Original Article

Title: Reflecting on the Study of Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society:

The Development of a Psycho-Cultural Approach

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of a psycho-cultural approach that brings together object relations psychoanalysis and cultural studies to explore the psycho-dynamics of culture, politics and society. While foregrounding the work of Donald Winnicott and other psychoanalysts influenced by his ideas, I contextualise that approach by tracing my own relationship to the study of psychoanalysis and culture since I was a Cultural Studies student in the 1980s and 1990s and also my engagement with the psychoanalytic scene that existed in London at that time. I have since applied a psycho-cultural lens to the study of masculinity and emotion in cinema and more recently to the study of emotion and political culture in Europe and the US. The article provides an example of that work by discussing the populist appeal of Donald Trump in the US and Nigel Farage in the UK, where the contradictory dynamics of attachment, risk and illusion are present when communicating with their supporters and the general public.

Keywords: emotion; Winnicott; political culture; political communication; psycho-cultural methodology

My perspective on the relationship between psychoanalysis culture and society reflects shifts in the Humanities and Social Sciences since my days as an undergraduate on a UK Cultural Studies degree in the late 1980s. Since that time I have, alongside others, developed a psycho-cultural approach that brings together object relations psychoanalysis and cultural and social theory to explore different aspects of culture, politics and the unconscious (Bainbridge et al., 2007; Bainbridge and Yates, 2014; Richards, 2007). In the past, researchers in media and cultural studies have been sceptical of psychoanalytic ideas because of the perception that psychoanalytic theory is blind to issues of cultural difference, history and political context, and object relations psychoanalysis with its strong links to clinical practice has attracted particular criticism in this respect.

Nonetheless, the psycho-cultural approach that I have developed does not endorse the naïve application of psychoanalytic theory to objects within a cultural and historical vacuum. Instead, it acknowledges the significance of irrational fantasy, feeling and desire that shape the cultural, socio-political and affective engagement with objects in particular settings and historical moments. Of late, I have applied a psycho-cultural lens to the study of political culture in Europe and the US, focusing on the emotions that are stirred up in different contexts (Yates, 2015). I have also developed that work to examine the rise of casino culture and the emergence of a new sensibility linked to the trope of the gambler and the emergence of what I call 'casino politics' (Yates, 2018).

I begin the article by contextualising that work through a discussion of my own shifting relationship to the study of psychoanalysis, culture and society, and I outline the development of a psycho-cultural perspective in auto-biographical and academic contexts. I elaborate on these ideas through a discussion of casino politics

and the populist appeal of Donald Trump in the US and Nigel Farage in the UK, where the psychodynamics of risk, attachment and illusion underpin their modes of political communication and shape their relationship with supporters.

Reflecting on the development of a psycho-cultural perspective

In the past, theories of object relations psychoanalysis have been under-represented in the academic fields of media, film and cultural studies, which instead have tended to deploy the work of Freud and Lacan when looking at the relationships between culture and the unconscious (Bainbridge and Yates, 2014). However, in recent years, the theories of D. W. Winnicott and psychoanalysts influenced by his work (see, for example, Milner, 1950; Bollas, 1987; Ogden, 1992; Green, 2005) have been taken up by psychoanalytic scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Bainbridge and Yates, 2014; Bowker and Buzby, 2017; Grant, 2015; Elliott and Urry, 2010; Kuhn, 2013). This development taps partly into current interests concerning the interactive relationship between affect and the materiality of objects and also the significance of maternal fantasy in shaping subjectivity in the creative movement between self and other (Hollway, 2016). The application of the ideas of Melanie Klein (1957) and Wilfred Bion (1962/1984) is also relevant here, and others and I have regularly drawn on that important body of work to discuss the affective dimensions of culture and its objects. However, the emotional, cultural and temporal dimensions of transitional phenomena as discussed by Winnicott (1971), with its links to processes of play and of 'working through', are especially productive when discussing the radical potential of the subject in process, and his concept of the third, intermediate realm of experience contributes usefully to contemporary theories of mobility, liminality and affect as a formative space for becoming (Bainbridge and

Yates, 2014; Elliott and Urry, 2010; MacRury and Yates, 2017). As I discuss, my own contribution to this psycho-cultural body of work began in film studies, but more recently I have turned to the field of political studies where the relationship between affect, culture and political subjectivity increasingly provides a focus for my research (Yates, 2015).

