

Article

FERENCZI AND GENDER TROUBLE

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The paper analyzes Ferenczi's contributions to contemporary debates on gender. It does not strictly adhere to what he wrote about masculinity and femininity, where he reveals himself as a man of his time, with the some of the prejudices of his time. Instead, the paper highlights the *utraquistic* method and the pluralist monism of Ferenczi, whereby he appears as an analyst who remains in synch with current problems. Against the purity of dualisms, Ferenczi embraced multiplicity, mixtures, and the transit between different spaces, beyond divisive frontiers. In terms of method, it resonates with Judith Butler's proposals, with the ideas defended by Paul Preciado and by Queer theory.

KEY WORDS: Sándor Ferenczi; gender studies; multiplicity; utraquistic method; queer theory

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Gender studies are part of the contemporary epistemological landscape. They tell us, among other things, that what we call *male* and *female* do not convey a universal difference between the sexes but are the expressions of two genders imposed by social norms. Does that mean that we should reconsider the way we think about sexuality? I believe psychoanalysis cannot shy away from this issue. I intend to approach the problem by asking two different questions: can gender studies teach anything to psychoanalysis? And, if Sándor Ferenczi was a psychoanalyst who disregarded the norms, could he make a contribution to gender studies?

First, I would like to address the risk of anachronism. The debate about gender is a contemporary phenomenon and Ferenczi, who lived from 1873 to 1933, cannot be expected to have explicit positions on current issues—on the transgender question, for example. No thinker is above the historical circumstances of their time. However, as Edward Said (2004) wrote, the intellectuals who continue to be relevant in the present are those who can have ideas and intuitions that go beyond the historical context they belong to. If we continue to read and rediscover Ferenczi today, it is because his

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thoughts managed to reach us through the barriers of time, inspiring new ideas and illuminating problems that were not even considered in his time.

I would like to propose a specific reading strategy when using the work of Ferenczi to think about gender problems. Instead of sticking to what he wrote about masculinity and femininity—he even wrote a text whose title was *Male and Female* (1929), where he reveals himself as a man of his time—I would like to highlight what Ferenczi said that was not so straightforward, emphasizing the points which present him as an analyst who remains in synch with current problems. Indeed, Ferenczi develops ideas, methods and intuitions which can help us think about issues of our time.

But before that, I want to talk about Ferenczi's context and to underscore to what extent it is different from Freud's situation. This is important so that we can understand the criticism that the Hungarian psychoanalyst directed at all forms of oppression—within society, in how science is made, and in the psychoanalytical clinic.

AFFECTION AND POLITICS

Freud, in Vienna, and Ferenczi, in Budapest, lived in the same Empire until the First World War—the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although it consisted of a Dual Monarchy, in which Austria and Hungary *de jure*, rested on a union, there was *de facto* a power relation between the two. Living in Vienna, Freud was not very interested in the political issues involving the Empire, unlike Ferenczi, who had grown up in an environment in which political insurgency was a common feature.

An example of this power relationship between Austria and Hungary, Vienna and Budapest, can be seen in the field of language. The *lingua franca* of the multilingual Dual Monarchy was German, both in Hungary and the rest of the Empire, a language everyone understood, in addition to their mother tongues. Judith Dupont describes how scientific writings were in German because many scientists, regardless of their ethnic origins, spoke German in the multinational Austrian Hungarian Empire. Similar to how English became the language of science after WWII² (Dimitrijević, 2022), what is also an example of a power relationship: we speak the language of the winner.

Ferenczi grew up in Hungary, and after he obtained his medical degree in Vienna, in 1894, he lived and worked in Budapest. His father, Baruch Fränkel, was a freedom fighter against the Habsburg domination during the Hungarian Revolution in 1848-49, and was allowed to settle in Miskolc, Hungary, after the Revolution was crushed with the help of the Russian Tsar

in August of 1849. Such power struggle would leave its mark on the introduction of psychoanalysis in Hungary. Ana Verônica Mautner (1996), a Hungarian analyst who lived in Brazil, says that most Hungarians in their private lives, when they loved each other, when they argued with one another or when they were moved by something, used Magyar, their Hungarian native tongue. Speaking Magyar and being Magyar was a form of resistance from the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy. Judith Dupont describes that many Hungarian citizens magyarized (legally changed) their German sounding names to Hungarian names in the *nationalistic revival* at the end of the 19th century (Haynal, 1988, p. 38). For example, the Ferenczi family officially changed their name from Fränkel to Ferenczi, Dupont's family from Engel to Dormandi, Michael Balint from Bergsmann to Balint (Dimitrijević, 2022).

