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The Future of Politics and Psychoanalysis

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Future of Politics and Psychoanalysis

Political Freud: A History. Eli Zaretsky. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 228 pp.

Murdered Father, Dead Father: Revisiting the Oedipus Complex. Rosine Jozef Perelberg. London: Routledge, 2015. xxii + 237 pp.

REVIEW BY STEPHEN FROSH

The politics of psychoanalysis has many facets. These include the internal disputes and maneuverings between groups; the response of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic institutions to authoritarian regimes; the micro-politics of the consulting room in which sexism, racism, homophobia, and domination have been sometimes enacted, sometimes confronted; and the engagement of psychoanalytic ideas with reactionary and radical political thought. There is also a related set of what might be called reflexive issues, in which the status of psychoanalysis as a cultural *product* comes into view. If psychoanalysis is a science in the positivist tradition to which Sigmund Freud was mostly committed, then these various aspects of its politics are encumbrances and interferences, distorting the pure vision of the unconscious that can be gained from a properly independent attitude. This might also be carried over to psychoanalytic *training*: what is compelled there is a kind of apprenticeship (though this underestimates the incredible emotional power of the transference process through which trainees become fully-fledged analysts) in which psychoanalysis supplies a framework for understanding and the task is to learn how to use it in the consulting room. Once it is allowed, however, that psychoanalysis has a politics and a set of cultural resonances and applications—and indeed, that it has a specific history that is not simply one of progressively more accurate

discovery—then it becomes clear that we must understand the nature and function of psychoanalysis in relation to the social conditions under which it arose, to those that sustain or damage it, and to how it is a player in these cultural shifts. This is what is meant here by reflexivity: psychoanalysis has certain conditions of origin; it has adapted, more or less successfully, as those conditions have shifted over the one hundred and twenty years or so of psychoanalytic activity; and it has shown a remarkable capacity to influence that same culture—indeed, many cultures in different places—so that the culture becomes psychoanalytically saturated even as it also offers up resistance to the psychoanalytic enterprise.

Accounts of the origins of psychoanalysis that attend sympathetically to the particularities of its formation have various emphases, but they tend to focus on either its scientific background in nineteenth-century biology, evolutionary theory, medicine, and psychology (e.g. George Makari, 2008) or on the specific social factors operating in Vienna (or more generally in Europe) at the time, most notably anti-Semitism and Freud's position in the history of Jewish emancipation (e.g. Stephen Frosh, 2005) or the emerging gender politics of the period (e.g. Teresa Brennan, 1989). Eli Zaretsky's previous and quite controversial history of psychoanalysis, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (2004) was unusual in offering a wide sweep of social history as a backdrop to psychoanalysis, in particular assessing it as a major product of, and contributor to, the second Industrial Revolution, which emphasised interiority and personal as well as family consumption and hence the expression and modification of desire. *Secrets of the Soul* was groundbreaking in some ways, but suffered from too strong a focus on American psychoanalysis that distorted some of its perceptions around the contribution of psychoanalysis in other parts of the world.

Zaretsky's new book, *Political Freud: A History*, reprises some of the analytical framework from *Secrets of the Soul*, especially in its imposing opening chapter on "Psychoanalysis and the Spirit of Capitalism," which traces the shifts in capitalism from the "work ethic and denial of desire" of the nineteenth century to what Zaretsky identifies as the more "hedonistic and expansive

consumerism” of twentieth-century American corporatism. Freudian psychoanalysis was well attuned to the former, particularly in its interest in how the drives could be managed in the interests of society—its interest, that is, in sublimation—and it also contributed to the destruction of this mode of capitalism by identifying the repression and hypocrisy at its heart. However, the emergence of consumer capitalism in the twentieth century meant that psychoanalysis lost its political edge: the reduction of explicit prohibition (the disempowerment, one might say, of the traditional Oedipal father) was in some ways a confirmation of the psychoanalytic perspective; but in other ways it removed the need for classical psychoanalysis itself as the repressive injunctions fell. What role can psychoanalysis play in a social world in which we are encouraged to enjoy, in which everything seems to be allowed, and enjoyment fuels capitalism itself? A debate over the answer to this question threads through much of Zaretsky’s new book and leads him to a relatively pessimistic conclusion about how psychoanalysis struggles for continued political relevance. In this regard, it is interesting to consider an important figure not referenced by Zaretsky—Slavoj Žižek, who proposes that psychoanalysis might now be the only practice that allows subjects *not* to enjoy. Here is Žižek’s version of recent developments:

