

Psychology, Europe, and Beyond

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ABSTRACT *This paper asks what psychology might tell us about Europe and the way in which we in Britain voted in the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016. I look back at five examples of psychological discourse that claimed to help us understand what we were thinking and feeling as we weighed up how to vote. The key question is how we might refuse where psychology leads us in order to find some alternative ways of thinking for ourselves. I argue that those who argued for Brexit or Brussels both thought they knew well what was good for us. Instead, we need to go well beyond psychology, to psychoanalysis, to discover why they are wrong. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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I work as a psychoanalyst, and I am an academic psychologist, as well as being a political activist, a Marxist in fact. So I live in three worlds three contradictory worlds which sometimes leak into each other. I hear some things about politics and what they mean and feel like to people in my work, and I can see psychological and psychoanalytic ideas increasingly being mobilised in political debate. Those ideas were mobilised around the question of Britain in Europe and how we would vote in the referendum on 23 June 2016.

Much of the psychological speculation related to the referendum was bound up with prediction, with trying to work out how people would behave when they went into the voting booths, with what they might be thinking and, of course, with what they were feeling. And it was usually about other people, not about the people making the predictions. In that respect, psychological discourse is staying true to the way the discipline of psychology has operated since it was formed at the end of the 19th century in Europe, or, more importantly, the way psychology was instituted as an academic discipline and professional practice in the United States and then the rest of the English-speaking world in the 20th century. It was then that it became what we understand psychology to be today. Psychology students are often taught first of all not to think about themselves, not to explore their own feelings, but to focus on the behaviour of others, the non-psychologists, and they are taught to think of their research or practice as concerned with “prediction and control”. That phrase “prediction and control” became the catch-cry for academic and clinical psychology in Britain, for example, in the middle of the 20th century, underpinning what was called the “scientist-practitioner” model.

Over the years there have been many attempts by psychology to challenge and unravel that aim of predicting and controlling the behaviour, thoughts, and emotions of others, with some success.

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But the overall frame for that way of doing psychology is still in place. Its critics inside the discipline have been working on two tracks. One way of making psychology more relevant to peoples' lives, in line with what the president of the American Psychological Association in 1969 called "giving it away", has been to popularise psychological discourse, and even to encourage psychologists to talk about how those ideas have helped them personally (Goldman, 2014). Another track is to turn the gaze around so that instead of standing with the psychologists and looking at what the non-psychologists are doing, we look back at the discipline and study what the psychologists are up to. This is a very different approach, crucially different for what follows. Instead of looking at behaviour, cognitions, emotions or personalities in politics, for example, we focus on what psychologists and psychological discourse is saying about those things and the political consequences of those ideas. The question then is not how "psychology" underpins and drives the discourse – that has always been the game in academic, professional, and popular psychology – but how the psychological discourse itself is operating, how it functions to shape and define how we understand ourselves.

That is what I am concerned with here. Psychology has become a discipline that shapes peoples' lives, and the psychology which has developed in the English-speaking world has become a global force. This is the stuff of "psychologisation", and it has been part of contemporary globalisation (De Vos, 2012). As it connects more and more with everyday, psychological experience it provides a discursive frame through which we speak about and make sense of what we are doing, including how we vote, including how we voted here in June.

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE REFERENDUM

Let us turn to some recent examples of how psychological discourse was and is working to reframe the debates about Brussels and Brexit, at how this psychologisation of politics was put to work during the referendum campaign. I will briefly look at five examples.

One article called "Brexit is a Matter of Psychology" took its title not from a psychologist, someone who you would expect to say this kind of thing, but from an American banker (Jimenez, 2016). The article, which is about the dangers of Brexit, concluded with the statement, "It is war", but the war it is referring to is something being fought between individuals, not nations, and inside individual bodies. There are some pointers to causes of this psychological matter, but these causes are not traced back very far, not much further than to the "insular mentality" of the British people which might then, the article says, "affect investors' appetite". Notice that "appetite" itself here is a metaphor taken from direct biological needs and then turned into psychology. Psychologisation works by reducing social phenomena downwards and inwards, and also by reframing biology as if it was itself already a series of mental processes.

