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# The causes of sanity[1]

Barry Richards

## *Sanity and safety*

The original title for this paper, when it was being prepared for delivery at the 2018 Association for Psychosocial Studies conference, was 'Changing modalities of containment'. According to some good advice I was given, that was too obscure and abstract a phrase, so it was changed to 'The causes of sanity', a phrase which hopefully sounds a bit more interesting, though it may be enigmatic.[2] In the following pages I hope to convey some meaning for both phrases, by approaching the question of sanity and its foundations through psychosocial reflections on the legacy of the 1960s. The focus of the conference was on how the psychocultural and psychopolitical changes indexed by the iconography of '1967' and '1968' (respectively, the hippy 'Summer of Love' and the revolutionary moment of 'May 68') had contributed to shaping our world as it stood a half century later.

In 1967 I read two books by Ronald Laing, one of which was *The Divided Self*. Laing was a major figure in the British version of the intellectual ferment of the post-WW2 period, which climaxed in the 1960s as part of the so-called 'counter-culture'. He had written *The Divided Self* in the late 1950s, while working as a young psychiatrist in Glasgow, after which he joined the Tavistock Clinic in London, an institution which has had a significant influence on the development of psychosocial studies in Britain. Laing was by no means the only clinician after Freud to have offered psychosocial insight into the nature of mental illness and its relation to culture and society, but he was one of the most passionate in his writing and ambitious in his intellectual scope, in his project of linking the phenomena of psychotic illness to the nature of modern society.

Reading *The Divided Self* led me to study psychology, which meant re-starting my undergraduate career and giving up on what seemed to me to be the pointlessness of philosophy and the narrowness of politics, at least as those subjects were taught in the programme I had been taking.[3] I was to discover that the psychology which holds sway in academia (even more so back then) can sometimes compete with any subject for pointlessness and narrowness. But the inspiration I had received from Laing saw me through a psychology degree, and propelled me on after that into clinical psychology, where I would work with people who were in the extreme states of mind which Laing had so powerfully described. Those were states of mind underlain by a dread of annihilation of the self, its dissolution into non-being.

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[1] This article is based on a talk given as the opening plenary of the Association for Psychosocial Studies Second Biennial Conference held at Bournemouth University in April 2018.

[2] I recently came across Adam Phillips' 2005 book *Going Sane*. Phillips' exploration of the under-theorised concept of sanity is a corrective to the assumption I make here that sanity can be straightforwardly defined. However, I suggest that adopting a relatively simple working definition of it can be defended as a necessary precondition for my objective here, which is to consider it in its broad socio-historical contexts.

[3] I had other reasons for restarting my undergraduate career, more personal and more "lifestyle"-related, but won't detour into those, though they were very connected to the culture of that time.

Laing's work had serious limitations, not least as an analysis of society, but it continues to have influence. This is at two levels: implicitly in the background, as part of the paradigm shift which established today's 'critical' orientation of much of the social sciences and humanities, and sometimes explicitly, in appreciative critiques and rediscoveries of his writing (see, e.g., Asibong, 2018, and other contributors to a Special Issue of the *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*). For me personally, in the long term the Laingian influence stems not so much from the broadly political side of his work but from what he called his 'existential phenomenology' and what it said about sanity. This was not only an intellectual inspiration. *The Divided Self* also scared the hell out of me with its evocative descriptions of psychotic states of mind, experiences of disintegration, implosion, petrification and so on – in short, states of internal terror. As a trainee clinician I was disconcerted by those descriptions, perhaps a little like the hypochondriacal medical student who fears he may have all the diseases he is learning about. However, the difference was that the medical student probably does not have any of the conditions in the textbook, while we all have interior zones of psychotic disturbance. I had a relatively short career in clinical psychology but it left me with an understanding of sanity as an achievement rather than a default position, a place of safety that had to be secured as an alternative to the default of psychotic collapse, and a sometimes brittle achievement at that.

