Talking to Rosine Perelberg[1]

Rosine Jozef Perelberg is a training and supervising analyst, and former president (2019-2022) of the British Psychoanalytical Society. She is a visiting professor at the Psychoanalysis Unit of University College London and a corresponding member of the Paris Psychoanalytical Society. Holding a PhD in social anthropology from the London School of Economics (University of London), she won the Sigourney Award[2] in 2023 for her work in fostering a creative dialogue between psychoanalysis and social anthropology, addressing issues of temporality, sexuality, and antisemitism. In 2019, her book *Psychic bisexuality: a British-French dialogue*[3] won the American Board & Academy of Psychoanalysis Book Prize for best edited book. In Brazil, in 2006, she was selected as one of the Ten Women of the Year by the National Women's Council of Brazil. Rosine is a Brazilian anthropologist, psychoanalyst, thinker, and creative writer, She lives and works in London, where she maintains a private practice.

Berggasse 19: Welcome, Rosine, to our journal. It is both an honor and a joy to have you in our psychoanalytic home outside Brazil's major cities. We would like to begin by asking you to tell us a little about your journey—your path as a woman, a Brazilian, and an anthropologist venturing into the field of psychoanalysis in England. What was it like to arrive in Europe so many years ago and build such a solid and internationally recognized body of work, eventually becoming the president of the British Psychoanalytical Society? How did you navigate these transitions—Brazil to England, anthropology to psychoanalysis, England to France—crossing borders and fostering dialogues? Could you tell us about this trajectory and the readings that have inspired you?

1. This interview was conducted via email, with the participation of the Editorial Board of *Berggasse 19* and the interviewee, Rosine Perelberg. We are grateful to Rosine for her generous participation and invaluable contributions to this edition.

2. A prize recognizing outstanding contributions to the global advancement of psychoanalytic thought.

3. Published by Routledge in 2018.

Rosine Perelberg: I am grateful to Ana Cláudia and *Berggasse 19* for inviting me to speak about my geographical and intellectual journey. I am very pleased to know that you are following my work.

I entered the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro[4] in 1969 with the intention of studying history. However, in 1968, following the 1964 Brazilian coup d'état, repression became more violent, and many intellectuals were imprisoned and tortured. Most history professors I admired were either suspended from the university, forced into exile, or, in some cases, arrested. The very act of thinking seemed to have become a revolutionary practice. Many students at UFRJ turned to social anthropology, an "exotic" discipline that had not yet been touched by the dictatorship. That is how my passion for social anthropology began. I remember my first class with professor Gilberto Velho, when he asked us: "what is the only universal cultural law?". He was referring to the incest taboo, as discussed by Lévi-Strauss. A whole bibliographic world opened up for me. The following year, I obtained a scholarship and became a teaching assistant for Gilberto's students.

As for the readings that inspired me... I was still in my late teens when I joined my first Freud study group, in which we read his works chronologically over five years. At the time, I was also part of another study group focused on Marx. I read *The interpretation of dreams* while simultaneously attempting to read *Capital*.

We studied the invisible forces shaping our lives by reading Marx, Engels, Althusser, and Martha Harris. With Althusser, we focused on the hidden structures that influenced and determined our existence.

Freud's and Marx's works seemed to share a crucial connection; there were intense debates about their theories and ideas, and their potential contribution to a theory of praxis. Freud's fundamental perspective was paradoxical: the individual is shaped by the dramatic structure of the Oedipus Complex in all its variations–an indication of the passage from nature to culture–yet this very structure also eludes the individual, as it is inscribed in the unconscious. The subject does not have a stable center within the ego or consciousness but is, instead, fundamentally decentered. Meanwhile, Marx emphasized the fundamental alienation of the individual, who is not at the center of their own history.

This sense of displacement and alienation resonated with the historical experiences of my family. On one hand, there were the pogroms in Poland and Russia, which had led my ancestors to scatter across Europe, North America, and South America. On the other, my father had been part of the French Resistance as a *maquis* fighter during World War II, following the arrest of his own father by the French police in Paris and his subsequent deportation to Auschwitz. Now, my experience of studying within an underground movement in Latin America gave me a fleeting sense of connection to these struggles. When I began studying anthropology, I continued to feel like part of a minority–especially in relation to more established fields like philosophy, sociology, and political science.

