


4-27-2010

# The Politics of Immigration: A Representation of the Unconscious Mind

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## Recommended Citation

Editor (2010) "The Politics of Immigration: A Representation of the Unconscious Mind," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 10 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol16/iss10/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Politics of Immigration: A Representation of the Unconscious Mind

Author: Editor

Volume: 16

Issue: 10

Date: 2010-04-27

Keywords: Immigration, Mind, Unconscious

**Abstract:** This article discusses the concept of an illegal immigrant from different psychological perspectives.

In the United States (US), the Governor of the State of Arizona has recently signed into law a bill that is intended to better identify, prosecute, and deport illegal immigrants. There is huge controversy about the new law, not just in Arizona, but throughout the US and the world. If one believes that politics is the continuous management of the disparity between the ideal and the real within, between, and among people—in essence, the management of power—then such controversy should not be surprising.

Supporters of the new law maintain that federal, state, and local laws already on the books have not been getting the job done. That is, too many illegal immigrants have not been identified, prosecuted, and deported—and, of course, most if not all of these immigrants should be contingent or not how they have civilly or criminally trespassed against us. The should be should become the are being and will be to protect or further physical security including health, economic vibrancy and viability, moral and ethical standards, and even an aesthetic standard of what people should look like and how they should act in Arizona, if not the entire US. Some of the law's supporters are using it as a stalking horse for other agendas—including blatant racism and ethnocentrism, the desire for more states' rights as opposed to federal rights, as a provocation for the federal government to resolve the illegal immigration problem, and just good old politics for upcoming campaigns and positioning on yet other political issues.

People against the new law assert that the vast preponderance of illegal immigrants are law-abiding (except for breaking immigration law) who have the same American dream as the rest of us to work, have families, and live normal lives in the land of the free and home of the brave. (This assertion might be parsed as conceding a base rate of murder, rape, embezzlement, fraud, frank stupidity, and the violation of community sensibilities similar to that of legal immigrants and US citizens). People against the law also assert that the US is a land of immigrants; that illegal immigrants will—overall—make constructive contributions to the US; and that—to the contrary of the law's supporters—illegal immigrants might be freer of some of the morally and ethically tainted peccadilloes, inauthentic living, and spiritually bereft experience that form one stereotype of those of us who are not economically or politically challenged. (It may be noteworthy that in Arizona politics, being against the law is consensually viewed as not good old politics, although this bears watching and may change).

An observer of the public discourse on illegal immigration might add that people expressing support or lack thereof for the Arizona law are also in the throes of less stated but still conscious or preconscious complexes of thought, feelings, and motives not immediately related to immigration politics. These complexes might include staking out a position so that one will feel like a real person or citizen; because someone whom one likes or admires has or is thought to have that position; or as general management of fear, anxiety, depression, anger, and frustration.

An observer also might attribute aspects of the public discourse to unconscious complexes of thoughts, feelings, and motives. One significant, unconscious contribution may originate in very early

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psychological development—the rise, maintenance, and change of the self; the differentiation of self from other; and the continuous dynamics within and between self and other.

One narrative or close reading of texts on the vicissitudes of self and other can be based largely, but not only, on the work of the psychoanalyst and object relations theorist Melanie Klein (cf. her 1958 article entitled “On the Development of Mental Functioning” in volume 39 of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*), of the psychoanalysts Anna Freud (cf. her 1936 book entitled *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* and her 1954 article “Diagnosis and Assessment of Childhood Disturbances”) and Jacques Lacan (cf. his 1966 article (English translation, 1977) in *Ecrits: A Selection* entitled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”), and of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (cf. his 1938 article “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense”). From these seminal articles, one then would be ready to read a host of works primarily on object relations theory and ego boundaries, including works by Wilfred Bion, Otto Kernberg, Heinz Kohut, and John Masterson.

According to this narrative, human psychological development might begin with no self/other differentiation at all, but only self. Everything is the person and the person is everything—perhaps, this is not much different from how early Hindu philosophers might ascribe the optimal endpoint of human consciousness (cf. the *advaita* concept based on the *Upanishads*). The psychoanalysts—unlike the writers of the *Upanishads*—might describe this phenomenon as primary narcissism, and the task of human psychological development becomes the rise of secondary narcissism—wherein the person might or might not remain the center of life but shares the stage of life with an other. This other might at first be part of the self that is split off from it. But even if this is not the case, and, at the earliest moments of human psychology self/other differentiation is, the fact remains that development includes modifications of the self, the other, and the relationship between the two. This development might include varying differentiations leading to multiple selves or the self containing many components, multiple others or the other containing many components, and varying relationships between the self and the other.