Another article by a Conservative Member of the European Parliament was entitled "Sowl and You'll Help to Lose the EU Referendum. Smile, and You'll Help to Win it" (Hannan, 2016). This article made some even bolder claims about the underlying drivers of behaviour, and how to gear these into support for what the author called "national independence". He noticed Nigel Farage's (leader of the UK Independence Party [UKIP]) comment that voting for the UKIP is a "state of mind", grounding this state of mind in two things, taking the argument in two directions that are actually quite indicative of current debates in psychology. On the one hand, the article insisted that there are underlying "temperamental conditions" that politicians arguing for a "No" vote need to key into, and that "intuitions" will be more important than the "data"; "what we think of as our

informed opinions”, it warned, “tend to be expressions of our personalities”. We know this, we are told, from “neuroscience and behavioural psychology”. On the other hand, there is an appeal to what was termed “positive psychology” by the president of the American Psychological Association in 1998 (Rippel, 2009). This is why you should smile to win the EU referendum; because “voters respond to cheerfulness”, you should “make the case for national independence in optimistic language” and “use warm, internationalist, positive language”. Hannan evidently knows something about discourse, and for him “business-friendly language” is part and parcel of what he calls “the soft power index” in which, he wrote, Britain leads the world.

A third article, “Emotions and EU Referendums: From Grexit to Brexit”, argued that the battle will be over “how to get people to feel” (Garry, 2016). It contrasted the first vote in Greece, in July 2015, to reject the EU financial package, which was, it says, driven by “anger”, with the Irish referendum three years earlier in which “fear” was in command. “Calm, rational discussion” in a “thoughtful, evidence-based campaign” is subject to what Garry, a “Professor of Political Behaviour”, called an “emotional cauldron”. There were no positive messages in this diagnosis, and, as the punch-line, “the battle over how to get people to feel”, indicated, the “calm, rational discussion” option does not really seem to be an option at all. Instead, we are completely at the mercy of psychology which is understood to operate “largely in emotional terms”.

The next article, on “Cameron’s Trick Question on UK’s Future in EU”, was by a columnist with Bloomberg (Gilbert, 2015). This one homed in on what psychologists call the “framing effect” in which “positive responses” are favoured over negative ones, an emphasis on positivity that pre-dates so-called “positive psychology” but sets some of the terms for it. We are still in the domain of “prediction and control” of behaviour here, but the issue is how to make the referendum question “clear and impartial”, as one of the psychologists quoted in the article put it. There is the problem of “bias”, which is something psychologists who imagine they are scientists have always tried to avoid, and the problem of “perception of bias”. The implication of the first problem is that people would be steered toward one kind of response if they were asked to choose “yes” or “no” as their answer to the referendum question which was initially going to be “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?”. They would then more likely opt for “yes”, due to being subject to “acquiescence bias”. What this article did not explore was how “perception of bias” might play out. One of the telling blind-spots in psychology is that while it focuses on predicting how people might behave when the psychologists do things to them it does not often look at how people might react to psychological manipulation of their behaviour.

That manipulation is the topic of the fifth article called “Psychoanalyst: ‘Reactance’ Could Determine Brexit” (Michalopoulos, 2016). None of the authors of these five articles are psychologists. They quoted psychologists, and this last one picked up the concept of “reactance” as defined by someone who was trained as a psychiatrist and specialises in cognitive therapy, that is, adjusting how people think about their problems. The scene is set for this psychological diagnosis with the claim that “mass psychology will be a critical factor” in what the article called the “upcoming Brexit vote”. “Psychological reactance” is then defined as a state of mind which occurs when someone feels that their own choice, their “free will”, is being compromised. When they feel that they are being pressured, people will resist, the attempt at control backfires, and this, we are told, “increases resistance to persuasion”. Language that puts people under pressure will be “perceived as more sinister” and this “causes anger, and unfavourable thoughts”. This last article is interesting not only for the way it identified deeper emotional resistance to attempts to predict and control behaviour, and here was another twist on a psychological account of what the effects

of psychological manipulation might be, but also for the way it muddled together different parts of the “psy-complex”.

