Xenophobia, the Unconscious, the Public Sphere and Brexit

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We examine xenophobia from the perspective of the unconscious of individuals, groups and nations, emphasizing the role of fantasy, and arguing that some leaders use xenophobic discourse to exploit fantasies arising from emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger. We discuss this in the context of the public sphere as conceptualized by Habermas. We illustrate this with reference to an analysis of the psychic life of 'Brexit', the UK decision to exit the European Union in 2016, arguing that Brexit was one expression of the unconscious life of a nation. We contribute to our understanding of xenophobia and the role of psychodynamic forces within the public sphere by highlighting the key role of the unconscious and its ability to be influenced by leaders. We conclude by reflecting on how we might work to counter xenophobia and its fantasies.

Keywords: xenophobia; unconscious; fantasy; Brexit; leadership; public sphere

Introduction: xenophobia and the unconscious

Xenophobia is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the 'deep antipathy to foreigners and foreign things'. It reflects a sense of individual, group and national identity narrowly defined in terms of an ethnocentrism (Levine and Campbell, 1972) that generates intolerance and aggressive rejection of those perceived as not belonging to your national group, manifested in the tendency of individuals and groups to identify with in-groups and reject out-groups. The aim of our paper is to present an argument for considering the important role of the unconscious in creating and sustaining xenophobia. We begin by considering unconscious drivers of individual and public behaviour such as fantasies concerning the self and others. We then examine the role of these forces in the public sphere. We focus on this dynamic in an examination of the unconscious forces at play in Brexit, the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union. Finally, we tentatively suggest how we might learn to manage better the unconscious drivers that impact our public sphere.

Our argument is influenced by psychodynamically derived political and social analysis, particularly psychoanalysis, which argues that ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism have their origins in deep-rooted emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger and fantasies, expressive of unconscious conflicts and desires (Auestad, 2013). Butler (1997) describes this process as part of the 'psychic life of power'. Our psychic life, she argues, is, in part, generated by the social operation of power mediated by the discourses of those who hold and define power: 'power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity' (Butler, 1997, p. 3).

Anderson (2006, p. 9) suggests that nations are haunted by 'ghostly national imaginings' and argues that these tend to become more extreme when we experience events that are perceived as forms of national trauma, for example, economic decline and war. As Young-Bruehl (2013, pp. 46–47) describes it, 'a society provides the individuals who constitute it with a protective shield or shields and there are traumas that breach these shields of existential belonging and social care or service and political union'. Social trauma is akin to individual trauma which reignites feelings based on events, real or imagined,

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in the past, in particular feelings of helplessness and betrayal by those responsible for caring for us or feelings of our own inadequacy or insignificance (Freud, 1921).

People react to trauma with fear and/or anger. Hostility to the other is frequently presented at a group/national level in terms of danger to the body, for example, the 'body politic'. The other brings with him/her the danger of pollution, of impurity, of sickness, of poisoning of that which is fantasied as pure (Douglas, 2002). The idea of the nation as mother being polluted by racial impurity was a central tenet of national socialism and Nazi propaganda. The xenophobic impetus is to reject the foreign body and to re-establish a sense of wholeness and continuity with an unsullied past (Eriksen, 2002). The pure object is idealized as the other is denigrated, demonized even, rejected and excluded. Freud (1921) sees this as a form of narcissism.

Leadership has an important role to play in encouraging or in resisting xenophobia. Much of the literature on leadership has tended towards the functional with arguments for the importance of heroic charismatic and transformational leaders as agents of change in public and private sectors (Kotter, 1996), setting 'bold aspirations', making 'tough decisions' as a recent report by the leading management consultancy McKinsey (Cohen *et al.*, 2019) describes. However, given the prevalence of negative leadership behaviour – for example, during the banking crisis and by those in public life – there is a growing interest in the dark side of leadership (de Vries, 2018) and the 'dark triad traits' (narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy) exhibited by some who have risen to positions of power (Rauthmannm and Kolar, 2012). Our analysis suggests that we might even consider xenophobia as an addition to the triad of dark traits.

Leadership in the public sector can be especially difficult if we accept that in the public sphere we are lacking easy answers due to the complexity of many issues concerning public life (Heifetz, 1998). We contend that one of the defining features of political leadership in recent times has been the recourse to a discourse of xenophobia to focus and simplify arguments about complex issues by appeal to people's darker emotions that are driven by the unconscious to gain political leverage.

The unconscious

A key assumption of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious plays a key role in social and individual life (Gabriel, 2011). The unconscious is the source of fantasies about ourselves and others and the emotional drive of the unconscious is an important factor in behaviour. The relationship between leaders and followers, for example, can be understood as rooted as much in emotion as in logic and reason. Groups exhibit strong emotional ties based upon shared fantasies of the way they would like the world to be which can prove impervious to the logic of scientific argument and evidence (Freud, 1921). Groups can identify strongly with leaders and idealize them (Bion, 1961) while leaders can exploit the emotionality of individuals and groups for their own ends.

