

Latin American Voices
Integrative Psychology and Humanities

Manuel Llorens

Politically Reflective Psychotherapy

Towards a Contextualized Approach

 Springer

Latin American Voices

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Politically Reflective Psychotherapy

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*I dedicate this book to the memory of
Deltry Musso, Juan Llorens and Marta
Llorens,
the best teachers of psychotherapy,
life and politics
that I could have possible had.*

Preface of the Series Editor

Psychotherapy as Permeable Developmental Arena

I got the final manuscript of this volume, *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy: Towards a Contextualized Approach*, in the middle of the Sars COVID-19 lockdown in Italy. It has been a strange coincidence: while I was forced in a state of social isolation, Manuel Llorens provoked my thoughts by showing that even the most apparently isolated and protected experience, that is, the psychotherapy session, is deeply affected by what is going on out there in a specific time and space. Psychotherapy is, in fact, much more permeable of what it appears.

Psychological sciences have been dramatically challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and by its psycho-social consequences, revealing the effects of social, racial and economic inequalities. I felt the lack of preparation to deal with this kind of global phenomenon and the urgency of a serious theoretical and epistemological reflection, seeking advancements in the way psychology understands human psychic experience outside the Western-centric way of life. This volume is not about the Corona Virus, yet it may shed the light on this intricate connection of Science and Society.

We are living a time of political turmoil in different places in the world, and we are facing the revival of all sorts of nationalisms and extremisms, the genocide of indigenous population all over the planet or their epistemic silencing (Guimarães 2020). All this makes almost unavoidable for clinicians to address political issues.

However, clinicians do not really know how to do it. This volume, *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy: Towards a Contextualized Approach*, fills this gap and gives the theoretical and methodological coordinates to guide clinical intervention. Also, it intends to explore how psychotherapy is developed in a historical and political context, even though psychology has tried to disregard this fact.

This leads to the core feature of any psychotherapy. Is it meant to be only facing the individual or does the relationship with the environment include also the acknowledgment of the collective? Freud describes it in 1921 as follows:

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. It is true that individual psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instinctual impulses; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well (Freud 1921/1966, p. 69).

The recent pandemic has overturned many long-standing assumptions about global relations, local realities and individual life course as a result of which prominent fractures in contemporary society have become exposed. The combination of narrow-mindedness and intolerance remains submerged under conditions of the relative safety and comfort that affluence provides. When this bubble bursts, people realized that epidemics (including political tumults) were not something that happened only to “others”: the poor, the black, the uneducated or the disadvantaged. Vulnerability and uncertainty are features of the human condition.

How do we make sense of such crises? Are we adequately prepared to understand political, social and interpersonal dynamics during such moments? Is psychology equipped to address all this? Manuel Llorens confronts these issues and takes a global view while underscoring the political conflict in Venezuela.

This is not the only one reason to be proud of hosting this volume in the *Latin American Voices* books series. The incredibly important message here is that psychotherapy is neither neutral nor apolitical. Llorens, indeed, puts under scrutiny the role of psychotherapy in serving the regimes in different latitudes and, by doing so, he calls for the “*the need to be politically aware in order to protect our field and those that seek our help*” (this volume, p. XX).

In my view, there is also another reason why psychotherapy is not apolitical: because it is ontologically developmental (Mihalits and Valsiner 2020). Any psychotherapy intervention deals with transformative processes that may help people to achieve a better quality of life. What is the human horizon of such a kind of intervention? Psychotherapy, in my view, implies a tension between the person and the imagined person, framed by an ideology behind. As any educational and developmental action (Marsico 2018), psychotherapy is also value laden. No neutrality is possible! Then, a reflective and contextualized approach to liberate psychology by its self-made false myths is very much needed. I am sure the reader will find in this volume the compass to navigate these uncertain waters.

Salerno, Italy
July 2020

Giuseppina Marsico

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Foreword

During the last 50 years psychologists in Latin America have been striving to respond to the needs of its communities. Within this context many European and American theories were tested and found lacking, which stimulated the development of pioneering clinical practices which helped hone new concepts and effective interventions. Despite substantial advances within the Latin American psychotherapy, most psychologists in developed countries are still unaware of this emerging literature. Manuel Llorens' book *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy: Towards a Contextualized Approach* addresses this gap by providing us with a rich psychotherapeutic model in which he shares his ideas and the clinical tools that he and his group in Caracas, Venezuela developed to work with underserved communities.