4. UFRJ.

Durkheim, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss were my next authors of interest. I joined a study group exploring Lévi-Strauss's fascinating *Mythologiques* (1963, 1964, 1966, and 1967). The concept that Latin American myths consist of a limited number of structures and ideas, each transforming into the next, echoed Freud's notion that only a finite number of things require symbolization.

Freud considered the repetition compulsion an ungovernable principle embedded in the unconscious—an involuntary reenactment of past experiences that the individual has no conscious memory of. This compulsion is tied to the conservative nature of the drives.[5] While repetition compulsion lies at the core of symptom formation, it can also be understood as an attempt to grasp something about oneself that has yet to be fully understood. At its core, this search for knowledge is ultimately a search for knowing one's origins. Freud's grandson's *Fort-da* game was an attempt to master the absence of his mother, creating an early narrative of a lost and later recovered object. But it also seemed to reflect the enigma about origins.

Underlying my interest in psychoanalysis and anthropology, other crucial readings permeated my life: the Latin American writers. My mother, Bella Jozef, was a distinguished professor of Hispanic-American literature—a prolific professor and writer. Throughout my life, the writers she studied were frequent visitors to our home, and over the years, I met many of them. Manuel Puig became a close family friend when he moved to Rio de Janeiro, and Mario Vargas Llosa was a familiar presence whom we would meet again years later when he took up a visiting professorship in Cambridge. Books by all such authors—including Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, and many others—would often arrive at our home even before they were published, sometimes still in manuscript form. I vividly remember my mother's sense of enchantment when she first read *Cien años de soledad* by García Márquez. Each of us eagerly devoured the book after her, before it even reached the bookstores.

Years later, Bella Jozef and I co-authored two articles: one for *Penser les limites*, a book published by Botella in honor of André Green ("Temps et mémoire dans 'Cent ans de solitude'", 2002), and another for Joan Raphael-Leff's *Between sessions and beyond the couch* ("After dark, before dawn", 2002), a collection that playfully invited psychoanalysts to write about what they did between sessions.

The myths crafted within so many Latin American literary works reflect a unique construction of reality—a kind of Hispanic-American cartography. These works create a reality that is at once fantastical and deeply rooted in the everyday, inverting and expanding common experiences, ultimately forging alternative perspectives. In *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, for instance, Vargas Llosa introduces a character who becomes so immersed in radio soap operas that he begins to mix them up, swapping names and events, creating a complete confusion among the stories.

5. See *The language of psychoanalysis* (2018), by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (Routledge publishing).

Another profound source of admiration and inspiration was my father and his personal history, which shaped his deep engagement with Jewish political history. His Jewish identity was primarily molded by historical events and his own political activism. He was an avid reader—the first critic of my mother's numerous articles and books, and always the first to read each new addition to the vast library that grew in our home. Literature on Jewish history and the Holocaust held a special interest for him. I followed in his footsteps, and these subjects now constitute a substantial part of my own library.

Returning to my interest in the works of Durkheim, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss, they were what led me to apply for a master's degree in anthropology at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. At that time, the National Museum was a hub of intellectual activity. As an "exotic" discipline, anthropology had largely escaped the military regime's scrutiny, despite the widespread intellectual repression of the period. Everyday aspects of life, seemingly trivial, became subjects of serious study. Professor Roberto DaMatta, an inspiring mentor, was researching Rio de Janeiro's *carnaval*, while Gilberto Velho had pioneered the field of so-called urban anthropology, examining topics ranging from drug-use patterns to life in Copacabana's most infamous apartment building. The seminars were lively and vibrant. It was anthropology in the making—something I kept in mind, a few decades later, as chair of the curriculum committee of the British Psychoanalytic Society. Designing a curriculum isn't easy; it requires balancing the past, historical foundations with the future perspectives, ensuring that students also learn from people's current areas of work.

My years at the National Museum of Brazil were a time of study and writing, reading works by authors such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Émile Benveniste, Michel Foucault, Thomas Szasz, Ronald Laing, Erving Goffman, Maurice Godelier, and Pierre Bourdieu. At the same time, I kept my interest in psychoanalysis and read Donald Winnicott, Masud Khan, and all of Melanie Klein's books. Winnicott's work captivated my imagination. I was deeply impressed by Klein's clinical work, but considering the theoretical discussions and readings I had been engaged with in previous years—including the heated debates inspired by Althusser on the distinction between theoretical constructs and lower-level concepts—I felt that Klein's theoretical framework blurred the line between theory and raw data. She had discarded Freud's metapsychology and, even though she continued using terms like "drives" and "Oedipus Complex," she meant something different by them. Her distinctions between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, however, were thought-provoking to me, although I also felt that she was describing older children.