The issue of the relationship between individual and social psychodynamics was a key concern of Freud in his later writings such as *The future of an illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and its discontents* (1930). In the latter, he argues that the individual perception of the social world emerges out of unresolved infantile psychological conflict in which the 'other' is identified as a threat because the source of the frustration of desire. The individual pleasure principle, the egoistic drive for pleasure, finds itself at odds with the reality principle, an unwilling acknowledgment that others will frequently frustrate our demands. To cope with this we generate a variety of forms of illusion and fantasy (Freud, 2008).

Psychoanalysis has made significant contributions to the study of organizations not least in illuminating the unconscious forces that can drive behaviours (Stein, 2003; Fotaki *et al.*, 2012; Stein, 2016; Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2018; Vince, 2019). A psychodynamic perspective focuses on the power of fantasy to obscure reason. Laplanche and Pontalis (2018, p. 314) define fantasy as an 'imaginary scene in which the subject is the protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes'.

Our lives are shaped by emotion as much as by reason and by the psychic defences we adopt to protect ourselves from the consequences of negative experience reignited in our fantasy lives. In times of high emotion, of anxiety, fear or anger, for example, we risk a return of the repressed aspects of our inner lives dominating our ability to respond to the present. We grow psychologically to the extent that we can acknowledge and learn from this (Winnicott, 1999). Conversely, to the extent that we fail to complete this psychological work of adaptation, we run the risk of regression and behaviour that repeats the unresolved unconscious dynamics of our earlier lives.

An important part of the psychodynamics of self is the tendency to dissociate from those parts of the self that we find unacceptable. We tend to project our negative fantasies onto others, blaming them for our problems (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012). Our capacity for responding effectively to change is jeopardized by unrecognized and deeply rooted defences (Miller, 1985). The psychodynamic challenge for individuals and groups is to create a sense of self and of the world that sustains us emotionally by making our libidinal and our aggressive drives manageable.

Social conflicts reflect our own unresolved inner conflicts and the aggression that derives from the frustration of being unable to adapt a realistic sense of what is possible. Freud frames this as a conflict between Eros and Thanatos, a life instinct deriving from our propensity to develop close positive human relations, and a death instinct, driven by aggression and a belief in what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw as a natural pre-civilized state of a war of all against all. Normal human unhappiness, Freud (2004) argues, comes from the acceptance of culture involving a renunciation of instinct.

In times of change, when our sense of self is undermined by the uncertain and the unexpected, unconscious fantasy can take hold of individuals and groups. In Freudian terms (Freud, 1962) the id and its repressed desires, its reaction to fear and anger, overwhelm the ego's capacity for self-regulation. What is particularly dangerous at this point is that we become overwhelmed by destructive fantasy focused on *the other* as the source of all our negative emotions and experiences. We project on to them our rage and despair (Klein, 1975), incapable of tolerating our unease, with fantasy overwhelming our ability to create higher order meanings of reconciliation with others perceived to be sharing our fate rather than causing it. The other is seen as cause of our problems and, in our unconscious, becomes the source of and victim of our fantasies (Bion, 1962).

Unscrupulous leaders exploit the psychic life of their followers by appeals to their unconscious emotions and desires, feeding in particular their anxieties, shaping these through leadership discourse. This, in both the case of both leader and follower, is a way of dealing with existential challenges felt deep in their lives that are projected onto the other. Identifying with the leader's discourse brings relief in the way described by Elliott (1996, p. 137) 'the mind is emptied of pain through the defensive use of omnipotent thinking and denial, and the self is fixed through an ideological framing (familial, religious, nationalistic and so forth) of what the world is really like'.

A major cause of psychic distress is something that disrupts the narcissistic sense of self-worth. Narcissism feeds on an unrealistic view of one's own power invested in a fixed form of identity that becomes brittle when challenged. To the extent that leaders feed anxiety, feed on anxiety, and offer hope, false or otherwise, of creating actions that will alleviate pain, the power and mastery attributed to them will be strengthened. Leaders promise to make good what their followers feel they have lost, providing reassurance and thus binding their followers to them in a dependent relationship where the leader is invested with the power to perform what followers feel they cannot. But this is dangerous because it gives a false sense of certainty and resolution when, in complex situations, a capacity to tolerate confusion and anxiety is necessary for reflective political thinking and judgement (Elliott, 1996).

