

From Cults to *Cobayer*: New Religions as “Guinea Pigs” for Testing New Laws. The Case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School

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ABSTRACT: A military-style police raid was launched on August 12, 2022, against the headquarters of a small metaphysical book club and spiritual school known as the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS). BAYS members were arrested on charges of human trafficking, money laundering, and running a prostitute ring. Videos of the raid and photographs of members with identifying information soon appeared in the media. This study argues that this unwarranted police raid, planned by PROTEX (Procuraduría para el Combate de la Trata y Explotación de Personas) and Argentina’s leading anticult activist, Pablo Salum, fits the description of a “crime control theater,” and that the heavy-handed use of brainwashing theory to brand and stigmatize the BAYS women as both prostitutes and “cultists” resembles strategies found in France’s government-sponsored anticult movement to control “sectes” and their “gourous.” Since both Argentina and France have passed new laws based on unprovable notions of “vulnerability,” “control,” and “abuse of weakness,” imported from brainwashing theory, it is argued the application of these laws to members of NRMs is a subtle and facile step towards the erosion of democratic principles. This study, based on interviews with BAYS members and legal team, focuses on the negative results of the raid, which damaged the careers and livelihoods of the alleged “pimps” and putative “victims” alike.

KEYWORDS: Buenos Aires Yoga School, Government Raids Against “Cults,” Crime Control Theater, Brainwashing, Human Trafficking, Abuse of Weakness, Anti-cultism.

Introduction

Democracy is generally taken for granted in the Americas and Europe—but history and politics tell us that democracy is not a privilege fixed in stone. It is constantly being challenged, and tested by new laws that are seemingly benign. It has often been eroded by cultural trends that appear to support the downtrodden and defend human rights.

What happened to the members of a small metaphysical book club in Argentina is a striking example of how human rights and democratic principles can be effectively eroded in unexpected and surreptitious ways.

The Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) emerged out of the philosophy teachings and discussion groups organized by Juan Percowicz in the early 1980s (Introvigne 2023a). Percowicz is a Jewish accountant (a widower now in his 80s and retired), who for decades has been cultivating his passion for books on mysticism and esoteric philosophy. His taste is eclectic, ranging from Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) to Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952); from George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) to Dale Carnegie (1888–1955); and his concern is how to apply these philosophical principles to one’s daily life.

Percowicz had his own teacher of Raja Yoga (ancient Hindu philosophy, as opposed to the *asanas* or physical postures of Hatha Yoga), and became a teacher himself, attracting a circle of students that expanded to around 200 people. He founded BAYS, which has been meeting on a bi-weekly basis to discuss assigned readings. It is also a social club, because these meetings have featured shows—from comedy acts to amateur skits or poetry readings, to performances by professional musicians, actors and magicians—all members of BAYS (Interviews with Juan Percowicz and longterm members of BAYS, May 2023).

The Raid of August 12, 2022

This flourishing social club and artistic/spiritual movement was suddenly blighted by a sudden, violent, militarized raid.

On August 12, 2022 armored police with machine guns smashed in the front door of a cafe on Estado de Israel Avenue where a class on esoteric philosophy was in progress. Around fifty BAYS students were held at gunpoint—most of them nicely dressed elderly people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s.

The purpose of this raid was to find evidence of human trafficking, to arrest the perpetrators, and rescue the victims.

But despite the lack of any prior complaints from ex-members or self-described “victims” of BAYS—or any compelling “evidence” whatsoever—19 members were arrested and accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and “money laundering connected with human trafficking.” They

had achieved this by allegedly using “coercive persuasion” techniques (i.e. brainwashing) to enslave nine female BAYS students and pimp them to “rich and powerful men” for “cultic” fundraising purposes.

As one of the lawyers on BAYS’ defense team noted:

The suspects were sent to prison *before* a trial, *before* any evidence was produced. And most of them remained incarcerated for almost three months as part of an ongoing pre-trial “investigation” on the basis of Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims of 19 December 2012.

There is a special prosecutorial office in Argentina called PROTEX (Procuraduría para el Combate de la Trata y Explotación de Personas [English: Office of the Procurator for Combating the Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons]). It was set up in the wake of the new Argentinian Law 26.842 of 2012 against human trafficking. The political and intellectual forces behind the passing of this law are analyzed in assistant prosecutor Marisa S. Tarantino’s 2021 book (Tarantino 2021). Recently, the Argentinian government has increased PROTEX’s powers and funding. PROTEX needs success stories for its annual reports.

In an unexpected coup, PROTEX, working in tandem with police SWAT teams and with Pablo Salum (Argentina’s one-man anticult movement), plus local television stations, launched a military-style police raid on the BAYS-owned building, starting with the cafe.

After smashing in the door of the cafe on the ground floor of the building, the SWAT teams systematically proceeded up ten flights to forcefully search the 25 private apartments and professional offices of BAYS members. When the residents trapped in the cafe offered the policewoman in charge their door keys, they were rejected. After all, this was an important photo opportunity. It was “crime-control theatre.”