I did my clinical psychology training so long ago that although it had the content of a doctoral programme it was not based in a university but in a hospital, and I was fortunate enough to be based in a hospital with a strong tradition of psychoanalytic work and close links with the Tavistock Clinic. Pleased though I was to be at Laing’s old institution for some of my training, since the Tavistock was the major centre in Britain for the dissemination of psychoanalytic thinking I soon moved on from his libertarian mix of Winnicott and existentialism into a more thoroughly psychoanalytic approach to understanding the divisions of the self, and came upon the now neglected work of Harry Guntrip (1961; 1968). In his description of the schizoid condition, a fearful ego withdraws from real engagement with what is experienced as an untrustable world and seeks safety in an innermost psychic refuge. Guntrip, who sought to develop a theoretical integration of the works of Ronald Fairbairn and Donald Winnicott, was not a conspicuously psychosocial thinker. There is little societal analysis in his work, but his compassionate analysis of our psychic vulnerability, of a fear at the heart of human relationships, suggested to me that the need for safety is key to understanding the general public, as much as it is to understanding how psychotic breakdown may ensue when safety cannot be found.

There are of course many other diagnostic formulations in psychoanalysis and related traditions which point to the importance of an internal experience of safety as the fundamental precondition of sanity, of good-enough mental health. I am thinking of, for example, attachment theory, for which having a place of safety in a secure base is paramount, and of much of the psychoanalytic work on narcissism, according to which the narcissistic defence of phantasied self-sufficiency is driven by the need to find a place of safety in a world in which nothing outside the self can be trusted. And in a very explicit formulation of the role of safety as the bedrock of psychic well-being, the psychoanalyst Joseph Sandler writing in the 1960s and 1970s had captured most fully this fundamental understanding of the basic cause of sanity in his account of what he called the ‘safety principle’. He defined safety as a feeling state in the background of all experience, and one which was more than the absence of anxiety – it brings a positive tone to experience, and enables the person to perceive reality more fully and therefore be more open-minded and complex in thinking. A reduced sense of safety could be experienced as a ‘threat to the intactness of the ego’ (Sandler, 1967: 6), and result in drastic rigidification or even, in extremis, the freezing of cognitive functions.

So I am suggesting that we start from the idea that the basic cause of sanity is an internal sense of safety, or what Laing, in his existentially-influenced terminology, called ontological security. This is safety as a state of mind, not as an objective situation. It is fundamentally a capacity to believe in the resilience of the self, and the stronger it is then the more the individual will be able to tolerate threats, both external and internal. Dangers of physical or psychological attack in the external world, or threats to the self arising internally from overwhelming anxieties or destructive impulses, all these can be better faced and survived psychically when there is a core internal sense of safety. This internal sense will of course also be influenced by the external world, both directly by the actual level of safety in our environment, and indirectly by how the external world influences our capacity to manage our internal dangers (of which more below).

The internal sense of safety may not guarantee sanity, but I think it is reasonable to argue that it is the strongest basis on which the capacity for sane engagement with the world can be built. By ‘sane’ I mean engagement which, to put it in Kleinian terms, is based on the depressive position and not driven by paranoid-schizoid phantasy. Putting that in a less technical way, it is a way of being which is concerned with others, and which sees the world in realistic, complex terms. So if a sense of safety is the basic cause of sanity, the next question is, what are the conditions for, or causes of, a sense of safety?

## Sanity and containment

Different psychoanalytic theorists would phrase things differently, but many would see the development of a capacity to contain anxiety as being key to creating an internal sense of safety. When anxiety of any kind is surging around in the mind, the containment of it – which means being able to acknowledge, manage and tolerate it - is essential for the stabilisation of the self and its endowment with a feeling of safety. For psychoanalysis, the capacity to contain oneself develops in the vicissitudes of early development, in the infant’s first relationships with external objects. It is a legacy of the introjection of containing parental objects. To those readers familiar with the language of object-relations theory, this is to state the obvious. To those unfamiliar with that language, this possibly esoteric statement can be translated as saying basically that we learn to contain ourselves in very early experience, primarily from our experiences of how our care-givers guide and support us in dealing with difficult states of mind.