The “psy-complex” is the constellation of competing contradictory theories and practices that describe and then try to treat how we think (Parker, 2007). It is increasingly present in schools and prisons, welfare services, and in self-help programmes and advice columns. Psychology is central to the psy-complex, and many of those who train as academic psychologists actually go on to work in personnel or social support programmes taking what they have learnt with them and using it as a kind of grid to make sense of distress and bad behaviour. But the psy-complex naturally also influences those who are medically-trained and who then may end up qualified as psychiatrists. Brain and behavioural dysfunction is then the governing explanation for thinking about cognitive processes for these psychiatrists, something we can see elaborated in the fifth article (Michalopoulos, 2016) which was preoccupied with what are called “unfavourable thoughts”.

The psy-complex also includes psychoanalysis, which Freud differentiated from medicine, despite his own first medical training, and which over the years has had an uneasy relationship with psychology, sometimes attempting to be accepted within it and sometimes explicitly trying to displace it. In the fifth article (Michalopoulos, 2016), which incorrectly flagged the theory of “reactance” in its title as provided by a “psychoanalyst”, there is actually a distinction drawn between that theory and the Freudian description of “psychological resistance”. The theory of “reactance” derives from social psychology, and this article quite neatly indicated the difficulty of differentiating ourselves from psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on. This article drew psychiatry into the frame, of course, as well as psychoanalysis, as if it is just another version of the same discourse. That is exactly one of the problems we face today under conditions of psychologisation under the dominion of the psy-complex; how to speak about what we think and feel in ways that are not reduced to psychology.

PSYCHOLOGY, COMMONSENSE AND SOMETHING ELSE

We need to step back from different kinds of oppositional terms that keep us locked inside psychological discourse – of mind versus behaviour, cognition versus emotion, and positivity versus negativity. One way of doing this is to turn to an argument made by the psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni in a classic 1969 paper “I Know Well, But All The Same” (Mannoni, 2003). Mannoni turned the tables on psychological discourse so that instead of psychoanalysis being framed as if it were just another version of psychology we have a way of reframing psychology itself. This is not simply in order to replace a psychological account with a psychoanalytic one, the reverse in fact. If we use psychoanalysis to explain what people are thinking or feeling and to predict their behaviour, all we will do is reduce our critique to a kind of psychology, turning psychoanalysis itself into psychology. This would simply continue psychologising politics and feeding that particular way of talking about Britain in Europe, what we are as Britain in Europe, and how we might vote in the referendum. The way Mannoni handled this problem of psychology is quite different.

The contrast that Mannoni (2003) drew, and it is there in the title of his paper, is between what I consciously rationally believe on the one hand, what “I know well”, and, on the other hand, what I continue to believe or, more to the point, what I continue asserting to be the case in the face of the facts. This might be a quite nonsensical belief, perhaps, that I repeat and directly refer to using the

phrase, “But all the same”. Each ridiculous notion conjured into discourse for or against Brexit, for or against Brussels, can be understood as operating in this kind of way, with some of the most ridiculous and dangerous of these notions now clustering around the motif of immigration: I know well that immigration is not the main problem that we face, but all the same; I know well that immigration will not suddenly stop if we leave the EU, but all the same; I know well that immigration will not increase if we vote “yes” to remain, but all the same.

These assertions subsist in the kinds of debates about Europe where “facts” as such are rather beside the point, for the most potent dimension of belief is actually at work beyond those facts, somewhere else. The discipline of psychology pretends that it knows where this somewhere else is; the discipline, and psychological discourse generally, tells us that it is to be found in particular kinds of “mentality”, “personality”, “emotions”, “bias” or even “mass psychology”. That last possibility – “mass psychology” – is a favourite catch-all term to warn us that something bad lurks inside us as the opposite to calm, thoughtful, reasonable, individual psychology. Psychology is about individuals and aims to confine its account of cognition and emotion to what is going on inside us as individuals, how we perceive the world, how we choose between different options, and how we might vote.