Traditionally, psychoanalysis was expected to allow the patient to overcome the obstacles which denied him or her access to ‘normal’ sexual enjoyment; today, however, when we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the superego injunction ‘Enjoy!’, from direct enjoyment of sexual performance to enjoyment of professional achievement or spiritual awakening, we should move to a more radical level: today, psychoanalysis is the only discourse in which you are allowed *not* to enjoy (as opposed to ‘not allowed to enjoy’). (2006, p.304)

This offers a novel defense of the analytic attitude, as psychoanalysis retains its virility through a constant ironic suspicion of what makes it acceptable—an impulse that is less righteous and more playful, but also more provocative, than Zaretsky’s

view that it is the continuing commitment to interiority that makes psychoanalysis enduringly relevant. In addition, it is odd to overlook some of the major contemporary attempts to articulate a critical psychoanalysis, even if their tendency to abstraction can make them seem unlikely sources for radical activity. Perhaps the relative absence of Lacanian psychoanalysis from Zaretsky's book—Jacques Lacan is mentioned mainly as one of a group of French thinkers responsible for “misreadings” of psychoanalysis (p.193)—explains the omission, but it could also be symptomatic. Zaretsky's attachment to what might be seen as rather classical psychoanalysis and similarly classical socioeconomics does not pick up, except in passing, on the European traditions that both critique and fill out those ideas.

That said, however, Zaretsky offers a very compelling and valuable examination of how politics, understood broadly as an engagement with sociality and culture, informs and is informed by psychoanalysis, and of what this means for the future of both politics and psychoanalysis. He distinguishes clearly between what he identifies, correctly, as three related elements or psychoanalytic projects: “a therapy or medical practice, a paradigm for interpreting culture, and an ethical current in everyday life” (p.185). It is the second and, more implicitly but equally powerfully, the third project that this book focuses on, and to very good effect. Zaretsky's second chapter traces the relationship between psychoanalysis, black liberation, and anticolonialism. The third uses Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939[1934–38]) to reflect on the invention and ethical function of psychoanalysis in the light of the Holocaust, and the fourth follows carefully through the story of psychoanalytic theorising on war and destruction, ending with a critique of Judith Butler's (2004) work on precarity. The final main chapter takes on the story of the New Left and feminism. Much of this account revolves around the United States, with passing reference to other geographical centers of psychoanalysis—notably, Latin America is mentioned in an informed way, but not given any detailed treatment. There is very little French psychoanalysis, but there is fuller treatment of British Kleinianism than in the previous book, though not of the general British School—Winnicott, for instance, is omitted

form the index and seems to get just one textual reference, despite his importance for American intersubjective thought and British social democracy.

But within its own terms—a social-democratic analysis of the rise and current fall of psychoanalysis in western, mainly American society—Zaretsky offers a very powerful and broad account of how psychoanalysis and twentieth-century culture emerged together, tested each other critically, and shifted in response to the pressures and forces that each aroused. For on the whole, psychoanalysis appears here at its strongest when it functions at an angle to social norms, both reflecting them and critiquing them—another aspect of reflexivity that registers its potential power. Here the third project identified by Zaretsky, the ethical one, comes into force. For Zaretsky, psychoanalysis embodies the necessity of a critical engagement with interiority, and this engagement has given it its liveliness and continuity. His concluding comments draw this out:

What characterizes the radical tradition and distinguishes it from Anglo-American liberalism is the idea that individual subjectivity and a critical approach to society requires a depth psychology. (p. 196)

Holding the different elements—therapy, culture, ethics—together is seen by Zaretsky as crucial to this critical vision: things really are connected, and understanding their connection demands the kind of understandings that only psychoanalysis can offer.