From a psychosocial point of view, we can recognise this primacy of early experience in shaping the internal world and thereby its importance in determining adult experience. But we must also examine how the external world as encountered in adult life can lend support to, or undermine, whatever sense of safety an individual is lucky enough to have acquired previously. I have argued elsewhere[4] that alongside close interpersonal relationships, an important source of containment is our societal environment. Our social worlds present us with many opportunities for our anxieties to be contained, and therefore for us to feel safe. So what are the various forces in society which can help us in the ongoing work of containing ourselves, of keeping us sane?

In pre-modern and early modern societies it was of course religion which was the societal institution most obviously concerned with attending to the primitive anxieties of individual citizens, and indeed with the general regulation of psychic life. This flags up a difficult question, which we cannot fully go into now but which must be acknowledged: it is related to Winnicott's basic distinction (1960) between truth and falsity in the self. How can we distinguish true containment from a false variety, i.e. from a process which may appear to be soothing and strengthening the sane ego but is actually itself a damaging defence, which in the long run weakens rather than strengthens the sense of safety? True containment is based on an acknowledgment of, even confrontation with, the disturbing feelings, not a denial or avoidance of them. The clinician may have the means to determine, in the specific individual case, which of these is happening. At the societal level, no such precision is possible. Nonetheless, it is important for us to try and reach some overall judgement about the psychic meanings of our social institutions and cultural practices. For example, we can perhaps understand how the act of confession may often have served a truly containing function, especially if linked with the possibility of forgiveness. But religious codes suppressing sexual desire, while they can be seen as intended to help in the containment of impulses, are likely to be very counter-productive, 'false' supports for emotional self-management.

We will touch on this difficult distinction later. More broadly, I want to suggest that we can think of there being different *modalities* of societal containment, different ways in which our social worlds can support us in the ongoing work of trying to be and to remain sane. These different modalities are offered by different societies, or by different sectors within a society. They will differ in the balance within each of truth and falsity, but also in other important ways – in what areas of life they operate, and in what appeal they have to people, what psychic attractions they present.

## 'The Sixties' and individualism

My suggestion is that the late 1960s ushered in key changes in the modalities of containment in the western world, changes which have subsequently become more or less global through their dissemination via global popular culture and consumer culture. These psychosocial changes are based on major socio-cultural shifts which have been copiously described and analysed in social and cultural theory as the arrival of the postmodern, and some of which are intertwined more recently with the ascendancy of what is often called neo-liberalism. They include extensive detraditionalisation, especially in the collapse of traditional forms of authority; the spread of an individualistic, perhaps even atomised consumer culture; the displacement of class conflict by identity politics; deep marketization, and so on. I am suggesting that we can see these socio-cultural shifts psychosocially, as a change in societal containment, which means a change in the relationship between anxieties in the individual mind on the one hand, and the societal environment on the other.

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[4] This argument is most recently set out in my 2018 book *What Holds Us Together* (two chapters of which were co-written with Joanne Brown and Karl Figlio).

Of course there have been many other psychosocial reflections on this transition to the post-modern, from analyses of it as deeply damaging (e.g. the culture of narcissism thesis of Christopher Lasch, 1979, or in a very different register the diagnosis of 'neophilia' by the journalist Christopher Booker, 1969) to much more positive narratives such as Ronald Inglehart's description (e.g. 2015) of a shift to what he calls ‘post-materialist’ values, and Anthony Giddens’ (1992) view of the deep changes in the nature of interpersonal relationships.

These divergences arise partly from how the individualism at the heart of the cultural changes which we associate with 'the Sixties' is pictured.[5] There is a blurred but important distinction between expressive and possessive individualisms.[6] The former is primarily socio-cultural, and is about freedom of expression for the individual. It is most obvious in the huge diversifications of personal appearance, of leisure pursuits and other consumption practices which have unfolded across nearly all social groups. It has contributed to the growth of identity politics, though as Fukuyama (2018) points out in his discussion of expressive individualism, the identity politics of contemporary nationalisms and Islamism are more expressions of collectivistic impulses rather than of individualism.

