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How can psychoanalytic interpretations of political situations have effects as actions?

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ABSTRACT



This article examines the difficulties of making use of psychoanalytic insights to understand and influence political events. In clinical practice, it has often been possible to bring about understanding and change in patients, and in that context, immense developments in psychoanalytic theories and techniques have taken place. But there is no parallel tradition giving rise to the interpretation of unconscious political phenomena although there have been outstanding contributions of this kind by individuals, beginning with Freud's work on group psychology. There have been valuable psychoanalytic understandings of broad social changes, but effective interventions in "here and now" political situations have been few. Some examples of these include Keynes's understanding of the economic consequences of the peace of 1918 which were seen to be relevant mainly after the later peace of 1945 and Mitscherlich's analysis in the 1970s of the German people's "inability to mourn" the catastrophes of the Nazi period. The article concludes with reflections on the conditions which might facilitate effective interpretations of political situations by psychoanalysts today.

KEYWORDS

Interpreting political phenomena; John Maynard Keynes; *The Inability to Mourn*

This paper arises from the Conference on the theme "Words and Deeds: Language, the Psyche and Object Relations", which was organized by the Psychoanalysis Unit at University College London in December 2023. Its central question is this: can psychoanalytic interpretations of political situations make a difference and have real effects?

Its presupposition is that political situations are shaped in part by citizens' unconscious beliefs and understandings, and that psychoanalysts will have something of value to say about them. The starting point of such reflections must be Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1921). This described the unconscious transferences involved in the relations between political leaders and their followers, and the loss of rationality in large numbers of people to which they give rise. Theodor Adorno ([1977] 1951) made effective use of these ideas of Freud in his analysis of Nazism and its methods of propaganda.

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However, psychoanalysts have reason to have more confidence in the effectiveness of their insights in their clinical work with patients than when these are brought to bear on political events. This difference is understandable. Clinical practice has taken place on a significant scale over more than a century, its techniques and methods have been refined, and an ample literature has expounded its concepts and theories. In the clinical sphere, psychoanalysis has developed a large clinical “evidence base”. One can argue that the clinical consulting room has some of the attributes of a laboratory (Rustin 2019), and that because of this psychoanalysis has some of the qualities and achievements of a science, with unconscious mental life as its distinctive object of study.

The conditions for the effective interpretation of political and broader social phenomena are far less accommodating than those of the clinic. With the partial exception of psychoanalytic organizational consultancy there is no profession which is engaged consistently with this work.¹ The phenomena one might especially wish to understand – those where irrational states of mind are in the ascendancy – may seem to be historically unique occurrences. Unlike in clinical practice, there are few similar “cases” to be compared with one another. It is only where the extreme irrationality of a phenomenon has become virtually unmistakable, such as following the rise of Nazism, that neighbouring social sciences seem willing to give serious consideration to the unconscious dimensions of political life (Rustin 2016, 2019).

Furthermore, it is one thing for psychoanalytically informed observers to understand the unconscious dimensions of a situation, but another to persuade larger publics of their relevance. Here the phenomena of “resistance” play their part. People mostly do not like to be advised that they are in the grip of irrational states of mind, and analysts of social phenomena do not have the training in overcoming such resistances that clinicians do. Psychoanalysis has had more success in influencing the understanding of social phenomena seen from a distance, than with interpretations of what is happening politically in the “here and now”.

For example, it is clear that Freud’s critique of the phenomena of repression had a considerable influence during the twentieth century on the emergence of a culture of consumption, and of “sexual liberation”, not least through his influence on the industries of advertising and public relations, including through the work in the USA of his nephew, Edward Bernays (Curtis 2002). Some (Gellner 1995) have seen this as an emancipatory social development, whereas others (Marcuse 1955; 1964) have been more critical of its effects. Zigmund Bauman (1979) suggested that Norbert Elias’s account of the civilizing process (Elias 2007) expounded Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents* as a historical narrative. But I will now give examples of some more immediate interpretations of unconscious social processes and ask what can be learned from them.

One of these was made not by a psychoanalyst, but by John Maynard Keynes, the economist, in his unsuccessful attempt to influence the peace settlement of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, after the First World War. Both during the peace negotiations, in which he participated as an adviser to the British government, and in his book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* in 1919, Keynes argued against the victorious allies’ decision to hold Germany wholly to blame for the war, and to impose punishment on it in the

¹Psychoanalytic work in conflict mediation has been another relevant kind of intervention in the socio-political sphere, for example in the work of Vamik Volkan (2014) and John Alderdice (2022), who is referred to later in this article.

form of reparations, the prohibition of its rearmament and the loss of the part of its territory (Alsace-Lorraine). Keynes urged that these measures were unjust and economically impractical and destructive. It has been widely argued that the punitive settlement which Keynes had opposed was a major cause of the collapse of democracy and the rise of Nazism in Germany. This outcome had been made more severe by the actions of the French government of Raymond Poincaré, in the military occupation of the Ruhr Valley between 1923 and 1925, in response to Germany's failure to meet the reparations payments imposed on it at Versailles.² The larger economic collapses of 1929 and 1930 were further major causes of this disorganization of German society. Keynes had been ignored on those economic issues also.