Llorens was a founder, main researcher and clinical supervisor of a new and innovative graduate program in the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, which was designed to address the needs of the residents of *el barrio*¹ of Antímano—the second largest barrio of Caracas with almost half a million inhabitants—and nearby communities. This graduate program was founded in 1998, when Venezuela was starting to experience one of the most dramatic transformations ever experienced by any contemporary nation. Venezuela, fueled by a roaring oil industry and solid democratic institutions, was the richest country in South America and every year it welcomed thousands of immigrants from all over the world. Today, in 2020, it is the poorest country of the Southern hemisphere, and it is governed by a dictator who has a warrant for his arrest in the United States for drug trafficking. Furthermore, over 5 million people have fled Venezuela during the last 5 years. This unprecedented mass migration is the largest experienced by any South American nation. Similarly, Llorens resides in Bolivia and many of the leaders and supervisors of the graduate clinical/community program are spread throughout the globe. Other Venezuelans like myself are unable to visit Venezuela because we cannot obtain the proper legal documentation to enter the country.

¹Barrios are slums or shanty towns similar to Favelas in Brazil in which people take discarded lands (in which it is hard or dangerous to build) and build their homes with cardboard or wood. Most families in barrios have no access to basic services, such as water, electricity or gas.

The collapse of the Venezuelan political and economic system is not only the backdrop of *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy*, but it is also a central protagonist in this powerful text. In contrast to prevalent psychotherapeutic models that assume that science is universal and independent of circumstance, *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy* shows us how psychotherapy is crafted within a historical and political context that decisively influences psychotherapeutic ideas and interventions. Throughout this text Llorens describes how transformations in the Venezuelan society translated into clinical interactions and interventions. Not to include societies' socioeconomic and political dynamics would exclude a large part of peoples' experience from the psychotherapeutic process.

Llorens explains that regardless of clinicians' levels of political awareness our actions are woven into societies' fabric and extend beyond the walls of the consulting room, and thus every clinical action is a political statement. Llorens develops and details a psychotherapeutic model that reflects and opens space to discuss the political aspects that are inevitably embedded within the psychotherapeutic process. He develops and adapts psychotherapeutic tools to evidence and review clinicians "positioning" and "the distribution of power" in the therapeutic relationship that allow us to link the interpersonal psychotherapeutic work with the wider sociopolitical and economic context. This process allows clinicians and clients to address the structural conditions that may have not been noticed. However, Llorens does so as he helps his clients learn to cope with their individual symptoms.

Llorens' clinical approach is informed by psychodynamic ideas, yet he does not subscribe to one school of thought. His ideas are also enriched by cognitive behavioral techniques, the trauma literature and narrative approaches. In addition, Latin American psychologists Ignacio Martín-Baró and community psychologist Maritza Montero are prominent influences in his work, which is also enriched by excellent writers such as Ernesto Sábató and postmodern philosophers like Foucault and Derrida. Perhaps as a result of this unique combination of ideas and a commitment to serve marginalized communities, Llorens is able to develop a rich and effective psychotherapeutic model to respond to the needs of underserved communities in Caracas, Latin America and other parts of the world.

Some clinicians living in developed countries may wonder why it is helpful to learn from a book written in a different country. Llorens explains that a broader outlook encourages us to learn from different perspectives and deepen our understanding of ourselves. A wider view furthers our ability to identify, reflect and question our preconceptions, which may have inadvertently been limiting our clinical work. Consequently, *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy* allows us to examine psychology's legacy and gives us permission to question, explore and reinvent it according to our contextual realities and the needs of our clients. An enhanced awareness allows us to increase the efficacy of our interventions. The benefits of this approach are not limited to Venezuelans or South Americans; it can enrich clinician's psychotherapies throughout the world. In addition, the rise of the Black Lives Matters movement across the United States and the world reminds us that oppression and authoritarianism are not limited to Venezuela.

Furthermore, it is crucial to learn from different cultural and geographical communities because although the United States and Europe constitute only 10% of the world's population over 95% of all psychological ideas are tested with American or European samples and written by American or European researchers. As a result, psychology remains culture-bound, restricted in its origins, concepts, methods and its findings. Current psychological understandings only represent a small and limited fraction of the world's views; nevertheless, psychotherapy purports to be universally applicable. Llorens' book transports us beyond these borders and includes the voices of many who have never even been considered in the margins of any discourse.

