

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/10/web-roundup-annals-of-politics-and-psychopathology.html>

Web Roundup: Annals of Politics and Psychopathology

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By Talia Gordon

For those of us in the U.S. who read the Liberal News Media, September began with a bang that reverberated loudly, if anonymously, around the Internet. Well, the bang had a source, but the source of that source requested not to be identified. A few weeks ago, *The New York Times* published [an Op-Ed essay](#) written by a senior official in the Trump administration who claims to be part of an inside resistance against the president. In a rare move, citing the author's vulnerability to job loss, the *Times* did not disclose the person's identity.

Unsurprisingly, the unsigned op-ed and the *Times*' decision to run it caused an uproar, garnering accusations of cowardice and reviving a [call to remove the president](#) from office over [concerns about his mental health](#). Dr. Bandy Lee, professor of psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine and editor of *The Dangerous Case of Donald: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (2017), called the op-ed a "cry for help" from someone affected by the "contagion" of Trump's various psychopathologies. In response, lest we forget the many ways the psychological is marshaled in service of the political, "Trump Derangement Syndrome" — a diagnosis given to the president's detractors by politicians, pundits, and ["psychology experts"](#) alike — has made a popular resurgence over the last few weeks. Meanwhile, as the din from the op-ed died down (bless the brevity of the news cycle), Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's [testimony of sexual assault](#) by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh brought the neuropsychology of trauma into the judiciary courtroom and into public discourse this month.

The melding of the psychological and the political is certainly nothing new. Dissent from the ruling order has long been pathologized as a symptom of mental illness and the rallying cry of feminist protest decades ago claimed that "the personal" formed the very foundation of political structures. Things are not so different now, in a moment when the psychic effects of living within one's subject category (and under Trump's presidency) have galvanized protest movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, and the individual experience of difference is increasingly politicized as a collective call to action. Many on the left have expressed concerns that

these forms of mutual identification and the modes of participation they facilitate in fact [dilute the power of collective action](#) by reinforcing exclusions along lines of difference and allowing protest itself to stand in for other, more effective forms of political resistance (e.g. see critiques of the 2017 Women's March). Yet, rightly weary as we may be of identity politics (and [rightly wary as we may be of diverting intellectual energy to apparent novelty](#)) the demands for recognition that drive contemporary social movements are drawing upon and, in turn, shaping psychological understanding in ways that suggest the need for new kinds of attention.

One recent argument for paying attention to the relationship between identity politics and psychology can be found in political scientist Francis Fukuyama's new book, [Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment](#) (published this month by Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In it, Fukuyama argues that the demand for recognition at the heart of identity politics constitutes the primary threat to universal liberalism. Fukuyama's argument is that the drive for recognition, which he names *thymos*, borrowing from Plato, is a central part of human nature. While Plato saw *thymos* as the psychological origin of political action, Fukuyama claims that the feelings that underpin *thymos*, such as pride and self-esteem, are universally related to our serotonin levels. So, the personal may indeed be political, but according to Fukuyama, the political is *chemical*. Thus the threat to liberalism: such feelings, biologically rooted as they are, can be neither produced nor satisfied through economic or legal reform.

Nevermind the pitfalls of liberalism and universalism (let alone the danger of a universal liberalism), Fukuyama's argument has been [critiqued for the way it biologizes the desire for recognition](#) by rooting identity politics in our brain chemistry. Perhaps this argument for the neurochemical can be read as a push against hints at a vitalist revival taking shape through the notion of a "vital politics" that appears to be emerging in theories of contemporary identity-based political movements. Yet, even as a corrective to such ways of theorizing the lived experiences of difference, the biologization of feelings — and of politics — leaves something to be desired (sorry!) when it comes to understanding the forms of identification that shape contemporary social movements.

