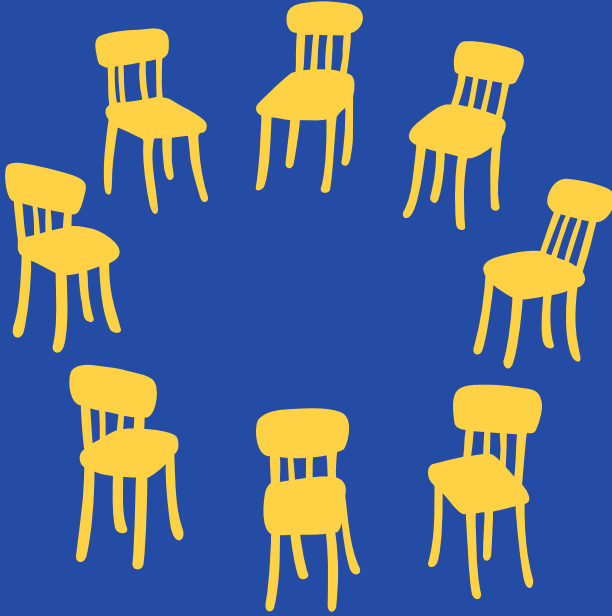Brian M. Hughes

THE PSYCHOLOGY

From Psychodrama to Behavioural Science

OF BREXIT

The Psychology of Brexit

"As a psychologist and former president of the UK's professional body for psychology, I have seen Brexit concerns in both the UK and Europe at first hand. But depth of psychological analysis has up to now been in short supply. Brian Hughes fills this gap with a penetrating analysis of the impact on citizens and communities, written with energy and style. One that I think will earn an enduring place on the Brexit bookshelf."

—Nicola Gale, *Department of Psychology, City, University of London and Former President of the British Psychological Society*

"This book is an articulate and insightful enquiry into the psychology of Brexit. Brian Hughes draws upon theories from cognitive psychology, social psychology and individual differences to explain what compelled a majority of British people who turned out at the ballot box to vote to leave the European Union, and the psychological consequences of this collective decision. Hughes's accessible and absorbing style makes this a must-read for anyone interested in human behaviour and decision-making."

—Michael Smith, *Associate Professor of Psychology, Northumbria University, UK*

"This book is a must-read for politicians, academics, and teachers, as well as the layperson. In this excellent and clearly written volume, Hughes has illustrated the integral connection between political decisions and psychological well-being and as such this book is in the vanguard of the area. Politicians need to be cognizant that their decisions impact not only the political and economic future of their countries, but also they can seriously impact the mental health of their citizens."

—Esther Greenglass, *Professor of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Canada*

"Political circumstances are inherent companions of human experience, bringing gains and losses, rewards and costs, regardless of whether or not they are directly or indirectly influenced and/or experienced. It's no surprise then, particularly to social scientists, to discover how much politics affect our psychological beings. Yet the psychological dynamics that govern political processes and outcomes may be less obvious, particularly to politicians. Hughes's timely, insightful and brave analysis of the psychology of politics of Brexit is a lesson for all."

—Krys Kaniasty, *Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA, and Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland*

Brian M. Hughes

The Psychology of Brexit

From Psychodrama to Behavioural Science

palgrave
macmillan

Brian M. Hughes
School of Psychology
National University of Ireland, Galway
Galway, Ireland

To my parents,
Mary and Jarlath

Acknowledgements

As always, I want to pay personal tribute to the usual gang for their constant support and patience, to Annie and Louis, and, especially, Marguerite.

Brian M. Hughes

Also by Brian M. Hughes

Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology (2012, Prentice-Hall)
Rethinking Psychology: Good Science, Bad Science, Pseudoscience (2016, Palgrave)
Psychology in Crisis (2018, Palgrave)

Contents

1

Brexit as Psychodrama

'THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK' shouted the headline, its huge white letters consuming almost the entire front page. It was one of those days when the news needed to be announced in block capitals. In the background was a barely visible greyed-out Union Flag, worn away, no doubt, by winds of destruction, while below, a cut-out of Prime Minister David Cameron gazed offstage, his pained face signalling defeat to the world.

