



BOOK REVIEW

Shining an Overdue *Barry Richards Light* on Humanistic Psychology

The Psychology of Politics by Barry Richards, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon,
ISBN-10: 1138551708 / ISBN-13: 978-1138551701, 112pp, price (hardback) £84.00,
(paperback) £9.99, e-book £6.49

Reviewed by Richard House

Words and images which suggest these kinds of merger should ring warning bells; they point to a regressive wish to lose the self in the imagined safety and strength of the perfect collective, built around an omnipotent parent.

(Richards, pp. 71–2, on the ‘ideology’ of communism)

...if psychology is a ‘science’, it is a moral one, and... in studying the psychology of politics we are bound to make moral and political judgments.... [S]ome definitions [of science] are too narrow... [D]ifferent forms of inquiry should not all be subject to the same methodological strictures.

(Richards, pp. 83, 99)

Writing short book reviews is not normally my bag – they almost invariably turn into quasi-essays without my consciously intending it (cue Barry Richards, perhaps!). But I’ll do my best with this very short little book by Barry Richards. The lead epigraph I’ve chosen to introduce this review will give the game away as to the tone and direction of Richards’

writings and theorising (though readers with Zen, postmodern and transpersonal tendencies will likely find much material about ‘the self’ to chew over in this quotation!). And speaking of epigraphs, that which introduces Richards’ Chapter 1 and the book itself is a most interesting one – viz. ‘The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing’ (Blaise Pascal).

Barry Richards has been writing interestingly about psychoanalytic understandings of the political and the social for many years; and I don’t think we’ve given his works nearly enough coverage in *Self & Society* over the last 35 years. For while not a humanistic psychologist per se, Richards brings telling insights to understanding society and modern culture through depth-psychological thinking – and he therefore has much of considerable import to say to fructify open-minded humanistic thinking on the self/society interface and their complex interpenetrations.

I can only give a flavour of this book and Richards’ thinking in this short review; at the end, I’ve assembled a short bibliography of his

writings that I'm personally aware of, so readers can follow up, if their appetite gets whetted by what follows.

Barry Richards is Professor of Political Psychology in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, having previously been Professor and Head of the Department of Human Relations, University of East London (UEL). He has a degree in psychology, and trained and worked as a clinical psychologist in the NHS, before becoming a lecturer and taking a Ph.D. in sociology. At the UEL Barry led the establishment of psychosocial studies as an interdisciplinary teaching programme and research paradigm, researching and writing in areas like popular culture, advertising, consumer behaviour, political leadership, and the rise of 'therapeutic' culture. At UEL he also led the development, with the Tavistock Clinic, of the MA in Psychoanalytic Studies. Richards has thus been developing psychosocial approaches on emotion in political communication, on journalism and emotional literacy, and on the drivers of terrorism – with specific research interests in freedom of speech and hate speech; nationalism; cohesion and polarisation; leadership; citizenship; and fundamentalism and political violence.

Now to the book under review. In *The Psychology of Politics*, Richards explores how the emotions which underpin everyday life are also essential for understanding what happens in the world of politics. He draws particularly upon psychoanalytic ideas to show how fear and passion shape the political sphere in our rapidly changing society, examining topical social issues like Brexit, the evolving nature of democracy, political activism, and the Trump phenomenon in the USA.

A key aim of the book is to show how we can make sense of what drives human conduct in the realms of political ideas and action; and in the book, Richards also looks at highly prescient questions like how some political leaders manage to capture popular support, what is so powerful about the sense of belonging to a nation (nationalism), and whether democracy can thrive.

The book is divided into five short chapters – 1. The heart of politics; 2. Leaders; 3. Nations; 4. Ideologies; and 5. Prospect. There is a useful Further Reading section, notes and references, but regrettably no index (though this is perhaps less important for a book of this length).

This review is already far longer than I'd planned, so a few select notes in what particularly struck this reader will suffice. Richards bemoans how little impact psychology has had on politics (p. 2), and maintains both that there are reasons to be more optimistic about human nature, and that 'there are destructive forces in our internal worlds which our societies often do not manage well' (p. 3). We also see the bold claim that 'our collective mental health... is likely to determine the future of democracy' itself (p. 4). Richards goes on to discuss what it means to 'think psychosocially' (pp. 5–6), and he elaborates at length on how the two principles of safety and dignity – along with the psychoanalytic notions of containment, defences, identity and narcissism – can be deployed to think about the core themes of leaders, nations, and ideologies.

Here, I want to focus on Chapter 4 – 'Ideologies' – which is a rich feast for anyone interested in politics and who is wanting tools to help deepen their understanding of contemporary political cultures and social formations – looking closely at neo-liberalism, communism, fascism and its psychology, takfiri Islamism, political violence and the violence of idealism, liberal democracy, and the phenomenon of victimhood. This chapter certainly got me thinking more deeply about the 'ideology' label – and how I've myself been guilty over many years of casting the accusative term 'ideological' around without realising that in so doing, I was both implicitly claiming to be coming from a (superior?) *non*-ideological position – and also assuming an implicit, clear distinction between 'science' and 'ideology' – a distinction that I believe to be philosophically unsustainable. As Richards points out, 'our ideas... always embody ideology: they tend to reflect the outlook and interests of the social class to which we belong' (p. 65) – so he uses the term 'ideology' 'in a broad and neutral way' (p. 66).