I was first introduced to psychoanalysis during my time as a Cultural Studies undergraduate in the 1980s. In that academic context we learnt to observe the specificity of psychoanalysis as a discourse and the shifting nature of its place in history, culture and mind. As students, we discovered that psychoanalysis functioned evocatively both as an object of academic study and as a clinical practice with different post-Freudian traditions that tussle jealously for the possession of Freud's legacy. As an object of cultural studies analysis, psychoanalysis contained a radical means of exploring the seeming irrational realm of feeling and fantasy, and the shaping of subjectivities in political contexts. Drawing on the ideas of psychoanalytic feminists including Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (Mitchell, 1975; Mitchell and Rose, 1985), Sally Alexander (1984) and others, we were encouraged to return to the texts of Joanna Field (1934/1986), Joan Riviere (1929), Marion Milner (1950), and Melanie Klein (1957), and as well as more contemporary writers of the time such as Jessica Benjamin (1990), to think reflexively about the relationships between personal and political experience (as it was referred to at the time) and to examine questions of gendered subjectivity and its relationship to culture, class 'race' and difference.

I first came across the ideas of Winnicott through the work of feminist historians Elizabeth Wilson (1980) and Denise Riley (1983) who critiqued him as a conservative figure who domesticated psychoanalysis and idealised a middle class image of motherhood. When I joined the Psychosocial Studies programme at the

University of East London in the 1990s, it was often his theory of the 'true and false self' (Winnicott, 1960) that was singled out by critical psychologists and poststructuralist thinkers as perpetuating a naïve and dualistic vision of the subject that ignored the structures of language and culture in constructing subjectivity. However, as Val Richards (1996) argues, the concept of the 'true self' articulates a wish for authenticity and spontaneity that is also founded upon a capacity to relate to objects in one's environment, and it seemed to me that this desire for relationality and its illusions (as described positively by Winnicott (1971) in his discussion of transitional phenomena) evoked an important and productive dimension of late modern experience that challenged the perceived limits of normative patriarchal discourse and its laws, as discussed by Lacan (Mitchell and Rose, 1985), for example.

The emphasis on relationality was also enacted through the lively scene of Winnicott Studies outside the university. Away from the academy, on Saturday afternoons, I attended the open lectures of the Squiggle Foundation (Farhi, 1996)[i] and afterwards met some key figures in the field of Winnicott Studies – often over a glass of wine in the Primrose Hill Community Centre in North London. At that time, between 1996-2000, Nina Farhi was its Director and the work of the organisation was disseminated through the *Winnicott Studies Monograph Series* that included writing by André Green, Jacqueline Rose, John Forrester and Kenneth Wright amongst others. Marion Milner was reaching the end of her life and yet she was still on the London scene and held court to young artists and musicians(whom it was said would be invited around to her house for tea to discuss their creative blocks)! [ii] Adam Phillips was also emerging as a significant figure and he did much to promote Winnicott's work. We would read Phillips' books and found his approach exciting for

its capacity to challenge interdisciplinary boundaries and the normative aspects of psychoanalytic discourse and its hierarchies (see, for example, Phillips, 1994; 1997).