As a medical doctor in Budapest, Ferenczi's published his pre-analytic writings from 1897 to 1908 in *Hungarian only* (Mészáros, 1999). The question is: what language will be used by psychoanalysis once it is introduced in Hungary? With Hungarian speaking patients psychoanalytic sessions will be conducted in the official Magyar, the language of intimacy and affection, which also has long roots in the language of political resistance since the centuries before the creation of the Dual Empire in 1867. Therefore, political resistance and affection are inherent to psychoanalysis in Hungary. Those two elements are also present in Ferenczi's work: with him, affection and politics become inseparable dimensions.

So, even though Freud and Ferenczi were contemporaries, they found themselves in different situations. They had different expectations in relation to psychoanalysis as well: Freud was a brilliant researcher who was opening a new field and seeking scientific recognition for that. Meanwhile, Ferenczi was a political activist by family tradition and a therapist sensitive to power games and suffering by nature. In the dictionary of psychoanalysis written by Elisabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon (1997, p. 232), Ferenczi is presented as "the most talented clinician in the history of freudianism." A talented clinician who always took the side of the underdog, regardless of the type of relationship: in social or political relations, in the relationship between children and adults, between patients and analysts, between heterosexuals and homosexuals, between men and women. It seems that he was always in tune with minorities. Today we know, mainly thanks to Black feminist thinkers who proposed the concept of intersectionality, (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Lord, 1984), that the forms of oppression cannot be analysed separately, since they are informed by a similar logic and are part of a system of oppression that organizes society. Even though this way of thinking was not common in Ferenczi's time, he did somehow have this sensibility and always fought for those who were weaker or disenfranchised.

His interest in minorities, however, was never about making them part of the majority; it was never about making the weaker side more powerful or better adapted; this would be the equivalent to shifting the center of power without confronting the logic that determines the existence of unequal positions in the first place.

Ferenczi's sympathy for marginalized populations motivated him to propose a different way to understand psychic suffering, as well as a different approach to treating this type of complex suffering. Instead of using *neurosis* as a subjective model for his patients, Ferenczi took his suffering patients as a point of departure, and he saw everyone's psyche as vulnerable to trauma and suffering. His perspective represents a substantial difference. One approach is to use the way of functioning of the majority – the neurosis – to think about the minority – the psychotic, the difficult, or the borderline – in terms of the person's deficit in relation to the neurotic functioning. Then, these patients are described through what they cannot do: they cannot symbolize, represent, or fantasize. In these cases, the aim of the analytical treatment would be to take these patients to the right and correct form of functioning. Another, completely different approach is to use the way of functioning of the minority as a starting point, to consider them the foundation, seeing every psyche as minority. It means thinking that the aim of an analysis is to turn life more liveable for anyone, in any way.

QUESTIONING GENDER NORMS

Ferenczi's clinical practice was focused on minorities from the beginning, years before he met Freud and even before he became a psychoanalyst. The *enfant terrible* of psychoanalysis was already an *enfant terrible* of medicine. According to Pierre Sabourin (1985), during this period Ferenczi was a combative and subversive psychiatrist. He was always willing to listen to the people who were considered mad, the prostitutes, the deviants of all sorts and fought against the prejudice of his peers. Two situations, written before Ferenczi met Freud in 1908, illustrate his attitude. First is the Róza K. case (Ferenczi, 1902). In this paper, while still working as a neurologist, he writes about Róza's treatment. She was a transsexual who preferred to be called Robert. In Ferenczi's day, psychiatry would have diagnosed Robert as a case of physical and psychic degeneration. But Ferenczi asks Robert to write down the story of his own life and, when describing the case, takes the the patient's autobiography into account—movingly demonstrating that *he* really values how the patient feels and the way *he* talks about *himself*.³ Going against the medical point of view, according to which there were ready-made diagnoses patients must fit into, Ferenczi sought to see Robert

as a person, trying to understand the patient from his own perspective. He took into consideration not only the patient's individual standpoint but also the social context of sexual misfits, people who cannot find either a dwelling or a social place, not to mention space for psychic recognition.

Three years later, in 1905, Ferenczi took part in the Third Hungarian Psychiatry Conference where he proposed the creation of an International Committee on Homosexual Protection (Sabourin, 1985). Ferenczi not only fought for the creation of this international committee but also became its correspondent in Hungary. His *Early Papers* include an essay, "Intermediate Sexual Stages" (Ferenczi, 1906), in which he presents a more nuanced and complex perspective on homosexuality. He differed from the accepted stance that all homosexuals were alike—that it was an undifferentiated state. Unlike the prevailing wisdom, he did not see homosexuality as harmful to society; on the contrary, he thought it was important to human evolution. Later, as a psychoanalyst, Ferenczi preferred *the term homoeroticism* believing the term *homosexuality* could be easily misunderstood as being only about biological sex rather than about a whole form of eroticizing.