Powerful emotion drives out considered and rational decision-making. Leaders and followers are united by their fantasies. 'The emotional register through which the underpinning fantasies of the regime function thus makes the ethos of the regime less open to thorough-going critique' because fantasy, driven by unconscious tensions and conflicts, 'outstrips the psychical potency of rationality' (Tie, 2004, pp. 163–164). Emotions such as anxiety and envy predominate and we tend to approach the world with aggression born of paranoid anxiety (Klein, 1986). We see the world as peopled with hostile and frightening figures because we project these emotions onto others. Leaders imbued with one or more of the dark traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism or psychopathy, and with an exaggerated sense of their own power and capabilities, capitalize on the fears of their followers (Fotaki and Harding, 2012).

Particularly dangerous are those leaders who feel that it is their destiny to make history, that it is their role to express their own intrinsic mastery by imposing their fantasy of order and leading their followers into the brave new world they imagine. Followers exorcize their sense of impotence by projecting their desire for power onto their chosen leader. The fantasy of omnipotence manifests itself in the discourse of leaders with an over-developed sense of their personal power, their rightness and their vision. A significant danger for leaders is that they become trapped in narcissistic fantasy myths of a special destiny that makes them blind to their own limits (Kayes, 2006).

The social function of civilization, Freud (2008) argues, is the social regulation of relationships by coercion of various kinds to promote discipline by imposing instinctual renunciation. 'Regulation means coercion of the individual, anarchic and rebellious by nature, by the power of the community' (Lothane, 2012, p. 526). Richard (2011, p. 2), analysing present-day forms of discontent with culture from a Freudian perspective, argues that there is a constant tension between civilization and a regressive tendency towards 'barbarism', 'social morality winding up living in cynical cohabitation with a destructiveness that no longer even tries to conceal itself … hungry for immediate gratifications and intolerant of any withholding of its needs or resistance'.

The public sphere

Xenophobia is at odds with the concept of a 'public sphere' that enables groups to transcend difference and come together in a shared sense of their common humanity. Most influentially, Habermas offers us the idea of the public sphere as 'the ideal communication

community' (Bernstein, 1995, p. 1). His work presents 'an acute appreciation of social-political life as a dialogical-communicative process' based upon the assumption of the possibility of communicative rationality in the public sphere (Beiner, 2014, p. 132). Habermas offers psychoanalysis as a model of this process, the manifestation of an ideal speech situation leading to the unlocking of human potential through working through the neurotic fantasies that stifle human potential with an appeal to the transformative power of reason.

For Habermas the challenge is to undo the iron cage of administrative, purposive rationality that dominates and reduces the human potential of human life. Here his work builds upon Weber's vision 'of rationalization as engendering a loss of meaning and value' (Bernstein, 1995, p. 5). This loss can be challenged, he suggests, by an emphasis upon the practice of a more enlightened form of communicative rationality. From a psychoanalytic perspective though, it is as or more likely to be disrupted by an eruption of irrational fantasy. Rather than the ideal of all members of society coming together to engage in a shared dialogue about to create better practices and organizations to improve our common life, society fractures into separate interest groups characterized by their own distinctive fantasies.

For many this Habermasian vision of the potential of the public sphere is utopian and unrealizable (Calhoun, 1992) while the discontents discussed by Freud (2004) continue to dominate private and public life. One can retain Habermas's (1987) ambition of achieving forms of social dialogue based upon a conception of communicatively mediated knowledge creation while also, in our view reasonably, suggesting that the capacity of many participants, including leaders, to make value claims based on the attainment of intersubjective recognition seems, regrettably, in short supply. It is the psychic conditions that limit this supply that we focus on in the theoretical part of this paper, illustrating this shortage in debates leading up to Brexit.

Habermas (1987, p.315) suggests that it is 'the unfettered imperatives of the economic and administrative subsystems', dominated by an Anglo-Saxon capitalist ethos, and their cognitive-instrumental orientation that limit the potential of dialogue in the public sphere. We suggest that it is also the unconscious of individuals and society that is equally limiting, expressing itself, as in Brexit, in an irrationally driven challenge to the claims of scientific expertise and knowledge. The possibilities of communicative, intersubjective rationality are limited in two ways: the myopic rationality of a particular form of modernization (cognitive-instrumental) and the irrational fantasies driven by Freudian discontents.

Castoriadis (1997) is less idealistic than Habermas in this analysis of the possibilities of the public sphere, linking this to a social psychoanalytic perspective on the tension between private and public and a crisis of the 'social imaginary'. Quoting Freud's view that neurosis has its origin in the flight from an unsatisfying reality into the vicarious pleasures afforded by fantasy, Castoriadis (2005) argues the individual's relationship to the public sphere reflects the experience of what is perceived as the violence that prevents full realization of private desire. This tension/unconscious war between the public and the private is a clash of what Castoriadis (2011, pp. xvi–xvii) theorizes as 'two imaginary significations: autonomy and "rational mastery"'.

