



## Freud, Sullivan, Mitchell, Bion, and the multiple voices of international psychoanalysis

Marco Conci. . International Psychoanalytic Books: New York, 2019, 735 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781949093346

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To cite this article: Carlo Bonomi (2020): Freud, Sullivan, Mitchell, Bion, and the multiple voices of international psychoanalysis, International Forum of Psychoanalysis, DOI: [10.1080/0803706X.2020.1738123](https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2020.1738123)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2020.1738123>



Published online: 07 Apr 2020.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Marco Conci. *Freud, Sullivan, Mitchell, Bion, and the multiple voices of international psychoanalysis*.** International Psychoanalytic Books: New York, 2019, 735 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781949093346

In his preface to this remarkable book, Stefano Bolognini praises the recent tendency to build bridges and create a dialogue with other “psychoanalytic families,” presenting Marco Conci as “an example of this progressive international evolution of the contemporary analyst.” A new type of analyst, indeed, since Conci’s path through different analytic communities outside and inside the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA), which Bolognini assimilates to a journey through different countries and cultures, would have been most unusual, if not impossible, until not long ago. Rolling out this metaphor, the 12 chapters of this anthology represent as many travel reports of the shattered world of psychoanalysis, collected with the faith that the time of schism and estrangement is over and that unity is viable and advisable.

These chapters, written in the course of almost three decades, are geographically grouped in four parts, each representing a main region of the psychoanalytic world. Part one is focused on early Freud, from his adolescent correspondence with Silberstein and juvenile choice to study medicine to his self-analysis, which is here reconsidered emphasizing its interpersonal background. Part two consists in an articulated account of the roots of the interpersonal theory and of its contemporary transformation into relational psychoanalysis; two figures stand out here: Harry Stuck Sullivan and Stephen Mitchell. Elements of the Bion *galaxy* are explored in Part three from different angles: the roots of Bion’s work, his analysis with John Rickman, and the important role played by intersubjectivity in his work, which allows a compelling comparison between Bion and Sullivan. This part ends with a very informative reconstruction of analytic field theory, in which traditional regional divisions are merged and crisscrossed, in anticipation of Part four, namely the

idea of a germinal international psychoanalysis. Here we find a chapter on Gaetano Benedetti and Johannes Cremerius, and two interviews, one with Stefano Bolognini and the other with Horst Kächele. Many of these chapters are enriched by unpublished letters and documents stemming from Conci’s personal archive. Moreover, each part is forwarded by an extremely useful introduction that reviews the main themes and problems, further providing a vast, exhaustive, and updated bibliography. The four introductions are indeed four bibliographical essays that enhance the value of the book, making it similar to an encyclopedia – which literally means circular, or global, education.

The key word, and epistemological tool, here is “comparative psychoanalysis,” by which the author means not only a theoretical comparison of the different clinical approaches, but also a deeper understanding of the different models based on all the biographical, professional, and contextual variables involved in the creation of a specific perspective. According to Conci, the historical approach is the best way for disabling exclusion, undoing segmentation, and promoting a process of synthesis. This is not just historicism; rather, the author is fully aware that each perspective operates not only in a positive way, but also in a negative one. Finitude implies a certain degree of blindness. Each specific way of investigating is rooted in the social group to which one belongs and conditioned by a “thought collective” (Fleck), which is also informed by a kind of blindness to alternative ways of observing and conceptualizing. The combination of different perspectives is thus a necessity if we want to elaborate the traumatic fragmentation of psychoanalysis produced by schisms and conflicts. Sticking to the language of the group to which one belongs, while denying the legitimacy of other perspectives, is a defense against recognizing the traumatic past and a way to perpetuate it.

Pioneered by Edith Kurzweil, the method of “comparative psychoanalysis” has been embraced by a growing number of scholars in recent decades. According to the author, substantial contributions

were made in this field by Roy Schafer, Fred Pine, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, James Grotstein, Arnold Richards, Robert Wallerstein, Otto Kernberg, Leo Rangell, Arnold Cooper, Steven Ellman, and David Tuckett – and, in Germany, by Wolfgang Mertens. The specificity of Conci's approach to "comparative psychoanalysis" consists in the disclosing function of the personal encounter. Human beings come first. Each paper and contribution is marked by a life event. Each intellectual bridge is an expansion of a human link, the pivotal function of which is amply reflected in the narrative. The latter is ultimately aimed at the integration of the many voices of psychoanalysis as a form of an ongoing and never ending synthesis that is rooted in a mental attitude and fostered by our personal experiences.

