

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EVOLUTION OF PSYCHOLOGY IN ISRAEL: THE ROLE OF ENZO BONAVENTURA

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Abstract

Enzo Bonaventura (Pisa, 1891 – Jerusalem, 1948) was an eminent figure in the development of scientific psychology in Italy before Second World War. Born to a Jewish family (the father was a musician), pupil of Francesco De Sarlo, one of the “fathers” of the Italian psychology, he graduated in the University of Florence in 1903, and was appointed there as Assistant Professor and Director of the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology. In 1932 De Sarlo resigned from the University for opposing fascism. Bonaventura won a national concourse to succeed to him as Full Professor, but for political reason the Faculty did not “invite” him, postponing the decision till 1938, when the fascist government excluded by law all Jews from the Italian universities. He, then, decided to emigrate in Erez Israel. During the Italian period, under the influence of De Sarlo and of Vittorio Benussi, he produced very important experimental and theoretical contributions on the psychology of time and space. He used many instruments, mainly tachistoscopes, demonstrating a great ingenuity. He was also interested in applied psychology, in particular psychology of education, and in the last period spent in Italy, in psychoanalysis. He trained a generation of very good young Italian experimentalists, like Carla Calabresi and Alberto Marzi. Once in Palestine-Erez Israel, Professor Bonaventura established the first laboratory for experimental study of psychological phenomena at Hebrew University. In fact, he established the first Department of Psychology in Israel at large. Earlier, Hebrew University turned down offers for establishing a Department of Psychology based on psychoanalysis -- despite pressure from Freud who was a governor of the University. With the tragic death of Enzo Bonaventura in a convoy to Mount Scopus, the Department died with him. For the ensuing ten years, students could not study psychology as a major or minor subject at Hebrew University. However, one of Bonaventura's young students, the late Professor Isaac Lewin, established a Department of Psychology following his mentor's example, at Bar-Ilan University in 1955-6. Bar-Ilan was just founded with a modern Department of Psychology mainly due to the contribution of Bonaventura through Lewin. Subsequently, the Department at Bar-Ilan and the re-opened Department at Hebrew University supplied the faculty to the new Departments at the new universities in Haifa and Beer-Sheva. Today, Israeli Universities rank among the top research institutions of psychology in terms of quantity and quality of scientific output.

The Italian Years

Enzo Bonaventura was one of the most eminent Italian psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century, and played a key role in the establishment of the Israeli psychology. Great experimentalist, he was also a pioneer of applied psychology, especially in the educational field, and was a great popularizer, author, among other things, of one of the most popular (and still read in Italy as in Israel) handbooks of psychoanalysis. If he could not develop his full potentials, it was due to the fact that he had to confront two serious handicaps. First, in Italy in 1922 the fascist dictatorship assumed power. With his "official" philosopher, the neo-idealist Giovanni Gentile, the Fascism confronted psychology, believed to be a “pseudo-

science”, unable of “true knowledge”, and hindered it in every way, reducing university teaching, removing chairs, denying funds to research. Secondly, perhaps also to please its Nazi ally, in the '30s the Fascism embraced a policy of persecution of the Jews, culminating in the “racial laws” of 1938, which, among other things, forbade the Jews including Bonaventura, to teach in the Italian universities.

Bonaventura was born in Pisa, on 24th of December, 1891. The family was Jewish, the father was a respected musician and musicologist (on Bonaventura, see Gori Savellini, 1990). However, the parents were not much concerned with religion. In contrast, Enzo was devout, and he was actively involved with the *Università Israelitica* of Florence (as the Jewish community was then called – see Funaro, in Gori Savellini, 1990). He studied philosophy in Florence, in the Regio Istituto Superiore (University from 1924), with Francesco De Sarlo, from 1903 Professor of Theoretical Philosophy. De Sarlo was one of the “fathers” of the young scientific psychology in Italy. Before teaching in Florence, he had been a concerned experimentalist, adhering to positivism and Darwinism. However, at the time Franz Brentano lived in Florence, and De Sarlo and Brentano became friends. Under the influence of Brentano, De Sarlo turned to a “descriptive” psychology, full of spiritualism and phenomenism. Anyway, when no longer directly involved in experimental research, he strongly encouraged this activity in his pupils, and established the (officially) first Laboratory in an Italian University, which was endowed with the most advanced equipment of the time. (On psychology in Florence at that time, see Luccio, 1994; Albertazzi, Cimino and Gori Savellini, 1999).

Bonaventura graduated in Philosophy in 1913, with a thesis on the “Qualities of the physical world” (Bonaventura, 1916), that was published as a book directly by the University of Florence, as a sign of distinction. In 1917 he obtained the “libera docenza” in Psychology, in 1919 he was appointed as Assistant professor, and from 1924 to 1938 he was Director of the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology. In 1931, he won a national concourse as full professor of Psychology. For the Italian law, to win was not enough to get the chair. Bonaventura hoped to get the one left at disposal by De Sarlo (who had resigned for conflict with the fascism), but the Faculty of Philosophy of Florence, maybe cowardly, refused to “call” him, and no other University had the courage to give him a chair. In 1938, due to the “racial laws”, he was forced to leave the University, and decided to emigrate in Erez Israel, a goal that he had dreamed for years. In this, he was strongly encouraged and supported by “Padre” Agostino Gemelli, a terrible Franciscan friar, who was Rector of the Catholic University, fascist and anti-Semite, real master, then, of the Italian psychology. Gemelli esteemed Bonaventura, but somebody says that his support was due to the desire to have a Jew less in Italy...

