Yannis Stavrakakis (ed) *Routledge handbook of psychoanalytic political theory*

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We live in a time where the critical deployment of psychoanalytic theories and methods in order to interrogate politics and political questions could not be more urgent. Increasing political polarisation is visible across the world, whether it is growing global right-wing nationalism and populism from Europe to many parts of the world, a divided Britain over the outcome of the Brexit referendum, the handling of the global Coronavirus pandemic and the many crises that have followed, rising geopolitical tensions between states in the Middle East, China and India, or China and the USA, to name but a few recent examples. What can psychoanalysis offer to the study of politics and fields beyond the clinic such as political studies? If anything, politics are rarely truly rational. The recently published *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, edited by the leading Lacanian scholar Yannis Stavrakakis (2020) presents a much needed collection of introductions to key psychoanalytic thinkers, traditions, concepts and themes as well as challenges and controversies. Featuring key thinkers who all draw on psychoanalysis to think about the political and the politics of particular issues, this Handbook is also much needed for a second reason: to further institutionalise psychoanalytic political theory and scholarship as its own field.

There are, as Stavrakakis points out via Frosh (1999) in the Introduction, always two broad questions that present themselves when it comes to the complex of psychoanalysis and politics: firstly, politics of psychoanalysis itself and this includes scandals, debates and critique that have surrounded the psychoanalytic movement since Freud started it. This has become all the more pertinent when it comes to discussions of sexuality and race within psychoanalytic institutes e.g. in relation to questions of whiteness, heteronormativity or supposed sacrosanct ‘neutrality’ within the clinical sphere. Secondly, there is the application of psychoanalysis to politics, culture and society. The Handbook deals with both and discusses ‘approaches that

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use psychoanalytic concepts and logics in accounting for political phenomena. It will also place emphasis on critical, psychoanalytically inspired orientations able to reflexively analyze our contemporary predicament(s) and chart new orientations for the future, especially for alternative political rearticulations of the psychosocial sphere' (Stavarakakis 2020, p. 6), as Stavarakakis writes in his introduction.

While much recent scholarship that deals with politics or the political in the broadest sense is Lacanian and many chapters in the Handbook are too, there are also of course other highly important figures. The book devotes its first section to major figures and specifically the political aspects of their work: Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Wilhelm Reich and Carl Gustav Jung. While Klein is part of the British object relations tradition, a chapter on D. W. Winnicott might have been a useful addition to the section, although Winnicott is discussed in some other chapters (for example in Candida Yates' fascinating chapter on affect and emotion).

The 'figures' section practically lends itself to lead over to the second section, entitled 'traditions'. It deals with specific, but not exhaustive, fields and groups that established itself particularly by being influenced by Freud and Lacan: Marcuse and the Freudian left (although this tradition could have also been discussed more broadly under the Frankfurt School banner); the Lacanian left; psychoanalytic feminism; and critical management studies. Naturally, there are overlaps between such traditions. If I would articulate a small point of critique at this point, what is missing from this section is specifically a discussion of psychoanalytic film theory with the so-called Screen Theory and more generally the pioneering works of feminists such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane, Valerie Walkerdine, Elizabeth Cowie, Tania Modleski, Candida Yates or Caroline Bainbridge who interrogated the unconscious and ideological effects of cinema and television on spectators, particularly with a focus on femininity and masculinity and the politics of representation.

Section III, Concepts, features chapters on the law and superego; narcissism; affect and emotion; trauma; fantasy; identification (with the aggressor); mourning and melancholia; language and discourse; and collective subjects. All chapters comprehensively introduce the reader to central psychoanalytic ideas and link them to politics in an eloquent manner. Yet, a dedicated chapter on the unconscious and its relation to the political would have made an important contribution as well and is sadly not to be found in the volume.

The fourth section is entitled 'themes' and discusses sociopolitical issues which can be analysed or approached through psychoanalysis. The Handbook makes a particular timely intervention when considering the following chapters of that section: Racism (written by Derek Hook), Nationalism (by Amanda Machin), Capitalism (by Samo Tomšič), Populism (by Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló), Neoliberalism (by Valerie Walkerdine), Migration and Diversity (by Nikolay Mintchev and Henrietta L. Moore) and Post-politics (by Olivier Jutel).

I discuss some of those chapters in a little more detail now. There are of course other chapters too which focus on sexuality, hate, consumerism or the arts.

Most parts of the world are under the iron-like grip of neoliberal capitalism. Samo Tomšič's chapter on capitalism and Valerie Walkerdine's chapter on neoliberalism provide useful entry points for a psychoanalytic political theory of the

wider structures of the dominant economic system. Drawing on Freud's notion of unconscious labour as a key characteristic of capitalism and the subject (e.g. in Freud's notion of the dreamwork) as a psychosocial condition and system, Tomšič writes:

Because the main feature of unconscious labor resides in its atemporal character—it knows no day or night and continues to work behind the back of consciousness—there is a constant expenditure-consumption of mental energy in the mental apparatus. The subject is confronted with an insatiable demand for labor, and Freud provided two names for this demand: desire and drive (Tomšič 2020, p. 298).

For Freud, pleasure equals profit, and desire and drive operate like a capitalist in their never-ending labour for satisfaction, or enjoyment in Lacanese. Tomšič goes on to discuss how Lacan drew on and developed Freud's ideas by combining them with Marx, Hegel and other philosophers. We can see through this discussion how something as fundamental as capitalism can be analysed through psychoanalysis and other disciplines.