Possessive individualism is primarily econo-political. It was first identified and analysed by the political scientist C. B. Macpherson (1962), who saw it as a cornerstone of liberal political thought. It is based on the principle that we completely possess not only our own property but also our own *selves* and their properties - we do not owe our skills, capacities, energies and so on to anyone else. So we enter into exchanges with others free of any obligations to our wider society. This is the monadic individual of hardcore neo-liberal economic and political theory.

These two types of individualism are both of very long standing, and in the consumer culture of capitalism, there are complex and contradictory interrelations between them. Both underwent particular modulations in 'the Sixties'. The most dramatic was probably the expansions of expressive individualism in the freedoms resulting from the 'sexual revolution'. For example, the censorship of sexual material in the arts collapsed, between the 1960 acquittal of Penguin on the charge of obscenity for publishing D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the 1968 Theatres Act. And as the historian Arthur Marwick (1982) has observed, 1967 was a momentous year for sexual mores: three Acts of the British Parliament in this year of the 'summer of love' respectively decriminalised homosexuality, made contraception much more freely available, and widened access to abortion.

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[5] The article in this issue by Carla Penna offers a complex analysis of individualism which to some extent stands as an alternative to the simpler binary to be used here, though our accounts are by no means incompatible.

[6] This distinction can related to, but not equated with, that between individualisms of 'singleness' and 'uniqueness', as defined in Penna's discussion of Georg Simmel's writing.

We might see a possessive individualism also at work in some of these changes. In a number of ways, the liberalisation of sexual codes in this period has led to morally complex problems (not least, for example, in debates about abortion, and in the present scale of pornography), but it is hard not to see it as in major part a liberating and enabling development. It has given many people ever since a measure of freedom to inhabit life-enhancing forms of expressive individualism - expressive not of a *unique* individuality, as has become the goal in other areas of personal life, but of the desire at the core of the individual self.

To focus on sexuality and the individualising dimensions of the period is, for some, to distort the legacy, which they argue should be based not on the free love and flower power aspects of 67, which were geographically limited) but on revolutionary movements around the globe in 68 (see, e.g., Hamblin and Adamson, 2019). The 60s were certainly a time in which radical political ideologies emphasising forms of *collective* consciousness and expression gained substantial support, led by Marxism and its rejection of all types of individualism (though compromises with expressive individualism, especially around sexuality, have always been common amongst Marxists). The trajectory of those ideologies since then, and their influence today, is obviously important. However, with over fifty years of hindsight it is difficult not to see a large part of the combined legacy of 67/68 in the enhancement of individualism in various forms, at least across Western societies and cultures.

The argument of this paper is that this surge of individualism, particularly in its expressive form, later identified as part of the postmodern, involved a shift in the modality of containment, a change in how individuals used the cultural practices and societal institutions around them to help them manage their more primitive anxieties. To see the emergence of postmodern individualism in terms of changes in the process of societal containment will enable us to bring additional depth and refinement to a psychosocial assessment of the cultural shifts of the last half-century.

## Containment and popular culture

Viewed in this way, these changes amounted to the transfer of much of the burden of societal containment from the traditional institutions of church, state and other hierarchical organisations, to popular culture in its media-based, heavily commodified, individualistic and globalising form. This popular culture has centred on music, sport, the moving image and consumer goods, but has ramified into all areas of leisure and creativity. How can it offer containment, and do so in a more powerful way than the old institutions such that it displaces them in our individual minds? It does so through on the one hand its recognition and validation of needs and impulses, and on the other its simultaneous affirmation of how reality must constrain and sometimes frustrate the fulfilment of those needs and expression of those impulses. It recognises and embraces needs for attachment, and sexual and aggressive impulses, rather than marginalising or seeking to suppress them. This was a key difference from traditional, more restrictive modalities of containment: it is more true to inner experience, and it shifts the cultural balance towards expression. Yet it also presents us with the demands and benefits of civilisation: social channels for the regulated expression of desire and destructiveness. Within that framework, which we internalise, self-regulation can develop, and a sense of internal safety and coherence be strengthened.

