Politics and the unconscious

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It is often remarked that in politics much of significance takes place below the radar. ‘Dog whistle politics’, ‘tacit knowledge’, ‘complicity’ and ‘surmise’ are just some of the terms used to capture such silent unofficial processes, which are central to our understanding of social and political practice. Psychoanalysis makes it possible to qualify a subset of such silent, but irrepressible, processes as *unconscious* processes, and a flurry of now-classic texts in the middle third of the twentieth century reveal the centrality attributed early on to such processes in our understanding of social and political life (for example, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud, 1929), *Psychopathology and Politics* (Lasswell, 1930), *The Civilizing Process* (Elias, 1939), *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse, 1955), *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman, 1964), *The Social Construction of Society* (Berger and Luckman, 1967)).

Nevertheless, while the concept of the unconscious can be used to qualify this ‘silent’ dimension of social and political life there are disagreements about how it should be understood, theorised and operationalised for purposes of critical and empirical analysis. Differences between the Freudian and the Lacanian Left point to one frontier in terms of negotiating such understandings and uses. At any rate, however, and despite their differences, figures such as Adorno and Reich, Althusser and Jameson, Castoriadis and Butler, testify to the productive inter-implication of politics and the unconscious. Of particular interest to us in this special issue, is the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between the unconscious, political subjectivity and affect – a question that has informed the work of psychoanalytically informed political theorists from the very outset. As early as 1930, for example, Harold Lasswell noted how ‘[p]olitical symbols are particularly adapted to serve as targets for displaced affect because of their ambiguity of reference ... and because of their general circulation’ (Lasswell, 1930, p. 265). In fact, we could say that the scholars whose work appears in this issue take up this general problematic, updating it with regard to developments in psychoanalytic thinking and contemporary

political theory and practice. In this context, both Freud and Lacan are invoked, especially their concepts of libido and affect, enjoyment [*jouissance*] and fantasy, showing how they yield valuable insights in the context of contemporary research that takes seriously what are variously called the linguistic and affective turns.

The work of Ernesto Laclau is properly situated at such a crossroads. As is clear in our opening interview with him, one of the key lessons that Ernesto Laclau draws from a focus on the unconscious for political theory is the idea that political struggle should be understood not simply as discursive in character, but also as constitutively *distortive*. In conceptualizing the relationship between psychoanalysis and a post-marxist political theory, Laclau has always been keen to avoid the common tropes of ‘supplement’ (that is, ‘that psychoanalysis *adds* a theory of subjectivity to the field of historical materialism’) or ‘causality’ (that is, that psychoanalysis introduces ‘a new causal element – the unconscious instead of economy’). Instead, he sees the relationship between politics and the unconscious in terms of a ‘coincidence’ around ‘the logic of the unconscious as the logic of the signifier’ – ‘a logic of unevenness and dislocation ... which presides over the possibility/impossibility of the constitution of *any* identity’ (Laclau, 1990, pp. 93–96).

The notion of the unconscious as dislocation or distortion is important for Laclau because it implies that politics should not be understood in epiphenomenal terms, ‘as the mere phenomenal expression of some underlying structure or laws – the latter being either the mode of production (in a traditional leftist discourse), globalization (in a neo-liberal discourse), or anything else capable of playing this role’. Laclau’s approach thereby accords a certain centrality to the political moment because this is regarded not as derivative of another (for example, economic) domain but rather as the primary ontological terrain in the hegemonic struggle over meaning and the constitution of the social. For this reason the notion of ‘hegemonic formation’ takes on for him the role previously occupied by the category of ‘mode of production’.