The aim was clear: the filming of the police operation would produce videos used to justify the crackdown ordered by the prosecutor of PROTEX.

Simultaneous aggressive raids were carried out that night at a total of fifty locations around Buenos Aires.

On the street outside the cafe, reporters were stationed to take photos of the handcuffed people as they were dragged out of the building and placed in paddy wagons. It appears that a few journalists knew about the raid even before it took place.

A video showing the heavily-armed “heroic” door-smashing police and the one-sided statement of the prosecutor was uploaded on YouTube just in time for the morning news about the yoga school BAYS, “la secta del horror” or “the horror cult” that had allegedly been operating an international prostitution ring for thirty years.

The Research Method

It is one situation to read in a distant country about a “cult” that has been busted for trafficking women—and quite another thing to fly to Buenos Aires and interview members of the said “cult” and listen to their side of the story. Most readers coming across the BAYS story in the news would probably think, “They must be guilty. After all, isn’t that what cults do—exploit people?” Some readers might even quote the proverb, “Where there’s smoke, there’s a fire.”

This research was conducted in Buenos Aires in May 2023 by myself and my research partner, Professor Holly Folk from Western Washington University. Our colleague Dr. Massimo Introvigne, who had previously written about BAYS, encouraged us to undertake this research; we were not paid for it, but our travel expenses to Argentina and accommodation costs were covered.

After spending eight days interviewing BAYS students (both the “perps” and the “victims” of human trafficking), the founder of BAYS, Juan Percowicz, and their lawyer, we concurred that the presumption of innocence should definitely apply here. None of these people were pimps, brainwashers, or human traffickers. Certainly, none of them were “victims”—except they all had the misfortune to be trapped in a Kafkaesque, bureaucratic nightmare.

One of the functions of PROTEX is to protect the victims. But these BAYS women complained they had been falsely labeled as “victims” and then punished for their mythical victimhood.

Each woman we interviewed in her own apartment described vividly her experience of the 12 August 2022 raid and its aftermath. Their accounts were quite consistent.

First, the door of each woman’s apartment had been smashed on the eve of the police raid. Second, they found that the police had searched their apartments, seizing gold jewelry, watches, paintings, computers, and stashes of cash. Third,

over the next few days, their names, faces, addresses, and job information appeared in the media in salacious reports and videos on the *secta del horror*. The result was that most of these women lost their livelihoods. Or at least, their careers—in real estate, television production, acting, health clinics, sales motivational training, computer technology—were adversely affected.

Several women described post-raid symptoms of PTSD; of feeling insecure sleeping in their unlocked or doorless apartments; and a lack of confidence in dealing with their clients.

But mostly, these women were angry. As strong, independent feminists who worked hard all their lives to build their careers, they were insulted to be told they were “victims.” Most of them were involved in relationships of ten to twenty years with their boyfriend, partner, or husband, and were flabbergasted (or amused) at being told they were “prostitutes.”

When a report appears in the news about a “cult” that has just been “outed” as a criminal enterprise, whose leaders have been arrested, whose assets have been frozen—nobody cares. Nobody questions. But if someone bothers to view the situation up close, to listen to members describe the impact of “anticult” framing and media labeling on their professional and personal lives—one often confronts a very different reality.

Here are their stories; summaries of the interviews conducted in May 2023 by myself and Professor Folk. In these personal narratives, one might see how easy it is for democracy to be unraveled, and how frightening this process must be for the targeted individuals.

First, in Part One and Two of this article, we will examine the experiences of two extraordinary artists who were charged with human trafficking and sent to prison before a trial, and their accounts of the devastating impact of these false allegations on their professional careers. In Part Three, I will explore the narratives of the nine women “victims” who must remain anonymous, since they deserve a chance to reconstruct their careers after the negative exposure they have suffered in the media and on Pablo Salum’s website.

Part One: Carlos Barragán, Magician

Carlos Barragán is a professional stage magician. His father and father's father were famous magicians in Argentina, who taught him his first magic illusion at age 3. Carlos achieved international fame by inventing a new, poetic style of stage magic and won many awards, notably, the World Magic Championship in Great Illusions FISM in 1997. For over two decades, Barragán has toured Latin America, Mexico, Las Vegas, Europe, Russia, and China, performing his theatrical magic shows at festivals, corporate events, and selected private parties.

MagicPedia sums up Carlos Barragán's unique career as follows:

His inventive, philosophical, and emotional thriller-show production, combine illusion and theater, comedy and mystery in a sensual show... touching the emotions of the audience with his new emotional-philosophical magic concept. Carlos Barragán has been enchanting audiences around the world in theaters and on TV; he prepared a special show for Prince William and Máxima at the Royal Dutch Wedding in 2002 (MagicPedia 2023).

In between his world tours, Carlos Barragán would drop into the Buenos Aires Yoga School and attend its philosophy classes. Carlos felt at home in this warm community of intellectuals and creative artists who welcomed Jews, Muslims, and homosexuals to their gatherings. Carlos' parents and sisters never joined BAYS, but he maintained a close relationship with them. He worked closely with the fellow artists he met at BAYS to create innovative theatrical shows with music and comedy. One of them, a gifted young actress, became his regular stage assistant and traveled with him to Germany in 1997 to perform and receive the FISM prize.

