

Democracy's Freudian Slip? Who'd Have Thought It?

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ABSTRACT *The Referendum in the UK on 23rd June about Membership of the European Union appears to have resulted in a mistake. Democracy itself is up for questioning. Certain conditions should apply for democratic methods to succeed in reaching good decisions. It is however clear that Democracy like everything else is not perfect. It is better not to idealise Democracy as if it was perfect (and unlike everything else), and to struggle with what to do when it lets us down, and why it has done so on this occasion. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Well, “Democracy” made a mistake! Of course, why not? Nothing is perfect. Nothing is all good, but, democracy? I’ve never heard a bad thing said about it, but obviously it is as fallible as anything else. And – oh my God – how undemocratic to try to put right a democratic mistake! When something like this goes wrong, we, psychoanalysts, call it a Freudian slip, an idea that is commonplace in the world at large as well. We all know there are churning unconscious determinants that are both hidden and powerful.

Psychoanalysts have a nasty habit of thinking they can explain anything and everything, but it is not true. There are quite ordinary explanations of things, conjured up by conscious thought and analysis. We really should stick to the mysterious things, those that cannot be explained by conscious analysis – and what could be better than this sudden triumph of hatred over good sense?

Of course one of the interesting things about this occurrence is that it is the unconscious dynamics *at a group level*. No-one at this stage can be informed about these dynamics, so of course we rush to conscious reasons. And, indeed, there are conscious problems of a political nature that set the scene for this mess: decades of elitist education leaving most of the population feeling second-class, plus a newspaper system which refuses to provide balanced informed opinions and privileges advertising revenues over news. But these spin-offs from our contemporary political ideology have been around in a lethal form since the 1970s. These factors may be all there is to it: a culmination of an ill-educated and ill-informed public, making some of the most difficult economic and political decisions.

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However, it would be worth considering if there are genuinely unconscious factors that are stirring groups within our societies. For instance, and this will be the one instance I will consider in this short note, there was a clear dynamic between the older groups of people and the younger ones. Older people seem embittered, deprived and entitled. Yet the older generation has never had things better: reasonably good health provision as we get older and our bodies wear out; and pensions that are index-linked and at higher levels than ever before. Certainly, we, the older generation, can remember the hardships of the austerity our parents went through up until the 1950s and 1960s.

Why should a group with unprecedented affluence become so embittered? It is not a sensible position or set of attitudes to hold, unless we take into account possible unconscious forces. Two come immediately to mind.

First, we need to understand that the elderly, reinforced by a generous health service, are facing a major life event: their own dissolution and death. As is often noted, today we find death as much of a prohibited topic as our parents and grandparents in their day found the topic of sex. There is not an easy conversation about it; it is not all around us as it was in the days before antibiotics; and we can easily be led into the view that it should happen. Yet all around us our colleagues, friends and family do start dying! Our decline – “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, *sans everything*”, as Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It* – now seems a cruel injustice for which we must find some responsible agent. Just as a dream finds symbolic substitutes, so perhaps the older generation must find a responsible substitute for our loss of entitlement.

A second thought derives from Freud's (1917/1963) paper on those who are wrecked by their own success in which he is beginning to explore the idea of unconscious guilt, an idea that evolved into the theory of the super-ego (Freud, 1923/1961). The point is that unconscious guilt has to be dealt with just as much as conscious guilt. One of the examples that Freud used was the criminal who acts out of a sense of guilt. Such a criminal must arrange for himself to be put through a punishing experience as means of expiating his imagined, unconscious crimes. He does so on the grounds that any actual hardship will never be as bad as the beating up which he gives himself internally. He is simply not entitled to what he has, in a conscious and rational way, become entitled to in reality. Indeed, we have a lot to be guilty about – how could we deserve better than the parents who brought us up, cherished us and devoted their lives to us. We have beaten them hollow in life's stakes.

Following on from this is the certainty that our children will have it even better. At least we thought, unconsciously as ever, that it was a certainty – and so did they. They, our future generation, will trash us as we did our own parents. In this sense we have the miserable vision of the blooming lives of that generation, in which we invested, and they will reap the dividends. What an aching sorrow. And now an opportunity arrives to scupper all their future for them, quite unowned consciously. What an uncivil, and unparental, thought! And so another guilty unconscious secret. Perhaps that generation is squeezed between the guilt for wearing out our parents, and guilt at resenting the new generation who come along to take over from us.

In parenthesis, and without elaboration, do those hated foreigners form a kind of symbolic substitute (in the manner of dreams) for those who come along and take out lives from us? In other words, are they an innocuous substitute we can hate rather than our own children?

None of this is reliable, and is intended only as the beginning of a speculative discourse on our democracy's Freudian slip. The real challenge is to find methods for giving evidence of the validity, or invalidity, of these speculations.

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