What Mannoni (2003) noticed, and this brings us to the other important aspect of his argument, is that this somewhere else of belief, the “but all the same” part of it, is always located in some particular part of the social world, in a particular group of people. He claimed that “in all societies, beliefs are based, first and foremost, on the credulity of the children” (p. 76). What he meant by this is that children function for us as believers in ridiculous things that “we know well” to not be the case; children function as the place-holders for these beliefs. We spend a good deal of time as adults pretending that we believe certain things for the sake of children, that they should, in their innocent, stupid, and uncivilised state of being, still be encouraged to believe in Santa Claus, say, or in the most concrete untenable elements of religious systems of thought. It is not so much that we have a more sophisticated understanding of their mistaken understanding, their misunderstanding, but we can repeat this “but all the same” for their benefit to complement what “we know well”. In the process we also, of course, deceive children. What is at stake here is the fantasy that psychological discourse keeps in play about childhood itself, something that critical developmental psychologists have been trying to challenge and untangle (Burman, in press). That critical step takes us beyond Mannoni’s argument. What I want to stay with here, however, is how his account of belief helps us break from psychology as such.

Mannoni (2003) pointed out that psychology as a discipline devoted itself in its early years to what people were consciously aware of. When psychoanalysis came onto the scene there was a shift of attention to what people carried on believing despite what they knew. The “I know well” became the specialist domain of psychology, and also embedded in commonsense. The link between psychology and commonsense is today reinforced by forms of psychologisation in which what we think about thinking is part of a psychological discourse that psychologists and non-psychologists alike participate in. The implicit sub-text of this psychological discourse, and an aspect that is crucial to the continued existence of psychology as an academic and professional practice, is that there are credulous others, naive or untutored others who are subject to cognitive “bias” or to their “emotions”, others about which psychology speaks. These other people are those positioned as if they are children whose internal states psychology will explain to us at those moments when it generously educates us as rational psychological subjects, psychological beings. That psychological being is what is being addressed when we are invited to move beyond our

“insular mentality”, to use “positive” language, engage in “rational” discussion, be “clear and impartial” and so better understand “voter behaviour”.

SOVEREIGNS, INCLUDING OF OUR SELVES

Our personal psychology is built up from our relationships with others, images of those significant to us who we mimic or define ourselves alongside or against, just as individual nations patch together an identity from those they define themselves in relation to. It is no accident that the discipline of psychology was constituted as its founding ideas and methods were transported from continental Europe to the United States in the early years of the 20th century, at exactly the moment when nation states were themselves being constituted as if they were separate self-sufficient entities. Mainstream academic and professional psychology in the English-speaking world cut itself off from its European origins and became, in the process, more individualistic. The individual psychological subject “knows well” all that they know in line with dominant forms of commonsense around them while relying on the motif “but all the same” to hold onto beliefs they take more pleasure from; this individual psychological subject is like a little micro-nation of the self, replicating and reinforcing the sovereign nation state. Western psychology as a discipline was historically closely tied to colonialism and so has always been concerned with both self-hood and nation-hood. And it is no accident that psychology developed at the self-same moment as the emergence of capitalism as a dominant global political-economic system.

Mainstream psychology does not often take an explicitly political position, partly because it aims to be scientific, clear, and impartial. But it is profoundly political. The psychological discourse that runs through the five articles I described above opt cautiously for one or the other side of the fence or sit on it, offering a neutral description laced with warnings about bias. But one of the reasons we should take psychological discourse and psychologisation seriously in these debates is that this conservative discourse also appears on the left. Psychology as a discipline has often operated to enforce good commonsense and to ensure obedient behaviour among workers or, more recently, “happiness” among those who cannot find work (United Nations, 2016). Because it deals with personal, individual aspects of our lives that are often missing from political-economic calculations and policy decisions, psychology has been attractive to some on the left as a progressive resource. Perhaps it can be, but we first need to work through how these psychological notions are actually functioning, how they enforce the division between what we know well as commonsense and what we want to keep others less sophisticated than ourselves believing for us so that we can also in some way carry on believing it ourselves, to indulge in that “but all the same” side of the equation.