One reason to read *Political Freud* alongside Rosine Perelberg's *Murdered Father, Dead Father: Revisiting the Oedipus Complex* is that they are in some agreement about the significance of Freud's ideas on the Oedipus complex and, more particularly, on preserving a notion of the solidity of this apparently patriarchal emphasis on the function of the third against a more mollifying and matricentral relational approach. The latter is now a characteristic of much British and American psychoanalysis. It extends to Zaretsky's reading of Butler, which is not quite complex enough, as it stops short before what might be her most psychoanalytically radical text, *Giving an Account of One-*

self (2005), as well as to the highly influential work of Thomas Ogden and Jessica Benjamin, to which Perelberg devotes some critical attention. Perelberg, however, is less overtly political and more anthropological in her reading of the social element in psychoanalysis. As a practising psychoanalyst, Perelberg contrasts with Zaretsky in drawing on clinical material in a very compelling way, though unfortunately the clinical cases phase out as the book proceeds. More importantly, she has expert knowledge of French and British psychoanalysis. The sophistication of the social theory that she uses is less striking than in Zaretsky's book, with some rather old-fashioned discussions of psychoanalytic anthropology and a slightly clumsy use of Pierre Bourdieu's (1972/1977) notion of habitus to describe the taken-for-granted culture of violent anti-Semitism that marked part of the background to the Holocaust. Her clinical and cultural embeddedness in the European tradition, however, offers an important counterweight to the American history that Zaretsky gives, both in articulating alternative psychoanalytic views and in offering a detailed theory of the paternal that reinstates the necessity for understanding the kinds of violent thirdness that operate in the current political world.

Perelberg's essential theoretical claim is that a distinction exists between the murdered father and the dead father, the former being the narcissistic, dominating father, the latter being an *outcome* of a successful psychoanalysis—the symbolic father. Perelberg explains, "The shift from the murdered to the dead father represents the attempt to regulate desire and institutes the incest taboo" (p. 36). And later, following some powerful clinical examples: "The elaboration of the Oedipus complex and the relinquishing of the fulfilment of one's incestuous phantasies place the individual in a symbolic and temporal trajectory" (p. 57). Drawing on Biblical legend (the Akedah, or Binding of Isaac) and Holocaust material, Perelberg works this seam to offer not only a defense of the concept of the Oedipus complex specifically, but of *structural* theories more generally. She makes the case for this broad defense very persuasively at the start of the book, drawing on André Green (another absence from Zaretsky) and offering a clear exposition of why Freud's introduction of the notion of the id (structural theory) and of the death drive matters:

If the topographical model of the mind suggested an intrinsic link between drives and their representations, the structural model of the mind and the concept of the death drive postulated a drive that did not correspond to a representation but expressed itself through repetition compulsion. The topographical model of the mind emphasized a psychic world *full of representations*, whereas the structural model pointed out the *radical heterogeneity of psychic life*. (pp. 6–7, emphasis in the original)

This is not quite Zaretsky's language, but it has some resonance with the idea of the structuring function of the social. It also conveys the "itness" of psychic life, how what matters is not solely how we recognise others and are recognised by them (a position that Perelberg does not see as particularly psychoanalytic), but also how the external is mediated, constructed, and intersected by forces that constantly repeat, whether we like them or not.

Perelberg's rich account in this book—spanning clinical work, mythology, history, and psychoanalytic theory—draws on French theory (mainly non-Lacanian), interspersed with British Kleinianism and a rigorous reading of Freud, to show that the life left in psychoanalysis might actually be traced to some of its original perceptions. At times Perelberg walks a tight line between a psychoanalytically stringent insistence on facing the reality of violence and suffering, and a rather reactionary reiteration of gender binaries long held in traditional psychoanalysis in both Britain and France. Nevertheless, this is an important book in thinking through a structural and social vision of psychoanalysis that, if accompanied by a narrative of the social and cultural forces within which psychoanalysis itself is embedded, as Zaretsky has begun to offer, could mark out a new composite version of psychoanalysis—a political or psychosocial one—and help answer the need for a radical rethinking of the psychosocial and psychopolitical terrain.

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