Anti-vitalist and universalist arguments about neurochemistry aside, by relying on *thymos*, Fukuyama's argument gestures to the ways in which our politics — ever inseparable from our identities — have become a metric for evaluating the soundness of our mental faculties. Let's return, for example, to "Trump Derangement Syndrome" (TDS), which first made landfall back in 2016 as a descriptive diagnosis characterized by symptoms of hatred, disgust, hyperbole, and irrationality in reaction to the president. The diagnosis can be applied to anyone displaying these

symptoms, typically leftists, liberals, progressives, and anti-Trump conservatives, and especially those who suggest that the president himself exhibits signs of psychopathology or [neurological decline](#). ([The president recently caught wind of TDS and has been applying it liberally \[sorry again!\] to his detractors](#)). In mid-September, Sean Hannity, Fox's "King of Cable News," [invoked TDS](#) in response to a [Washington Post editorial](#) suggesting that Trump's policies were contributing to Hurricane Florence, saying: "It is now a full-blown psychosis, it is a psychological level of unhingement [sic] I've never seen."

These kinds of diagnostic pronouncements come out of the somewhat paradoxical valorization of psychology within a strain of political conservatism that otherwise tends to largely [dismiss the validity of psychiatric knowledge, particularly as it's applied to Trump](#). A recent example is Dr. Gina Loudon's new book, *Mad Politics: Keeping Your Sanity in a World Gone Crazy* (published this month), which argues that America has been insane for decades and asks: "How can we restore a sound mind to the body politic?" Her answer? Join Trump and reject political correctness. Loudon, who has a PhD in human and organization systems, is a seasoned Fox News commentator and the outlet's resident "psychological analyst"; Sean Hannity wrote the forward to her book. On Hannity's show earlier this month, Loudon diagnosed the senior official who penned the anonymous op-ed with a full-blown case of TDS.

At the same time, attempts such as psychiatrist Bandy Lee's to diagnose the president from afar have been met with bipartisan critique, as Democrats and others critical of Trump have argued that recourse to psychological/psychiatric knowledge in analyzing his behavior distracts from more pressing concerns about the moral and ideological beliefs that govern his decisions. Further, mental health experts have condemned the use of diagnostics in political analysis, arguing that psychiatric illness is neither a prerequisite for nor partner to the dangers and abuses delivered by those in power (and that resorting to accusations that the president is "crazy" further reinforces stigma around mental illness).

And yet, it seems, theories and attitudes about the mind are the linchpin of both mainstream politics and contemporary protest movements. Take the case of Dr. Ford, whose devastating testimony of sexual assault by Justice Kavanaugh shook the nation earlier this month. Despite Dr. Ford's insistence that she did not come forward as a partisan actor or member of any social movement, many [lauded her decision](#) to speak publicly [as an act of resistance](#) within a political system that disavows the voices of the most vulnerable. Indeed, even in the watershed of #MeToo, shame, fear, and stigma remain the dedicated handmaidens to silence for many who experience sexual violence.

However, beyond the sheer force of breaking that silence, one of the things that made Dr. Ford's testimony so stunning was her use of psychological science in describing the effects of sexual assault and the potency of its memory over time. When asked how certain she was, three decades later, of what had taken place at the hands of Kavanaugh, Dr. Ford responded unhesitatingly: "one hundred percent." Then, Dr. Ford, a psychology professor and research psychologist, explained to members of the judiciary committee how memories of traumatic experiences become encoded in the hippocampus, indelibly locking themselves into the brain. Thus, in the absence of corroborating witnesses, Dr. Ford effectively verified her subjective recollection of assault by using her long-term symptoms of emotional and psychological distress as evidence of its objective facticity. That is, she stood as expert witness to her own experience of trauma. As Dr. Ford's decision to speak publicly became immediately and inevitably tied to #MeToo, her testimony not only demonstrated the ways in which bearing witness to trauma remains central to identity politics and demands for recognition; it showed how scientific understandings of psychopathology could be used to invest the individual claims of experience that drive these collective demands with the quality of incontestability.

The echoes of the op-ed may have already faded, and despite the delay produced by Dr. Ford's testimony, Kavanaugh ultimately ascended to the bench last week (cue the TDS pandemic). But whether performed behind the shroud of anonymity or publicly, in front of a senate judiciary committee and national audience, acts of resistance are always already political — even if unsigned or unintentional. So too are the responses to such acts, and the forms of knowledge we reach for to make sense of them. And, at least for now, the desire for recognition, from wherever it may spring, remains a potent force in reckoning with experiences of difference as they come to constitute a politics. As Dr. Ford's testimony and Fukuyama's argument each remind us of the ever-urgent turn towards the brain as the locus of human experience, they also point to new ways in which the personal, the psychological, and the neurochemical shape the political, and vice versa.

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