For Laclau, then, the task of a psychoanalytically inflected political theory and analysis derives from a focus on distortion. And this is because processes of distortion – processes of overdetermination and displacement – leave signifying and affective traces within discourse. A psychoanalytically oriented rhetoric applied to politics would thus involve precisely ‘the systematic study of these distortions’. Moreover, such an approach encourages considerable attention to nuance and analytical detail because ‘[t]o assert that the distinction between affect and the symbolic is intra- and not extra-discursive is perfectly compatible with sustaining that some elements of a discursive formation may be highly cathected while others are not; that there is within the discursive field a certain “combined and uneven development”’. Laclau is thus keen to undermine a straightforward (or ‘external’) opposition between the symbolic and affective dimensions of our experience by situating both within the terrain of discourse.

He thus problematizes the criticism, emanating from biopolitical and 'post-hegemonic' approaches (for example, Lasch, 2007; Thoburn, 2007), that theories of hegemony and discourse analysis neglect affect, and opens new avenues for research in this area.

The question of affect has emerged as a focal point in contemporary debates within political studies, and the first article in our collection explores how best to conceptualize the relation between affect and subjectivity, asking what it might mean to treat affect as autonomous. In her 'Affective Processes without a Subject' Caroline Williams draws on Spinoza's work to develop an explicitly anti-psychologistic view in which affect 'is not an originary experience *upon which* a world is constructed'. Deploying the Spinozist concepts of *conatus* ('as the fractural site through which affects have to pass') and *imagination* ('as the impersonal conductor of affects'), Williams nevertheless attributes to affects a degree of autonomy, arguing that they are best understood 'as transitive states through which bodies pass, they meander through and between bodies, resting like "foreign objects", or excessive impersonal forces, awaiting transformation into the thought-imbued emotions of subjective experience'. This accounts for what she calls the affective density of the political and associated acts of identification: '[I]t is through the dispersal and circulation of affects ... that subjectivity is retroactively produced. In other words, there is no subject of the affect, because affect drives the subject towards identity and performance'.

Affect enters on a slightly different register in Shanna T. Carlson's article 'In Defence of Queer Kinships'. She begins by noting how heated debates in France over civil partnerships regularly invoke the authority of psychoanalysis, specifically its interpretation of the 'Oedipus complex', to defend the family as 'properly' heterosexual, this carrying what for many appear to be very high normative costs. Carlson thus finds reason to revisit the notion of the Oedipus complex, showing how Jacques Lacan sought to reframe the constituent elements of this well-known drama in terms of formal variables or what she calls 'singular statements'. In this view, the elements of the Oedipal drama (for example mother, father) are not reduced to persons with predefined features (for example, anatomical characteristics or sexual orientation) but are rather understood to denote important symbolic roles that can be performed by any number of identifiable persons. According to Carlson, this opens up an alternative normative pathway whose political implications are significant when we consider how particular understandings of the Oedipus complex inform public debates over civil partnerships and the rights that flow from them, especially reproductive and adoption rights. Carlson's paper highlights important internal divisions within the field of psychoanalytic interpretation, demonstrating the creative potential of the Lacanian framework in addressing such complex issues.

Candida Yates also seeks to probe the creative possibilities of going beyond an Oedipal heterosexism, but this time focusing on the way (male) politicians are presented, and often present themselves, in a highly mediated political

culture. In particular, Yates invokes the category ‘flirtation’ to elucidate the way a politician’s intervention can sometimes be understood as a ‘refusal to accept the hegemonic certainties of patriarchal masculinity and the impulse for mastery’. But Yates is alert to the way flirtation can be deployed in a defensive way to shore up traditional masculine narcissistic mastery. While the first ‘creative flirtation’ (often exemplified by Blair, Cameron and Obama) blurs gender boundaries through a kind of feminization or emotionalization of politics, the second ‘defensive flirtation’ tends to reinforce traditional gender boundaries (often exemplified by the likes of Putin and Sarkozy). And even if there is sometimes the possibility that a male politician is unable to flirt (often exemplified by Brown), Yates argues that, post-Bernays, our highly mediatized political culture makes the category of ‘flirtation’ work well as a metaphor that can help identify and elucidate powerful, often unconscious, dynamics at play.