Although of course Keynes was not a psychoanalyst, I suggest that his closeness to the milieu of Bloomsbury, in which psychoanalysis had a significant presence, was relevant to his understanding. He wrote about the interactions between the main holders of power in the peace negotiations – Clemenceau, Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George – as determining factors in their outcome. He described these in quite psychoanalytic terms:

In the language of medical psychology", he wrote (p.29) to suggest to the President that the Treaty was an abandonment of his (moral) professions was to touch on the raw a Freudian complex. It was a subject intolerable to discuss and every subconscious instinct plotted to defeat its further exploration.

Thus it was that Clemenceau brought to success what had seemed to be, a few months before, the extraordinary and impossible proposal that the Germans should not be heard. If only the President had not been so conscientious. If only he had not concealed from himself what he was doing, even at the last moment he was in a position to have recovered some lost ground and to have achieved some considerable successes. But the President was set.

It is notable that although Keynes' attempts to influence the settlement of the First World War were unsuccessful, his understanding of those events influenced the settlement which followed World War Two, although he had died in 1944. In 1945, there was agreement among at least the Western allies that it was its Nazi leadership and not the entire German people, which should be held responsible for the war and its atrocities. In 1945, having brought about the unconditional surrender of Japan and Germany, the Allies imposed a total reconstruction of their political systems. They imposed constitutions designed to maintain democratic stability and a balance between political forces, in which they succeeded.

In the early years after the Second World War Keynes' view that capitalism's stability and growth needed to be enabled by the active role of governments was also influential in ensuring post-war prosperity. He believed that unjust and exploitative relations between different social classes had harmful consequences (Keynes 1919, 10–11).

The second example I will give of an interpretive political intervention is one which was more professionally psychoanalytic in its nature and source. This is the argument put forward by the German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967), in their book *The Inability to Mourn*. Their argument was that the German people (they were mainly referring to West Germany) had been engaged since the war in a massive

²The USA and UK insisted that this occupation be brought to an end, after which the Weimar Republic under the liberal Chancellor and then Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann achieved some recovery.

act of denial of what had happened during the period of Nazi rule. The authors rejected the view that responsibility for this should be attributed only to a minority of Nazis. On the contrary, they argued, a large majority of the German people had seen the Nazis as having brought deliverance from misfortune, and as leading a justified reassertion of Germany's greatness and superiority. They contended that the German "economic miracle" of the post-war period and its celebration of Germany's technological skills should be seen as a "manic defence" against what would otherwise have been unbearable states of grief, disillusion and guilt. They argued that Hitler – the Führer – had been internalized as their ego-ideal during those years by many Germans. The collapse of this ideal and the unavoidable disillusionment with it after 1945 could have been expected to give rise to a condition of melancholia, or to psychological collapse. But, the Mitscherlichs argued, a state of effective amnesia and denial had been a defence against such a catastrophic reckoning with the past. For twenty years, this had been a subject scarcely ever talked or written about by Germans. That many former Nazis were allowed to take senior positions in post-war German was part of this denial.³

What is remarkable about the Mitscherlich's analysis is not just its deep psychoanalytic understanding of German society's then state of mind, but its positive reception and influence. *The Inability to Mourn* was a best-selling book in West Germany, and was widely discussed in various media. It was published at the beginning of a much wider reappraisal of the past in German society, expressed in many forms including novels, works of art and public monuments. One historically significant moment in this process was Chancellor Willy Brandt's falling to his knees at the monument to the 1943 Warsaw Uprising, in December 1970. Although the Mitscherlichs' intervention was one of many interventions which contributed to the change in consciousness which took place in Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s, it is nevertheless remarkable that a psychoanalytically based analysis should have had a major presence in that society's public discourse.

So, there are two examples of political interpretations with a psychoanalytic dimension, one of which failed in a context of self-deception and vengefulness and the other of which had some influence on challenging a state of denial which had existed for two decades.

The sphere of conflict mediation is one in which the potential value of psychoanalytic understanding has sometimes been put to the test. A recent paper by John Alderdice (2022) discusses the problems of this practice. How can a space be created in which antagonists who feel deeply injured and threatened by those they perceive as their enemies be enabled to explore the possibility of resolving or at least moderating their conflict with them? Alderdice has described his experience of the prolonged "peace process" during the Northern Ireland Troubles, which was brought to a relatively positive outcome in the Good Friday agreement of 1998. Alderdice has said that the key to the Northern Ireland peace process was the recognition by both sides in the armed conflict, the Provisional IRA and the British military, that neither could achieve their objective of victory by military means. It seems that "back-channel discussions" between the warring parties, over a period of years, created space for greater recognition of the

³The *New York Times* reported at the time that 66% of senior officials in Adenauer's post-war Foreign Ministry had formerly been members of the National Socialist party (<https://www.nytimes.com/1952/10/23/archives/adenauer-backs-use-of-nazi-diplomats.html>).