A third reason is that the COVID pandemic has shown how we are all inextricably interconnected. What happens in one part of the globe can sooner or later influence us and we are more productive as we work together to solve global problems. The COVID pandemic, climate change or economic inequality can only be effectively addressed by an international collaboration. However, nationalist movements are growing in strength and pushing for the construction of walls that could isolate us from others. Nationalist trends are encouraging us to isolate and to dehumanize Others. In contrast, Llorens reminds us of the richness of discovering the Other or those who are different than we are. Far from being a threat, Others have unique qualities with who we can learn and grow.

In addition to eloquently describing the main assumptions of *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy* in the first two chapters, Llorens also examines how many of the pioneers in the field of psychology were inadvertently shaped by the prevalent assumptions of their times. For example, in clear detail, Llorens describes how Sir Francis Galton's theory of intelligence ended justifying preconceived ideas of the inferiority of "colored people" which then supported societies' racist views. The field of psychology is not immune from cultural assumptions. Yet when it ignores cultural influence as when it speaks in individual and intrapsychic terms it ends up perpetuating the current political and socioeconomic establishment.

In Chaps. 3 and 4, Llorens describes some of the dangers of developing a psychotherapy that is disconnected from its cultural context. Using lively international examples he illustrates the importance of listening to patients rather than lofty ideals. Llorens describes how psychology has repeatedly been weaponized to control and harm people. Psychologists have been involved in some of the most egregious crimes in history and Llorens summarizes over 15 international cases (e.g., China, Poland and Argentina). The incidents of torture by American psychologists in Guantánamo Bay Prison demonstrate that the United States is not free from these abuses. After the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York City and the Pentagon in 09/11/01 a group of psychologists supported by the American Psychological Association developed strategies to interrogate and torture prisoners in a Guantánamo Bay Prison. These illegal practices were justified because it was assumed that they could prevent future terrorist attacks or decrease the number of American military fatalities.

Furthermore, the power of psychology is evident in the numerous times in which it has been employed to counter and/or disavow any criticism of governments. For example, Llorens notes how the Venezuelan dictatorship has promoted itself as a

progressive movement and used ideals of social justice to persecute the same people it claims to protect. Nevertheless, thousands of homicides are executed every year by the Venezuelan national police and mass graves attest to these crimes. Furthermore, throughout these chapters Llorens poses important questions that challenge the nature of psychotherapy. For example, is it possible to conduct psychotherapy in a space in which clinicians know that their opinions are dangerous and leave them vulnerable to persecution? Is effective psychotherapy conceivable in such an environment? How can psychologists survive economically and avoid becoming an instrument of the privileged few who can afford their services? Llorens explains that an understanding of the episodes in which psychology has been used as a weapon of repression can help us identify how clinical practices can run the risk of being perverted to serve authoritarian political projects. It can also help us open up the debate about the risks of training in a craft that attempts to develop independently from its political circumstances. Llorens' descriptions highlight the possibility that psychology again and again be used as a tool for political control unless we consider the cultural context.

One of the most dramatic case examples of this text is that of Franklin Brito, who was a government dissenter who died in a Venezuelan Military Hospital after being forcefully hospitalized for alleged "psychiatric" reasons. In fact, Brito was starting to draw international attention as he led a hunger strike in front of the offices of the Organization of American States. He was declared mentally unfit and the Venezuelan attorney general forcefully interrupted his protest to "protect" his health. He was sent to the Military Hospital where mental illness was used as an excuse to incarcerate him and delegitimize his political ideas. Llorens clearly shows how psychiatric language, procedures and institutions were used as a weapon to persecute and ultimately murder Franklin Brito.

Unfortunately, psychology has been used to pathologize political dissenters on too many occasions. Psychologists are often recruited by political elites to maintain their grip on power. In these circumstances, psychologists often use the language and credibility of science to reframe social problems as "paranoid protesters" or "psychopathic masses." In this way, problems cease to be poverty, abuse of power, corruption, political differences or social injustice and become individual pathologies. As Harvard psychiatrist and trauma researcher, Judith Herman, explains, the systematic study of social injustice—just as the investigation of trauma—requires the support of political institutions. Advances in the field of psychology can only occur when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimize alliances between clinicians and clients. Unfortunately, in the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of silence. For well-meaning and politically "neutral" mental health providers, it is challenging to continuously hear the testimonies of social injustice which often leads them to be passive. Nevertheless, clinicians remaining idle in the face of injustice helps maintain power imbalances, thereby favoring the offender.