On the fateful evening of 12 August 2022, Carlos Barragán was attending a study session at BAYS' café on the ground floor of the Estado de Israel Avenue building when the police raided the building and other locations linked to BAYS. Handcuffed and arrested at gun point, along with 18 other BAYS members, Carlos was accused of human trafficking through the operation of a prostitution ring.

While incarcerated in prison, Carlos Barragán learned that his large, elegant house had also been raided that night. His friends told him they found the front door smashed in. The police had invaded his Museum of Magic and seized two large boxes with an historic collection of magic props and paraphernalia. Carlos Barragán explained:

Pablo Salum had told PROTEX that I had in my house—in my “bunker” (as Salum calls it)—all the blackmail material for the extortion of rich men who were offered our women. He said videos of sex acts were taken so that we could extort money from them. So, the police smashed their way into my house and stole over 4,000 VHS, expecting to find blackmail material, but of course all they found were my historic collection of magic shows, and the VHS series on our philosophy classes in BAYS.

Carlos Barragán was released from prison on 4 November 2022, when the charges against him were suddenly dropped. To this day he has no idea why—or indeed, how he came to be arrested in the first place.

He returned home to find the police had ransacked his study and he found that his meticulously-crafted inventions which he used to make to sell to other magicians, had been torn apart and trodden underfoot. Windows had been broken and he found animal droppings on the floor. But for Carlos, the most devastating realization was that the police had discovered his secret hiding place where he kept his passport and his father’s gold and silver medals for his service to the community. There they had also found—and stolen—a large cache of money his mother had given him for safekeeping shortly after the death of his father on the 9th of June of 2022.

His mother, Señora Barragán, was fearful of burglars, for she now lived alone. Like many Argentinians, she did not trust the banks, ever since the famous *corralito* in 2001, when all the banks froze their clients’ money—both pesos and dollars—only to return it several months later exclusively in pesos, in installments and devaluated. Many people lost huge amounts of money and assets, and a wave of emigration to other countries followed. After his mother’s jewelry and his father’s life savings had been stolen by the police, Carlos realized his bank account had been frozen at the time of his arrest. Even after the charges against him were dropped, it has remained frozen.

“They have destroyed my life’s work,” Carlos said bitterly. But what he found unbearable was the assault on his reputation:

Men who look like [Adolf] Hitler [1889–1945] are saying I am a criminal in Argentina. Now that my name has been dragged through the tabloids I will never work again. I have been [falsely] “unmasked” as a member of the “cult of horror”—as a brainwashing pimp—as if I were not much too busy promoting an infinitely more exciting and more lucrative profession as a world class magician!

Carlos protested that the media portrayed him as a sleazy “cultist” who goes by the phony alias of “The Magician.”

But I *am* a magician. It is not my “alias”—it is my honorable profession, my family tradition into which I was raised since the age of three!

He spoke of Pablo Salum, the career apostate (Salum’s mother took him to BAYS meetings at age 10) who is Argentine’s fiercest anticult activist. Salum had told the media that BAYS was a “child abuser association.” [Pablo Salum has gone on record claiming the Dalai Lama is a “pederast,” and that the Mormon Church and the Carmelites are hiding “brainwashing” or “pedophile rings”: see Introvigne 2023b].

Carlos protested:

This is an evil slander! The allegations against us were human trafficking and money laundering—that’s it! Child abuse was never part of the case. In my profession, where we magicians perform for families and schools, the tiniest hint of scandal involving pedophilia rumors will be the death knell for your career. No one will work with you ever again.

Carlos’ health has declined rapidly since his release from prison. He is currently recovering from open heart surgery under the care of his old BAYS friends.

Carlos spoke of his most heartbreaking moment. While he was being held in prison, he was not allowed a leave to attend the award ceremony for his late father, a great Argentinian magician. The ceremony was a public recognition of all the community service and charity that Carlos’ father had performed throughout his life. Carlos had been emulating his father by performing magic shows for fundraising benefits.

Part Two: Mariano Krauz, Oboist and Composer

This is the story of Mariano Krauz, whose brilliant international career as a solo oboist and emerging composer was suddenly, unexpectedly derailed, due to the ludicrous fantasies of an anticult activist and career apostate, and the opportunistic machinations of PROTEX.

Born in 1964, Mariano Krauz is the grandson of Polish Jews who immigrated to Argentina. Mariano discovered music at age 5 when a music-loving aunt escorted him to recorder lessons. He switched to oboe and soon became a child

prodigy, winning prizes since age 13. He studied at the Conservatoire of Amsterdam and by the age of 24 Mariano Krauz became the first oboist in the Teatro Colón, the magnificent opera house in Buenos Aires.