I had already applied for a teaching position at UFRJ, so by the time I was 22, I was teaching my first undergraduate and graduate seminars at the university. Over the next four years, I taught courses on "Freud," "rituals and symbolism," "psychoanalysis and anthropology," and "structuralism."

After completing my master's, I applied for a doctoral program at the London School of Economics,[6] as my husband had been invited to work in London. I had already read Elizabeth Bott Spillius's *Family and social network*, which had a profound impact on me. I was interested in developing my previous fieldwork from my master's research at the National Museum of Brazil, particularly in exploring how the families' social networks functioned during mental health crises and how that was intertwined with notions of personhood.

Arriving at LSE was an anthropological experience in itself. I felt as if I had landed on another planet, where the faculty members seemed to have taken on an uncanny resemblance to the "natives" they studied: James Woodburn to the hunter-gatherer group he had researched, and David McKnight, my first tutor, to the Australian Aboriginal communities—so much so that I think he eventually moved to Australia to live among them. Maurice Bloch, who studied the Merina people of Madagascar, was one of the department's most influential figures. He was fiercely opposed to psychoanalysis, which once again placed me between cultures. Alfred Gell became a dear friend, and his untimely death was a terrible loss. His work on cultural constructions of maps and time held particular interest for the department at that time.

The Friday morning research seminars were exhilarating. The discussions were intense, and in my first months attending them, I often found myself holding my breath, at times wondering if people would ever speak to one another again. But the ritual always ended the same way: we would all gather at the pub, reflecting on the debates over a beer. A few years later, when it was my turn to present at one of these seminars, I felt that I had "arrived"—that I had become one of the characters in the "play."

The year of preparation for my fieldwork was a privilege. I spent countless hours in the LSE library every day, immersing myself in the works of key anthropologists—Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Bronisław Malinowski, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach—alongside the writings of my LSE professors. I maintained my interest in French scholars, whose work was barely cited in seminars in London.

If the British tradition emphasized the study of structures, the French tradition valued the imagination of the models. I continued navigating "between cultures," a position that enabled me to dialogue with both sides of the English Channel. Once again, I found myself in an intermediary space, bringing insights from both British and French approaches into discussions within the department. This personal tradition remained a feature of my intellectual career.

After completing my doctorate, I applied for the training at the British Psychoanalytical Society. That period of training was exciting. I was fortunate to find a training analyst who I viewed as an independent thinker and who established a powerful connection with me from our very first interview.

The most valuable aspect of my training was the clinical seminars. I felt that each of the British Society's traditions had something unique to offer.

6. LSE.

Despite the institution's still strong hierarchical structure, students had begun to gain more of a voice, and I became president of the student organization.

Upon qualifying, I was invited by David Tuckett to join the editorial board of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* as an associate member, and Elizabeth Bott Spillius invited me to become an associate editor of the *New Library of Psychoanalysis*. I worked with both for about ten years, an experience that provided me with substantial editorial expertise—something that would later prove invaluable in the process of editing my own books.

My involvement in the scientific life of the Society led to consistent invitations to present papers at international conferences. I collaborated particularly with colleagues from the Paris Psychoanalytical Society[7] and the French Psychoanalytical Association, traveling extensively across Europe to give lectures and conduct clinical supervisions. I also visited several psychoanalytical societies in Brazil and the United States.

Monique Cournut-Janin, from the SPP, and I met at conferences and began organizing a series of Franco-British meetings focused on the theme of sexuality. Chantal Lechartier-Atlan, also from the SPP, joined Monique in coordinating these meetings. We gathered for about 15 years, alternating between London and Paris. The first meeting addressed female sexuality, the second focused on anality, the third explored femininity in men, and the fourth examined masochism and countertransference. The last meeting was dedicated to bisexuality, which ultimately led to the publication of my book *Psychic bisexuality: a British-French dialogue*. The ongoing dialogue with contemporary French psychoanalytic colleagues has profoundly shaped my thinking.

I maintained steady participation in the organizational life of the British Society, from my early role as president of the student organization to later becoming curriculum director, then as director of the postgraduate program, followed by scientific committee secretary, and eventually joining the training committee. When I was invited to take on the presidency, I accepted, serving for a three-year term.

Berggasse 19: You discuss the analytic situation as inherently traumatic when you evoke *Hilflosigkeit*, the helplessness of the newborn as the prototype of the traumatic situation that lies at the origin of the anxiety experience. Could you elaborate on this, particularly regarding how these aspects manifest in the analytic encounter?