Social crisis is the result of a 'crisis in social imaginary significations', especially the 'capitalist imaginary of unlimited production and consumption' in which the active citizen has been replaced by the hyperactive consumer. The background to this is a social imaginary that reflects a reality that '[o]n the factual level the essential features of public affairs are still the private affair of various groups and clans that share effective power, decisions are made behind closed doors, the little that is brought onto the public stage is masked, prefabricated, and belated to the point of irrelevancy' (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 407).

The unconscious of Brexit

A central argument of psychoanalysis is that fantasy, desire and social order/disorder are deeply entangled (Elliott, 1996). We illustrate this argument with respect to Brexit, suggesting that fantasy and desire conspired among Brexit supporters and their leaders resulting in the disruptive change of the UK's exit from the EU. Stein (2016) analyses European monetary union as a 'fantasy of fusion' in which a key desire was to heal the trauma of the Second World War. Our analysis suggests that Brexit was, in part, driven by a fantasy of liberation from fusion, linked to xenophobic displacement activity which found a convenient scapegoat in the EU and, in particular, its open borders, for undermining the history, identity and purity of the UK. Blame for our current discontent was projected onto the EU and its perceived beneficiaries, for example, immigrant labour, and this served as a convenient distraction from accepting personal responsibility for our own shortcomings and also seeing the benefits of EU membership.

Our analysis of Brexit is text-based (Gephart, 1993). We draw inspiration for this from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) which was developed to examine the social and political significance of texts. Critical discourse analysis interrogates discourse as forms of social practice, comparing its expression at different contexts, for example, 'the situation, the institutional context, and the wider societal context' (Fairclough, 1993, p. 137). First, we locate the Brexit 'debate' in terms of its socio-historical context of deeply-rooted fantasy of British

nationhood. Next, we look at the discourses of Brexit leaders preceding the UK referendum. Finally, we look at the motivations of two different groups of Brexit voters, the affluent white older conservatives of the UK 'home counties' located in the South-East of England, and the working class voters of the industrial north, particularly the North East.

Fantasies of a once greater nation. The unconscious of a nation is reflected in the stories it tells itself, the myths it propagates to bolster its sense of self, its culture and its telling and retelling of its history. Historically, there has always been a great deal of scepticism and even hostility in the UK about EU membership. The UK as a union of nations voted collectively to leave the EU with the desire to leave being more concentrated in England and Wales. Pro-European UK political leaders acknowledged, from the outset, that arguments for greater integration with Europe had to address a deep-rooted English xenophobia. In the 1960s, when a Conservative government under Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was working towards closer integration with Europe, the view in government was that 'the xenophobic tendencies of the British could be reined in and their patriotism made to incorporate a sense of Europeanness' through an appeal to idealism (Weight, 2002, p. 350).

There was little evidence of idealism during the Brexit debate. For example, a key driver, exploited by those leading the case for Brexit, was the anxiety of many in the UK that drove their attitude towards immigration and the many forms of negative projections onto this 'alien' group (Fortier, 2017). A discourse of xenophobia was used, no longer as a weapon of last resort, but as a first line of attack, signifying what many saw as a 'race to the bottom' in the lead to Brexit (Thränhardt, 1995). Brexit brought to the fore deep-rooted anxieties about Britishness and its place in the world. The EU was a convenient scapegoat for UK projections onto others of blame for its decline.

Brexit saw strident claims for English exceptionalism and greatness – it is, after all *Great* Britain – used as a weapon project imbued with nationalist and sometimes explicit racist fervour. This was a fantasy that refused to come to terms with what leading historian of Britishness, Strong (2011, pp. 208, 12) describes, as the reality that 'we have to face up to the truth that we are the inheritors of an idea of empire that no longer has any substance in reality […] Today Britannia no longer rules the waves – and with that we have yet to come to terms'.

Strong (2011) argues that an 'imperial mythology' has been crucial in constructing a strong discourse of English identity, harking back as it does to the days of empire and to victory in the Second World War, which still exerts a strong pull on the imagination of many. Older voters are particularly imbued with this belief and they were a key Brexit-voting group. The idea of empire rather than Europe also remains particularly strong among this group despite evidence of the unequivocal decline in British imperial power and its national competitive performance on a number of economic indices including productivity. In this discourse, there is a constant replaying of stories of the glories of history and tradition, examples of British greatness including being a victor in the Second World War (Hennessy, 2019). 'Britons never ever shall be slaves' is an old English nostrum that supports ideas such as national sovereignty, free trade and liberation from stifling, wasteful EU bureaucracy and legislation.

