(Some) Psychologies of Brexit

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Overview

- Organisations of Feeling
- Perspectives
  - Demography
  - Economics
  - Politics
  - Social and Public Policy
  - Network Analysis
  - Media Studies
  - Financial Power
- Circumstances and Feelings
“The entire psychological field .. Is a vast and branching development of feeling” (Langer 1967, p.22)

(Political) rationalities are:
- Local
- Contingent
- Already constituted of both discourses/symbols AND feelings
Organisations of Feeling

Contingent associations get worked up between particular feelings and specific objects/events/discourses/narratives/practices:

- Pride/admiration: venture capitalist ‘dragons’, not anti-capitalist protestors
- Resentment: immigrants ‘taking our jobs’, not employers paying poverty wages
- Anger/contempt: ‘benefit scroungers’ not bankers
Organisations of Feeling

- Feeling gets repeatedly and thus habitually connected with symbol, discourse, narrative etc., to organise:
  - What is felt
    - In relation to what event, symbol, topic etc.
  - What is unfelt
    - e.g. empathy can come to be felt very selectively (Olsen, 2010)

- (Political) belief: an organisation of feeling contingently associated with a set of discursive (and corporeal) practices and positions
The Overton window (sphincter?)

The continuous work of (temporarily, partially) stabilising the window/sphincter involves making ideas outside of it *feel* unacceptable - too radical, too extreme, too dangerous – this is precisely how ideas are rendered un/thinkable.
Ford & Goodwin (2014) - some characteristics of UK demography at 2 recent points in time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1964</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers in manual work</td>
<td>Almost 50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union membership</td>
<td>40%+</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council housing</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University educated</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Nearly 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethic minorities</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>10%+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ford & Goodwin (2014) – source, British Social Attitudes, 2013:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Under 35</th>
<th>Over 65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigration: negative economic impact</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative cultural impact</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should be reduced a lot</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being born here is very important to being British</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same sex relations always or mostly wrong</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities for LGBT have ‘gone too far’</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU should have less/much less power than nation-states</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would vote to leave EU in a referendum</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demography - a ‘generative mechanism’ in the referendum?
Pettifor (2017): 

“the 'Brexit’ vote is but the latest manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the utopian ideal of autonomous markets beyond the reach of regulatory democracy. Brexit represented the collective, if (to my mind) often misguided, efforts of those ‘left behind’ in Britain to protect themselves from the predatory nature of market fundamentalism.” (p.127)

“Re-regulating the British economy in favour of finance and enriching the 1% while shrinking labour’s share of income resulted in rising inequality and lit a still smouldering fuse of popular resentment. Resentment made most explicit in the Brexit vote.” (p.130)
Kagarlitsky (2016):

“[the] majority of Britons did not only vote against the EU. They did so in the face of opposition from three quarters of MPs, the leadership of the biggest parliamentary parties—the Conservatives, Labour and the Scottish National Party—the overwhelming bulk of British industry and almost every major capitalist institution, from the Bank of England to the International Monetary Fund. .. the Brexit vote was not only a rebellion against the neoliberal European project but also no less a popular uprising against Britain’s own ruling elites, including both intellectual and political classes, business and media.” (p.111)
Gietel-Basten (2016):

“the power of the Leave campaign can be explained by the fact that it was not just about distant political institutions and secretive decision-making cabals, however derided or feared; it was about gut-wrenching issues like borders, culture, and the homeland.” (p.678)

Combined automatic topic extraction and sentiment analysis to compute ‘distances’ between emotional tone of post and emotional tone of its associated comments

Showed the existence of two distinct ‘echo chambers’ corresponding (presumably) to Leave and Remain camps
Financial Power
Financial Power
“Cambridge Analytica has teamed up with Leave.EU. We have already helped supercharge Leave.EU's social media campaign by ensuring the right messages are getting to the right voters online, and the campaign’s Facebook page is growing in support to the tune of about 3,000 people per day.”
"We collect up to 5,000 data points on over 220 million Americans, and use more than 100 data variables to model target audience groups and predict the behaviour of like-minded people."

The convergence of marketing, big data, and psychology

Similar to behavioural economics or ‘nudge’ although Cambridge Analytica:
- favours bespoke rather than mass interventions
- prioritises emotional sway over e.g. norm setting or choice architecture manipulation

Efficacy questionable...
Circumstances and Feelings

- Neoliberal economic policies (since 1979)
  - Globalisation > increased immigration
  - Financialisation of the economy
  - Uneven benefits of growth
  - Increasing inequality
  - Precarity, de-skilling, unemployment
- Abandonment of the traditional working class by ‘New Labour’
  - Discredited by Iraq War and by slurs of financial mismanagement
- ‘Austerity’ in response to the 2008 crisis
- Discrediting of Liberal Democrats by student fees and 2010 coalition
- (Print) media advantage of Leave Campaign
Feelings (differentially distributed according to age, gender, region, SES etc):
- Fear
- Dissatisfaction
- Resentment
- Indignation
- Anger
- Distrust
- Equality ‘going too far’
- National pride
- Hope

Feelings organised and ‘interpellated’ (Althusser) across different and overlapping timescales by economic, social and material circumstance

Orchestrated and given form by and through:
- Newspapers and TV
- Social media
- Targeted advertising
- Big data
- Financial power
Conclusion

- There was no single ‘belief’ that Britain should leave the EU – rather, multiple ‘psychologies of Brexit’ (different, overlapping, contingent organisations of feeling and discourse).

- Neither side in the referendum debate integrated a convincing factual narrative with a persuasive feeling based narrative (Forss & Magro, 2016).

- ‘Facts’ and feelings were part of both Leave and Remain campaigns: we have not suddenly entered a post-factual world ruled by emotion.
Our task now is:

- To understand how feelings and information are always already conjoined in (political) discourse and belief.
- With colleagues from other disciplines, to more accurately and effectively analyse and rebut false information.
- To move the Overton sphincter into a more comfortable position....