With clichéd but nonetheless vivid visual cues, this tabloid headline proclaimed a unique historical juncture, a moment in time that few readers would ever truly forget (Miranda, 2016).

It was the day after the Brexit referendum. Against every expectation, the people had voted *Leave*. 'Get us out of here,' they said. Britain, and perhaps the world, would never be the same again.

But while it was certainly eye-catching and suitably dramatic, the headline was a little curious just the same. Something did not quite add up.

Precisely what 'EMPIRE' was being referred to?

Was this an allusion to the United Kingdom's self-styled standing as an imperial power, whose global relevance owes more to historical and cultural nostalgia than to actual territorial dominion?

Or was it a reference to the European Union itself, a pan-national expansionist consortium, often accused by Eurosceptics of having imperialist intentions of its own?

As with all things Brexit, matters were more complicated than they first appeared. As we will see throughout this book, quite what everything means depends largely on your perspective.

At least the notion of 'empires' 'striking' at each other was appropriately apocalyptic. It was beginning to feel as though reality was falling apart. Within hours of the referendum result, the Prime Minister had announced his resignation. The value of the pound—and of the euro—plummeted on global currency markets. The world's media began to obsess about the implications of this unexpected sociopolitical meltdown.

And in the United Kingdom, Brexit was quickly becoming an all-consuming, collectively traumatising, and supremely challenging social upheaval.

For want of a better term, in the years since 2016, Brexit has unfolded into a fully-fledged psychodrama.

In the media, academia, and the public square, there is an ever-present impulse to explain Brexit in psychological terms, albeit with varying degrees of convincingness. Brexit attitudes are frequently projected as symptoms of pathological thought. People who voted Remain are labelled 'Remoaners', implying the presence of chronically disordered mood. Those who voted Leave are dismissed as 'Brextremists', which hints at sociopathy.

The language of psychiatry is often used to decry Brexit as an act of national 'self-harm', with little apparent regard for the sensitivities of people for whom *actual* self-harm is a lived reality. This so-called national self-harm of Brexit is sometimes depicted as a catastrophe; at other times, it is employed to titillate readers by implying a nationwide predilection for masochism.

Other perspectives focus on political performance. They analyse the group dynamics and organisational behaviours required to achieve the best bureaucratic Brexit. The entire enterprise, ostensibly the crafting of a new national sovereignty on an unprecedentedly grand scale, is reduced to the grubby realities of personality clashes and the needs of internal party management.

For many people, the psychological impact of Brexit is the challenge of its complexity. Brexit melts the brain. Its incomprehensibility is a source of national distress. In a daytime chat show interview that went viral on social media, the actor Danny Dyer spoke for millions when he declared Brexit to be 'a mad riddle' about which 'no-one's got a f***ing clue' (Busby, 2018).

Brexit is not the result of accidental tragedy or spontaneous economic turmoil. It was contrived by politicians, was voted for by citizens, and is now being implemented by bureaucrats.

Brexit did not 'just happen.' It exists because people decided to make it exist. It is therefore hugely influenced by a myriad of psychological factors as experienced across many social groups. Brexit is the combined reflection of a multitude of perceptions, preferences, choices, self-images, attitudes, ideas, assumptions, and reasoned (or ill-reasoned) conclusions.

So if you want to understand Brexit, why not turn to a psychologist?

After all, psychology is the formal study of these very human behaviours, these emotions and thoughts, these experiences of individuals and communities. Psychology is a science (more or less) in that it seeks empirical evidence to support or reject given claims.

Psychologists develop theories, conduct experiments, and gather data. They look for signals in what would otherwise be treated as noise. They seek to impose intellectual order on worldly chaos.