As Jeremy Kinsman (2016), former Canadian High Commissioner in London, argued, in any referendum over separation – and, of course, Canada has significant experience of this – the 'independence' side appeals to the 'patriotic heart':

> The thinking of the Leave side is magical. It plucks at a dimly remembered but glorified past (that was never as good as nostalgia makes it) and offers a future that is imaginary … appeals to the nation's head did not get through. In a post-factual political age, reasoning does not reach the heart. To win, you needed to mobilize convincing passion behind the case that the status quo is both preferable and improvable.

Brexit spoke to British fantasies of exceptional power and heroic British individuals, quintessentially represented in the seminal figure of Winston Churchill, regularly voted Britain's greatest ever leader. The Second World War continues to cast a long shadow over the UK and forms a key reference point of national consciousness with older generations stuck in what Weight (2002, p. 345) describes as a 'cultural bunker'. The myth of Churchill is of an heroic leader singlehandedly saving the world from Nazi domination and this remains one of the great British epics.

There is in this a fantasy of omnipotence, the unquestioning and unquestionable ability to control our own destiny irrespective of outside forces. History is appealed to as evidence of a special British destiny. Liberated again from the oppression of foreign powers, in the case of Brexit, the EU, the fantasy is that we will be free to regain our former glories. This omnipotence, with its echoes of imperial greatness, refuses to come to terms with the lessons of history, wallows in nostalgia for a lost past, and presents a golden future in which a renewed nation resumes its lost global role as "Britannia Unchained" (Kwarteng *et al.*, 2012) as depicted by leading Brexit supporting Conservative politicians.

Leaders stoke the flames with xenophobic discourse. A psychoanalytic perspective suggests that leadership can sometimes be construed as an exercise in 'exploiting primary dependencies' and that, in their need to belong, followers 'subject' themselves to leaders' discourse which

trades on their 'primary vulnerability' (Butler, 1997, p. 20). There were two main groups campaigning for Brexit. One was led by a group of politicians, mainly Conservative, under the leadership of two government ministers, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. The other prominent group on the Leave side of the argument was Leave.EU, led by a member of the European Parliament (MEP) and leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage.

Johnson and Farage are classic exponents of what has been described as the 'post-truth' ideological strategy (McIntyre, 2018), asserting one's own sense of truth supremacy, thus reinforcing one's own sense of omnipotence, by persuading people to believe you, even if the evidence suggests otherwise. In the Referendum Vote Leave leaders emphasized all the negatives they could find, or create, to denigrate the role of the EU (Clarke *et al.*, 2017). The Remain camp argued, rationally and rather politely, for the *status quo,* largely on economic grounds, warning against the economic damage Brexit might cause and claiming that the UK would be 'Stronger In'. The Leave campaigners were much more extreme and emotional in their arguments. First, they labelled the entire Remain campaign as 'Project Fear'. Second, they played their trump card of xenophobia, focusing on what they claimed was the threat of large-scale immigration as a result of the EU's policy of freedom of movement, one of the EU's foundational principles. They denigrated their opponents for stoking 'fear' unjustly, while themselves exploiting their own supporters' fear and anger.

Johnson, a future Prime Minister and then most popular member of the Conservative Party for his flamboyant appeal to traditional Conservative voters, not least because of his anti-EU stance, played a pivotal role in the Brexit campaign. His expression of support for Brexit was a seminal event. It is credited by many as being the key factor in creating a majority vote for Leave. In the campaign, Johnson felt enabled to resort to racial stereotyping and harking back to the atrocities of the Second World War, warning against 'a Gestapo-controlled Nazi EU', while re-igniting the long cherished British mythic conception of itself as the hero of two world wars, which, perversely, had their origins in Europe. In this biased conception of military history Britain had stood alone and was the key force in returning freedom to a continent ravaged by war. Part of Johnson's appeal was to a particular form of English nationalism, which resonated strongly with many areas of the UK. According to Shipman (2017, p. 181), Johnson became 'the embodiment of the nation', at least for those who were anti-EU. He also became the emblem of a form of British nationalism that Remain campaigners were trying to resist.