Alongside this interest in Winnicott, feminist psychoanalytic research into popular culture, gender and difference continued to shape my research. During the 1990s, some of us turned our attention to questions of masculinity in order to understand the enduring power of patriarchy as a psychosocial formation (see Segal, 1990). Jealous women have been the staple of Hollywood cinema, but I wanted to shift the gaze away from those representations of femininity and its alleged instabilities and focus instead on the insecurities of jealous men and the unravelling of masculinity as a psycho-cultural construction. I looked at cinematic treatments of male jealousy in films such as *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), *The Piano* (Campion, 1991) *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Minghella, 1999) and *Closer* (Nichols, 1994) and turned to Melanie Klein (1957) to understand the deathly, controlling nature of paranoid jealousy, but also its reparative aspects which can signal a capacity to cope with love, loss and its disappointments. At a wider cultural level, jealousy provided a framework through which to examine the precarious nature of masculinity and its fictions and the defences that operate culturally as a consequence of that precarity. I returned to a Winnicottian framework through the work of Christopher Bollas (1993) and his notion of the 'good-enough Oedipus complex' to challenge the seemingly univeralising connotations of certain readings of patriarchy. I wanted instead to explore the possibilities of a less idealised and flawed but 'good-enough masculinity' and its relationship to the complexities of jealousy and the cinematic gaze (Yates, 2000, 2007).

I then turned from masculine jealousy to masculine flirtation as an object of study. As Ernest Jones (1929/1950) noted, there is a close relationship between the

two. He said that the wounds of male jealousy are warded off through the 'masquerade' of flirtation in which the experience of lack and loss are dealt with by projecting such feelings onto the other. One can extend Jones's reading of flirtation to think more widely about masculinity and its performative rituals in public and private spheres of communication. I went on to use flirtation as a metaphor to examine more widely the sensibility of the late modern subject and its role in shaping the dynamics of attachment and communication in different contexts, applying this psycho-cultural framework to the interactive, mediatised field of political culture and political leadership where the flirtatious dynamics of performance, play and transitional space also operate (Yates, 2015). Today, in an era of celebrity politics and a resurgence of right-wing populism, the study of political leaders and their psycho-cultural appeal as objects of the political imagination take on a new urgency.

Having contextualised the object psychoanalytic framework that I have established in relation to the analysis of culture and society, I now turn to the deployment of those ideas in my current research, which examines the psychodynamics of political culture. Using a case study approach, the discussion focuses on the psycho-cultural appeal of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage.

The Politics of Play and Political Leadership: A Psycho-cultural case study

The narcissism of Donald Trump and his alleged pathologies have received a fair amount of attention in clinical and popular discourses (Alford, 2015). However, whilst the individual traits and life history of a politician can add to our understanding of his or her motivations and actions, it is also important to take into account the wider cultural processes that shape the complex relational dynamics of political leaders and their appeal to followers. Political culture has been defined as that which

includes 'political experience, imagination, values and dispositions', which shape both the environment for the 'political system' and the 'character of political processes and political behaviour' (Corner and Pels, 2003, p. 3). The spaces for interaction and political engagement that have emerged within the mediatised field of political culture can be linked to what Winnicott (1971) calls the transitional 'cultural field' of the psyche and imagination, where the experience of illusion and transitional phenomena takes place. As I discussed earlier, Winnicott provides a paradoxical model of subjectivity and culture that challenges the traditional boundaries between inner and outer reality. He argues that social, cultural and psychological worlds intersect to produce 'potential' or 'transitional' space, where meanings are made and re-made and where selfhood, identity and political subjectivity are also shaped.

A psycho-cultural approach to the matrix of political culture and leadership takes account of these different inter-connecting layers of meaning and experience, where the relationship between leaders and followers is shaped through processes of attachment, mirroring and identification, and also through unconscious processes of illusion and play within the political field. As is well known, Winnicott (1971) foregrounded the role of play in the development of the psychosocial self and its interaction with the environment. Phillips (1994) takes up this theme when he argues that the first playful relationship between mother and child resembles a form of flirtation where an open process of communication takes place before the father steps in and limits the possibilities of that early desire. Phillips' psychoanalytic reading of flirtation is suggestive when applied to the field of politics, particularly in an era of social media with its interactive modes of political communication.