So why did this highly disciplined, conspicuously successful musician join BAYS, a local metaphysical book club that has been catapulted into notoriety through recent media reports and TV shows on Buenos Aires’ *secta del horror*?

We were sitting in BAYS’ spacious, high-ceilinged café when I asked Mariano this question. It was hard to imagine that this serene space, which opened onto a charming garden courtyard, had, just last August, been the site of the dramatic militarized raid, when police smashed in the front door and held around fifty BAYS philosophy students at gunpoint.

Mariano spoke of how he met BAYS in 1991.

I was very successful as an oboist, I traveled a great deal, but my life was incomplete. I felt empty. I couldn’t find a role model in my parents who were secular Jews, both pharmacists. They were very supportive of my studies, and I loved them with all my heart, but they couldn’t show me my higher goal, or explain the meaning of life.

Mariano had a girlfriend whose mother was a BAYS student:

That summer I was preparing for an international competition in Yugoslavia. It was very hot in Buenos Aires, I had no air conditioner. My girlfriend’s mother rented a place in the cool mountains of Calafate, the south of Argentina, and offered me a cabin where I could stay and practice. I was very shy and lonely, but she gave me a book, [Maurice] Nicoll’s [1884–1953] *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky* [Nicoll 1952–56]. I did not understand it, but he compared human beings to “leaves in the wind”—I thought, “That’s me.” So I accepted her invitation, and the next time we went back to Buenos Aires I attended a BAYS meeting.

Mariano recalled his very first BAYS meeting:

A little boy of 5 spoke up: “I want to read a poem I wrote yesterday!” As the kid read it out, I started to cry. “This is my home,” I thought, “a place where people can express themselves.”

I asked Mariano about his first impressions of Dr. Juan Percowicz, BAYS’ founder.

When I first listened to him [Juan], he gave a long lecture, where he spoke, among other subjects, about the pain of being a musician; of how the music in one’s head is never the same as the music out there. This resonated with me, and I gradually got to know him. He is so wise, his way of being with people... He suggested I learn to play tango. This was

one of my first Tasks. [In BAYS the students have an Instructor who suggests “Tasks” that will help them apply philosophical ideas to their daily life.] I was surprised, because I had always played classical music, reading from notation, from a score. Now I had to learn to improvise, to play from memory. It forced me to loosen up, to feel the music in a different way. Playing tango led me to write my first compositions. Now I am more of a composer than an oboe player.

In the early days of the School, Juan organized many different branches to study the arts, medicine, business, etc.

We had a [Fyodor] Dostoevsky [1821–1881] group that read *The Gambler*. Together with Dr. Percowicz, we wrote a book called *Dostoevsky and the Poker Player’s Marked Cards* [Percowicz, Franca, and Pallotta 1993]. This inspired me to write an opera called *Cartas Marcadas* (“Marked Cards”) with my fellow student, Susana Mendelievich. Extracts from this opera were performed at the Salón Dorado of the Teatro Colón, and the overture was performed at the San José Arena in California.

Plácido Domingo performed a duet from *Marked Cards* at the Campo Argentino de Polo in 1996. Mariano notes,

Plácido Domingo and I were friends for more than twenty years and often worked together, but after the raid the media tried to frame him as a secret member of BAYS. In fact, he had showed no interest in philosophy, and never went to a single BAYS meeting. The scandal about the “horror cult” in the media tainted my public image. Plácido Domingo has now distanced himself from me. It turned out the police had been bugging our phone calls for at least a year before the raid. Now, no one will hire me, I have not put a foot in the Teatro Colón since the raid.

Then Mariano told a sad story:

Two days before the raid happened, I was meeting with the directors at the Teatro Colón about my ballet for children. We were planning to stage it in 2023. It took me years and years of creating this music written as a ballet. It had been performed in Japan by the Osaka Century Orchestra. People loved it. It was based on a story about Baron Munchausen. The choreographer had changed the plot about *Venus, the Baron and Love* to be more suitable for kids... but after the August 12, 2022 raid, no one would answer my phone calls. And a concert planned at Teatro Colón for November 25, 2022, with the Academic Orchestra playing part of my ballet was also cancelled. Of course, on the night of the raid I was put in handcuffs and taken away in a paddy wagon to prison where I lived in a basement cell for 84 days with other BAYS men—the supposed “human traffickers.”

But at least the police didn’t break Mariano’s door down.

I was lucky, because I decided not to attend the meeting in the cafe that evening. When I heard the loud noise below, I opened my door on the 10th floor, so when the police arrived, they didn’t bother to smash in my front door like the others. The worst part of it

is, they seized my computer. So now I don't have access to the new compositions I was working on, or to the orchestral scores of my previous compositions.

Mariano and Juan Percowicz had just spent 18 days in the same prison cell, during a pre-trial investigation into allegations of human trafficking and money laundering. Mariano spent 84 days in prison with his comrades from BAYS, but Dr. Percowicz was allowed to go home after 18 days, where he remained under house arrest.