Johnson had history in Europe. He had started his career as a political journalist. As EU correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, a fiercely anti-EU newspaper owned by (allegedly) tax exile billionaires, Johnson's dispatches from Brussels (Johnson, 2003) became legend due to the comic vigour of his prose, his propensity for exaggeration and his cavalier approach to the truth, always at the expense of the EU's image in the UK (Gimson, 2016). Entertaining fiction sells newspapers and Johnson's was particularly popular among the affluent middle-class home counties readership of the *Daily Telegraph*. Johnson regaled his readers with comic vignettes about the EU desire to regulate staples of the British diet such as sausages and bananas. 'The bigger the lie and the more frequently it was repeated the more it was believed' (MacShane, 2016, p. 10). Clarke (2017, p. 353) says of Johnson's reports for the *Daily Telegraph* that they 'were often nearer to fiction than reality'

The other key leadership figure in the Brexit story was Nigel Farage. A former commodity trader, he helped found then became a member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the UK Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP was established with only one aim – to get the UK out of Europe. As its leader, Farage progressively refined UKIP's anti-EU stance to include hostility towards large-scale immigration from the EU. Like Johnson, Farage came to enjoy an intense popularity and loyalty among his followers. Under Farage's leadership UKIP, although a single-issue organization, became a powerful political force in the UK. Indeed, one of the main reasons for agreeing to a Referendum was the then Prime Minister David Cameron's conviction that if he did not agree to this the Conservative Party would lose political ground on the right to UKIP.

Like Johnson, Farage extolled the unique virtues and power of the UK, the ability to stand alone, against the world if necessary, backed by appeals to an extreme brand of patriotism. This argument was encapsulated in the message of 'Taking back control' and the fantasy that we are 'Stronger alone'. What was most striking about the Farage-led campaign was its unremitting focus on the toxic issue of immigration. The official Leave campaign had overemphasized the likelihood of Turkey joining the EU as a full member in the near future, something that most commentators accepted was unlikely. This was interpreted as a veiled reference to problems of immigration from new EU accession countries. Farage was more explicit and emphasized what he argued were the detrimental effects of uncontrolled immigration on the life chances of the British people, undermining services and stealing employment opportunities. It was claimed, for example, that towns felt besieged by large-scale immigration and that Britain was being 'swamped' by overseas benefit claims.

There was no evidence to support the latter claim but in a post-truth environment there is a tendency to believe what we want to believe and to disbelieve what expert

opinion suggests is more fact-based, a case of what Thompson (2016, p. 211) describes as the 'pollution of meanings'. A low point of the Brexit campaign for many was Farage unveiling posters about immigration, including an image of a long stream of migrants at the Croatian–Slovenian border under the slogan 'Breaking Point'. As Freud (2004) points out, a key feature of self-aggrandizement and the lust for power is to blame others for our own failings and use the other as a convenient focus for scapegoat aggression.

Unscrupulous leaders cynically exploit the emotions of their supporters. Former EU President Jean-Claude Juncker (Stone, 2019) later regretted that he did not intervene more forcefully during the Brexit campaign to challenge the 'bullshit' and 'lies' spread by 'Boris Johnson and others'. It is also reported that President Macron of France described Brexiteers as 'anger-mongers backed by fake news' peddling lies and irresponsibility. This is a key tactic of those who exploit xenophobia. They prey on the grief and anger that stems from loss of various kinds and the melancholia and anger that loss creates. Leaders lead their followers with an irrational promise, a fantasy of regaining that which was lost, presented, in the case of Brexit, in a discourse of individual and national pride. They normalize anger at loss and paranoia that the other presents an existential threat, channelling it through xenophobia into a positive sense of hope for the future if only the threat can be eradicated. Because the other is presented as a threat and even as dehumanized, certainly not one of us, leaders vindicate negative emotions and absolve followers of guilt for their anger and expressions of hostility which is felt as a form of liberation.

Paranoia and narcissism combine to create the perfect xenophobic storm. 'Xenological' discourse (Schick, 1999, p. 10) signals out the stranger, the other, as source of our trauma and as its solution if we can exorcize his/her baleful presence. In Brexit it was the unconscious psychic life of its most fervent supporters through which political leaders channelled emotions of anxiety and anger into the Leave vote through appealing to latent xenophobia. Ethno-nationalists make their case around mantra such as 'Take back our country' or, in UK reaction about the growing integration of the EU as a political entity, 'Take back control', regain sovereign power.

A tale of two social groups. The expression of xenophobia was made almost respectable in the discourse of some pro-Brexit politicians and by some sections of the right-leaning media and ran wild on social media (Sveinnson, 2009; Gillborn, 2010; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Xenophobic behaviour is particularly attributed to white youth and a racist working class. However, xenophobia also manifested itself in a more genteel way in the affluent generally older conservative population, inhabitants of the South-East of England home counties, with a particular form of national pride rooted in its own view of English/British history. Johnson's journalism, for example appealed to particularly the latter group who read the *Daily Telegraph* and this reinforced their fantasy image of the EU as a rapacious, out of control anti-UK beast committed to total control of its nation members. Leaving the EU would magically allow Great Britain to rediscover and reassert its intrinsic greatness and, once again, repel unwanted foreign invasion.