In the early noughties, the concept of political flirtation seemed apt when the culture of 'spin,' the third-way politics of Blair and New Labour, together with the

promotional glitz of celebrity politics – epitomised by Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas

Sarkozy – dominated the European political scene. However, in the current climate of

right wing populism, global precarity and the rise of politicians such as Donald

Trump, political communication has taken a new turn. Is the concept of political

flirtation based on Phillips' Winnicottian reading of play still useful in the current

climate? André Green's (2005) critique of Winnicott's theory of play (which is key to

Phillips' reading of flirtation) is productive here as it reminds us of the sadism that

often underpins authoritarian populism and the forms of political communication to

which it is linked. Green returns to Freud's (1920/1984) description of play in the

Fort/da game, when the former says that play that can be 'cruel' and 'narcissistic'

and 'not based on interchange, but on the will to dominate' (p.12). This description of

play is suggestive when applied to flirtation in its more manipulative guise as a form

of mastery over the other and is productive when looking at the psychodynamics of

political leadership and political communication in an age of risk and performative

celebrity politics, where the impulse to master uncertainty often dominates.

One can apply these ideas to the sphere of political performance and to the

communicative strategies deployed by male politicians such as Donald Trump and

Nigel Farage.[iii] Both men appeal to the emotions of certain sections of the electorate

who have otherwise been ignored or who feel despised by the political classes

(Goodhart, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). Often referred to as 'the left behinds' (Goodwin

and Heath, 2016), the dissatisfactions of this group provide a fertile ground for

politicians who set out to woo them and their votes. There are clear differences

between Trump and Farage in style and influence; on the one hand the avuncular

Farage with his banal, racist bonhomie, wields enormous influence at the level of

public opinion and yet, as an ex-leader of the UK Independence Party, he now holds

no UK political office except paradoxically as Member of a European Parliament that he would gladly destroy (Hunt, 2017). On the other hand, while Trump wields real power as the US President, his style is less polished than Farage, more erratic in tone, and also more overtly authoritarian in his misogyny and racism, for example. Despite those stylistic differences (reflected, of course, in Trump's actual policies), both men (who performed together on a political stage in 2016) share a style of political flirtation that brings to mind André Green's (2005) description of play as linked to mastery and sadism. Their style of political communication evokes an element of being slapped and tickled – and a sort of tantalising play of 'now you see him, now you don't' as they break the fourth wall, stepping in and out of role as politician, celebrity, friend and partner in crime as they invite you to join them in scoffing at the dishonest establishment (of which they are a part) and at what they see as the modern curse of liberal values and so-called 'political correctness'.

The tantalizing aspects of their appeal resonate with the ups and downs of what I define as the development of casino politics (Yates, 2018). Over the past twenty years, the term 'casino culture' has been used as a metaphor to convey the widespread experience of uncertainty and risk that permeates different aspects of social and cultural life. Some of this work draws on Ulrich Beck's (1992) well-known sociological thesis on 'risk society', whilst others (Giroux, 2010) apply Susan Strange's (1997) analysis of 'casino capitalism' to analyse the instabilities of global capitalism. If the casino once denoted an actual place where people played games in order to win money, its ethos and the ludic qualities associated with it are now widespread and fantasies of winning and losing have become culturally embedded as a way of life (Yates, 2018). The seductive power of politicians such as Trump or Farage is related to their masculine personas as 'players' who like to win- or at least 'gamble big'. As cultural objects of

fantasy they each resemble the figure of the buccaneering gambler/entrepreneur who embraces and also to an extent creates feelings of risk, fear and uncertainty, but who then heroically promises to 'make it better' as in Trump's promise to 'Make America Great Again' and in Farage's vow to rescue the British from the EU and give them their 'country back'. These processes and the feelings associated with them arguably reflect the highs and lows of casino politics as an affective, psycho-cultural formation. The cultural coordinates of casino politics also include the objects of social media and popular culture – such as, for example, The National Lottery, television game shows like *The Apprentice* (2004-15) and dramas such as The *House of Cards* (2013-), *Game of Thrones* (2011-) and *Billions* (2016-) that all contribute to the texture and cultural ethos of casino politics in the contemporary climate (Yates, 2018).