For example, the emotional and aesthetic discourses of popular music and of sport have both been elaborated as domains for the affirmation of selfhood, despite their accommodation of sexism and racism going relatively unchallenged until quite recently, and despite the acquisitive and sometimes corrupt presence of the corporate interests involved in them. In popular music, some television drama and film, it is the constraining realities in the interpersonal sphere of love and attachment that are often the focus: romance and hope are interwoven with the realities of loss, disappointment, separation, conflict and so on, the endurance of which is encouraged and modelled by the content of the songs, scripts and other narratives we consume. In sport, it is the rules of the game which confront us with the reality of the societal other and the imperative to subject ourselves to that other. To enjoy the expression of aggression which (amongst other things) the game affords, we must basically comply with its laws, and thereby enter a community of pleasure and safety.

So at the same time as offering a more expressive and hedonic world than was previously open to most people, these leading forms of popular culture present us with the limits set by reality, which means primarily limits set by the existence and needs of others. In a way that is analogous to the work of the containing parental object, popular culture recognises both desires and anxieties, while it also instructs us in how to manage and not be overwhelmed by them – how to tolerate pain and frustration, to inhabit pleasure, to manage aggression and so not to fragment psychically. And as is often observed, the development of the online universe has both expanded the resources available to support us in our psychic self-management, and vastly multiplied the opportunities for us to choose delusional and destructive alternatives to authentic containment.

It may be that much of what I have just been trying to say in a psychosocial language, about the containing power of popular culture, has been said in a simpler way by people who feel that were it not for their immersion in a particular area of popular culture, whatever that might be, they would go mad – an exaggeration, probably, in most cases, but one with an element of literal truth. Popular culture, or at least some major forms of it, help keep us sane.

This argument is set out most fully in a book I wrote in the early 1990s called *Disciplines of Delight.* That book's core idea was that a blend of pleasurable release with the reassuring presence of the societal other can be very containing. At that time, the early to mid 90s, there were grounds for much more optimism about the world than we can find today, and that book correspondingly had a positive tone, pointing to the psychological depths of popular culture and criticising elitist disparagements of it. I would still take that positive view of the popular, but in re-presenting the analysis now it is necessary to extend it by locating it historically and in relation to both the political sphere and to a major cultural trend which infuses popular culture but also much else besides, especially in personal life and in many professional contexts - the rise of therapeutic culture, defined not only as an everyday interest in emotional life and its expression, but also as embodying a thoughtful reflexivity and a wish to explore and deal with feelings in constructive ways. This trend is a major positive legacy of the expressive individualism characteristic of the 60s, and it endows popular culture with a capacity to contain additional to its aesthetic resources and its powers of community.

Although the burgeoning popular culture of the 60s was often powered by creative individuals of broadly working class origins (e.g. the Beatles and many other leading figures in the explosion of pop music), and in some respects drew heavily on working class experience, it offered an alternative to all traditional class-based identities, and hastened their obsolescence. In Britain, the institution which was crucial in nurturing the creativity of 1960s British popular music was the art school, not the working class pub or club (Frith, 1988). Similarly, the novels of the late 1950s and 1960s by working class writers were bringing their class experience to the cultural fore, but only to document the moment of deep defections from that culture.[7] The compelling pleasures of a more expressive sense of self, of consumerism and sexuality, were pulling people away from primary identifications with collectives, most significantly with the working class (however much even today most people in many strata may still want to call themselves 'working class').

