although the treatment only lasted six months, Pope Francis considers his therapist, in addition to his mother, "one of the women of his life."

In the early 1960s, Argentina—particularly the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, which is home to roughly 25 percent of the total population—experienced a "psychoanalytic boom." The number of practicing analysts and people

in analysis skyrocketed. There are no precise statistics on how many people have undergone psychoanalysis, but we do know that in 1995 one of every 198 *porteños* (as Buenos Aires residents are called) was a psychologist. Even now, Argentina boasts one of the largest psychoanalytic communities in the world, and terms such as *psicopatear* (to manipulate someone as a psychopath would) or *histeriquear* (to behave like a Freudian hysteric) are part of everyday speech. Being in therapy is considered normal for middle- and upper-class *porteños*, while talking about one's traumas and psychological problems is standard fare at social gatherings. Growing up in the late 1960s and the early 1970s in a Jewish, middle-class family, I was sent to a child psychoanalyst when I was 6 years old. Most of my friends at school had similar experiences, and going to therapy was as much a part of childhood for my social milieu as playing soccer or studying English.

Having said that, many Argentines have never spent time on a couch, especially since in the last few decades, psychoanalysis has had to compete with new forms of therapy and spiritual practice. However, in part because of the adoption of psychoanalysis by the public mental-health system in the 1960s, and more recently by some psychiatric wards within the prison system, a certain "psychoanalytic mode of thinking"—that is to say, the belief that unconscious, mostly sexual, desires play a central role in determining our behavior—is far more common in Argentina than probably anywhere else in the world.

The fact that Buenos Aires experienced such a boom in the 1960s is not surprising: Many major cities flirted with psychoanalysis during that decade. In some Western cities, it was associated with the sexual liberation

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movement, as it was seen as a doctrine that permitted people to investigate repressed desires and understand hidden aspects of the self. An interest in psychoanalysis as therapy also converged with a fascination in Freud’s ideas as a social theory. What is surprising, however, is that in Argentina the massive dissemination of psychoanalysis took place while the country was ruled by violent dictators. The Argentine—and to some extent, the Brazilian—case contradicts the popular idea that psychoanalysis can only flourish in free and democratic environments. What the histories of Argentina and Brazil show is that psychoanalysis, like any other system of thought, can be appropriated and used in different ways and for contradictory purposes.

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In the late 1960s through the 1970s, Argentina entered a phase of rapid social, economic, and cultural modernization. A large number of women entered the job market and universities grew dramatically. By the late 1960s, almost 40 percent of all college students were female. At the same time, the country was suffering from unparalleled political violence. Leftist guerrillas collided with an increasingly

repressive state ruled by ultra-right-wing military cliques. Between the fall of Juan Domingo Perón’s government in 1955 and the definitive restoration of democracy in 1983, Argentina was ruled by a series of intermittent military dictatorships. The rest of the time, the country was led by weak civilian governments that were under more or less open military control.

The psychoanalytic community, which had grown considerably since the late 1950s, was also divided along political lines. The traditional Asociación Psicoanalítica Argentina (APA), created in 1942, was the first Latin American psychoanalytic society to be affiliated with the broader International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), which was, at that time, the only international organization devoted to psychoanalysis and an undisputed source of professional legitimacy. While the APA continued to boast of its “apolitical” (i.e., conservative) position, in 1971, a sizable group of leftist analysts split with the association, at the same time giving up their rank as members of the IPA. (During its long history, the APA has often declined to take official positions on public issues, including recent legislation that allows people to easily change their gender.) The secession of 1971 was the first time in the history of the worldwide psychoanalytic movement that a large

group of senior analysts resigned from national and international psychoanalytic associations for purely political reasons. For some leftist intellectuals, the crisis of the APA, which took place at a moment when Argentine society was hyper-politicized, was part of a broader cultural and political crisis. As the leftist intellectual journal *Los Libros* (a kind of Argentine version of the *New York Review of Books*) claimed, “The conflict that stirs the psychoanalytic institution is the sign of a general situation that includes us all ... the problems exposed [by the crisis] are linked to the future of culture, that is to say, the political future of the whole country.” Leftist psychoanalysts approached Marxism and the social sciences and offered their psychoanalytic practice as a revolutionary tool.