During our trip to Buenos Aires, Holly Folk and I (Susan J. Palmer) visited Dr. Percowicz in Buenos Aires. He is a retired accountant, now 84, who welcomed us to his modest apartment where he described his lifelong interest in philosophy, particularly esoteric philosophy. As a young man, as I mentioned earlier, he had found a teacher of Raja Yoga and of Hindu philosophy, which focuses on divine knowledge, both intellectual and experiential (in contrast to the better known types of yoga: the devotional/ecstatic path of Bhakti Yoga, and the physical discipline of Hatha Yoga). Percowicz is a gifted teacher of philosophical ideas and their application in daily life, so he attracted a small circle of students who kept inviting their friends—until the reading/discussion circle expanded to around 200.

Media told the story differently. *Spectrum New BN 9* had claimed:

The Buenos Aires Yoga School, which operated for more than 30 years ... under the leadership of 84-year-old Juan Percowicz, did not actually offer yoga classes. Instead, it lured in people with promises of eternal happiness before it exploited them sexually and financially, prosecutors say (see Rivas Molina 2022).

Mariano described the filthy dark basement prison cell where he and his close friends from BAYS slept on pallets, sharing one latrine for a toilet. Once a week, they were permitted to escape to the courtyard to exercise in the fresh air and sunlight. But Juan stayed behind because he couldn't climb the stairs.

Mariano recalled the circumstances in prison that led him to work on his new composition, *The Power of God*:

Juan, my philosophy teacher, said to me: “Why don't you write a composition about all this happening to us? Now is the moment. All the emotions and events are fresh in our minds and blood. After sometime, we will start to forget, don't you think?”

I thought, “he is totally right.” But, I had no pencil or music paper. Then, as if by magic, the prisoners in the cell across from ours lent us a board game that came with some papers and a pen.

That got me started. The first song that appeared to me was “The Jail Bars Band,” a jazzy song with lyrics about the ten of us sleeping on the floor, with almost no light and no water, sometimes listening to Juan’s master philosophy classes, sometimes telling our stories, sometimes singing or telling jokes...

“The Jail Bars Band” became our anthem. We would sing it together several times a day. It helped bring some happiness and energy to that dark, dirty place.

After that song, it was like I had turned on a water tap. Inspiration was flowing and I couldn’t stop composing day and night. Later, I received a paper with music staves [“pentagrama” in Spanish] from friends and family, and I started to write a song about the raid we had all just gone through. As the lyrics and music took shape, I would sing the different parts to my cellmates, and two of them became my partners in song.

Carlos, the world champion magician, used to sing along with us sometimes, when his health would allow him.

So, when “The Raid” was finished, Juan proposed that I write a musical in three acts. Act One was “The Raid.” Our prison time could be the Act Two. And from the moment we get our freedom back, that will be Act Three that will end with the closure of the case.

What Juan suggested in prison really happened. Since we were released from prison and got our freedom back, so far I have composed 72 songs with a total duration of more than 4 hours. My dream is that *The Power of God* will be performed around the world, delivering a message of peace, togetherness and tolerance.

Part 3: The Nine Women “Victims”

When Holly Folk and I interviewed the women “victims” of BAYS, we found they were quite diverse, in terms of age and profession, but we noticed they shared features in common.

All but two owned their own condos in the BAYS building on Estado de Israel Avenue. We interviewed them in their small, compact, beautifully kept homes that—with two exceptions—were in the same 10-floor building of the ground floor cafe where BAYS held its classes until the raid disrupted their activities. The BAYS building functions as a coop, not as a religious commune. The apartment owners pay maintenance fees but they are financially independent.

Another common feature is they did not have children. One woman (67) who joined BAYS in 1990 and has owned her apartment for 32 years explained,

I don’t believe in marriage. Argentinian culture is very *machista*, so when you get married you belong to your husband. I belong to me.

Other women explained they had always put their careers first and valued their independence and freedom. However most of them maintain close relationships with their relatives outside BAYS. One woman said,

I have always put my career first, lived with boyfriends, never married and now I am very involved with my niece and her children.

Another woman told us about how she was planning to freeze her eggs so she could be a mother after she turned 40. Only one woman had wanted to have children but was unable to conceive due to a health problem.

These women all had long term boyfriends, partners, or husbands (except for one woman whose life partner had recently died). Two were with men they had known since childhood when their parents brought them to play together during the BAYS meetings. Only one woman was with a man who was not a BAYS member.

An interesting pattern we noted was that, with only two exceptions, these women preferred to live alone, so the couples owned separate apartments.

All these women were passionately engaged in their work and highly motivated in their chosen professions—as artist, actor, television producer, computer technician, salesperson, etc.

Their accounts of the August raid and the ensuing negative publicity that affected their personal lives and careers were quite consistent.

One woman (65), a professional artist who has owned her apartment for 7 years, said, “I feel more comfortable living with people I know.” She was in the cafe when some 100 Argentine Federal police officers with helmets, shield, and heavy guns broke the street doors and the doors to 22 apartments (out of 24):

When I returned to my apartment I saw the police had collected all my gold jewelry in a jacket. I screamed so they changed their minds and didn’t take it.