## Political authority as a failed container

The importance of popular culture in society had been building up through the twentieth century, and is still being extended today, but the years of the 1960s saw a step-change in that process, through the vast democratisation of hedonistic self-expression with which 1967 in particular is associated. The true inner self was emboldened to come out and find itself in the new freedoms, as ascendant social liberalism joined forces with popular culture to create the flux of the West's cultural revolution. Popular culture thus laid claim to the *authentic*[8], while politics became identified as a realm of inauthenticity and, increasingly, of falsehoods and lies. This was partly due to the way in which liberal anti-authoritarianism often morphed into reckless hostility to all authority, but the political classes are also to blame (in their party tribalisms, and their lack of vision and of emotional literacy) for the fact that at least since the early 1980s, as Ipsos MORI's survey archive[9] shows, the whole domain of democratic politics has been regarded with distrust, now amounting amongst many people to a default position of cynicism and contempt. Before the end of the twentieth century democratic politics had become a corrupt, bad object in the public mind, to the point where some commentators were talking of an 'anti-political' age (e.g. Mulgan, 1994). To be at all effective, a societal container of anxiety, whether we are talking about an individual, institution or cultural practice, has to be an object of trust. A sense of safety can develop only in the context of trust. So it became very difficult for political leaders or institutions to provide the reassuring connection with the public which must lay at the heart of containment.

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[7] Just two examples: Arthur Seaton, the central character in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), one of the iconic novels of the time, is sociologically 100% working class, but is a narcissistic hedonist with no shred of fraternal sentiment, as is the eponymous anti-hero of the film *Alfie* (1966).

[8] See also the article by Crociani-Windland and Yates in this issue.

[9] https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/trust-professions-long-term-trends.

The corrosion of trust was proceeding in the context of major and material changes in society which were serving to weaken the connections people felt with the political public sphere. In Britain, the decline of the heavy industries had set in, and so - adding to its cultural corrosion noted above - the socio-economic future of the working class no longer seemed clear. While the onrush of the consumer society in the 1960s was strongly differentiated on class lines, this stratification by taste was much less profound, especially when, as in Britain, the expansion of the higher education sector[10] was announcing a major increase in social mobility. So by the late 1960s there were clear signs that the deeply stratified society which people had felt themselves to belong in, albeit with much discontent and antagonism, was being radically reconfigured.

Also, in some of the major cities and towns, large-scale immigration had by then raised questions about what kind of society Britain was becoming. In short, a crisis in national identity was beginning to unfold. There were no answers from the political classes to those questions about the future of British culture and identity, perhaps because they were not posed in the policy discourse of the 1960s (nor for some time thereafter). The cathexis of democratic political institutions and processes depends on a level of emotional investment in and commitment to the societal whole, so there were a number of ways in which those with a sense of ‘us’ would have felt that to be weakening, and with it the containing power of the polity which was ‘ours’.

Also, perhaps more fundamentally, as we entered the age of nuclear weapons, the ability of governments to secure the safety of their citizens was compromised. Belief in the ultimate efficacy of national democratic politics, in the ability of the state to discharge its first and most basic duty of keeping its citizens safe, was therefore corroded. Growing fears about global terrorism, climate change and damage to the planetary ecology have all added to the experience that our national governments cannot protect us, that in fact, in the absence of effective planetary governance, there is no safety anywhere on the planet. At the time of writing, this has become true in an immediate sense due to the spread of Covid-19, which has just earned the title of ‘pandemic’. Climate change is also of course a non-human force, though one called into existence by human activity.

Democratic politics has also been weakened during this period by trends in ideological outlook amongst the public. The nation-state is now a heavily compromised and ambivalent object in the minds of many of its citizens in liberal democracies. Both the nation and the state are the objects of much negative feeling. Publics are caught in a dichotomous discourse on the *nation*, in which the poles are defined by, on the one hand, those extreme ethnonationalists who are driven by a fantasy of a purified and exclusive nation, and on the other by those anti-nationalists who believe that nations should be dissolved into an international community, a 'spectacular political infrastructure, which we have not even begun to conceive' (Dasgupta, 2018). Both poles attack the actuallyexisting nation, for being either a degraded or a deluded version of the nation's rightful place. The *state*, meanwhile, is widely regarded with contempt across the political spectrum, from antipathy on the 'Right' towards state welfare provision to hostility on the 'Left' towards the security state. The state is shrinking in the psychic space it occupies as a benign object. Indeed, we might say that hatred of the state is one of the most variegated and potent emotional forces in contemporary politics. In these conditions, the nation-state is under attack from two sides on the levels of both nation and state, and is not likely therefore to exert much containing influence on many of its subjects.