Then, in 1976, a particularly murderous military coup d'état ushered in a new era in Argentina. The state became a criminal organization that kidnapped, tortured, “disappeared,” and killed its own citizens. The newly established dictatorship scrutinized any activity that questioned authority or involved public social interactions, and it used terror to discipline and demobilize the population. The word “subversive” became a catchall term describing everything from independent thinking to almost all forms of political organization, and being classified as a subversive usually meant a death sentence. Universities that housed schools and programs associated with the social sciences were considered fertile ground for subversion. For some military officers, this extended to psychoanalysis. As *Somos*, a popular magazine supportive of the dictatorship, claimed in 1980, “from the beginning of the war against subversion, among the information evaluated was the relationship of psychoanalysis and terrorism. ... It has been proved that many subversives were enlisted in the active fight after spending time on the analyst’s couch.”

Many members or former members of guerrilla organizations sought the aid of

psychoanalysts to make sense of the split between their political and nonpolitical selves. Although fighters were not supposed to reveal details of their personal lives to anyone, members of the Argentine middle class—which included most guerrillas—were so steeped in psychoanalysis that going to therapy seemed the natural thing to do when confronted with the existential dilemmas associated with violent political activism. Psychoanalysts who agreed to see them did so in life-risking sessions, often carried out in public spaces for security reasons. Sometimes, as an additional measure of

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protection, neither the analyst nor the patient knew the other’s real identity.

Yet if anything happened to the Argentine psychoanalytic culture during those years, it was its consolidation. Neither the APA nor the Asociación Psicoanalítica de Buenos Aires, another IPA-affiliated organization, were ever targeted by the government. The APA, moreover, refused to denounce the dictatorship in international public fora when given the opportunity. The APA even received a grant from the Ministry of Public Health in May 1976—only two months after the coup, when repression was at its height—to organize a Latin American psychoanalytic conference in Buenos Aires. By 1979, the APA had become the fourth-largest IPA-affiliated psychoanalytic association in the world. Prominent APA members wrote articles

in official mental health publications and participated in conferences organized by the state. In 1980, the APA president publicly boasted about the importance that his institution, and by extension psychoanalysis, occupied in the nation's cultural life.

While some factions of the military saw psychoanalysis as a threat, other parts of the regime saw it as a way for Argentines to express distress without challenging conventional values. They considered psychoanalysis acceptable so long as it remained one-on-one, and confined to a consulting room. With this in mind, these "modern" factions of the military began to appropriate dimensions of psychoanalytic discourse to appeal to the "enlightened" middle class. According to the official propaganda, for instance, young people were in danger of becoming subversive agents not only because parental authority failed, but also because they could not find a nurturing environment at home. Thus, the government appropriated the same (or very similar) language that analysts and psychologists had been using to explain neuroses or drug addiction among youth as a way of explaining "subversion." The military, which was fond of medical metaphors, described subversives as cancerous cells in society that should be "extirpated" by whatever means available. Meanwhile, state-sponsored propaganda advised parents to talk to their children and provide psychological support in order to keep them away from the temptations of subversion.

No Argentine psychoanalysts has been accused of actual involvement in cases of torture, as has been documented at least once in Brazil, but survivors of the infamous concentration camp at the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics, or ESMA) have reported that they were taken to psychologists who evaluated their potential for being resocialized ("recovered" in Navy jargon). Those not considered fit for recovery were murdered,

and their bodies disappeared. A former prisoner reported that on one occasion during a depressive crisis she was sent by prison authorities to see a psychoanalyst outside the camp. Another ex-prisoner mentioned the case of a fellow inmate who decided to start psychoanalytic therapy during his family visits without informing his jailers. To everybody's surprise, when ESMA authorities learned of this therapy the officer in charge told the prisoner: "If you have problems, let us know, we can offer you a reliable psychologist."

