

Book review: *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*.

Yannis Stavrakakis (Ed.), Routledge, 2021, 482 pp., £190.00, hardback, ISBN: 9781032089409

Reviewed by: Savvas Voutyras, Department of Communication Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

Published in: *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2022)

[pre-proofs version]

2021 marked the centenary of the publication of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In that monumental work, Freud offered one of his most elaborate attempts to take the psychoanalytic concepts out of the clinic and use them to explain the formation and character of groups, one of the most fundamental social processes. The implications of Freud's analysis for politics are immense. The bond at the core of all social identity, he tells us, is of a libidinal nature; as such, its logic runs counter to the rationality traditionally associated with isolated individuals. Yet, even with a quick look at our most common responses to recent events (Brexit, the election and presidency of Donald Trump, the various forms of populism and polarisation, etc.) we can easily notice how little we have learned from Freud's lessons. We tend to treat such political developments as exceptions, disturbing anomalies, deviations from a 'normal' politics that we take to be about consensus and compromise. However, the current political conjuncture presents an opportunity for us to revisit our conceptual tools and core assumptions about politics. While the post-Cold War optimism about the future of the liberal-centrist Western model has faded away, something similar cannot be said about the liberal-rationalist paradigm itself that still predominates in political theory. The above make the *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory* an extremely pertinent and timely resource. The *Handbook* has been edited by Yannis Stavrakakis, a scholar well known for his own contributions to political theory from Freudian and Lacanian perspectives.

The discovery of the unconscious brought a true revolution to our understanding of subjectivity, which made psychoanalysis, since its inception by Freud, a major alternative to positivist and rationalist approaches to human behaviour and social processes. Nevertheless, as Stavrakakis (2020: 1) notes in his Introduction, the *Handbook* 'marks the first time that psychoanalytic political theory is acknowledged as a distinct orientation within political

studies and theory in general in such a prominent way'. While Freud's work has been received with contempt in the field of psychology, psychoanalysis has been thriving in many other areas in the social sciences and humanities. And despite not being a 'mainstream' approach in most of these disciplines, either (certainly not in politics), the volume, variety, and quality of scholarly contributions drawing on psychoanalysis is, indeed, impressive. It is, actually, a daunting task to map the entire variety of contributions of psychoanalytic thought that are of relevance to politics. But this volume achieves this in the most comprehensive way possible, covering a range that starts from Freud himself and extends to emerging research agendas at the crossroads of political theory and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis and politics have crossed in multiple intersections, owing not only to the different meanings and uses of psychoanalysis itself (as a practice, a technique, as well as theory, as Stavrakakis reminds us, through Althusser), but also to the many political questions to which psychoanalysis has been applied, proving to be an invaluable resource. One consequence of the latter is the interdisciplinarity of psychoanalytic political theory, something reflected clearly in the *Handbook*.

The *Handbook's* chapters are organised in five parts, each focusing on a different theme. The first part, 'Figures', presents the work of five of the most influential psychoanalytic theorists and the distinct directions they gave to psychoanalytic inquiry. These are Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Wilhelm Reich, and Carl Jung. The respective chapters present those aspects of their work that are key to grasping politics psychoanalytically, but also carry out the task of discussing their relationship with politics (latent or manifest, but always complicated). The chapters also sketch the ways their work was taken up by politics scholars later, something on which the subsequent parts expand further.

The second part, titled 'traditions', presents some of the major attempts to properly incorporate psychoanalysis into political inquiry, thus recognising it as a major resource for political analysis and action. Douglas Kellner's chapter on the Freudian Left presents the work of Herbert Marcuse, focusing on *Eros and Civilization*, one of the first concrete attempts to combine Marx with Freud in formulating a critical theory of society. This allowed Marcuse to formulate a powerful critique of Western capitalist society by revealing its reliance on a perpetual repression of human instincts, and the alienation of the individual through the internalisation of such repressive forces. Emancipation, for Marcuse, requires the breaking of the opposition between libido and reason, and the cultivation of an 'eroticised rationality', a

striving for happiness and gratification – ideas that inspired the New Left in the 1960s and after. In the following chapter, Sean Homer discusses the Lacanian Left as a distinct movement in psychoanalytic political theory. The chapter features a historical account of the different encounters of Lacanian insights with the Marxist tradition, and the different theoretical trajectories that sprouted from them. Starting with Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson, this account features, amongst others, Laclau and Mouffe's innovative discursive political ontology, the interplay of identity and difference, and the centrality of antagonism and lack in thinking about politics. Slavoj Žižek is another important figure whose work is covered by the chapter, including his influential re-theorisation of ideology through Lacan's concept of fantasy. The final figure is Alain Badiou, and his attempts to revise and deploy Lacan's categories of subject and the Real. Lisa Baraitser's chapter offers an overview of the engagement of feminist theory with psychoanalysis. While the theories of the Oedipus complex and castration were accused by many feminists of reinforcing patriarchal worldviews, some feminists also identified in psychoanalysis a complex understanding of sexual difference that can be a valuable resource for the critique of patriarchy. This, of course, necessitated a significant problematisation of aspects of psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic feminism thus developed as an internal critique of psychoanalysis, and the chapter presents the attempts of Irigaray, Kristeva, Butler, and others in this direction. Alessia Contu's contribution to the *Handbook* covers the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS), an interdisciplinary area of study focused on organizations and their management. Psychoanalysis makes significant contributions to this field by capturing the play of unconscious processes within organisations, as well as society's investments in them; for instance, in the formation and operation of groups, leadership, identification, motivation and commitment. By uncovering how these mechanisms are exploited by management, CMS articulates a powerful critique of the ideology of corporate capitalism.

