On the Psychodynamics of Boris Johnson and Brexit

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Earlier this year, Boris Johnson used his much-trailed Valentine's Day speech to deliver his vision of how the UK should come together, accept the 2016 UK Referendum result, and look forward to all that life outside the EU has to offer. In the lead up to this speech, we were told that he intended it to reach out to Remainers, to reassure them that things wouldn't be as bad as they feared. He urged them - in effect - to dust themselves off, accept 'the will of the people', and start all over again by embracing the new landscape of a post-Brexit Britain (Johnson, 2018). And yet Johnson's playful stab at political courtship, with its mock-psychological references to the problem of 'Brexcosis' failed to hit the spot, leading some to argue that, like a fading music hall act performing at the end of the pier, Johnson had lost his touch and that his cachet as a popular politician was on the wane. Johnson's attempt to flirt with Remainers was probably always doomed, and one suspects that his speech was aimed more at shoring up approval ratings among his existing supporters. Research shows that since 2016, attitudes have hardened on each side of the Remainer/Leaver divide in British public opinion, a split that reflects the polarised and highly emotive nature of contemporary UK politics (Hobolt et al, 2018). A psychodynamic analysis of emotional investment in the Brexit campaign and its leaders allows us to understand the powerful structures of feeling that shape politics today. Johnson played a significant role in rallying support for the 'Leave' campaign in the months leading up to the Referendum. His decision to back the leave campaign and 'come out as an

outer' was taken after months of 'indecision' and 'a huge amount of heartache' (Johnson, 2016).

Johnson's vacillations around the EU campaign hark back to a deeply flirtatious style of politicking rooted in his time as London Mayor, as I discuss elsewhere (Yates, 2014, 2016). Johnson continues to draw on the familiar, playful routines that worked so well for him during this period, which one might see as his 'heyday'. All this helps to shore up his power base as a potential leader in waiting, but, as his prevarications around Brexit show, it is not easy to square such ambition with his public reputation. His flirtation with voters on the theme of Europe provides an example of his seemingly spontaneous, authentic un-spun qualities that in the past have been key to his ability to connect with the public. Johnson's communication skills have been honed over the years in various media settings, and his celebrity status on television and in political debates is such, that he is still regarded as 'political box office'. Johnson has constructed a persona as a benign, old-school English eccentric, who refuses to identify with superego figures of authority such as those who were eventually labelled in pejorative terms as the out of touch 'metropolitan elite' following the Brexit campaign, or as 'faceless technocrats' of EU leader, President, Jean-Claude Juncker's ilk.

In the past, psychoanalytic studies of leadership have focused on the processes of fantasy around politicians as idealised parental figures, where the vertical structures of identification shape our relationship to them as objects of the political imagination. Today, however, western democracies are influenced by a loss of faith in the old structures of authority where the hierarchical Oedipal identifications in public life have been challenged by the social and cultural forces of late modernity. The increasing influence of social media across all levels of society has also undermined

the old symbolic order of paternal identification and often leads to more horizontal, 'sibling' structures of identification. The popularity of Johnson's playful persona invites such fraternal rather than paternal identification, providing a perfect foil for perceptions about the 'faceless authoritarian' figures of the EU and the 'elitism' of its governing bodies. With his teddy bear looks and public gaffes that make people laugh, Johnson is a seductive figure – a cuddly toy with whom the electorate can play. Any notion of governance associated with his role as a senior politician is thus undercut.

In some ways, Johnson's image has allowed the electorate to identify with him as a version of Winnicott's (1953) 'transitional object', providing a sense of safety in an age of profound insecurity and crisis, thereby also illustrating the changing psycho-political dynamics of fantasy in public life. Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena has, of late, been applied to the experience of relating to the objects of contemporary media and popular culture (Bainbridge and Yates, 2014), and our unconscious investments in Johnson as a psychological object of political culture is an example of how this works. Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena and cultural experience can be deployed to explore the public fascination with figures such as Johnson. The public interaction with him – or at least the interaction with his persona as a cultural object – often mirrors the pleasurable dynamics of playing with a transitional object or toy, and Johnson's comedic, non-impinging image helps this process along. Aided by his appearance on various media platforms, including lively interactive social networks, Johnson also seems very good at taking part in the game (Yates, 2014).