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[10] This was in the establishment from 1961 of the ‘plate glass’ universities, and, following the 1963 Robbins Report, that of the Council for National Academic Awards in 1964, to validate degrees in polytechnics, which eventually (1992) joined the university sector.

If we compare popular culture with politics over the last fifty years in terms of safety and containment, I suggest that as the importance of popular culture as a modality of containment has grown, so the contribution of politics to our background sense of safety has shrunk. Its emotional importance in the public mind has not dissolved as dramatically as that of the Christian church. But we have de-cathected politics as well as institutional religion, and instead have sought to a build a sense of safety in the symbolic realms of popular culture, where we can find emotionally powerful identities. In time, of course, the decathexis of politics in favour of popular culture has come to generate a reverse flow of energy, in the development of 'identity politics' which partly represents culture's highly ambivalent regeneration of the political sphere. But despite these more recent signs of a partial reconstitution of the political, it remains the case that for large majorities in countries like Britain, politics does not have the credibility or authenticity necessary for most people to find themselves recognised in it, let alone for them to experience it as a source of safety and containment.

## Homely place as container

It might seem that the solution to this problem lies in pressing on with a re-cathexis of politics, building on some of the recent developments which have brought more young people into political activism, bringing passionate concerns with inequality and with the environment more fully into the political mainstream, extending the mainstream agenda still further (where might veganism take us for example), challenging the sclerotic party system, infusing the political public sphere with some of the inclusive and expressive spirit of the music festival, finding new ways of drawing the huge energies of popular culture into civic purpose, and so on.

That might all be well and good, but it leaves a crucial element out of the picture, one which is important to the principle of safety. This element can most simply be described as geographical *home*. Popular culture is a globalising force, in a good sense. In its early folk origins, it obviously had geographically-based identities, but in the global village of digital culture these are now threads in one vast tapestry. This is for psychological as well as socio-technological reasons, because the appeal of popular cultural forms such as music and sport is based on their address to universal aspects of human nature, to universally shared desires and anxieties. As such, they can provide deeply satisfying and containing symbolic homes, homes which are locations of personal identity and of global virtual communities.

But popular culture does not offer a *material* home, a geographical place of safety. That is because it doesn't organise the world, in terms of providing the material environment and the structures of management and administration necessary for human society. The overlap between popular culture and politics is now considerable, and let's welcome its further development, but the responsibility of managing the lives of actual communities in actual places, i.e. the provision of a secure home, remains a basic distinguishing characteristic of *politics.* This is the geo-political element in the experience of safety. It is geopolitical not in the usual sense of global international politics, but in the sense of a politics of place, of geographical location, of territory that has a political and jurisdictional boundary. Only within such a boundary can the conditions for effective containment and safety be found, because the authority of a polity is necessary for the containing fabric of the state to be reliably provided (though of course that authority alone is not sufficient, depending on the objectives of those in charge of the state). Since the nation-state is still the constitutive political unit of human civilisation, however reduced its autonomy may be, the nation is the main geopolitical unit of safety and containment. For historical, cultural reasons, it is also often the object of the sense of belonging. As the work of the psychoanalyst and international conflict expert Vamik Volkan shows (e.g. 2004; 2013), we have a need for belonging at the large-group level, and this need most typically leads to some assumption of national identity, based on a mix of self-defined values, language, aesthetics, material culture, and religious heritage.