In addition to adding nuances to the spectrum of sexuality, Ferenczi gave women prominence in his work. I would like to emphasize the fact that he gave *women*, not the *feminine*, a special place. When talking about the feminine, Ferenczi was a man of his time: he believed that the masculine and the feminine had inherently defined characteristics, not realizing that these features are socially constructed. However, he was ahead of his time regarding the social condition of women. His very first paper after joining the psychoanalytic movement, written in 1908 (published in the final volume of his works, in the section, Papers Omitted from Previous Collections), his "calling card," as Franco Borgogno (1999) describes it, is entitled *The Effect on Women of Premature Ejaculation in Men* (Ferenczi, 1908). The paper does not address the problems encountered by men who experience premature ejaculation, but focuses on the suffering faced by women. Ferenczi describes how the lack of consideration to this phenomenon derived from an overall patriarchal system, replicated by the male medical community. He writes:

Only the selfishness of the male, and of physicians who are generally males, has made it possible to overlook the fact that such a state of affairs, if it becomes stabilized, must lead at least to functional disturbances." (p. 291).

And then he says:

If men gave up their selfish way of thinking (...) they would gain some idea of the sexual martyrdom of the female sex, which is faced with the appalling dilemma

of choosing between complete satisfaction and self-respect. They would then understand more easily why so large a proportion of women take flight from this dilemma into illness. (Ferenczi, 1908, p. 293).

Borgogno (1999), sees this first paper as the precursor to Ferenczi entire clinical-political agenda: he would spend his entire life and career discussing and denouncing the extent to which women, children, and difficult patients were constrained by society, family, even the psychoanalytic profession who had a reductionist view of these groups to suit their own demands and norms.

More broadly, Ferenczi showed a stronger affinity with the maternal than with the paternal order. It led him to propose, in *Thalassa* (Ferenczi, 1924), a mythology that differed considerably from that presented by Freud (1912-1913) in *Totem and Taboo*. Instead of a narrative about the creation of the law which would enable the organization of human society—a myth about the paternal function—Ferenczi constructed a narrative based on a maternal order: the heart of the matter was not parricide or castration, but the origin of life in the ocean. According to this myth, life thrived through a series of catastrophes which compelled it to invent newer, richer, and more complex forms of being. A most interesting aspect to consider is the fact that Ferenczi wove a tale in which the mother is no more an undistinguishable figure associated with chaos, and, likewise, the father is no longer the separating force whose role is to establish the symbolic order, both within the subjectivity and within social life. For Freud, the father would be the necessary organizer who creates culture and implements the Law, without which we would be abandoned to the dangerous, chaotic, and psychosis-inducing world of the mother. In the psychoanalytical tradition, the maternal domain must be limited by the entrance of the father, the representative of a phallic order that is granted privilege in our culture. To Ferenczi, though, society is one of life's potential developments and, as such, is also an outcome of the maternal order. Even so, he felt he could have gone further and wanted to completely revise *Thalassa*, as he mentions in his *Clinical Diary*, near the end of his life:

The ease with which Freud sacrifices the interests of women in favor to male patients. This is consistent with his unilateral androphile orientation of his theory of sexuality. In this he was followed by nearly all his pupils, myself not excluded. My theory of genitality may have good points, yet in its mode of presentation and its historical reconstruction it clings too closely to the words of the master; a new edition would mean a complete rewriting. (Ferenczi, 1932, August 4, 1932, p. 187)

DIFFERENCE AND MULTIPLICITY

The fact that Ferenczi privileges the maternal dimension is linked, on an epistemological plane, to the value he places on mixtures, favoring them over binarisms, above all the one that separates culture from nature. The father becomes a fundamental figure if the premise is that culture must overpower nature, the symbolic must prevail over the organic and mind over body. Ferenczi, however, does not establish such boundaries. On the contrary, his notions tend to transcend boundaries: *bioanalysis*, *utraquistic method*, *amphimixis*, *tact*, *organic symbol*, *hysterical materializations*. From this perspective, it is possible to say that Ferenczi is in synch with current discussions about transdisciplinarity, gender, and even climate change. Many contemporary debates are over the nonbinary aspects of different fields: knowledge, sexuality, nature. For example, in gender studies it is claimed that sexuality is multiple and does not fit into only two possible genders—male and female—even acknowledging the existence of bisexuality. As a matter of fact, bisexuality does not break with binarism, in the sense that it maintains a dualistic logic. What breaks with binarism is the idea of multiplicity; the notion according to which sexuality is perverse and polymorphous, for instance, could be understood from this angle. The problem is that even when the psychoanalytic tradition admits the existence of a polymorphous perversion, it maintains a dualistic logic. And it is at this point that Ferenczi allows us to go further.