His apparent lack of deference to the establishment sits well with an electorate who are increasingly cynical and disenchanted with politics, and he manages to ward

off any potential envy of his position as an elite politician by representing himself as an un-impinging figure that people can enjoy. Throughout the Brexit campaign, Johnson often appeared to gently mock the pomposity of those in the establishment who were too negative and seemed to take themselves too seriously. This very traditional *English* trait of refusing to commit and take things too seriously taps into Johnson's populist appeal, allowing him to associate himself with a nationalist fantasy of 'home'. In this rendition, the 'England' in question is one that belongs to a less complicated and secure pre-globalised age symbolised by flag-waving street parties, jammy dodgers and comics such as *The Beano*. And yet, in this realm, psychosocial and political relations were also underpinned by the values of empire and the injuries of 'race', gender and social class.

The use of nostalgia as a defence against the losses and uncertainties of contemporary culture has been discussed at length in psychoanalytic and cultural studies, and the desire to turn back also taps into deep-rooted concerns about change and of being 'left behind' by the forces of modernity (Yates, 2015). As research shows, for many, such anxieties played a key role in motivating them to vote to leave the EU, and Johnson's image and leadership style resonates in that respect (Eaglestone, 2018). A cultural desire to look back, or at least to turn away from contemporary malaise and to identify instead with the retro style of Johnson, can be seen in this broader cultural context, but it is also framed by the experience of social and economic precarity.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this turning back also brings to mind Christopher Bollas's (1987, 1992) theory of object relating, where he contrasts the 'conservation' of objects with their potential to bring 'transformation'. Bollas develops Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena to argue that just as we seek

objects that may hold and reassure us, providing a bridge between inner and outer worlds, we are also changed by those objects, as part of an on-going process of transformation. Each time we experience an object, 'subjectivity is newly informed by the encounter, its history altered by a radically effective present' (Bollas, 1992, p. 59).

Nonetheless, as Bollas argues, alongside the creative aspects of transformation, there are also more defensive and reactionary ways of relating, when objects are used in the service of warding off the risks, and we can extend this to think about the losses that come with cultural change and the fragmentation of late modernity which are also linked to the dynamics of Brexit (Yates, 2015). Bollas's discussion of the relationship between the 'conservation' of objects and 'malignant' moods is evocative when thinking about the mood of Brexit Britain. Bollas (1987, p.102) likens the 'special state of a mood' and the emotional work that takes place within it, to that of a dream, as the mood works as an environment through which the emotional work of object relating takes place. He distinguishes between 'malignant' and 'generative' moods: the former is used as a way to block object relating and is linked to an inability to work through the 'unthought known', those aspects of history that have yet to be properly processed and integrated (1987, pp. 100-101). At the collective level, history is returned to and remains unmourned, as, for example, in idealised accounts of Britain's place in the world as a colonial power.

Bollas's insights throw light on what we see within the hopes and aspirations of those who wish to leave the EU – a desire for some kind of positive transformation in the form, say, of greater sovereignty, a desire to shape one's own laws, remove unnecessary European regulations, develop a more sustainable eco-environment and so on. Johnson's upbeat performance as the leaver's champion can evoke such sentiments. Nonetheless, the wish for transformation in the Brexit campaign has often

been underpinned by a mood of conservation grounded in illusions of nostalgia for a Britain of an earlier era, when the old hierarchies were in place and where cultural differences were less pronounced.

Whilst Johnson likes to talk in an upbeat way about transformation, his speeches and writings in his *Telegraph* column are often awash with signifiers from an earlier era of nation and empire, evoking a kind of *Boy's Own* style of masculinity, often with some Winston Churchill references thrown in, to convey the threat posed by the 'European powers' to the border shores of Britain. He conjures up a picture of the electorate as helpless infants faced with the threat of an all-engulfing Brussels 'Nanny' who has lulled us into a passive state of acquiescence, and he makes a plea for the British to 'be brave', to wake up out of their slumber and imagine 'an independent future' (Johnson, 2016).

More recently, however, one can detect a number of tensions between his comical *Just William* persona and his role as a more serious politician who is currently the British Foreign Secretary with ambitions to lead the UK after severing ties with Europe. As the contradictions of his public persona increasingly fail to convince, a time may be approaching when he can no longer profit from his performance as the popular politician as jester and instead, as an aspiring leader, risk the hate and disappointment that will inevitably come his way.

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