In some sense, the domain of sexuality is a less unexpected area within which to find psychoanalysis being invoked to elucidate the political implications of unconscious dynamics. However, equally important, even urgent, in the present conjuncture is the need to draw out the implications of psychoanalytic insights for the domain of the economy. Lynne Layton seeks to do precisely that. Her strategy is to start by affirming the view that various conservative backlash movements in places like Kansas since the 1990s are a direct result of the inequalities and vulnerabilities wrought by government policies since the 1980s (Frank, 2004). She develops this idea by arguing that neo-liberal policies over the last 30 years have eroded precisely those institutions that have functioned historically as ‘collective containers’ that keep anxiety at bay – the US welfare system.

Rather than experience the extreme vulnerability resulting from the loss of care and containment, one finds in the backlash movements both a hatred of the vulnerable “other” – women of all colors, gays, the poor, non-Whites ... – and, in the case of the anti-abortion movement, an unconscious identification with the most dependent and vulnerable of all – the helpless fetus. Backlash ... is a perverse solution to the anxiety produced by failures in caretaking, a solution marked by a fantasy of invulnerability and a retaliatory response to injury.

Equally perverse, however, is another prominent response to exposed vulnerability: the retreat from public life into the private life of the family and the individual. Layton argues that retaliation and withdrawal are responses to profound failures in the caretaking environment triggered by the dismantling of the welfare state, registering numerous clinical manifestations of neo-liberal subjectivity’s ‘perverse disavowal of vulnerability, dependency and interdependence’. Regarding neo-liberal subjectivity in terms of a ‘narcissistic individualism’, Layton finds in her clinical material an extreme oscillation between two

opposed fantasies: fantasies of omnipotent self-sufficiency and fantasies of victimhood and a passive wish to be taken care of. Layton argues that no progress can be made without mourning the loss of a caring environment and creating the conditions in which people can directly affirm the experience of dependence and vulnerability.

Given the above analysis, we can ask whether the particular moves recently in the United States to reform the financial regulatory regime and the health-care system will help rebuild, and re-establish trust in, the collective containers that will make such mourning possible. Maybe. Özsəlçuk and Madra suggest, however, that neo-Keynesian New Deal solutions have their limits. Özsəlçuk and Madra do so by relying on a mix of Lacanian theory and a non-structuralist, non-humanist Marxism that seeks to repoliticize the conditions under which surplus is produced, appropriated, distributed and consumed. They thereby continue in a tradition that links psychoanalysis and the economy, starting with Freud, and reinforced by Lacan in the link explicitly made by him between 'surplus enjoyment' and Marx's 'surplus value'. While consumption processes have been animated by an enjoyment (*jouissance*) that gorges on credit because it 'knows nothing about rational moderation', processes of appropriation and distribution have been subject to different principles of governance. In particular Özsəlçuk and Madra argue that '[e]ven though New Keynesian "designers" differ from the "Chicago boys" in the way they parse out the question of when greed becomes a problem and how to govern it [with proper institutional incentives], they share the foundational figure of *homo economicus* as the working assumption regarding the behaviour of individuals'. By according foundational status to economic incentives and processes of market exchange both approaches are understood by Özsəlçuk and Madra as variants of neo-liberal governmentality, thereby keeping questions about the appropriation and distribution of surplus as 'the untouchable limit of public debate'. Instead such a regime continues to encourage individuals to fight for scarce surpluses 'animated by fantasy frames of entrepreneurship, growth, efficiency, upward mobility, and so on'.

In sum, the articles in this special issue explore innovative theoretical and philosophical insights centering on the relation between politics and the unconscious – especially regarding the relation between affect, subjectivity and political identification – often combining these explorations with urgent critical analyses of topical issues linked to sexuality and the economy. Together, we think they demonstrate the richly productive character of a field of inquiry located at the intersection of psychoanalysis and the political.

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