In the last four chapters of *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy*, Llorens provides many vivid clinical examples through which he illustrates in detail the psychological interventions that he and his group have designed and adapted from different approaches. One of the first psychotherapeutic tasks when working with clients facing social injustice is to identify and name the power dynamics present within the psychotherapeutic room which are derivative of political and socioeconomic forces. The same contextual macro-forces affecting nations are also expressed interpersonally in the consulting room. However, these influences are not only acknowledged and validated but clients are also taught strategies to more effectively manage them. As clients are more successful in managing their anxiety and depressive symptoms they are more effective in transforming their lives and contexts. The specific descriptions of Llorens' clinical examples make it difficult not to feel the pain and strength of his patients and the clarity in which they are described permits them to be generalized to different contexts.

Moreover, Llorens offers a stark warning about what can happen in societies in which psychologists listen to dogmas and ideals rather than to the voices of its communities and clients. One of Llorens' patients expresses this truth in her admonition, "what happened to me can happen to you tomorrow." She had not only lost her well-paying job but also her right to vote. As many democratic institutions in developed countries are increasingly strained by the pressure of nationalist and authoritarian forces, *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy* sheds a much-needed light which will help clinicians navigate through turbulent and excruciating political times.

Politically Reflective Psychotherapy does not limit itself to describing the risks of a politically neutral psychotherapy, it is mostly a testament to our strength and resilience. We can improve even under the worst of conditions. Through Llorens' rich clinical illustrations again and again we experience how psychotherapy can become an open and intimate space, where repressed voices can speak freely. As these voices are acknowledged, they sustain personal freedom and offer hope to individuals and communities. Within the psychotherapeutic process silenced experiences are validated and bear witness to struggles that would not have otherwise been heard. Llorens' text offers support to those who have survived oppression and helps them learn how they can be empowered and transform oppressive forces. This book is a powerful tool to assist people in liberating themselves from irrational ideas and from political control. *Politically Reflective Psychotherapy* is an invitation to join this transformative dialog and continue refining a more effective psychotherapy for all.

Boston, Massachusetts

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Preface

From Carl Rogers' efforts to bring person-centered workshops to challenge Apartheid in South Africa to the psychoanalysts who had to flee Nazi persecution, from the writings of the School of Frankfurt to psychoanalyst's activism under the Latin American dictatorships, not to mention the deliberate use of clinical terms to dismiss dissidence in the Soviet Union and China, as well as the participation of psychologists and psychotherapist in torture, as in the recent controversy regarding Guantánamo or in the prisons of Yugoslavia and Uruguay, the dilemmas psychotherapy has faced in regard to politics have been complex and controversial throughout its history.

Yet, when I trained as a clinical psychologist, reflection on our craft's history or in regard to the social and political frame in which psychotherapy operates was never brought up. Consideration about the client's or the therapist's social, economic and political history, and how they influenced the therapeutic relationship were also often disregarded. As if the specific circumstances in which psychotherapeutic theory and practice developed had been filtered to be able to show a "pure," abstract discourse, free from the contingencies of a particular context.

These silences regarding the history of our task are especially problematic considering the fact that it is an activity that pretends to open space to recover that which has been silenced and repressed. The historical recuperation of the origins and political influences of our profession, that "archaeology of silence" as Foucault (1967) has called it, has evidenced how psychotherapy is as susceptible to repression, to forget part of its history, as some of those who seek our help. The reasons why a task dedicated to the recovery and elaboration of personal history tends to forget part of its own are, of course, thought-provoking in itself. To consider the political and social circumstances that helped mold psychotherapeutic thought can protect us from the frequent dogmatism in clinical training that tends to elevate proposals developed in specific contexts to universal truths. It allows us to return to our own particular contexts and listen to it in detail, perhaps for the first time.

My clinical formation began to be challenged over its lack of social and political reflection, thanks to the work of social psychologist Martín-Baró (1986). His proposal to think and develop a psychology that could be relevant to the unresolved issues of Latin America, rather than be content importing solutions that didn't quite fit, made sense in my clinical work that worked with clients who faced poverty, social violence and the political polarization that has marked Venezuela during the last three decades. I had to deal with dilemmas that my clinical training had not prepared me for. Too often case discussions and supervisions invited us to leave those issues aside and concentrate on the "psychological" elements of the case. I found, over and over again, how the challenges posed by our historical circumstances were avoided and silenced.