For example, a person may vary in how many selves that person experiences. Some selves may be situationally dependent, some may arise randomly. The different selves of a person may vary as to how big or small each is; how each constitutes different components of pleasure and pain and good and bad; how static or dynamic, and, if dynamic, how regressive, progressive, or retrogressive each is; how significant each is in activating or deactivating other selves; and how easily they can penetrate their respective boundaries. In essence, we all have multiple personality order and disorder, and all of this impacts on behavior.

The other often as others in the mind of a person also will vary, much as the selves do—e.g., as static or dynamic, regressive or progressive, and the like. In fact, the other and others are part of the self and selves in so far as a self can be characterized partially but what kind of other is perceived. The key, however, are the interactions between the self and other as selves and others—especially how easily they may penetrate their respective boundaries, and how they affect their respective contents, structures, and functions. Perceptions of the others will affect the nature of the selves; the nature of the selves will affect the perceptions of the others. The others, at times reconstituting as the other, may threaten to take over the selves, at times reconstituting as the self. The converse may occur as well, as a trend appears towards the re-emergence of primary narcissism. A person constituted by the self without other or the other without self is psychologically doomed to social maladaptation and may not even be seen as psychologically human by social beings.

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The psychological jargon used to represent these phenomena include Sigmund Freud's projection, Klein's paranoid and depressive positions and her projective identification, Lacan's imaginary and symbolic constructs, and Anna Freud's elaborations of defense mechanisms. For example, in projective identification, an individual unconsciously transmits something deemed bad by that person from the self to another person—an other. Then, the transmitter acts in such a way so that the other begins behaving as if that other had the something bad that was originally part of the self of the transmitter. The other then identifies with what was transmitted, and becomes that something which at first characterized the self of the transmitter—the self of the transmitter being initially an other to the other who has just changed and been changed. Of course, the self setting the whole process in motion has changed as well. And concurrently, the self of the initial other might have been doing the same thing to the self of the other—this last other perhaps wrongly thinking through narcissism that it was not a self and an other but only a self. (Easy-to-understand phenomena related to the above include (1) a charismatic speaker drawing in listeners to engage in behavior as varied as killing, emptying their bank accounts, and following the speaker as a god; (2) falling head-over-heels in love with and becoming willing to do anything for someone evil; (3) losing one's mind or having a nervous breakdown in a highly stressful situation; (4) staying in an abusive relationship; (5) the putative phenomena constituting a cult; (6) finding it more difficult to be good or bad among good or bad people; (7) deciding who to be before going to a party or after arriving as one scans the crowd; (8) making up one's mind about whom to like, respect, and hate; and (9) and seeing as less than human all those who look, seem to look, behave, or seem to behave in a certain way.)

This narrative is intricate and complex and may be difficult to apperceive and interpret. It is also only a brief and simple description of what may actually be a field of psychological dynamics. But all such narratives have to do with boundaries; how easily selves and others may interpenetrate and reciprocally influence; how one psychologically is, lives, changes, and dies—and all this brings us back to illegal immigration.

The heat of the public discourse on illegal immigration often enough is characterized by people talking through, around, over, and under each other—i.e., anything but to each other. [This might also characterize how some readers might have experienced the last few paragraphs, which attempt to describe a primitive language of the unconscious with a socialized language of the conscious]. A public Issue that might seem to possess the potential for logical and rational resolution through reason may not possess it.

Why not? Our continuous, human psychological existence is at stake, and the illegal immigration issue is a dynamic representation of our unconscious with the immigrants and those who agree and disagree with us as pawns. In fact, we all may be caught in what Sigmund Freud would term repetition compulsion, as described in his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Here we continue to unconsciously repeat that which threatens our psychological existence so that eventually we can control the threat and rise above it, even if, ultimately, we are all fated to die. In a grim irony, people for and against controlling boundaries and that which is on either side of them are trying to extend security and life. Regardless of being for and against legislation, we and they will all inevitably fail. Even if all the illegal immigrants of the world could be rounded up and deported to some place labeled where they belong, our unconscious isn't going anywhere. It is for this reason that Freud's civilization had discontents. [Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu].

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