

RESEARCH COLUMN

The Political Psychology of European Integration – being mindful of Europe

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In an era of European crises over political legitimacy, economic austerity, and collapse of confidence in the EU the topic of European integration has become

a very emotional subject. The anger which protestors demonstrate against economic austerity, the hate which nationalist far-right parties express for the EU and fellow Europeans, and the passion with which supporters of the EU argue for greater integration and enlargement are today central to understanding European integration. Being mindful of Europe - reflecting on the ways in which psychology and politics are deeply implicated in understanding European integration is no longer an option; it is a necessity.

Strangely there has been little systematic attempt to bring together the analysis of psychology with that of politics in the study of European integration. A step towards addressing this absence of engagement can be taken by briefly surveying what political psychology and European integration have to say to each other in the understanding of the European Union. Political psychology is understood as the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes. European integration is understood as the economic, social and political processes of mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples.

The most common approach has been from conventional psychological approaches which tend to read European integration from the perspective of individual psychology. These approaches have been heavily embedded within individual poll data and public opinion studies. For example, the common use of Eurobarometer data tends to suggest that national identities and opinions are fairly homogenous and fixed for any one member state. However, closer examination of variation over time and variation between regions within a member state argues in the opposite direction – that identities and opinions exhibit considerable variation over time and space, raising some fundamental questions about the ‘essentialisation’ or commonplace stereotyping of national identities in political language.

In contrast to the work of conventional psychology, social psychology has historically been stronger in Europe, reflecting the effect of the collective on the construction of identity. Social psychology has some interesting things to say about European integration, including the argument of Brigid Laffan that shared loyalty, rather than an all-or-nothing shift of loyalty, is more likely than any radical transformation of identity. Laura

Cram takes this idea further to suggest that rather than the ‘heroic nationalism’ of national identity projects, a social psychology of the EU reveals a banal Europeanism where the EU is a facilitator for diverse understandings of collecting identities at an everyday level.

Social constructionist approaches to political psychology have very broad origins in hermeneutics, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and post-structuralism. For example, social constructionist political psychology has provided some thought-provoking analyses of European integration by applying notions of ontological security. The search for ontological security helps explain the need for a secure space to call home, particular for those Europeans who are part of migrant, transnational or diaspora groups.

The origins of political psychology as a discipline are to be found in psychoanalytical work where political psychology is about the struggle between desire and order and the challenges of balance. For example, Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalysis suggests that European integration symbolises broad processes of coming to terms with, coordinating, and cohabiting with difference and diversity – processes of reconciling and recognising plurality and strangeness in oneself and others. The rise of the far right across the EU and their portrayal of abject foreigners are important from the perspective of Kristevian psychoanalysis. The projection of otherness onto individuals and the social groups they represent is so strong precisely because they are also an abjected and disturbing part of European selves. Finally, critical political psychology provides a crucial arena for trying to understand the dissatisfaction and alienation that many Europeans feel towards politics, politicians, government and the EU in the twenty-first century. Critical political psychology helps explore concepts of political identity by addressing how events on the global stage interact with the local and the particular. This approach is most important when studying the political psychology of antidemocratic, nationalistic and destructive political patterns, whether found in minority or majority populations.

In conclusion, there is clearly both potential for greater engagement between political psychology and the study of European integration, but more importantly a necessity for such an engagement in order to better understand contemporary Europe. It is clear that engagement must meet the fundamental definition of political psychology – it must be a bidirectional interaction of European political and psychological processes.

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