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Why to Read Winnicott after the US Election, and How

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By Leo Coleman

Commentary and speculation after this election have focused on voters' motives and emotional states, and, especially in the day or two after the result, why experts didn't know in advance how this would turn out. Why did public opinion polling skew the way it did? What does this teach us about voting and its psychological and social dimensions? These questions touch upon areas of interest and practice among Somatosphere readers—[intention](#), the [plastic brain](#), [political subjectivity](#), and biosocial and neurosocial [collaborations](#) have all been addressed in these pages in ways relevant to understanding politics. Still, we readers and contributors may not usually be professionally involved in the political arena; we may feel less than personally addressed by questions about prediction and public opinion, and the popular debate about “media responsibility” that ensues. I'm not going to suggest that we change either of those things and “get involved.” But with all our varied expertise, at the interface of the mind, the body, and the social, we may have more tools handy than we might think to help in understanding—really understanding—current events. While we might want to continue cultivating our gardens, as it were, I think that just working over our own specialist knowledge and theories at a time like this can itself contribute something of importance to the public sphere, and in fact provides a basis on which we can know more about what just happened. The historian and *New Yorker* writer Jill Lepore said, on the [“Politics and More”](#) podcast on November 11, that when it comes to historical models and political science predictions, “what we thought we knew we don't know anymore.” Other kinds of knowledge about politics are urgently needed.

After the election, for myself, I started to think about psychoanalytic theory and what it tells us about the results and their consequences. For example, Freud observed long ago that the kinds of persons who occupy high political office matter, and not only because of the power they wield; the events (both public and personal) that touch those offices and their incumbents affect people's psychic lives (I'm thinking of the “Mass Psychology” and “Fetishism” essays). Freudian theory indicates that how we identify with politicians and even abstract institutions can determine what *within* ourselves we are able to find valuable, what parts of our own character we can cultivate. On this understanding, political results have

deep implications for the culture we live in.

But Freud was not the most immediate source, for me, of insights of value and use. I wanted to think more concretely about what certain psychoanalytic (and anthropological) theories offer by way of a widened understanding of *technical* issues of democracy. I wanted to think about how public opinion is forged and democracy is done. An essay by D. W. Winnicott, “Some Thoughts on the Word ‘Democracy’” came to mind, and upon re-reading it seemed to have tangible lessons to offer. In what follows, I will discuss what Winnicott had to say about what he called “democratic machinery”—voting, opinion, and leadership. The broader lesson I want to take away from this reading is that our interpretive disciplines, forms of personal knowledge, and ethnographic work may in fact offer a robust basis for critical engagement with how our legal and political institutions work, as well as offering insights into how they work upon, with, and also within us. Understanding these latter dimensions of politics—for which we don’t even have a common vocabulary—is one prerequisite for better institutions.

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In 1950, the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott tread upon the specialist terrain of political science, with apologies for his ignorance of their technical vocabularies, to offer “Some Thoughts on the Word ‘Democracy’” (this essay was originally published in *Human Relations* and has been reprinted twice, in *The Family and Individual Development* and the collection *Home is Where we Start From*; page numbers here are from the latter). He stipulated that democracy is a psychological and a social achievement of a healthy and mature society, a matter of “democratic machinery” which allows for “the expression of feelings, *apart from conscious thoughts*” (241, italics his). Specifically, he argued that unconscious feelings and identifications are uniquely expressed through the secret ballot, and by this means become integral to democratic functioning. Moreover, in order for an election to really express a collective judgment of what is to be done, the secret ballot is not enough: there must be persons for whom to vote, not ideas or principles, because only a person can make promises, respond to unconscious demands, and change if necessary to meet new situations (249). Only a person can bear the delegated responsibility which is equally important to democracy.

Through such democratic machinery, the voter’s inner world is “turned into a political arena for a limited time,” while psychological struggles play out—in intensified, dramatic forms—in the external world of political competition (241). Winnicott was careful to add that because it implicates the unconscious and personal psychic realities, democratic machinery has to work in ways that allow for irrational results—as the legitimate expression

of real unconscious feelings—but also to provide means of fixing them.

As for public opinion polling, Winnicott cautioned that, without the anonymity and secrecy of the voting booth, polling can only solicit reiterations of abstract party-principles or slogans. It cannot measure the underlying feelings they tap into, and hence, opinion polls can provide only limited indications of actual ballots. He of course was aware of the highly technical nature of polling and opinion research, and noted that “a great deal of trouble is taken to avoid exactly this pitfall” (250), but in his view the problems remained (as, perhaps, we have just learned again).

Winnicott’s thoughts on gender and the role of women in politics seem less timely, even particularly limited and limiting (we need to read psychoanalytic theory with a healthy dose of feminism and even melancholy, insofar as both can widen our sense of what kind of identifications are possible within and across genders). He noted that, at the time of his writing, men occupied almost all the high political offices in the world, but he grounded this political (in a deep sense) fact in a psychological complex, a fear of dependency that he traced back to the infant’s ambivalent love and hate for its mother who both cares for it and controls it. This verges on a parody of psychoanalytic speculation. But Winnicott’s argument is not about actual men and women and their relative fitness for command of the political unconscious (as Margaret Thatcher’s much later political success indicated, among other late twentieth century women leaders). Rather, Winnicott notes that whosoever successfully appeals to unconscious fantasy—fearful and unmasterable ideas buried in our psyche—will by this means be gifted with the group’s power, in compensation for the unthought debt which emerges from our bodily dependence on each other, as a condition of our very social being. In his own words:

“The tendency of groups to accept or even seek actual domination is derived from a fear of domination by a fantasy Woman. This fear leads them to seek, and even welcome, domination by a known human being, especially one who has taken on himself [or herself] the burden of personifying and therefore limiting the magical qualities of the all-powerful Woman of fantasy, to whom is owed the great debt” (253).

Read today, these thoughts about unconscious domination offer much more than just a psychoanalytic theory of charisma, and indeed say something beyond their immediate reference to dictatorship. Winnicott seems to be addressing here the potential within democratic machinery for its own subversion, when its users fail to understand the wellsprings of the power it provides. He draws our attention to unacknowledged debt, felt

(but not thought) resentment, and unsatisfied yearnings for solidarity (misconceived as “greatness”), as elements of that machinery that must be reckoned with if the machinery itself is not to break down. Progressive politicians may have something to think about, in these terms.

Understanding and anticipating the outlook of voters is perhaps the most challenging task of any democracy, and it is both a technical craft and a political art. But there is a real danger, internal to democracy, when the search for understanding becomes too technicized, too demographic and instrumental. That is what Winnicott was talking about when he emphasized the need for, the positive value of, a machinery that can deal with unconscious identifications while not manipulating or directing them. In a sense, he was pointing to the moral importance of core democratic values of letting each individual decide for him and herself (though not in a vacuum or absent other considerations that may shape the alternatives presented).

Most importantly, reading Winnicott helps highlight the danger of political words, messages, and slogans that mean too *little* as much as too much. Winnicott helps us see how democratic machinery can be affected not only by the charismatic leader who sways the passions, but also by the small-bore demagogue who only speaks to the conscious, distorted, “split off” level of thoughts. This kind of politician produces only narrow *reactions* rather than truly personal actions of the voter as a *whole* person, with her complex and individual history. On this understanding, and at this moment of crisis, we might then recall that recovering persons and their history is the special task of psychoanalysis and ethnography, and this can also be their political vocation.

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