Rosine Perelberg: By inviting the patient to lie on the couch and speak whatever comes to mind, in a setting where the rules are determined by the analyst, the relationship with the primordial object is brought to the forefront. Within the analytic space, different temporal dimensions unfold, activating a tension between the old and the new. Between the patient's presentation (their speech, pauses, dream narratives,

7. SPP.

and associations) and the analyst's response shaped by their internal work (which involves their own free associations, responses, countertransference, and theoretical models), specific dimensions of time and space are created within the relationship.

There is a chain of associations linking this state of helplessness, repetition compulsion, trauma, infantile sexuality, pleasure, and unpleasure. This chain lies at the heart of transference, finding its highest expression in the analyst's listening. Transference is, by definition, charged with the patient's desires, which are tied to their unconscious fantasies and infantile sexuality. Memory was central to Freud's early studies on hysteria. However, in 1914, he introduced the concept of repetition compulsion, which marked a paradigm shift in his formulations, emphasizing the process of trauma repetition and linking it to the network of concepts I have just outlined.

Berggasse 19: Your latest book released in Brazil, *Murdered father, dead father: revisiting the Oedipus Complex*,[8] offers a profound and rigorous study of one of psychoanalysis' cornerstones—a (re)interpretation of the Oedipus Complex that bridges anthropology, literature, history, and clinical practice. It is an invaluable contribution. Temporality is one of your key research axes, and in this work, we experience an investigation of the Oedipus that spans past, present, and future, revisiting established concepts while unfolding new dimensions in the present that point to future developments. Could you tell us a bit about the conception of this work?

Rosine Perelberg: The focus on this theme emerged from a conference at Columbia University centered on André Green's work—a conference he attended. It was another opportunity for me to work with him over several days. The conference was titled Dead Father, intending it as a counterpart to Green's notion of the *dead mother*—though one could argue it's the opposite.

For the paper I presented, which became the first chapter of *Murdered father, dead father*, I traced the evolution of the concepts of father and fatherhood in Freud's work. In a way, this is how I approach all my works—everything begins with mapping the development of a concept in Freud's writings. Today, this is easier with computers and PEP-Web,[9] but when I first started, it was an entirely manual endeavor.

The theme of patricide runs through Freud's work. He oscillated between interpretations—at times, he considered it a real historical event in the distant past that had been repressed; at others, he saw it as a myth. This introduces a paradox: for Freud, the father's murder is a prerequisite for establishing social order, which in turn prohibits all murder. However, the father need only be metaphorically "killed"; actual exclusion of the father lies at the root of many psychopathologies, from violence to psychosis and perversions.

8. Published by Routledge in 2015 and by Blucher in 2021 in Brazil.
9. Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing.

In *Totem and taboo* (1912-1913), Freud recounts the story of a primal horde of brothers ruled by a narcissistic, tyrannical father who claimed all women for himself. One day, the brothers unite to murder this father in order to take his place. However, they renounce the desire to possess all women for themselves. This act marks the origin of society and culture. According to Freud, the dead father became more powerful than he ever was in life. Thus, this dead father is seen as constitutive of the symbolic order and must be distinguished from the real figure of the father (and the dead mother).

The Oedipus Complex was gradually uncovered during Freud's second phase of work, establishing distinctions between sexes and generations. However, it is only in his final book, *Moses and monotheism* (1939), that he introduces the term "fatherhood."[10] In this work, Freud brings together ideas he had been developing over time—starting from the reality of seduction by the father in his early phase, moving to the fantasy of seduction in the second, and culminating in the formulation of the Oedipus Complex in its asymmetry between paternal and maternal functions. This also incorporates the complexity of the *après-coup* process. By referencing an all-powerful god who is both invisible and inaccessible to the senses, *Moses and monotheism* establishes a link between paternal function and monotheism. This raises questions about the connections between the two: the invisible god and the invisible bond connecting a child to their father—and ultimately, to the paternal function—which should not be conflated with the biological reality of the mother and the father.

My book suggests that the distinction between the murdered (narcissistic) father and the dead father is central and paradigmatic for understanding different configurations in clinical practice. It is also relevant to interpreting literary works, religious narratives, anthropological essays, and historical events. This distinction sheds light on diverse outcomes across psychopathologies, from patients who are violent toward their fathers (or substitutes) to those with perverse or borderline structures.

