

BREXIT PSYCHOSIS

Stepping back for a moment from my sense of alarm at the UK's descent into Brexit chaos, I find myself intrigued by the unmistakable psychotic phenomena evidenced in our current turmoil. There are clear indications of the play of infantile psychotic anxieties driving the vote for Brexit, and also of psychotic modes of thought amongst those promoting Brexit and within the general national discourse on the subject. It is as if we have become collectively stupid and divorced from reality.

Psychotic (schizoid) mechanisms of splitting and projection are rampant currently in the political community and the nation as a whole. Feelings of hatred and rage and distrust prevail. The mother (Theresa May) is viewed as engaging in betrayal, cooking up a plan in secret intercourse with the EU behind closed doors. She is seen as a Jezebel who is being coerced and seduced by the pimping EU who conspire with her to inflict the European cult on us for eternity. There are cries for a 'strong man' who will stand up to the European bullies and rescue us from our humiliating weakness and helplessness – and restore us to the 'greatness' of our childhood fantasies.

The fantasy of the powerful Other, controlling our bodies and minds, is common in infancy and psychosis. During our earliest period, when we are at our most helpless, our parents, particularly the mother, do in reality take on many of these characteristics. There can be a further fantasy of a sinister figure controlling the mother's desires and mind, evoked when the mother's attention is taken from her infant. The mother may be distracted or preoccupied, but the infant's feeling is that he/she has been robbed of the mother's love and attention. Usually these fantasies become grounded and localised in the idea of the father or a sibling as the rival. The classic 'oedipus complex' is actually a structuring dynamic constellation that serves to bring order into the child's world – allowing the child to situate him/herself within the family (Leader, 2012). Although there may be many variations in contemporary family structures, all children need (for healthy development) to have a sense of boundaries – to know the difference between the generations, who belongs to whom, and in what way, and where he or she comes from. Most fundamentally, the child must discover the difference between fantasy and reality. The archetype of the 'symbolic father' and the 'Law of the Father' (Lacanian concepts) function to provide boundaries and structure and limits – in short, the Law. The Law itself is structured by words – indicating mother,

father, sibling, kinship relations, and the child's name. Such Law sets limits on both the child and the parent – for example, the mother is forbidden to eat her child. Without adequate entry into this structuring world of the Law and the Word, the child is at the mercy of primitive confusions and fragmented images of self and other, and all manner of imaginary terrors of the monstrous Other (depicted in both traditional 'fairy stories' and horror movies). In these infantile states of terror, primitive defences of projection and splitting and other 'magical' actions are employed, as the immature psyche seeks to rid itself of whatever is felt to present danger. The infantile psyche's perceptions are extremely unrealistic, with disparate elements combined in sometimes bizarre ways, rather as in dreams.

During optimum development, the child's psyche gradually settles into a reconciliation with reality and an acceptance of the Law and of limits. The child accepts his or her place in the family and the wider social world, and understands that time, development, and education will lead to a positive future place in the adult world. Such healthy developments are encouraged if the child feels his or her place is clear and fair. Malign developments, by contrast, may occur if the child does not feel that he/she does have a valid place, with a voice and speech – or if the child is placed in a position of scapegoat, the recipient of parental or family projections.

These childhood developments are followed by finding a place and an identity in the adult world. In times past, the child may be asked what he or she wanted to be on growing up – and may have replied 'train driver', 'pilot', 'scientist', 'doctor' etc., and in time would perceive the route to becoming these. There is a certain order in such a world – educational procedures to follow, resulting in predictable achievements. Much of this order has been lost in our modern world. Many occupations have become redundant. Fantasy 'jobs' based on image rather than reality, accompanied by absurd incomes, are presented as desirable alternatives to real work. Social structures have broken down. Gender roles and differences have become profoundly fluid. Moreover, the world has become increasingly complex – and makes decreasing sense to many. Impersonal computer systems have frequently replaced human interaction. Most of the population struggles financially, whilst others become mysteriously hugely rich. If people feel they do have a place and a stake in society, these positions are often felt to be undesirable and unfair by comparison to those of the elite. The financial markets appear vast, global, and

fickle, carrying the power to devastate our lives and render our savings worthless.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1932) noted that psychosis is often triggered by shifts in a person's position in the social world, of a kind whereby he or she is not able to assume a new or modified and appropriate identity. It is as if there is experienced a hole in the fabric of the symbolic world – and delusional ideas then develop to form a patch over the hole. A very fundamental feature of human psychological functioning is that we tend to hold tightly to our existing ways of making sense of the world because these form, in essence, the structure of our psyche. When these structures are challenged or violated, we are inclined to experience what Kohut described as 'disintegration anxiety', which he considered the deepest anxiety we can feel.

Little wonder that current societal developments, characterised by shifting sands in place of secure and predictable roles and occupations, stir up disintegration anxiety – as well as re-evoking infantile anxieties of having no place, no identity, and no voice – many of which then become focused on the EU. Fears and fantasies regarding immigration play very much into early anxieties about loss of boundaries and of being swallowed by a gigantic omnipotent Other, or of being usurped by an infinite number of rival siblings being discharged from the belly of the EU. At the same time, the EU is perceived as a huge and obsessive law-giver, issuing diktats that regulate every detail of our lives. It seems the EU is perceived as both a devouring mother and a mad law-giving father bent on denying any freedom – a monstrous combined parental figure. Because it is perceived as amorphous and relatively unknown, the EU functions like a gigantic Rorschach ink blot, into which all manner of projections can be placed.

Some responsibility for these anxieties and confusions clearly lies with the political class, including MPs, MEPs, and constitutional experts, as well as the media, who consistently failed to explain to the general public what the EU is, how it functions, and how we participate in it. In general, our MEPs have performed lamentably in their function of communicating with their constituents.

The most malign agents in fostering the Brexit psychosis are those in leadership positions who have proffered a simplistic solution to disintegration anxiety – it is all the fault of the EU and of migrants. Such a narrative is akin to a ready-made delusion that is presented as a patch over the hole in the fabric

of social meaning and self-esteem. It is poison, presented as a medicine to heal our shattered self-image and feed our wounded narcissism. The idea appears not to be delusional only because it is widely shared.

A notable characteristic of the more fanatical Brexiters is that if we try to probe below the surface of their slogans and bombast, we find there is little there. They are like a façade or charade with nothing behind – actors who are always in role. There is a complete lack of emotional depth. This emptiness drives them.

The vote to leave the EU clearly had qualities of a desire to restrict or ‘castrate’ the fantasised overwhelming and devouring Other – the omnipotent mother seeking to consume her child. In a psychotic world, concern for truth does not exist – hence the proliferation of lies during the campaign. However, the success of the leave campaign brought its own psychotic terrors. Who could forget the looks of shock and foreboding on the faces of some of the leading Brexiteers the day after? They looked like they had just killed their mother!

The psychosis continues. The quality of ‘thought’ in our political discourse has become profoundly degraded to the level of robotic clichés and slogans – and logical argument has been replaced by the repeated assertion of magical claims that reality can be dismissed by strength of will. We have indeed become collectively mad.

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