Trump and his appeal as an object of attachment

During the 2016 Presidential election campaign – and in contrast to Hillary Clinton – Donald Trump was able to project a political persona that was at once reassuring and exciting. As a famous celebrity businessman, Trump in many ways embodies the values of casino culture. For example, he came to public attention in the 1980s as the owner of large casinos and then through his high profile marriages to a series of beautiful women and his identity as a tough, charismatic businessman was given a further boost as the host of the reality television game show series, *The Apprentice*, His role as a popular television personality from that series shows the extent to which celebrity culture and politics are now closely entwined and the myth of his competence stemmed from his performance as the strong and decisive leader on that programme. Trump showed his skill as a politician by deflecting onto Clinton the populist anger that was felt towards the establishment to which he is closely linked.

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Richard Sennett (1977) argues that, historically, the growth of personality-orientated politics is linked to the emergence of 'secular charisma', where the residual envy or *ressentiment* of voters in relation to powerful politicians is warded off by focusing on the personality and image of politicians rather than substantial political issues and policies.

However, Trump's appeal as a leader was and is also achieved through a form of *faux* intimacy that he creates as he offers himself up as an object of attachment for his supporters. Alongside the ritual chanting games at his rallies, his success is also linked to the display of love and empathy that he seems to direct towards those citizens who normally feel despised and unloved by establishment politicians such as Hillary Clinton, who referred to 'half of them' as 'a basket of deplorables' (Mercia and Tatum, 2016). As Trump said in his 2016 Inauguration Address: 'My protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body. And I will never ever let you down' (Trump, 2016). Trump has some affluent supporters, yet his skill has been to tap into a vein of shame amongst those citizens who cannot provide for their families and who reject or feel left behind by the forces of modernity, globalisation and the values of social liberalism (Hochschild, 2016). The discourse of shame and the fantasies that circulate in relation to it have been a recurrent motif in late modern politics. We see this both in relation to Brexit and in the rise of Trump. In both contexts, shame has played a role in stigmatising groups such as welfare and benefit claimants and refugees who are defined as abject, and who are made to carry that shame on behalf of others.

From an object relations perspective, feelings of shame are bound up with the wounds of narcissistic failure, whose roots lie in an early pre-verbal stage of development when the infant fails to be mirrored or recognised by a rejecting parent.

This experience represents an early failure of attachment (Mollon, 2002) and is akin to being dropped, which is a scenario that resonates with those citizens who feel rejected and misrecognised by the governing classes. In this regard, one could argue that, despite the macho authoritarian stance of Trump, he nonetheless presents himself as an empathic parental object for those seeking to identify with the image of the leader as a strong and caring provider.

The idea of the nation as a transitional object is pertinent here when thinking about the powerful appeal of both Trump and Farage.[iv] One could say that Trump mobilises a nostalgic idea of nationhood in the manner of a comforting transitional object that operates in a regressive fashion to soothe and bridge the losses of identity that are linked to the American Dream as an imaginary object that cannot be mourned or let go. Winnicott (1960) said that, at times of uncertainty and change, the outside world is experienced as an 'impingement'. Trump offers a defence against that impingement, creating a national 'false self' (1971) which, in the manner of the wall that he promises to build along the Mexican border, functions as a shield against the imagined enemy that Trump himself creates. The avoidance of vulnerability through a public show of power is a recurring theme of casino politics more generally.

When Trump promises to restore the nation to some notion of its former glory, he seems to offer himself up as an object of change and renewal. The performative appeal of Trump in this context can be explored through Christopher Bollas' (1987) concept of 'the transformational object'. Bollas developed Winnicott's theory of the transitional object in order to explore the world of object relating and its role in shaping subjectivity.[v] For Bollas, the experience of transformation is linked to a dialectical movement between self and other and is brought about by the mother's *adaptation* to the needs of the child. Yet as a leader (and symbolic parent), Trump's

version is not adaptation, but rather it is a defensive triumph over vulnerability and also the fantasies of dangerous femininity associated with the risk of the unreliable mother – as symbolized in the figure of Hillary Clinton. In this way, Trump's promise of transformation is underpinned by a wish for control - and at the level of fantasy, its collective appeal seems to operate culturally as a form of manic defence against the unknown and the loss of faith in the grand narrative of history and nation.