She spoke of the impact of the well-publicized raid on her career:

I have always made a living from my paintings and from teaching art. I have lost my teaching work and my clients, and now I make crafts to sell at artisan fairs.

All nine women reported the same “Catch-22” experience when they were interviewed at the Camara Gesell (Special Victims Unit); that when they denied being a victim, they were told their denial *proved* they were victims. The artist said,

It is a place where you sit and talk to a psychologist and there are mirrors, behind is the judge, the lawyers they don't interrogate you, you are alone with the psychologist. But the judge said, "The victims don't realize they are victims." For them, they say I was abused for 30 years and didn't realize it, so they treat me like an idiot. The Prosecution says I am a victim of "coercive persuasion." In my opinion, they create this bullshit, these liars. They call me a "victim"—and I still don't know of what.

My photo was on the media, my face was seen in a television show because there was a TV channel inside the cafe during the raid. The prosecution, the judge, they don't care about the people who belong to BAYS.

Another woman (45) from a Jewish family, graduated from university with a MBA, and has worked with her father, a TV producer, in various roles at his station, producing television shows. But after the raid, her life has changed dramatically:

I was in the cafe when I heard men screaming and banging. The police were breaking down doors, tearing up all the apartments. A policewoman told me they were having trouble getting in the door of my apartment. It was a Blindex door, so I went with her to open it with my key, but they had already broken it down, along with the wall attached to the door, and there were deep marks in the floor. They took all my pictures and the deed of sale of my apartment. For four nights I couldn't sleep because the door was broken and I was afraid to be alone, to be robbed again. The damage they did was terrible! It costs thousands of dollars to repair the door and the wall.

The police took my father and my sister to be questioned. Pablo Salum posted photographs of me and my dad and some of our employees at the TV station on Twitter. One woman resigned because she feared her image would be tainted working with us.

My boyfriend, he lost his job in the real estate company, and he is now trying to rebuild his career. He started a new realtor business, he has a degree in this field. The mother of my boyfriend was one of those accused of human trafficking. He is trying to be strong for his mother, sister, and me.

It would be nice to live as if we weren't back in the Inquisition. We want our voices heard. In Camara Gesell, our word is not valued. They asked me strange irrelevant questions like, "Are all your members Jewish?" They should have proof and taken the time to evaluate us before tagging us—labelling us as "prostitutes" and "brainwashed victims".

Tagging someone is easy, but getting rid of that tag is more difficult. I work in the media, in television, so I know how it works. When we are eventually found innocent, no journal will bother to report on us—or maybe there will be a tiny paragraph on the back page. Now our faces are all over television, Pablo Salum mentions our names and call us "cultists" on his anticult website. Tagging is so simple. I don't know if I will ever be able to "de-tag" myself.

One of the supposed “victims” (57) we interviewed is from a Catholic background and has always worked as an actress. Against her parents’ wishes, she studied theatre for six years, and in 1991 joined BAYS. There she met many creative actors and artists who helped her launch her career. Her instructor in BAYS was a well-known professor of theatre who “taught me to love my profession as an actress.” She worked in comedy and wrote for a magazine that offered political satire (“a relief from the oppression in which we were living”). Two of her cousins disappeared in the 1970s [she showed us their photos], leaving behind their 3-year-old daughter who was then raised by her aunt.

This actress described her experience of the raid:

In the cafe I see the first policeman enter and I see surprise on his face. All he saw were fifty old people sitting at tables, drinking tea and coffee, reading books. The police were evidently hoping to bust into a sex orgy. They started to break the other doors, I said, “No, these are our homes, let us give you the keys!” But they didn’t want our keys. They made us wait at gunpoint in the cafe. They had photojournalists with them and they wanted to appear on the news on TV as heroes ramming in the doors of the evil *secta*.

Finally, at midnight, they allowed me to go to my apartment. I was worried about my roommate, who is 64 and very small. When I saw what they had done, I became very angry. They broke my door in, everything was in a mess. They threw my roommate down on the floor and held a machine gun to her head. She told me they had found money in my bedside table. These were envelopes given to me of money with the names of my friends in BAYS, old people who live in the building. They had asked me to do their shopping for them during the pandemic, and I was still helping them. But I made friends with the police, so they gave me the money back.

I am suing Pablo Salum. On his website he uses my image and implies that I am a prostitute; that Juan gave me to rich and powerful men to raise money for the cult. He showed a video from one of the magic shows where I was Barragán’s assistant. He says I was “naked,” but I was not, I was wearing a dance leotard. Salum put my name on this video, so now I can open a lawsuit for harassment, for slander and insults. This is a misdemeanor, so I am filing a civil suit. The judge has summoned Pablo Salum to the court. So, next Thursday I will meet him in mediation and I will pursue him to the end!