And what could be more chaotic than Brexit?

The Psychologising of Brexit

Brexit is unavoidably relevant, and not just to British audiences. It is a case study in group decision-making within mass democratic systems; its lessons speak to any community where choices are made at ballot boxes. It took one of the most advanced societies ever to have existed and turned it into a place of prevalent and near-permanent pandemonium. It is a warning to all other peaceable countries against cultural complacency.

And in disrupting the balance of society—in wrecking its resting home-ostasis—Brexit is the very definition of what psychologists refer to as a

'stressor.' It can therefore be presumed to be inflicting a grievous mental load on the population.

Brexit emerged from psychological impulses, was determined by psychological choices, is construed in terms of psychological perceptions, and will leave a lasting psychological imprint. For many people, especially in the United Kingdom (but not only there), Brexit looms large in the psyche. It should be no surprise then, when pundits try to explain it, that Brexit's psychological dimensions receive so much airtime.

But not all hot takes are equal. Sometimes the interpretation of events reveals more about the people doing the interpreting than it does about the events themselves. The very idea that Brexit reflects a British yearning for past imperial glories may well be a case in point. This is important because such imperialist narratives have been used not only to explain Brexit, but also to demonise those who support it.

The notion that centuries of history intrude upon the behaviour of citizens alive today offers a highly seductive narrative. However, with any psychological approach, it is important to consider empirical evidence and scientific standards of reasoning. This is because seductive narratives are themselves propelled by psychological influences. In many cases, they are often seductive precisely because they are divorced from real-world banality.

In other words, many seductive narratives are examples of escapism.

They are seductive precisely because they are wrong.

Empire 2.0

It is in the psychological nature of humans to consider one's own kind exceptional. In this regard, the humans who make up the modern United Kingdom are, well, no exception.

Britons are generally aware that the United Kingdom has had a significant impact on the world. Few nations can claim to have impacted the world more. At one time or another, the British have forcibly invaded all but twenty-two of the countries that make up the current international community (Laycock, 2012).

It seems that Britain has been looking to take things over for as long as history has been written: one of the first recorded mentions of the British was when Julius Caesar wrote about them turning up, unexpectedly, fighting the Romans in France.

The first formal British endeavour to topple another state—an invasion of Gaul led by Clodius Albinus in AD 197—got no further than Lyon. However, over successive centuries, Britain went on to accumulate a slew of dominions, colonies, territories, and protectorates. Britain ruled the waves 'at heaven's command' and built a commonwealth that spanned the globe. Its truly global reach prompted George Macartney, the Irish-born governor of the British West Indies, to declare it a 'vast empire on which the sun never sets, and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained' (Kenny, 2006).

In the United Kingdom, schoolchildren are taught that, at its peak, the British Empire comprised a quarter of the earth's land area as well as a quarter of its population. The concept is ingrained in citizens' minds from an early age. Whether all its ramifications are appreciated is less clear.

Occasionally, the statistic is garbled, as when a caller to national radio claimed that citizens should have no fears about a post-Brexit future, because their country used to control 'three thirds of the world.' When challenged, the caller reduced this to 'two thirds' (Oppenheim, 2017). Past glories are often more influential in essence than in substance.

Public commentary and media coverage regularly locates Brexit within a post-imperial frame. For academic Nadine El-Enany (2017), the Brexit vote reflected a long-held anxiety about loss of empire. This created for Britain an 'extreme discomfort at its place as, formally, an equal alongside other EU member states', rather than holder of the imperial throne. Vince Cable, leader of the Liberal Democrats, argued that many Brexit supporters are addled by 'nostalgia for a world where passports were blue, faces were white, and the map was coloured imperial pink' (Jamieson, 2018).