While the Leave vote was high among older more affluent Conservative voters harking after a Great Britain that they thought they remembered and that they feared they had lost, support for Brexit was also high among the economically disadvantaged, less educated and poorer voters in regions such as the North East of England, who had suffered most from de-industrialization (Hobolt, 2016; Colotone and Stanig, 2018). For this group recent history had been a time of change and dwindling economic fortunes, with the decline in traditional working class jobs and austerity eating into the provision and quality of state-provided public services. Social groups who feel themselves threatened by immigration, for example, linking it to decrease in job opportunities, access to housing and welfare and other services, are a key target for xenophobia and racist ideology (Wrench and Solomos, 1993).

From a psychodynamic perspective, as traditional forms of work, particularly industrial manual work, are replaced by more precarious and less well-paid jobs, the consequence can be a deep sense of both loss and impotence which finds expression in rage against those identified as perpetrators of your harm. People experience a challenge to their sense of identity that manifests itself in both anxiety and anger. The EU is a convenient target, portrayed as the enemy 'forever exposing them to a relentless downward pressure on their living standards in the name of market opening competition, privatization and austerity cuts in social provision' (MacShane, 2016, p. 15). This exacerbates the sense of grievance and impotence that has arisen, at least in part, due to the perception of Britain having an unending and large redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich (Gilmour, 1992). In the regions, it was the case for Brexit that ignited passions and fantasies of revenge as the apparently disenfranchised took their cues from what Kinsman (2016) describes as populist identity-driven nativists with xenophobic views such as that immigrants' sole aims are 'to exploit the social benefits of the state or destroy its core values' (Arrocha, 2019, p. 245).

Discussion/conclusion

Our first conclusion is that we need to become more willing to consider the role of the unconscious in

individual, social and public life. Particularly in relation to dysfunctional thinking and behaviour, such as xenophobia, individuals, organizations and institutions are not the rational entities that many like to believe. An engagement with the unconscious sources of emotions, values, desires and fantasies can promote deeper consideration of the barriers to the rational modes of behaviour that many aspire to. This gives us deeper insight into the unconscious barriers so resistant to change. Such understanding is necessary if we are to counter the 'illusions of self-foundation, necessity and universality' that so many of us identify with and to promote 'new political objectives and new human attitudes' (Castoriadis, 1997, pp. 35–43). As Habermas argues, social life is not only 'a set of objective processes capable of being mastered from an objectifying standpoint' (Beiner, 2014, p. 143). In its fullest expression, it is created out of inter-subjectivity, communicative agency and dialogue about how to improve our social practices and institutions.

Psychoanalysis belongs to 'the same emancipatory project as democracy and philosophy' (Rockhill, 2011, p. xx) not least in its role of explaining why the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere is so difficult to achieve, revealing beneath the veneer of rationality in individual and public life the role of the unconscious, not least in the service of power. Beneath a discourse of instrumental rationality, as Castoriadis (1997) argues, there exists the pervasive influence of the social imaginary. Beneath the appeal of Brexit, based on the discourse of Great Britain reasserting its greatness lies the lust for power of political leaders, the fantasies of both an aging affluent population and marginal less affluent groups focusing their fear and anger on alien government and the threat of the immigrant other.

The alternative to these fantasies is to promote the importance of 'reflective subjectivity' to encourage the development of subjects 'capable of calling into question the imaginary significations of the society in which she lives, and even the institutions of that society', thus expanding the psychic space of what is 'thinkable' (Castoriadis, 2007, pp. 219–220). For psychoanalysis the goal is to facilitate a more autonomous subject, recognizing that our goal of autonomy is indissociably linked to and has to be pursued in the context of our relationship to the freedom of others in which the goal of autonomy is to create new meanings about how to relate to each other (Castoriadis, 1991). The true expression of autonomy depends upon the desire and the ability to self-question, to challenge the rule of an imaginary (Castoriadis, 2005; Bauman, 2001). The autonomous subject is he/she who can bring into consciousness that which is repressed and thus forge a new relationship with self and other, with desire and reality (Castoriadis, 2005).

A major concern of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (2004), was the forces driving and inhibiting civilization. Civilization, he concluded, is constantly threatened with disintegration because we frequently indulge in delusional behaviours that manifest hostility to others. 'The fateful question for the human race', Freud (2004, p. 74) argues, 'seems to be whether, and to what extent, the development of its civilization will manage to overcome the disturbance of communal life caused by the human drive for aggression and self-destruction'. Freud identifies the tendency as 'the greatest obstacle to civilization'.