This book is an attempt to engage with the provocations proposed by Martín-Baró in the field of psychotherapy. It is an effort to examine our discipline and the way it has dealt with the political dilemmas of our clients. Along the way, Latin American community psychology, Liberation Psychology and feminism, as well as postmodern paradigmatic revisions of various theories have offered resources to deal with these issues. I share some of the tools that I have found useful along the way to comprehend what happens in a psychotherapy that focuses on its context, as well as the ethical and practical dilemmas that this brings along. I do not pretend to refer to one particular school of psychotherapy as I believe these issues are relevant across theories and should be addressed on a metatheoretical level. But psychoanalysis and systemic approaches appear more prominently in the examples of the book, as they have been more present in the Latin American clinical literature.

Psychotherapy's language, settings, professionals and logic have been used and abused by many governments in order to further their causes. Latin America has been a politically complex continent and important reflections have come out of the terrible experiences faced, for example, during the dictatorships suffered in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, as well as the civil war in El Salvador. I will examine the use of psychotherapy to persecute dissidence in different latitudes to evidence the need to be politically aware in order to protect our field and those that seek our help.

Venezuela's political hardships have produced complementary material to what psychologists wrote in regard to the impact and consequences of political repression in other Latin American countries. But the authoritarianism represented by Chavismo in Venezuela has also been different in the sense that it evolved from a personalistic, military-led, but democratically elected government that had popular backing and flourished during a spectacular oil boom, to an economic crisis of historical dimensions led by the cruel dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro. The polarization that Chavismo has produced throughout the years in and outside of Venezuela has elicited intense passions and influenced the interpretation of many events. These political conditions have impacted therapy in many ways and have been a challenge to address. Politics did not creep into the therapeutic setting in Venezuela, it blew the door open, sat down and presided it as the elephant in the room.

So I will also describe how psychology, in general, and psychotherapy, in particular, has been recruited by Chavismo's discourse to further its power and persecute dissidence. I want to record and share many of the abuses that have been greatly obscured behind government's effective propaganda, and show how the struggle to attend to the population's urgent needs has had to navigate in the midst of intense political currents.

Finally, I propose a metatheoretical frame that I believe allows the incorporation of a series of tools developed, thanks to the critiques provided by Latin American community psychology, Liberation Psychology and feminism. Clinical examples of these issues and possible ways to address them will be shared.

I wrote the original draft of this book from 2007 to 2011. A first edition was published in Venezuela in 2015, thanks to the efforts of my university, the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello and the Universidad Simón Bolívar. But the book, like so many other things, suffered the consequences of the terrible economic crisis of the decade and, after a number of years in the waiting, finally came out as an edition of only 100 copies. Although it allowed me to open conversation on these issues in a number of sites in Venezuela, it suffered a rather underground existence.

The wonderful opportunity to publish it with Springer has allowed me to revise the original edition, including some interesting material that has come out in regard to these issues in the last few years, as well as include a more detailed chronicle of what has happened in Venezuela.

Psychotherapy is an activity based on dialogue, and therefore a book on psychotherapy needs dialogue to exist. One of the harshest consequences of the political disaster in Venezuela has been the increasing isolation universities have suffered. The invitation to edit a revised edition of this book in English is an opportunity to counter this isolation and participate in a wider conversation. I believe in the power of debate to inspire thought. In that sense, the desire behind the book is to open space for conversation, rather than pretend to have the last word.

Caracas, Venezuela

Manuel Llorens

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In second place, sitting in silence is not a sufficient condition to be able to listen. I have had the wonderful opportunity of learning my craft from psychotherapists that I admire, as well as through work with enriching colleagues. Among them I want to first thank the team of psychologists who I worked with at the Parque Social Padre Manuel Aguirre, S. J. throughout the years. That project marked my professional outlook as no other. In particular, Pedro Rodríguez, Carolina Izquier, Juan Carlos Romero, María Alejandra Corredor, Geraldine Morillo, Alejandra Sapene, María del Valle Westinner, John Souto, Maribel Goncalves, Rubén Regardiz, Francisco Sánchez, Mikhael Iglesias, Desiree Loreto and Guillermo Sardi have all been central to these ideas. Claudia Cos, Ana Herrera, Fernando Rísquez and Marta Llorens were essential to my development in psychotherapy and life. I would also like to mention my friends and colleagues Susana Medina, Sandro Mazzucatto and Carlos Alzualde.

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The School of Psychology of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello has been my home throughout the years. I am proud to have been part of its struggle to resist oppression and to develop a university that faces the terrible challenges our country continues to offer.

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²Red de Activismo e Investigación por la Convivencia.

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