The injustice these people were experiencing seemed all the more severe because they were citizens of Argentina. Thus, their anxiety was compounded by memories of the *corralito* (2001) and the *desaparecidos* of Argentina’s “Dirty War.” Several members we spoke to described how they were worried about their loved ones (who were arrested on the fateful night of the raid) would simply... disappear. Therefore, they described how they would jump in their cars and tail

the paddy wagons to find out where they were being detained. The BAYS members would take shifts, setting up a 24-hour guard to ensure that no detainees disappeared.

Conclusions

What do these interviews tell us?

First, it is highly unlikely these women are moonlighting (functioning in a “brainwashed zombie state”) as prostitutes. They didn’t strike us researchers as promising prostitute material. While neither Holly Folk nor myself, as middle-aged North American women academics, are in a position to predict what “rich and powerful men” in Argentina might consider as “sexy,” it appears unlikely that pimps would bother to groom women in their late 50s and 60s as prostitutes.

Moreover, the fact that these women are independent, high-performing professionals; and that the majority are in long term, stable relationships with men, makes it difficult to imagine them dabbling in the world’s oldest profession.

Massimo Introvigne lists the profiles of the nine women “victims”:

- a 66-year-old social psychologist and professional singer;
- a 62-year-old visual arts teacher and painter;
- a 57-year-old actress, member of the 1997 world champion stage magic team;
- a 55-year-old elementary school teacher and philosophical business coach;
- a 50-year-old woman who was already considered a “victim” and was subjected to an expert opinion in the previous case [that BAYS won in 2000], which proved that she was neither a victim nor exploited;
- a 45-year-old management graduate;
- a 43-year-old real estate agent;
- a 41-year-old digital marketing professional;
- a 35-year-old real estate agent, macromedia designer, and web designer (Introvigne 2023a, 27).

Introvigne comments:

To consider this group of women as a gang of prostitutes exploited by the BAYS would be laughable if it were not painful and insulting to them (Introvigne 2023a, 28).

1. Were the BAYS Women “Brainwashed”?

The 9 “victims” were all sent to the Cámara Gesell, a room equipped for interviews of victims and criminals, conducted by a psychologist.

All nine women were interviewed individually while the judge, lawyers, and prosecutors watched via a zoom link. They insisted vehemently that they were *not* prostitutes, nor brainwashed; that they were fully in charge of their own lives, and not forced to do anything by anyone.

But Judge Martín Irurzun and Judge Roberto José Boico both stated in the Chambers of Appeals decision of November 4, 2022 that, since the female victims had been involved in BAYS for so long, they had internalized the manipulation and were unaware they had been manipulated.

After their initial interview at the Camara Gesell, all nine women submitted to second, independent, psychological examinations.

In the psychologists’ reports they all passed with flying colors, as “normal.”

It is well-known in academic and legal circles that the theory of brainwashing has been consigned to the realm of “pseudoscience” (Richardson 1991; Anthony 2001; Introvigne 2022).

The arrested persons were accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and money laundering on the basis of the already mentioned Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims, passed on 19 December 2012 (an amendment to the previous law, Law No 26.364). As Introvigne (2023a, 22) notes, Argentina does not criminalize prostitution but it criminalizes the behavior of those who economically benefit from the sexual activity of another person.

Law 26.842 categorizes prostitutes as “victims” even when they deny their “victimhood.” But if PROTEX identifies them and chooses to “protect” them, they are trapped in this category.

Introvigne explores the feminist critique of this law by Tarantino, who scrutinizes Argentina’s tool used to criminalize prostitution, which is “vulnerability as a tool of control” (Tarantino 2021, 200). Tarantino argues this tool creates a “paradigm of victimization” that denies to certain subjects their “political agency” (Tarantino 2021, 206). Introvigne concludes:

In other words, a prostitute is by definition “vulnerable” and “a victim.” If she says that she has freely decided to be a prostitute, this only proves that the “victimization” has been especially effective (Introvigne 2023a, 22).

2. Strange Parallels: Brainwashing and Vulnerability Concepts in Argentinian and French Law

Introvigne also points out that Argentina’s concept of “vulnerability as a tool of control” exhibits a striking

similarity ... [with] the “abus de faiblesse” (which translates precisely as “abuse of vulnerability”) that is the typical crime of which “cults” are accused of in France. It looks like just another incarnation of brainwashing (Introvigne 2023a, 22).

In both countries, this concept was the underpinning in new laws created to fight human trafficking and “cults”—by categorizing new religious movements members as “victims” of brainwashing (*manipulation mentale* in France and “coercive persuasion” in Argentina), thereby depriving them of their political agency.

It is interesting to recall that, in the very first application of France’s 2001 anti-cult About-Picard law, when Arnaud Mussy, a young prophet of a small new religious movement called Néo-Phare, was accused of causing the suicide of a fellow member, Mussy’s defense lawyer, Fabrice Petit, objected to his client being used as a “*cobaye*” (guinea pig) for this new law that had not yet been tested. He cautioned the court:

One is asking you to be psychiatric magistrates. Neither you nor I have the competence to judge *manipulation mentale* (Palmer 2011, 157).