We see xenophobia as a classic 'disturbance' of the possibility of communal life and, as such, a great 'obstacle to civilization'. For us xenophobia is primarily a psychic phenomenon formed out of negative emotions and fantasy. Psychodynamics, and within that psychoanalysis analysis, suggests that the antidote to social disintegration is to rekindle the capacity for reparation, to understand better the fear and anger that undermine relationships with others, 'to bring the relationship back to life, and to protect self and other from further unacceptable aggressive and destructive wishes … generated through the defensive use of omnipotent thinking, idealization, denial and, crucially, projective identification' (Elliott, 1996, p.78). This is easier said than done and requires leaders capable of focusing people's attention on a more positive future that does not involve the denigration of others, leaders who promote a discourse of inclusion rather than separation and exclusion. This involves relinquishing fantasies of an ideal world based on simple one-dimensional notions of good and bad. It also requires the ability to tolerate uncertainty and ambivalence (Lapierre, 1989).

Klein (1986) argues that the ego has to learn to trust more in the benevolence of others and to control our own tendency to do harm to others. This is not an easy process, involving as it does the withdrawal of identification with fantasy objects. Klein (1975) also argues that it is in the drive to make reparation, to repair the damages done and the cleavages created, that makes hope for the future prevail and grounds our ability to create a better future than can come from any fantasy of omnipotence. Boris Johnson used Brexit to further his long-held ambition of becoming UK Prime Minister, something he finally achieved in 2019.

One conclusion of our paper is that we can only resolve our current dilemmas if we have leaders who are capable of bringing people together, focused not on creating discord but on reparation and the healing of divisions for a common good. Until then fantasy is likely to prevail. In such a context, the common public interest, mediated by a variety of institutions and organizations in public and private sectors, is perceived as controlled by sectional interests, political or economic. A critical task of our time

for political and business leaders is to re-establish trust in such an order, changing its structures when necessary to achieve this, thus promoting positive emotions of reality-based pride and achievement rather than failure and prejudice. Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality and more ethical discourse does provide an important touchstone and aspiration for political democracy and other forms of organization (Bernstein, 1995).

As management educators we link this to the importance of education. Leadership and management education needs to be based less on disseminating 'rules' for technical competence, many of them based on fantasies of reason and control, and more on cultivating reflectiveness, 'an openness to our ethical and moral capacity to tolerate difference and otherness; which in turn implicates the imagination, the bringing in of the human element … to the point where knowledge is turned back upon itself to examine its presuppositions, thus allowing room to unearth the contradictions of the established social order' (Elliott, 1996, p. 93). Universities have been central to the Western discourse of the university and the public good. When Harvard Business School was established, it was justified as enhancing the capacity of the university for public good. However, in recent years, business schools have been criticized for putting private gain above public purpose (Khurana, 2007). As Nussbaum (1998) points out, liberal education is about developing the ability to think critically and reflexively about ourselves and others, based on respect for the humanity of others. One of the educational tragedies of our time is, as Nussbaum also argues, is that education has become too focused on technical competence and employability at the expense of respect for humanity. We need to integrate technical competence and humanity with education that aligns public and private interests and leads to better outcomes in terms of public value (Moore, 1995). We need to disabuse our leaders, in public and private sectors, that there are easy answers to complex problems (Heifetz, 1998).

We need to take history more seriously and conduct research to investigate why the past is not better used as a source of and a resource for learning. Andress (2018) describes the refusal to engage with history as driven by emotional forces and political convenience. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) capture the underlying dynamic of this situation, arguing that we face a situation in which individuals, because they know that honest conversation is difficult or impossible, perversely use all the resources at their disposal to ensure that there is no proper conversation. A discourse of economic necessity proliferates without critical reflection on the fact that this is one expression of a particular discourse of the dominant social imaginary and not, necessarily, the best or the most useful form of discourse.

The role of the business school and management education in contributing to a public sphere in which 'practical reason [is] institutionalized through norms of reasoned discourse in which arguments, not statuses or traditions, [are] decisive' (Calhoun, 1992, p. 2) is an important issue for urgent consideration. A public sphere thus constituted has the potential to be a powerful force for social integration based upon a people developed and public use of their reason to address complex social challenges through a shared commitment to practical reason (Habermas, 1989). Reason itself achieves greater competence in the process. Habermas (1989) acknowledges the degeneration of the public sphere in contemporary mass consumer society but it is not clear how Habermas's theory is practically useful in allowing us to discuss the ideal of a more just, more rational democracy based on a more vibrant and integrative public sphere (Hohendahl, 1989). We suggest that such a project will involve greater engagement with the theory of the unconscious and its expression as a means towards how we can better channel its energy productively and mitigate its destructive potential. We contribute to our understanding of xenophobia and the role of psychodynamic forces within the public sphere by highlighting the key role of the unconscious and its ability to be influenced by leaders. Freud (2004) argues that a clash between barbarism and civilization lies at the very heart of the collective unconscious. Without taking this seriously and a collective attempt in the public sphere to counter it, xenophobia will only increase.

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