The scientific production of Bonaventura, in his Italian period, is large enough (for a complete bibliography, see Gori Savellini, 1998). Apart from the truly scientific papers, he wrote also many popular books, and left also several unpublished writings: among them, two important writings on space, one psychological, published posthumous as book in 1961; the other philosophical, published only in 1990.

The most important work made by Bonaventura in the Italian years was undoubtedly on psychology of time (see Luccio, 1990), influenced by Vittorio Benussi, who was often in Florence, to discuss scientific problems with De Sarlo and Bonaventura (see Poggi, 1985). One of the first articles of Bonaventura (1913) is a critical essay on a work of Benussi (1913) on the apprehension of the time. The problem of Bonaventura is the possibility of freeing space and time from the Kantian definition by “the transcendental method”, and try to give a psychological foundation to them. In 1924, Bonaventura published a technical note, which describes a double-drop tachistoscope, with which it was possible to study the phenomena of 'apprehension' of the time, as well as doing research in the field of the attention. The main

focus was on the duration of a mental act of apprehension of one or more objects. This is also the fundamental experimental problem of his best student, Renata Calabresi (1930). Renata was also Jewish, and was also forced to leave Italy in 1938 for the United States, where she died in 1957.

In 1928, Bonaventure publishes two new works on the psychology of the time. The first one, theoretical, is essentially the backbone of what would become his seminal essay on the psychology of the time. The second is a technical note, which is a broadening and deepening of the themes addressed in previous work on the double tachistoscope. These two works, along with a work with Campanini on motor rhythms, and a contribution of Lewy Guinzburg on the perception of simultaneity, are reprinted in one volume (Bonaventure, 1929a). The issue will be taken up in a book of 1929, the most important work written by Bonaventura. The simple, last, irreducible phenomenon which is at the basis of the temporal representation, is the experience of *change*. The change is first and foremost, before the succession, to which it cannot be reduced, and it differs from change, allowing a representation of a temporal order, that in the change is absent.

In this essay, he affords also the problem of the psychophysical appreciation of the empty time intervals. Already in 1922, Bonaventure identified the possibility of psychophysical functions in the form of power function that better describes than the logarithmic function the trend of the phenomena. Unfortunately, he left this line of research that could precede Stevens' "new" psychophysics. However, his power functions had an exponent not simple at all.

During the Italian period, Bonaventure addressed many other issues, that we simply list: philosophical issues (Maimonides, Stoic logic, Arrigo da Settimello, categories of space and time, Vincenzo Gioberti); problems of educational psychology (normal as well as pathological); other problems of experimental psychology (affective memory, voluntary movements, introspection, *macula caeca*); methodological problems. But his interests were heading toward psychoanalysis, and he wrote on it the famous manual (1938) mentioned above.

The Short but Significant Time in Israel

Chaim Weizmann, the first president to be of the modern State of Israel (established in 1948), invited Enzo Bonaventura in 1939 to serve as the first professor of Psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Professor Bonaventura accepted the offer and came to pre-state Israel, along with his family, to establish the first laboratory of experimental psychology at the university and to start an ambitious, wide-reaching teaching activity. The environs were not unfamiliar to Bonaventura who had visited Erez Israel already in 1924 with family and friends. The publication of Bonaventura's book on Psychoanalysis prior to his appointment at the Hebrew University looks ironic when one considers the fact that the first attempts to establish a discipline of psychology at the university originated with people associated with psychoanalysis and that the university did not welcome those initiatives. Were the authorities at Hebrew University unaware of Bonaventura's psychoanalytic interests, or, more probably, did his reputation as a first rate scientists overshadow this psychoanalytic 'deviation'?

Attempts to introduce psychology have started in earnest during the early 1930s, when Dr. Max Eitingon, a disciple and friend of Zigmund Freud offered to develop psychoanalysis at the university. Eitingon had served as director of the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin, focusing on the training of future psychoanalysts, when forced to leave Germany for Palestine upon the rise to power of Hitler. An earlier attempt in 1922 by Eitingon and colleagues to introduce psychoanalysis into the academia in Berlin failed on the grounds that 'psychoanalysis is an amalgamation of brilliant scientific ideas and excessive dogmatism as

well as insufficiently empirical methods of inquiry' (verdict of the committee appointed by the Ministry of Culture and Science; Rolnik, 2007). Ten years later in 1933, Eitingon offered essentially the same program to Juda Magnes, Chancellor of the Hebrew University. Freud, a governor of the Hebrew University, was an enthusiastic supporter of some sort of association (*Ankuepfung*) between "our university" and psychoanalysis (letter from Freud to Magnes, November 17, 1933). Freud has become increasingly frustrated by the university's evasive response so that in subsequent correspondence he refers coldly to the "University of Jerusalem" (Rosenbaum, 1954).