“reality principle” over the “pleasure principle” as motivators of this conflict. There was some approach to a “depressive position” kind of awareness in this process too.⁴ One of the Protestant paramilitary leaders, the late David Ervine, gave a talk at the Tavistock Clinic in the 1990s, before the Good Friday Agreement, in which he reminded his audience that despite the routine blaming of the “other side” for all the injuries and atrocities that were being inflicted in this conflict, both sides must to recognize their responsibility for these. These words carried weight because Ervine was acknowledging his own responsibilities too. Ervine, who was accompanied on his Tavistock visit by Raman Kapur, a psychotherapist who had a role in the mediation process in Northern Ireland, had by then become a significant advocate of a non-military resolution of the conflict.

One needs, in considering the potential effectiveness of psychoanalytic interventions into social conflicts, to recognize a distinction between interpretations which might be correct in their explanations of behaviour, and those which can find a significant response among the people to whom they are addressed. Writing about the problems of the nurse training system of a hospital, Menzies Lyth (1959) achieved an original understanding of the “defences against anxiety” which were shaping the experience of the nurse trainees, and giving rise to a great deal of dissatisfaction, sickness and withdrawal from nursing among them. But she felt later that her findings had failed to change the practices of the hospital, such was the resistance her proposals aroused. However, it seems that since that time nursing practices have changed substantially, in the direction of the “personalization” of care she had recommended (Tutton and Langstaff 2014). Many hospital patients in the UK today may be able to confirm this from their personal experience. What seems to have happened is that Menzies Lyth’s “language of description” was heard and understood, while its theoretical foundation in Kleinian psychoanalytic ideas was found less acceptable.

In their clinical practice, and especially in work with children, analysts have to make use of an “experience-near” (Geertz 1983) language of description to communicate with patients, although this needs to be informed by their theoretical or “experience far” understanding of psychoanalysis.

The most serious obstacles to the psychoanalytic understanding of political events arise when there are extreme polarizations of feelings and beliefs, especially in conditions of violence and war. It may be remembered that when António Guterres the UN Secretary General asked, having condemned the Hamas atrocities of 7 October 2023, that the wider context of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis should be recognized, it was demanded by one side of this division that he resign from his post. Here, even the idea of seeking understanding was being attacked. And we know that the widespread polarization and segmentation of the media of communication in contemporary times often become lethal to reflection, since people become confined within the definitions of reality of their own faction or tribe, and may even deny facts that call these in question. The attacks on “fake news”, and the manipulations of propaganda, are destructive in this way.

The resistances to the understanding of beliefs which are unconscious to those who hold them are especially strong, as psychoanalysts obviously know from their clinical work. Consider for example the resistance to the understanding of the imperial histories of nations by

⁴The psychoanalytic theories of Klein and Bion hold that the capacity for thinking and reflection is closely connected with the integration of feelings of love and hate which makes possible a transition from paranoid-schizoid to depressive states of mind.

people who were brought up to take pride in them. People's identities and "ego-ideals" may internalize beliefs in the unqualified virtue of the collectives to which they belong, and any questioning of this virtue can feel deeply threatening. This of course can be the case among holders of any beliefs, including those of leftists and progressives. One difficulty in establishing a peaceful order in the world today lies in the traumas associated with the collapse of different empires and imperial hegemonies, including those of the United States, Great Britain and Russia, and the difficulties that each of these societies has in accepting a world in which their former power must now be shared with others.

To achieve a place for a psychoanalytic dimension in thinking about political issues calls for great patience and determination. We can see from the Mitscherlichs' example that interpretations may only be received when people are ready for them. Judging when and where this may be the case is difficult. There is a need also for there to be a state of trust in whoever is seeking to offer new understandings. How are psychoanalysts to establish such trust in publics who might listen to them?

Perhaps there are individuals who have a special ability to achieve this. Fintan O'Toole is an example of a commentator on British affairs whose relative distance as an Irishman from some kinds of partisanship has encouraged a respect for what he says. His book on the experience of Brexit, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (2018), which analysed the mixture of bravado and hidden pain which characterized the Brexit movement, was a recent example of a valuable interpretation, as psychoanalysts may see it. We can also note that the political interpretations of some psychoanalysts, such as Hanna Segal (1995) in regard to nuclear weapons, and Sally Weintrobe (2019) regarding climate change, have had considerable impact, although probably more within the psychotherapeutic culture and community than outside it.

I believe that a psychoanalytic understanding of unconscious states of mind, and of structures of feeling (Williams 1977, 128–135) can contribute valuably to political and social life. But I do not wish to suggest that bringing such insights to bear effectively on our present rather desperate political situations is anything but extremely difficult. How, for example, might any interpretative intervention now be made in the context of the war in Gaza or Ukraine that any of the conflicting parties might listen to?

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Patient anonymization

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