Since his first papers, Ferenczi shows a way of thinking characterized by multiplicity—Multiplicity thinkers are, in philosophy, considered monistic thinkers. What does that mean? Monism is a way of thinking that considers reality being ruled by a singular fundamental principle, in opposition to dualism, which sees reality ruled by two fundamental principles that oppose each other. The most famous dualist was Descartes, who claimed the existence of two substances, body and mind, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. The most famous monist was Spinoza, who was a contemporary of Descartes and asserted the existence of one single substance – God or nature – expressing itself through a multiplicity of modes. Based on this, it is possible to say that is not in opposition to pluralism, since a single principle might have multiple modes of expression (Japiassú & Marcondes, 1990). Monism can be pluralist and is compatible with multiplicity; it refuses dualism and any division of the world into two parts: nature and culture, male and female, life and death.

There is a political side to the debate about multiplicity and dualism. Every time the world is split in two, such separation is never made in a neutral way. Jacques Derrida (1972) is the one drawing attention to this issue. Every time an opposing pair is created—nature/culture, male/female,

body/mind—there is never parity in the division between them. There is always one pole which is considered the main one, the one used as a parameter, while the other is defined in relation to the principal one. In that sense, every dualism carries with it a moral slant that suggests the existence of a good principle, a good path, and of necessity, a bad one, which ends up producing second-class citizens.

Supporter of a pluralist monism, Ferenczi was not a theorist of defined structures or subjective positions. Throughout his whole work, he defended the transitions, the crossing of boundaries between body and psyche, nature and culture, psychoanalysis and biology. His theories were not definitive structures or subjective positions. Against the purity of the *dualistic*, Ferenczi created the *utraquistic method*, embracing mixtures and the transit between different spaces, beyond divisive frontiers. The logic of his reasoning allows us to conceive of differences without reducing them to oppositions. Instead of relative otherness, of the difference of one thing *in relation* to another, we can think of a bubbling of differences, a multiplicity of them. In terms of method, it resonates with Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) proposals, with the ideas defended by Paul Preciado and by Queer Theory. Preciado (2011, p.18) wrote that "There is not such a thing as sexual difference, but a multitude of differences, a transversality of power relations, a diversity of life potentials".

So, it is not when Ferenczi talks about the masculine and the feminine that he helps us think about the problems of gender today. He helps us when he proposes a thinking method which values multiplicity, regardless of the kind of multiplicity being considered. Such method highlights the polymorphous dimension that constitutes us, departing from a logic that makes it possible to look at other forms of sexuality without seeing them as deviations of an original sexuality. Therefore, it is possible to recognize, without labelling them as pathological, female and male multiplicities, as well as multiplicities that cannot be found on either of these sides, multiplicities that do not correspond to any intelligible gender.

From a different perspective, Ferenczi's psychoanalysis has yet another contribution to make. It seems that beyond the categories of binary or multiple, sexuality is *troublesome*. It is an area where definite identities or appeased diversities cannot possibly emerge. Ferenczi has always been aware of the power relations involved in sexual relationships—*Thalassa* (1924) and his article "The Effect on Women of Premature Ejaculation in Men" (1908) are two examples of that. The universe of sexuality is not easy nor peaceful to anyone, however multiple it happens to be. Let us make this extremely important point: a world which is multiple is not a world made of undifferentiated beings. Multiplicity allows for a great variety of differences. Actually, a greater number of differences, with more shades and hues than

the number of differences and values which could come from splitting the world in two parts, male and female. Therefore, multiplicity does not destroy the tragic dimension present in each form of sexuation, nor does it erase the fact that such process is always taking place in a territory marked with impasse and openness.

NOTES

1. **Jô Gondar, PhD** is a member of the board of the International Sándor Ferenczi Network; member of the board of Brazilian Research Group Sándor Ferenczi; member of the board of the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies; full member of Círculo Psicanalítico do Rio de Janeiro; full professor of Postgraduate Studies in Social Memory at the University Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.
2. About the power relations involved in the field of language, Galdi (2007) considers that English can be an active, aggressive language, and conveys cause and effect and linear thought successfully. Speaking and writing in English seem to tap into the sensitivities of Anglo culture. Language is one of the aspects of culture that clearly symbolizes central values (p. 10).
3. It is important to note that in the original Hungarian language article about the case of Róza K., Ferenczi (1902) never uses gendered pronouns (he or she). In contrast to German, where there are gendered third person singular pronouns: er, sie, es, or in English, there are she or he, in Hungarian the third person singular is simply referred to as ő. Essentially, Hungarian is a gender-neutral language and as a consequence there is a potential for more emphasis on equality (Galdi, 2007, p. 10).

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