Considerable pressure had mounted from various districts on the decision makers at the Hebrew University to accommodate psychoanalysis as the nucleus or part of a future Department of Psychology (or that of a Medical School). One major argument was that psychoanalysis was a uniquely Jewish science, the product the genius of the Jewish people eminently suitable to be embraced by the university of the Jewish people. This argument is quite ironic when considered in tandem with Freud's considerable efforts to avoid construal of psychoanalysis as a Jewish science (Jerushalmi, 1991). The disappointment of the Freudians is amply displayed by the words of the analytic protagonist in Arnold Zweig's *Traum ist Treuer*, "The university was happy to use Freud's name in its public relations efforts, but got cold feet in face of the attacks on psychoanalysis." The writer Arnold Zweig, a joint friend of Freud and Eitingon, lived in Palestine at the time. Freud himself would have been happy to accommodate psychoanalysis, "the science of the unconscious," alongside academic psychology, which is "confined to conscious phenomena," but the academicians do not want to know anything about psychonanalysis." (Freud's letter to Magnes, December 22, 1933).

Amidst these failed attempts to find a match with psychoanalysis, the University was keen to establish a Department of Psychology. Chancellor Magnes met with Professor Kurt Lewin, a famous social psychologist, in Berlin already in 1933. Unlike Eitingon and other psychoanalytic candidates, the university extended a formal invitation to Lewin to serve as the founder and chairperson of the Department of Psychology. Lewin, who moved in the meantime to the United States, considered the offer seriously and was actually enthusiastic of the prospect to establish an Institute of Psychology in the holy land -- modeled after the state of the art Institute of Berlin in which Lewin was acting for almost a decade. During his visit to Palestine in 1934 he met the architect in charge of construction in the Mount Scopus campus of the University to discuss needs of the Institute. He also met with prospective faculty (Bargal, 1998). The contacts with Lewin continued throughout the better part of the 1930s. They eventually failed on financial rather than on academic grounds. The University and Lewin himself were unable to generate the funds needed for a first rate institute on a par with leading ones in Germany and the United States. As Bargal (1998) perceptively concludes, the personal and academic needs of a leading psychologist of the stature of Kurt Lewin were incompatible with the conditions and capabilities of a young and still developing university.

It was on this background that Professor Bonaventura joined the University in 1939. He was a fresh addition to a faculty that almost exclusively comprised scholars from the German cultural milieu. Bonaventura established his laboratory on Mount Scopus and engaged in an intensive teaching activity. The poor economic conditions in Palestine dried up the financial sources needed for a first rate laboratory, which explains Bonaventura's focus on teaching. He taught a wide range of topics not only in psychology proper but also in education, philosophy and Jewish thought. He has also written textbooks for teachers and educators. The University approved psychology as a minor curriculum within the School of Education in 1941, at which time psychological training began in earnest. The Department of Psychology was expanded in 1945, strengthening its position within the University. During the war of 1948, Mount Scopus

became separated from the rest of Jerusalem and special convoys could only reach the enclave. Professor Bonaventura along with scores of others was killed in an attack on his convoy in April 13, 1948. His death was all the more tragic as Bonaventura made shorter his sabbatical abroad in 1947 to be back in the country whose independence was just declared. The young Department of Psychology at the Hebrew University died jointly with Bonaventura.

In the subsequent decade, political infighting as well as the absence of proper candidates kept the Department closed. Abraham Maslow, David Wechsler, David Rapaport, John Cohen, and Gregory Razran, among others were contacted to join or help in recruiting. Some came for short periods, but none of these attempts was eventually successful (Ben-Ari & Amir, 1986). The Department finally reopened in 1957 under the leadership of a young psychologist from the United States, Sol Kugelmass, to develop into a leading research and teaching institution in the world.

In the meantime, a young student of Bonaventura, Isaac Lewin, established the first modern Department of Psychology in Israel at around 1956 at Bar-Ilan University, itself founded two years earlier. Professor Lewin (1924-2008) shared the broad erudition, scholarship, and interests of his mentor, and the Department of Psychology at Bar-Ilan reflected these features in the diversity of its laboratories, faculty, and programs. Due to its pioneer role, the departments of psychology to be established later at other research universities (e.g., Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Beer-Sheva) largely followed the Bar-Ilan model. The faculty itself of these younger departments largely came from the Bar-Ilan and the Hebrew Universities.

To conclude on a bright note, the spirit of Enzo Bonaventura continues to be alive in Israel in and out of the academia. The municipality of Jerusalem called a street on his name in 1995. The University of Florence held a conference on the legacy of Bonaventura, marking the 50th anniversary of his racially motivated firing. His two sons are professors at the Hebrew and at Tel-Aviv University (not in psychology).

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