As we know, there are many chronic conflicts around the world because one nation feels oppressed by another, or a political boundary does not correspond to a cultural one, and some people want to create a new nation-state by dividing or leaving the state they are in, or merging with another state. The work of defining nation-states in stable and equitable ways is hugely complex, and always ongoing as migrations and other processes change national cultures. Nonetheless, insofar as individuals need to experience the safety of a geopolitical home, in order to support their internal sense of safety, then this can be provided most fully and effectively at national level. This is the core project of *national* politics. Yet for all the reasons I have described, the politics of the democratic nation-state are in a bad way, and unable to deliver the experience of having a safe home. So my contention is that some reconstruction of national identity and of commitment to the national polity is needed to develop a politics of homeness, and to fill the gap in societal containment that currently exists in that area.

This is not to idealise the idea of the nation, nor any actual nations that exist. However, the very idea of nationalism has such a bad reputation in left-liberal academia that it risks raising hackles to say anything positive about the nation as a political force. Still, an argument for the political importance of home is being developed elsewhere (see, e.g., Goodhart, 2017), and psychoanalytic psychosocial studies should have a contribution to make to the debate around that. A psychosocial analysis of the importance of safety should be at the centre of this debate, pressing for safety to be at the heart of political agendas.

Since safety and containment are what we seek, and if the realm of national politics is unable to offer much on that front, many people will find safety elsewhere, in popular culture and particularly in its therapeutic modes, but also in local communities and civil society, perhaps even in their work organisations. Again, that may all be to the good, but it leaves the liberal democratic nation state emotionally unattended. That means the tasks of creating a safe and beneficent geopolitical home, and of ensuring cohesion and good relations within it, will not be prioritised or effectively pursued. It also means that large areas of politics, perhaps even the centres of power in the nation state itself, are open to capture by those who promote a paranoid kind of nation and an illiberal kind of state, and whose emotional appeal to the public has no effective competitors. This is not of course a purely hypothetical scenario; there are toxic parties of that kind occupying seats in the legislatures of several European countries, not to mention the threatening presence in the White House.

This is one argument for encouraging the cultivation of national identity and sane nationalism as a barrier to the polarising threats of the regressive populisms which are currently insurgent, and which are all too aware of the importance of safety. And there is worse to fear from our debilitated attachment to the nation-state. The political forces in the world today most hateful of the liberal-democratic nation-state and most bent on its destruction are groups like the Islamic State and those groups and individuals we might loosely though inaccurately call neo-Nazi. Psychologically very similar, these people can imagine safety only in their psychotic visions of a purified world. Violent takfiri Islamists see the nation-state as the barrier to the creation of the global caliphate; most neo-Nazis have no real connection with their own nations, which is why the term Nazi is inaccurate. They are not 'Nazionalists'. They prefer to find connection with neo-Nazis in other countries in order to plot the destruction of their own societies. The most brutal example of this tendency to date, the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, was driven by a terrifying threat of the disintegration of his masculine self, and cared nothing about his country Norway, its culture or its polity (Richards, 2017). Whether in Syria or Scandinavia, these projects of destruction have more political and psychological space in which to incubate when the national community is widely felt to be unsafe and national identity to be weak and discredited.

Though parts of Britain are not safe, it is still basically true to say that this is a safe country, as are some others. An important agenda for psychosocial research is the fuller examination of what we owe that safety to, and therefore of how it can be made more inclusive. The importance of the nation-state in generating and sustaining that safety still has some appreciation amongst the general public, but little in academic discourse. At risk as we are, not only from insane political responses to the lack of safety but also from dangerous non-human forces, this may be a hopeful line of enquiry.

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**Barry Richards** is Professor of Political Psychology in the Department of Humanities and Law at Bournemouth University. His books include *Disciplines of Delight: The Psychoanalysis of Popular Culture* (1994), *Emotional Governance: Politics, Media and Terror* (2007), *What Holds Us Together: Popular Culture and Social Cohesion* (2018) and *The Psychology of Politics* (2019).