It was also interesting to see Richards writing about the idealisation of the British National Health Service (NHS) here (on p. 82) – with this written, of course, long before the current *mega*-idealisation of the NHS that's been unfolding during the C-virus crisis. And his touching upon victimhood (pp. 84–5), and how our 'surprising attachment to it... is a major factor in the generation of conflict' (p. 85), left me wondering what might come of a cross-fertilisation of these psychodynamic perspectives with the more humanistic and transpersonal perspective on victimhood of Jill Hall (Hall, 1993).

In his final short chapter of just seven pages, Richards succinctly addresses such prescient issues as the **environmental catastrophe** ('there is widespread denial about climate change... – a hidden, internal resistance to confronting the threat as it exists in the external world' – pp. 87, 88); **fake news** ('accusations of falsity made in order to close down debate and inquiry.... How do we understand this crisis of trust?' – p. 89, his italics); **the growth fixation** ('we... continue to subscribe to a phantasy about the "economy" as a huge force that surrounds us' – p. 90); and **growing inequalities** (with a detailed and illuminating connection made by Richards with Wilkinson and Pickett's important work in the area of inequality and well-being – Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). We read here that 'If it were possible to make early and skilled interventions into the family lives of all babies and young children whose emotional development was at risk, our politics... might look a lot brighter' (p. 91). As the psychiatrist said in *Fawlty Towers*, 'there's enough material for a whole conference there'!

It's really important for humanistic folk like me that in his book, Richards emphatically does not lapse into simplistic and deterministic psychoanalytic reductionism – see this, for example:

In pointing to the possible unconscious meanings of our actions, we are not saying that the political and moral reasons people may have for acting as they do are *always* superficial realisations concealing the unconscious needs which are the real drivers of behaviour. In the complexities of human behaviour, moral principle and unconscious need may act side by side.... What

is crucial is the strength of the secure and realistic parts of the psyche relative to the insecure and defensive parts, and the prospects for strengthening the former and containing the latter. (p. 72, original emphasis)

And a bit later, 'Any one ideological destination may be reached by a variety of different routes through personal psychological development, since the ideology may have several different points of emotional entry' (p. 79).

Richards also challenges those with left-progressive political inclinations to think deeply about the unconscious phantasies that might be at the least informing, if not furiously fuelling, our political predilections and strongly held convictions. Thus he writes – and this from someone who, certainly in the past, has taken Marxist theory very seriously indeed: 'there is continuing influence of socialist ideologies in the twenty-first century, which, when psychologically understood, suggest a phantasy of a good parent emerging and taking beneficent charge of things' (p. 73). Now this is not at all necessarily an anti-socialism argument (just as teasing out the psychodynamics underpinning capitalism would not *necessarily* be an anti-capitalism argument – see, for example, Wasdell, 1992/2019); but it certainly should give us all pause for reflection on the extent to which our political beliefs are indeed unconscious projections of our own internal issues and developmental histories. This kind of perspective might also help to account for the phenomenon of left and right libertarians sometimes being surprised to find that they're standing on much the same ground – for perhaps authoritarianism of both the 'left' and the 'right' is underpinned by the same unconscious phantasy of 'a good parent emerging and taking charge of things' for us. Much food for political-ideological thought here, perhaps!

I was also delighted to see Richards' views on the 'science' of psychology (see the second epigraph at the start of this review): what a delight to see someone from the perspective of psychoanalysis taking a suitably critical, 'post-positivistic' perspective on the cultural story that is 'science'! (cf. Reason & Rowan, 1981; House, 2010).

Other reviewers of this book have had complimentary things to say about it. D.J. Winchester of Columbia University (in CHOICE Reviews), for example, points out how the book illustrates just how such a psychoanalytic perspective ‘can illuminate the behavior of people acting within a political community’. And a recent 5-star reviewer on Amazon writes of the book ‘shin[ing] a welcome and much-needed light on what is really going on below the surface, superficial level which most debate and analysis is [sic] stuck at’ – and with psychology having much to offer ‘to help us understand politics, politicians, and our own political reactions so much better’. I have to say, however, that it’s difficult to understand how Andrew Samuels’ important work on the political psyche (e.g. Samuels, 1993) isn’t even mentioned in a psychoanalytic book on psychology and politics! – but I guess the book is short; and perhaps the schism that has existed historically between Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian Analytical Psychology is still reverberating, even now.

As I come to the end of this (hopefully succinct yet provocative) review, I find myself remembering Lavinia Gomez’s important *Self & Society* article from 2004. In that article, Vin makes the telling point that psychodynamic and humanistic thinking can sit together and fructify one another – and don’t have to be opposing psy factions fighting it out for ideological supremacy! I think this is something all hard-core humanistic psychologists need to hear – that is, that we can stay true to our humanistic pretensions (I almost wrote ‘ideology’!) whilst at the same time staying open to learning and being informed and enriched by other theoretical traditions and perspectives. Andrew Samuels’ and Nick Totton’s writings come to mind here. And I think Barry Richards’ works fall squarely in this category of a substantial body of writing and thinking, spanning over 35 years, that we can all learn from, and be fructified by.

I am also thinking of one of my favourite sayings – ‘Less is more’. Perhaps I’m just getting old, but I do come away from this book feeling that we need far more shorter books, and less long ones! It might even be that it calls on far greater skill to be able to write a good short book than to write a good long one – and Richards’ *The Psychology of Politics*

certainly falls into the former category. (And for the record, I’m discovering that writing short book reviews also demands skills that I don’t particularly possess.)

Yet I do also think there’s a yawning open goal for some interested scholar to write a much longer review essay on Barry Richards’ many and varied works on ‘psy and the social’ (if I may so categorise them); and perhaps this ‘short’ taster-review will inspire someone to do just that – I sincerely hope it does.

Perhaps I should try writing ‘short’ book reviews more often.

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