Academics and journalists have described how a 'nostalgic yearning for lost colonies' has become deeply embedded as 'part of [Britain's] national psyche' (Olusoga, 2017). It creates a condition of 'postcolonial melancholia' that continues to distort political debate (Saunders, 2019). Britain suffers a recurring 'self-deluded narrative' about its prospects for new imperial exploits, where '"our" former colonies will want to form a new, white,

English-speaking trading area—nicknamed Empire 2.0—to replace the EU' (Mason, 2018).

A theme of pathological self-aggrandisement appears repeatedly. According to *Guardian* writer Gary Younge (2018):

> Our colonial past, and the inability to come to terms with its demise, gave many the impression that we are far bigger, stronger and more influential than we really are. At some point they convinced themselves that the reason we are at the centre of most world maps is because the Earth revolves around us, not because it was us who drew the maps.

In their book, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, geographer Danny Dorling and sociologist Sally Tomlinson warn that such post-imperial 'arrogance' fuels Brexit, because 'a small number of people in Britain have a dangerous, imperialist misconception of our standing in the world' (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019).

The post-imperial slant is not confined to British commentary. It has been adopted around the world as journalistic shorthand for reporting on Brexit. The *New York Times* records Brexit as 'England's last gasp of Empire', a 'misguided craving' that plays on a 'fantasy of revived greatness' promoted by 'dreamers' who are 'sickened by nostalgia' (Judah, 2016). In the *Washington Post*, Britain's 'old colonial hubris' is depicted as causing the United Kingdom to 'cling to imperial nostalgia,' weighed down by 'a fair amount of delusion' (Tharoor, 2019).

In *Le Monde*, French historian Jean-François Dunyach complains of how British Eurosceptics deploy empire myths as 'ideological accessories,' comprised of little more than 'irreducible ambiguities' (Dunyach, 2019). American historian Dane Kennedy depicts Brexit as being permanently propelled by 'repeated evocations of the imperial past' (Kennedy, 2018).

All this talk combines to produce an elaborate psychological model—a theory if you will—that posits a clear role for deep-rooted empire-thinking in shaping today's events. As Dorling and Tomlinson put it, Brexit represents 'the last vestiges of empire working their way out of the British psyche.'

At first glance, it seems to add up. The very fact that Britain ruled the waves before would appear to provide *prima facie* evidence that it is capable

of doing so again. This makes British prosperity a tangible possibility in people's minds, and not merely a hypothesis.

But there is more to this psychodrama than a past that role-models the future. It is not just a case of learning logical lessons that allow you to imitate history. In this analysis, there are mysterious forces such as 'delusion', 'melancholia', 'yearning', 'discomfort', and 'nostalgia' and, of course, the amorphous 'British psyche.' With visceral drivers of thoughts, emotions, and behaviour operating on a collective national mind, this is a theory of Brexit that describes a people simultaneously overwhelmed by distorting impulsivity and incapable of true logic.

The effects of this type of thing should be wide-ranging. To assert that British people really are weighed down by colonial anxieties, imperial hang-ups, and delusions of majesty is to describe a kind of brain-addling sickness that subverts the very process of democracy. It is to imply that the British, or at least some of them, are *not of sound mind*. Such a claim should place the psychology of Brexit at the very centre of daily life.

From Self-Regard to Self-Loathing

But before we address its merits, let's take a moment to see where else this line of *Brexit-as-post-imperial-psychodrama* might take us. One consequence of no longer leading an empire is that the British people must now explain—to themselves, mainly—why it is their status is so reduced. Decades of psychological research show how most people are unlikely to account for losses by simply taking the blame themselves. Instead, they engage in various kinds of rationalisation process, where personal histories get re-written after the fact.

One approach involves finding a scapegoat, someone to blame for one's plight. Often scapegoats are accused of precisely those failings that the accusers themselves feel guilty of. In other words, people end up 'projecting' their own failings onto others. In couples therapy, a self-centred client might attempt to shift unwanted criticism by arguing that their *partner* is the one who is really greedy. Such rationalisations might succeed in deflecting blame in the here and now, but they are unlikely to produce long-lasting happiness.