Valerie Walkerdine's chapter on neoliberalism constitutes an illuminating and practical addition as she discusses recent work on the subject matter. While most psychoanalytic work on neoliberalism was written following the 2008 financial crisis, Walkerdine argues that we must analyse neoliberalism as a larger conjunctural shift. 'To think about a psychoanalytic engagement with neoliberalism, we need to build on an engagement with the histories, fantasies, and defenses both of middle-class professionals and working-class others, both singly and where they meet.' (Walkerdine 2020, 382), Walkerdine writes – and her work over decades has been foundational in establishing such a critical psychosocial perspective of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism demands and reinforces the production of individualistic self-regulation and self-responsibility by which the subject takes on an entrepreneurial view of themselves which focuses on productivity, improvement and a kind of flawless future. This goes hand in hand with neoliberal capitalism's ability to provide an ideology of meritocracy and consumerism (see also Salecl in the same volume).

Neoliberalism, for Walkerdine, can above all be understood through Kristeva's notion of the abject (a sense of disgust which is highly connected to affect and drive). Writing about the role of disgust in contemporary neoliberalism (which goes back to classic liberalism), the following question poses itself:

How is self-disgust being repudiated by projecting it onto others in the present (e.g., right-wing Brexit, voting Trump lovers, indolent welfare scroungers), and how does this build on the splitting and projection of the bourgeoisie onto working-class and colonial others in the past (Hoggett 2017)?

Such forms of projection operate with a simultaneous denial of relational needs and dependency. Similar to racism and nationalism, neoliberalism's abject Other is used as a projection surface so that the subject can uphold an illusion of self-sufficiency. All of those mechanisms are continuously overshadowed by threats

of unemployment, debt or precarious working conditions. Such threats go beyond the working class and now specifically include the middle class, while of course also being shaped by a complex matrix along racial, sexual and bodily lines. One response to such forms of existential undoing of what it means to be human today occurs through forms of denial, disavowal or splitting. The subject disavows the threats they are faced with, or projects them outwards.

It is thus perhaps no coincidence that forms of aggressive nationalism, right-wing populism and racism have spread in our post-2008 times of insecurity.

Amanda Machin's chapter on nationalism is also immensely valuable as an introduction to psychoanalytic political theory. As both Lacan and Klein note, subjects identify with other people but also with images and ideologies. 'I suggest that nationalism offers the image of the nation as an ambiguous and contingent and yet powerful and enduring object of identification; a unified and harmonious imaginary community' (Machin 2020, p. 286). Machin argues. The nation is invested in unconsciously by subjects as a form of libidinal identification. It provides a form of Imaginary unity in the Lacanian sense for its subjects and promises *jouissance*. This kind of nationalistic *jouissance*, Machin here brings in Klein and Freud to further elaborate on nationalism, is based on exclusion and the construction of an 'us vs. them' binary. Nationalism and racism are often explicitly or implicitly intertwined.

Derek Hook's chapter on racism, in summary, discusses the argument that a Lacanian perspective shows racism as a hatred of the Other's *jouissance*. This hatred is pleasurable in itself to the racist. 'Cultural otherness is not merely discursively constructed but is experienced, ascertained within the register of the senses and at the level of affect, sensuality, and fantasy. Within this Lacanian account, otherness comes to be marked by disturbing sensualities that not only "prove" difference but enforce and amplify it at an immediate and visceral level of comprehension' (Hook 2020, p. 275). This intertwining of discourse, fantasy and affect renders racism, and other forms of discrimination, so destructive and potent. The linking of racism and *jouissance* is, for Lacanians, so important because it also helps to illuminate the fact that racists regularly feel and express being cheated or robbed by e.g. immigrants. It is their own enjoyment that is allegedly stolen from them. While Hook is a Lacanian scholar, the chapter could have also briefly pointed to non-Lacanian works on racism, even if those are in a minority overall.

So where does all of this leave us in terms of political agency, the status of politics, and the position of human subjects? Section V of the book is entitled 'Challenges and Controversies'. It includes entries on geopolitics (by Danny Nobus), psychics (by Ian Parker), biopolitics (by A. Kiarina Kordela), climate change (by Sally Weintrobe), posthuman identities (by Anthony Elliott) and post-politics (by Olivier Jutel). In the remainder of this book review, I discuss Jutel's post-politics chapter.

On top of the current crises we are faced with, comes an illusionary liberal belief into technology, specifically big data, the internet and artificial intelligence. Drawing on contemporary US politics, Jutel argues that our apparent post-political moment is characterised by a technoliberal culture in which facts, statistics and data-driven processes trump any real politics. This was, he argues, exemplified in the Clinton campaign which conducted politics in a rational manner without any real politics at its core. Such a data culture also articulates itself in fears over rigged elections,

e.g. in the Cambridge Analytica or Russiagate data manipulation scandals. The data are both readily provided by users themselves and the tech companies that exploit them. The role that social media play as tools for political influence and as a stage on which politics occurs is of immense importance here. At the same time, truth itself has been destabilised through fake news by Trump himself and wider media networks and social media platforms. The ‘claim of liberal post-politics to history rests on the end of antagonism by way of a progressive technocratic management of society’ (Jutel 2020, p. 431). Such desires for a rational, clean and automated form of post-politics constitute a disavowal of the lack and antagonism that is at the heart of both the individual subject and politics as such. ‘The psychosis-inducing Real of the Trump presidency and the persistence of liberal disavowal means that the symbolic order of American democracy has been stripped down to the Cold War fantasies that sustain liberal claims to history’ (p. 435), writes Jutel.

While we may be at a particular bleak moment in time, the *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory* provides an important and foundational volume for scholars, students and activists who wish to understand and apply the different concepts and debates that different schools within psychoanalysis can offer. The thought that psychoanalysis is alive and well in some political scholarship may perhaps provide us with some joy and hope.

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