Berggasse 19: Still within this work, but I believe also throughout your entire body of research, you discuss the concept of the death drive and the negative (heavily influenced by André Green), even as a means to grasp phenomena such as Auschwitz and antisemitism, which remain active forces in the world today. They surface not only in the conflicts in Gaza and the Middle East but extend globally—not only against Jewish people and not restricted to declared war zones, but manifest in threats arising from the denial of life-sustaining conditions, in assaults on life itself through the denial of the other's humanity, disregarding the very animate condition of human beings. Could you speak about this?

Rosine Perelberg: The final chapter of my book, which I titled "The murder of the dead father as habitus," emerged unexpectedly. In a way, if we consider the

10. See *La fonction paternelle* (2007), by Jean-Claude Stoloff (In Press publishing).

readings that have interested me throughout my life—as I mentioned earlier in this interview—this chapter was born from my concerns about the Shoah (Holocaust) and antisemitism.

I propose that the Shoah could be characterized as the abolition of the law of the dead father and the reinstatement of the narcissistic father's tyranny. The destruction of any sense of maternal law and paternal rules, of time and genealogy, rendered Jewish people as abject. These ideas led me to my main formulation: a significant aspect of antisemitism, culminating in the Shoah, can be comprehended as an attempt to demolish the function of the dead father—the rules of genealogy, open temporality, and filiation. I argue that it is the centrality of the Oedipal structure itself that is under attack.

Furthermore, I suggest that the distinction between the narcissistic father and the dead father is paradigmatic for understanding contemporary antisemitism: the desire to murder the dead father, on one hand, and hatred toward the "chosen" brother, on the other, may be seen as core sources.

Examining the persistence of antisemitism through history reveals how Jews have been cast as the absolute Other, the foreigner, and the receptacle for projections of everything that contradicts an era's dominant ideology. The Shoah occurred against the backdrop of centuries of Jewish persecution under Christianity and Islam, with recurrent accusations of Jews as deicides. Understanding antisemitism is essential to explaining the historical continuity of this hatred, its compulsion to repeat itself with its continuities and transformations over time.

I draw on the concept of the death drive in relation to binding and unbinding, proposing that atrocities can be understood as manifestations of the death drive when it is unbound. Several ideas converge here: Primo Levi's "useless violence," Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, and Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil."

It may come as a surprise that, despite the intrinsic link between the history of international psychoanalysis and antisemitism, very few articles in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* include "antisemitism" in their titles.

Freud himself, however, was profoundly concerned with the issue. In a 1926 interview, he declared: "My language is German. My culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself a German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of anti-Semitic prejudice in Germany and in German Austria. Since that time, . . . I prefer to call myself a Jew."[11]

The way all this impacts the current war in the Middle East is complex. I am currently writing an article exploring whether psychoanalysis has a specific contribution to make in understanding this conflict. The historical relationship between Islam and Judaism is intricate, with periods of greater and lesser tolerance. To move beyond the dominant Manichean view of the present, one must understand the

11. In *Psychoanalysis and the future* (1957), by T. Reik, C. Staff, and B. N. Nelson (eds.) (NPAP publishing). Available at https://bit.ly/41iBW03

broader history of the Middle East–including the fact that nations like Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, created in the 20th century by the United Nations, the British, or the French, did not exist before.

Does psychoanalysis offer conceptual tools to help comprehend the current surge of antisemitism worldwide? How possible is it to engage in reflective thought while still in the midst of trauma, before enough time has passed to allow for an *après-coup* process?[12] Vamık Volkan has described how traumatized societies regress, resorting to splitting and projection: all nuance is lost. Issues and people are reduced to good or evil, friend or foe; extreme polarization takes hold.

In the article I am currently working on, I explore some of the conceptual tools psychoanalysis has provided for understanding prejudice against different minority groups across history. I then outline the multiple political groups that, like a perfect storm, seem to be converging in the present surge of antisemitism. The article argues that the current rise in antisemitic manifestations around the world reveals a structural antisemitism, derived from multiple sources, which is endemic and erupts in times of discontent. It is thus embedded in the fabric of the social system and surfaces periodically. This phenomenon operates relatively independently of the current Middle East conflict. Personally, I yearn for peace and a future where Palestinians and Israelis can coexist side by side with mutual recognition and cooperation.

12. See "The murder of the dead father: the Shoah and contemporary antisemitism", by Rosine Perelberg, published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (vol. 103, no. 5, 2022).