A second strategy is to try to transfigure discomfort into something that feels more positive. For example, a client who feels their partner is selfish could decide that they actually *love* the fact that their partner is, in fact, so 'self-assured'. Reframed in such terms, the client's uncomfortable situation becomes a source of positive emotions, rather than negative ones, albeit superficially and precariously so.

When adopted knowingly, these rationalisations can be seen as useful coping strategies, excuses that can be rolled out when seeking to avoid guilt. However, when earnestly believed, such excuses become something else. They become pathological delusions, beliefs in falsehoods, psychotic thoughts, disconnections from reality. They become *symptoms*. This symptomatic scenario is inherent in the depiction of Brexit as a post-imperial psychodrama.

Some accounts of Brexit attempt to tease out these ancillary notions, looking for signs that confirm the merit of the overall interpretation. Thus, it is said, the British people are frequently driven to find consolation by casting 'faceless Brussels bureaucrats' as an 'out-group' on whom they can project their own record of poor judgement (Carswell, 2018).

For example, British critics have frequently decried the European Union for failing to restrict immigration to the United Kingdom. However, for years, the UK authorities have had the power to regulate this for themselves (Lee, 2018). In other words, British Eurosceptics—many of whom are parliamentarians—blame the EU for looking the other way on migration; when, in fact, it is the elected UK parliament—in other words, many of those self-same Eurosceptics—who are the real culprits.

From Self-Loathing to Self-Abuse

The scapegoating strategy is often supplemented by an effort to seek solace in suffering. One lesson from psychology research is that human beings find it quite easy to re-purpose their emotions in light of circumstance. In fact, they do it all the time, often without realising.

In a famous 1960s experiment, psychologists in the University of Minnesota injected students with adrenaline without telling them what was

in the syringe (Schachter & Singer, 1962). They then convinced the students that their strange physical reactions were actually due to emotional responses rather than to drug effects. Importantly, the psychologists were able to *choose* what particular emotions the students ended up feeling. They convinced some of the students that their physical reactions were due to anger by saying annoying things to them. They convinced other students that their stimulation resulted from happiness by telling them jokes. All the students experienced the same physical adrenaline rush, but how it was interpreted depended entirely on what the psychologists *decided* they should feel. The study revealed how human beings are quite capable of re-interpreting their own emotions *after they begin to feel them.*

The implication is one of the most important principles of psychology: *human beings are greatly influenced by others—and are never as in control of their feelings and perceptions as they like to think they are.*

Because of this, people can even learn to *enjoy* wallowing in pain, or at least to feel affirmed by the experience. The identification with the role of 'pain-recipient' eventually drives them towards self-destructive behaviour. According to Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole, these very psychological ideas can be used to explain Brexit. O'Toole presents a particularly pulsating account of this view in his book *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (O'Toole, 2018), where he claims to catalogue several vivid examples of a 'sadopopulist' dynamic in British culture.

For example, he draws parallels between the 1970s punk movement—with its message of 'masochism as revolt'—and the 'nihilistic energy that helped to drive the Brexit impulse.' 'Punk took bondage gear out of the bedroom and on to the street,' he argues, while 'Brexit took coterie self-pity out of the media-political boudoir and into real politics.'

O'Toole juxtaposes the popular sadomasochistic penchant for Nazi uniforms alongside the World War II jingoism so repeatedly invoked by pro-Leave campaigners. He points to the unique popularity in Britain of so-called 'alternative history' novels in which the United Kingdom is depicted as having lost the war, and been subjugated by Fascists. Could this be, O'Toole asks, a sign that British people hold a deep sense of being dominated by, say, the European Union?

He goes on to note how 'the biggest-selling book by an English author' in the years leading up to the Brexit referendum was E. L. James's *Fifty Shades*