When the military took power, psychoanalysis was deeply rooted in Argentine urban culture. There were analysts who were deeply committed to human rights or political activism, risking and even losing their lives. There were a few analysts (some of whom were highly visible in the media) who, conversely, showed their support for the dictatorship. The vast majority of analysts, however, like the vast majority of other professionals, just tried to survive the best they could. There is no "natural affinity" between psychoanalysis and dictatorship, just as no such relationship exists between psychoanalysis and democracy. It is difficult to blame analysts for behaving like other professionals. However, after the restoration of democracy, many analysts and scholars, both local and foreign, claimed that psychoanalysis had been a crucial element of resistance against the dictatorship, and that psychoanalysts had been singled out for repression. The truth is that there is absolutely no evidence to support this claim.

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In 1983, after Argentina lost a war against the United Kingdom over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, democracy was finally restored. The military dictatorship had "disappeared" between 8,000 and 30,000 people. Many psychoanalysts participated in human rights work and helped

the families of those killed by the military process their trauma. Others continued practicing as usual. Psychoanalysis continued to spread, although in a highly fragmented fashion. (Since 1983, many psychoanalytic institutions have been created with different theoretical orientations.) In 2001, Argentina was shaken by one of the worst economic, social, and political crises in its history. The president resigned, and four more presidents, all civilians, succeeded each other within days, since nobody wanted to take responsibility for the situation. The state and the Argentine peso all but collapsed, and provinces started issuing their own quasi-currencies. People lost confidence not only in politicians, but also in social scientists and economists, who failed to provide explanations for the catastrophe. So, in a throwback to the 1970s, many Argentines turned to psychoanalysts to interpret society. Analysts (mainly followers of Jacques Lacan who, unlike the APA members, usually have professional backgrounds in literature or philosophy) became public intellectuals, appearing regularly in the media and writing columns in major newspapers. They provided psychoanalytic interpretations on topics ranging from political corruption to the *cacerolazos*—people who bang pans in the streets as a form of public protest. Like in the 1970s, many psychoanalysts became public figures. However, if in the 1970s leftist analysts had approached Marxism and other forms of social theory to enrich their own practice and discourse, in the early 2000s they considered themselves to be “prophets of the crisis” who could pontificate about almost anything from a purely psychoanalytic point of view. The result was an impoverishment of social discourse.

Today, psychoanalysis as a form of therapy seems to be in sharp decline in Argentina. Not only do the medical insurance companies generally refuse to pay for long-term therapy, but most people have neither the time, the patience, nor the money to undergo 25 years

of therapy as Macri has. People seem to be in search of much faster solutions. A quick look at any major bookstore in Buenos Aires reveals that self-help literature has replaced the once large sections on psychoanalysis and psychology. New and shorter forms of therapy based on neuroscience and psychotropic drugs are also competing with psychoanalysis, and the APA has lost some of its appeal as analysts have embraced Lacan’s theories. However, perhaps as a result of cultural inertia, psychoanalytic terms are still used in everyday speech.

Looking at Argentina’s recent history, it is evident that while being one of the most psychoanalyzed societies in the world may (or may not) have helped Argentines solve their personal traumas, the country continues to be deeply divided. After 12 years of a populist government headed by the Kirchner couple—Néstor was president from 2003 to 2007, and was succeeded by his wife, Cristina, who won a second term in 2011—Macri was elected in 2015. He promised to clean up the Kirchners’ corruption, to bring the inflation rate down to a single-digit number, and to help Argentina achieve “cero poverty” in just a few years. After two years of Macri, we are still far from “cero poverty,” as inflation, after having skyrocketed to 40 percent in 2016, is now only slowly decreasing. Opinions about Macri are deeply divided. A seemingly unbridgeable “crack” (*la grieta*) splits the population along political lines. Many Argentines define themselves as “Macristas” or “anti-Macristas;” “Kirchneristas” or “anti-Kirchneristas,” and claim there is no possibility of dialogue between them. This is perhaps the major problem facing Argentina today, yet whether it is—or should be—talked about in therapy, I cannot say. What is clear is that the Argentines’ flirtation with psychoanalysis has not softened social or political relations in a country that has survived bloody dictators, economic collapses, and many other kinds of crises. ●