For example, I was at a left political meeting before the vote where the topic of immigration came up again. This time it was with a twist, with a line that I have heard rehearsed before but was now being spun out to account for the way that immigration was becoming part of the debate over how to vote in the EU referendum. It is understandable, the speaker said, that British workers should want to protect their jobs and believe that there would be increasing pressure on housing and social services if more asylum seekers arrived in town. It is understandable because the government is telling us that there are finite resources. When some left groups accuse those workers of being “racist” they are actually, the speaker said, playing into the government’s hands. “British workers are not racist”, the speaker, a Marxist, continued, and someone else in the room finished his sentence for him, “they are frightened”. “Racism”, along with complaints about

immigration linked to the government's austerity agenda and now to Europe, is assumed here to be something inside each individual, assumed to be a psychological problem, and the charge of racism is then something that must be refused, an accusation that the "British working class" needs to be defended against. The motifs of "fear" and "anger" and of the self and the class being treated as an "emotional cauldron" are in this way simultaneously being warded off, defended against, and mobilised, kept in circulation. This will not work, it will not do, for this way of responding simply tips us from the frying pan into the fire, from one form of psychologisation to another. From the working class as demonised and infantilised cause of racism to the working class as innocent and free of racism; a class that could, as it were, believe for us and show us the true path.

There is one remaining trap in the idea that the escape from all this is simply to think for ourselves. This idea actually complements the notion that a self-sufficient sovereign state could free itself from the rest of Europe, a Europe that each European state has come to define itself with and against. Here it is worth recalling one of the feminist criticisms levelled inside psychology years ago against individualistic, self-centred, cognitive theories of moral development (Kakkori & Huttunen, 2016). Those mainstream psychological theories which tracked how an individual came to weigh up costs and benefits of courses of action were actually, the critique pointed out, presupposing that the psychological subject was stereotypically masculine and should be concerned with protecting their own rational decision-making from interference by others, putting aside commitment to the needs of others in the relationships they were actually embedded in, relationships that made them who they were. The risk in these critiques was that they romanticised young women as those who saw things as they really were and so could also, perhaps, believe for us.

Nevertheless, the critique itself holds. We could not really "think for ourselves" in this referendum, but think with others, with and alongside the needs of others, taking those needs into account. That meant moving well beyond the fiction of the sovereign nation state, and beyond the kinds of psychology that have emerged from and reinforced the very idea of individual sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Psychology encourages us to think in that selfish kind of way, but if we connect again to some of the earliest ideas in psychology as a European project we find a quite different concern, with social relationships and even, in a history hidden from many mainstream psychologists, very close connections with psychoanalysis as an alternative way of thinking about what it is to be a human being. And that includes responsibility to the over two million migrant workers from continental Europe working here in Britain.

Since the 52% vote for Brexit there has been celebration and recrimination that has intensified some of the key dimensions of the campaign, widening the gulf between those who see this result as a way of opening the Pandora's box of politics and so enabling real political change on the one hand, and those who are appalled at the increasing number of racist attacks in Britain following the vote. At a meeting I attended of the Manchester Trades Council to discuss the referendum result, the same argument about not accusing those who voted to leave of being racist was wheeled out. The celebrations and recriminations each, in different ways, utilises psychological discourse to frame what has happened according to hydraulic metaphors in which things that we would rather keep hidden have now been released, racism being a prime example. Now the debate is over, what Brexit actually means, and psychology will, no doubt, play a role in stretching apart the differences inside the left; between those who played with fire when they argued for what they called "Lexit" and those who reluctantly voted for "remain" and are now accused by their

comrades of lining up with the bureaucrats in Brussels. That use of psychological discourse is something we will need to continue tracking if we want to ensure that the debate remains at a properly political level.

The question should not have been a psychological question, and it should not have been framed in psychological terms. Voting for “remain” did not mean voting against fortress Britain and in favour of fortress Europe. We can break from that local fortress too, and more effectively, if we work alongside others inside it. Instead it is a question of how we voted with and for those others we are already connected with, a different kind of “yes” than the false positives offered by the government or by the psychologists.

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