A political flirtation with nostalgia and death

What Trump and Farage share is an appeal to a new kind of politics and yet their rhetoric is underpinned by a melancholic wish to return to a consoling fantasy of an earlier era that reassures and embraces history as an uncanny likeness of the past. In the case of Farage, the narrative rests on a colonial vision of England that is free from the castrating nanny-skirts of Europe, and, for Trump, there is also a pledge to restore the nation to some notion of its former greatness. The repetitive narrative of history that is presented here returns us to Freud's (1920/1984) theory of play in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Freud argued that the repetitive nature of play as a form of mastery is linked to the death instinct, and here I am reminded of the work of forensic psychotherapist Estella Weldon (2011). Developing the ideas of Thomas Ogden (1999), Weldon refers to the 'deathly' nature of flirtation on the part of some who repeatedly flirt with death and 'dance with danger' in order to experience a feeling of reality and defend against trauma and a dread of the past. Weldon's description evokes the quality of political communication in the current climate – where history is used and abused, the violent underpinning of flirtatious mastery asserts itself and the dialectical, interactive dimension of play is lost.

That pattern of relating is present in the extreme rhetoric of Trump, who uses 'the big lie' progaganda technique [vi] by repeating his version of the truth over and over again to bash his detractors into submission. At the unconscious level, such a strategy, with its echoes of deathly repetition, seems to carry in its wake the affective traces of earlier traumas and death. With that in mind, I want to conclude by turning back to the UK context and the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox by a right-wing extremist at the height of the 2016 UK Referendum campaign. The almost ritualistic nature of her death at that moment of high tension amidst an emotionally charged and often racist referendum campaign was at cultural and political levels over-determined by some of the processes that I have described. In the aftermath of her death, Farage's campaign was criticised for its overt and covert racism (Dathan, 2016). And yet on the morning after the Brexit result, a beaming Nigel Farage appeared on our television screens surrounded by his supporters saying that they should celebrate because they had won 'without a single bullet being fired' (Moran, 2016). In that moment of disavowal, Farage conveyed for us the violent underbelly of his brand of political communication and the cost of his charisma in an age of casino politics.

I have set out to show that the deployment of a free associative, psycho-cultural approach to such events allows one to explore the different registers of meaning that are bound up with the interplay of cultural, political and affective experience. Such an approach, which draws on object relations psychoanalysis and re-works it for the contemporary age, also contributes to the emerging field of psycho-political studies. I would argue that this is a timely move given the irrational and emotive nature of political culture today.

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Endnotes

[i] See http://squiggle-foundation.org/about-2/, accessed 20 July 2017.

[ii] This anecdote comes from a close friend of mine who in the early 1990s regularly visited Marion Milner to discuss issues related to his creativity as a musician and artist.

[iii] Questions of masculinity and intersectionality provide a sub-text for the present discussion. I have discussed the psycho-cultural relationship between masculinity and politics elsewhere (Yates, 2015).Women politicians have a different pact with the electorate to men and cannot mobilise the same flirtatious strategies as their male colleagues (Yates and Thompson, 2016, 2017; Yates, 2015). (In this last sentence, I'm not wholly clear how the first clause joins to the next one – who/what is doing the 'focusing on their appeal' here?)

[iv] Winnicott (1971) argued that the transitional object is the infant's first 'not-me' object, and its use helps the infant to move from his or her primary identification with the maternal object into a world of external objects. In so doing, it helps to bridge the divide that opens up when the infant perceives and begins to understand the outside world.

[v] Bollas (1987) says that, in pre-verbal experience, the adaptation of the maternal figure to the infant's needs transforms the infant's experience from pain or anxiety to comfort and safety. This experience of the infant that is provided by the mother becomes unconsciously internalised as a transformational object.