There are two initiating encounters from which Conci learned how important is to meet and talk with an author if one is to really understand what his or her work is like. The first was in 1986 with Johannes Cremerius, a German psychoanalyst representative of a continental psychoanalysis that remained mainly unknown in English-speaking countries, and in which the teaching of forgotten masters of the clinical work, like Ferenczi, managed to survive the diaspora of the central European analysts. Cremerius would become for Conci an important father figure, providing him with connections, a vision of the humanist dimension of the psychiatrist (an aspect, this, which was further enhanced by Gaetano Benedetti), and a lasting awareness that psychoanalysis is wider and better of its official self-representation. In spite of being an IPA member, Cremerius was influential in Conci's initial choice of having a training outside the IPA umbrella.

The second crucial and life-changing encounter was with Stephen Mitchell in 1988, on the occasion of the first invitation to Europe of the two, at the time, young and unknown authors (Greenberg and Mitchell) of the ground-breaking book *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*, which had been published a few years before. It was the beginning of a strong friendship that lasted until Mitchell's premature death, in 2000. Marco Conci was crucial in organizing the many seminars and conferences held by Mitchell in Italy in the ensuing years, helping the dissemination of his work in Italy, during a period when the local psychoanalytic institutes affiliated to the IPA were still far from realizing how deeply Mitchell was shaking and revitalizing the analytic world.

The only point in which Conci did not follow Mitchell was the growing politicization of the opposition to Freud, a tendency that was enhanced by the institutionalization of "relational psychoanalysis" and powerfully accelerated after Mitchell's death,

ending into "a form of perversion of the original intellectual richness of the comparative psychoanalytic perspective proposed by Greenberg and Mitchell in 1983." A bridge was broken, and one-sidedness replaced comparison, perpetuating the schismatic tendency rooted in trauma. Even the typical methods of feudalization resurfaced: when the historical reconstructions of the relational turn in Italy later appeared in journals and books, an entire decade, the one in which Marco Conci fostered the dissemination of Mitchell's work in Italy, was simply deleted.

This politicized and disappointing way of rewriting the history of psychoanalysis – in a different context, Erich Fromm spoke of a typical "Stalinist" method – came as a painful surprise to Conci, but did not affect his desire to weave ties, and his enlightened vision of a worldwide psychoanalytic fellowship. He was facilitated in this by his geographical position – born in Trento, he found himself moving physically and culturally between Northern and Southern Europe, settling his professional activity mainly in Munich – and by his lasting engagement with the *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, first as an associate editor and then, since 2007, as coeditor-in-chief. The very special atmosphere and working style of the editorial board of this journal, sponsored by the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies (IFPS) but run independently, nourished his curiosity and inclusive attitude. In 2002 Conci became member of the German psychoanalytic society (DPG), and when the latter was readmitted into the IPA as a society, he became a member of the IPA and, shortly after, also of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), without giving up his vocation of building bridges between different views and traditions.

The great quantity of Conci's significant encounters with prominent analysts of different regions, in both geographical and cultural meanings of the term, is really impressive. Bearing witness to the vitality of these encounters, this book is more than a theoretical contribution. It is an act of reparation, which is reciprocated by the many attestations of appreciation and expressions of affect collected at the end of the book – in the form of more than 20 endorsements. The book also contains a significant *après-coup* of these encounters in the form of the autobiographical afterword titled "Why and how I became a psychoanalyst," which is further commented on by Sandra Buechler and Frank Lackman. Conci suddenly felt compelled to write it as final act of his creative effort, as though his journey through the fragmented landscape of psychoanalysis enabled him to achieve a more integrated perspective on his life story. I am tempted to suggest the reader to start with this remarkable account – and with the

series of photographs accompanying it – first because it creates in us the right mood to begin the long journey, and then because it immediately tracks the circularity of knowledge that informs life, further inspiring psychoanalysis.

Marco Conci's view of psychoanalysis is truly dialogical and embedded in real life. The interpersonal encounter is the catalyst and yeast of this collection of scholarly written essays and fresh interviews, which provide a detailed map of the enlargement of horizons and differentiation of perspectives experienced by psychoanalysis in the last decades.

A necessary tool for the academic historian of this discipline, this lively book is also a travel companion for the clinician who feels the urge to adapt his views to the patient, instead of forcing them to the patient.

It shows how the principle of elasticity, introduced by Ferenczi in the analytic encounter, can successfully be applied to our need to organize psychoanalytic wisdom.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2020.1738123>