When Mussy spoke in court, denying that he was a *gourou* or *manipulateur*, he reports the reaction he received:

When I speak and tell them my side of the story, even the prosecutor says, “He seems to be very straightforward.” “Aha!” says the directrice from ADFI [a French anti-cult movement]. “That proves he is a *manipulateur*. All *gourous* have this ability to seem sincere. That is how they manipulate!” (Palmer 2011, 158).

The same “Catch-22” tactic (Heller 1961) became part of the “strange spectacle” in court where an anticult lawyer represented the “complaints” of the Peraltas (two Néo-Phare members) without their consent (Palmer 2011, 168). In the case of the Peralta couple, they had written a deposition for the court insisting

they had no complaints about Arnaud Mussy. But, just like the BAYS “victims,” their deposition was rejected on the grounds that “victims of brainwashing do not realize they are brainwashed”; that their denials actually are “proof” they are brainwashed.

3. Is the Buenos Aires Yoga School a “Cult”?

Sociologists in the field of new religious studies would classify BAYS as an “NRM” (new religious movement). But BAYS does not conform to the type of NRM that tends to generate controversy—what sociologist Roy Wallis (1945–1990) in his tripartite typology called the “world-rejecting” NRM—the type whose founder is a messianic prophet who makes extravagant, charismatic “god-in-flesh” claims, and requires that his/her devotees surrender their time and assets to the movement and live communally, spending their days evangelizing and/or fundraising door to door and preparing for paradise on earth or imminent catastrophe (Wallis 1984).

Dr. Juan Percowicz does not fit the profile of a messianic god-in-flesh prophet. He was described by his students whom we interviewed as their respected master teacher, a wise philosopher, a kind counsellor, a friend. In this way, Dr. Percowicz corresponds to the type of leader who founds “world-affirming” NRMs (Wallis 1984). This type is a wise teacher of techniques who does not tell his disciples how to apply the sacred knowledge he/she imparts. In other words, the focus in BAYS was on applying esoteric philosophy to the individual’s daily life. Everyone made their own choices, but they found emotional, intellectual, and artistic support in BAYS.

4. The BAYS Raid as “Crime Control Theater”

I would argue that the BAYS members who were targeted in the raid were indeed “victims”—but not of human trafficking. Rather, they were victims of “crime control theatre” (CCT).

De Vault, Miller, and Griffin define CCT as follows:

Crime control theater describes legal actions (e.g., policies) that appear to address crimes but are sometimes ineffective and can potentially have unintended negative

consequences. Four key criteria of CCT include reactionary response to moral panic, unquestioned acceptance and promotion, appeal to mythic narratives, and empirical failure (De Vault, Miller, and Griffin 2019, 1).

Scholarly studies of the CCT phenomenon point to *lack of evidence* as a frequent feature of this kind of “theater.” De Vault, Miller, and Griffin note:

Crime control theater refers to intuitively appealing laws that appear to address crime while lacking any evidence that they actually exist (De Vault, Miller, and Griffin 2019, 1).

CCT is theatrical; its purpose is to *create the illusion* of controlling crime in order to reassure the public. However, Logan A. Yelderman and his colleagues have pointed out CCT’s ineffectual nature and poor results:

Policies such as America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alerts, safe haven laws, Megan’s law, and three-strikes laws have provided the public with a feeling of safety and security. However, research has provided evidence that... these types of laws and policies... appear to be effective, serve the public’s best interests, and provide a crime control purpose, but [that they] are largely ineffective and have unintended negative consequences (Yelderman et al. 2018, 1).

The term “crime control theatre” was first applied to government raids on religious communities by contributing authors (Cragun, Nielsen, and Clingenpeel 2011; Lalasz and Gonzalez, 2011) in the volume on the 2008 FBI raid against a polygamous commune in Eldorado, Texas.

The flamboyant raid on BAYS fits the description of a CCT. It was clearly planned as a photo opportunity, with television camera crews trailing the SWAT teams as they moved up the ten floors of the building battering doors after refusing the keys. This dramatic footage was shown on television during the ensuing weeks in news reports of the “horror cult” that trafficked its women. The fact that no members or former members (aside from Pablo Salum) had filed complaints, or that no useful evidence was produced did not matter. Examples of “unintended negative consequences” (Yelderman et al 2018, 1) in this particular CCT were the harm to the “victims” in terms of door repair/replacement expenses, stolen cash and jewelry, and assaults on the targeted individuals’ privacy and reputations in defamatory media reports.

One of the nine women “victims” (45) gave an insightful interpretation of the raid and its fallout:

It takes just one toxic person who comes into a small religious community and brings the whole group down. We have Pablo Salum. No one in our group has ever complained or said they were a “victim.” There is just one person who tells lies. And PROTEX needs those lies. We are just a number for their annual report. PROTEX claims, “There are 200 victims in BAYS,” so that they can receive money from the government. If they were really concerned about us “victims”—then why treat us like animals? Why cancel our visas to the USA? Why destroy our livelihoods? They have zero proof of any crime, it is all speculation—and yet they have succeeded in ruining our lives.

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