Part three covers a series of concepts originally introduced to categorise and grasp clinical phenomena, but that gradually made their way out of the clinic and were put to the service of social analysis. The concepts covered are the superego, narcissism, affect, trauma, fantasy, identification with the transgressor, mourning and melancholia, language/discourse, and the (collective) subject. Despite the differences in style, all chapters include a history of the respective concept starting within the course of psychoanalysis's development, and then

moving to its further theorisation and application to social phenomena. Each author also provides helpful illustrations linked to recent and contemporary political events, to highlight its analytical and critical edge and relevance for contemporary political theory in particular. For instance, the superego helps us grasp not just the subject's adoption of the law, but the inextricable drive or, indeed, commandment for its transgression, as Todd McGowan explains. And, as Robert Samuels demonstrates, narcissism is a potent and critical lens through which we can understand the liberal elites' obsession with meritocracy, educational credentials, and the exhibition of moral goodness (vis-à-vis their concurrent aversion towards egalitarian politics). According to Candida Yates, the recently broadened acknowledgement of the proliferation of emotion in the public sphere should be welcomed, but its full appreciation also requires an understanding of affect's unconscious dynamics, something she highlights through her analysis of Brexit and Donald Trump. In their chapter, Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner show how the concept of fantasy has been pivotal in the revival of the critique of ideology from a non-essentialist perspective, and the development of the post-Marxist paradigm in political theory. The debt of post-Marxist and, more broadly, post-structuralist political theory to psychoanalysis is further demonstrated by the following chapter on discourse and language, written by Ed Pluth. While Freud was from the beginning aware of the role of language in the operation of the unconscious, Lacan's return to Freud through structural linguistics fully revealed the far-reaching implications of the logic of the signifier for our understanding of agency and structure, but also for the link between the two (i.e., the social bond).

Psychoanalysis has already produced established approaches to several research areas in the social sciences and the humanities, shaping an emergent interdisciplinary study field, often under the name 'psychosocial studies'. The fourth part of the *Handbook* covers exactly this, with its chapters dedicated to such research areas: sexuality, hate, racism, nationalism, capitalism, choice and consumerism, religion and Islamic radicalism, populism, and arts. Amanda Machin demonstrates how Lacanian and Kleinian insights on identification and fantasy can shed light on key aspects of nationalism, such as the affective force and resilience of national identity, when compared with other social identities. This is a genuine advancement of our understanding since contemporary theories of nationalism register these aspects, yet they leave them undertheorised. In his chapter on racism, Derek Hook argues

that the pervasiveness and durability of racism, as well as its affective, visceral character, are best grasped if we see racism as a manifestation of *jouissance* in the form of a 'theft of enjoyment'. Importantly, Hook also acknowledges and responds to the charge of psychologisation of social phenomena. He shows that we have to understand enjoyment not as a psychological, but as a sociological category, since it forms the underside of social norms and collective ideals whose coherence, in turn, is dependent on it. Paula Biglieri & Gloria Perelló's chapter discuss Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, fleshing out its grounding in Freud and Lacan. Unlike the more common approaches to populism found in political theory, they argue that populism should be seen as an exemplary expression of the logics of collective subject-formation and it, therefore, cannot be taken as a peripheral political concept or topical phenomenon.

The *Handbook's* final part, 'challenges and controversies' turns to engagements with recent political phenomena as well as new political questions and problems, outlining fresh trajectories in the research agenda of psychoanalytic political theory. These are geopolitics, psy ethics, biopolitics, climate change, posthuman identities and post-politics. Ian Parker's chapter discusses how the 'psy-complex' is often complicit to the reproduction and reinforcement of hegemonic accounts of morality that promote individual responsibility while bracketing political, social, and economic relations (including the place of the psy professions within these relations). He calls for an immanent critique of psy ethics, in which psychoanalysis has much to offer. Rather than reducing ethics to morality, for psychoanalysis the question of ethics has to do with our relation to morality, enabling the adoption of a more reflexive stance towards moral codes and self-images. In the same part, Olivier Jutel articulates a sharp criticism of American liberalism in the context of Donald Trump's election and presidency. The US Democrats' antidote to Trump has been a 'techno-solution' consisting in the restoration of notions of 'Truth', progress, and reason guaranteed by the collection of data and technical expertise. This, he says, has resulted in a politics disavowing lack and antagonism, and deprived of enjoyment, i.e., an administrative post-politics which, at the same time, seems to be struggling with the transgressive libidinal populism of the right.

This is a book that will appeal to several audiences. For new students of psychoanalysis, it offers a great introduction to different schools, concepts, and theories, and their application in politics. For the converted ones, it offers the first systematic exploration of the intersection

of psychoanalysis and political theory, as well as the most up-to-date collection and latest trajectories in this direction. The one obvious possible criticism of the *Handbook* would be directed to those traditions, concepts or themes that did not make it into the *Handbook*. For example, a dedicated chapter on the Frankfurt School (although the chapter on Marcuse covers an important part of this tradition) or the theme of democracy, and its psychoanalytically-inflected theorisations. But this would be an endless exercise. And one person's essential chapter is another person's fringe interest.

In his introduction, Stavrakakis notes an analogy between the unconscious, and the political. The contributions assembled in the *Handbook* are testament to this analogy. I think that it is therefore appropriate to finish by slightly rephrasing Chantal Mouffe, an author known for her own work on the political and who frequently draws on Freud: to negate *the unconscious* 'does not make it disappear, it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and to impotence in dealing with them' (Mouffe 1993: 140). The *Handbook* will leave us all a lot less bewildered.

References

Mouffe, C. (1993). *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.

Stavrakakis, Y. (Ed.). (2020). Introduction. In *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, 1–16. London: Routledge.

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.