
Healing the Social Wounds of Injustice



By Michael Jarrett , INSEAD

Sigmund Freud’s concept of the pleasure principle offers clarity on how to repair fragmented societies in the aftermath of destructive populism.

A violent insurrection at the very heart of American democracy. Stubborn rejection of life-saving public health guidance during a surging pandemic. Polarisation. To an appalled observer, the contemporary social landscape appears disfigured by unappeasable, unaccountable rage and division. How bewildering it all seems - until one returns to Sigmund Freud’s seminal theories of the unconscious. Viewed through a Freudian lens, the chaos of the current moment starts to form intelligible patterns.

As the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud maintained that childhood experiences foster repetitive thinking, feeling and behaviour, which continue as adults. While radical at the time, these theories now underpin the sciences of the mind and are commonly held by professionals and scholars. Even popular media and drama entertains the thought of ‘animal instincts,’ the ‘Freudian slip’ or the portrayal of psychological struggles in the Korean drama, “It’s Okay Not to be Okay”.

Critics of Freud frequently conclude that he was all about sex. Yet, closer inspection highlights a higher complex narrative that carries implications for society and our future choices. I want to demonstrate how Freud's work helps enhance our understanding of the psychological ties between individuality and society. By *throwing* light on processes that can foster healthy societies, I contend that society develops through a fine balance of psychological containment and reparation.

The pleasure principle and the reality principle

In Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he examines the conflicts between individual drives (the pleasure principle) and society. The *pleasure principle* refers to the spontaneous, libidinal drives (e.g. desire, greed, sexual pleasure) that propel human actions. It dominates in motivating people to avoid suffering or "unpleasure" and, equally, seek happiness and satisfaction. During times of stress, satiating these needs becomes more tantalising. Freud warns that "an unrestricted satisfaction of every need (is enticing)...but it means putting enjoyment before caution, and soon brings its own punishment." The negotiation of instincts creates an internal strain or frustration, which is released only after gratification. For example, the release that follows partying with friends during lockdown, the thrill of love, or the hedonic aspect of diverse primitive instincts. Thankfully, many influences are at play that help regulate basic impulses. For example, social norms inhibit most of us from fully expressing our hidden (even to ourselves) desires.

Working in parallel with the pleasure principle is the *reality principle*. This refers to the mind's capacity to evaluate the external world. It demands we respond to the actuality of events, even when they do not concord with our instinctual desires. Accordingly, these two unconscious motives drive our psychological life and behaviour. The tension between them serves as a caldron for personal and collective actions. Among the outcomes, instinctual impulses can be exaggerated or subdued.

Destructive populism

During Covid-19, some groups allowed the pleasure principle to dominate their thinking, refuting the reality of the virus. Science became fake news. Instead, people formed another reality, fixated on themselves and proceeded to react in a manner that risked their own lives and that of others. Karin Johanna Zienert-Eilts terms this type of social movement "**destructive**

populism.” It targets negative emotions, deep-seated fears, feelings of disadvantage, primitive aggression, as well as a polarisation between the psychological state of individuals, groups and society. According to Zienert-Eilts, it serves to explain the allure of leaders like US President Donald Trump. These leaders represent the anxious feelings of groups and magnify their expression. Thus, Trump is archetypal of that part of society and a vehicle to voice their inner world. The armed insurrection at Capitol Hill, the seat of the US Congress, is demonstrative of how Trump incited and channelled those anxieties into action. The result is a further risk of societal disintegration. Trump, of course, is not alone. There are many such examples of leaders feeding paranoia, generating negative social contagion across society.

The recipe for reconciliation

Psychological containment provides a means to assuage the anxieties that inflame basic instincts. Containing objects include loved ones, role models, important events, organisations and other ideals that give a sense of stable attachments. The **examination of identity work** by INSEAD Professors **Gianpiero** and **Jennifer Petriglieri** illustrates the containing, holding function of a business school. Spiritual or civil communities offer a similar function. Thus, people find respite in social ties that protect them from isolation and threat. Finally, society provides containment through the symbolic role of governance, security and social rules of engagement. As a post-populist leader, US President-elect Joe Biden could begin the healing process by inspiring emotional reinvestment in democratic institutions cast into doubt by his immediate predecessor. He needs to go beyond mere lip service to heal the wounds of the past.

However, containment is only half of the recipe for reconciliation. Societies have complicated histories rife with the eruption of uninhibited drives in the form of atrocities, massacres, ethnic cleansing, etc. If the troubled past is not faced squarely, the instinctual cycle repeats itself. It fuels ongoing social unrest, as seen today in climate change, war, poverty and the refugee crisis. These evoke distressing images of burning forests, open graves, children begging for food, or three-year-old Alan Kurdi face down on a Turkish beach. Thus, uninhibited drives leave others’ reality in discontent, even traumatised across generations. Segments of society continue to suffer. Hence, the importance of reparation and healing.

Reparation makes amends for the wrong done. It symbolises psychological and emotional compensation, indicates remorse and guilt for terrible actions. It means giving up the distortions of the pleasure principle and accepting both reality and responsibility. For example, South African President Nelson Mandela set up the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) to deal with historical violence and human rights abuses in South Africa from all sides during apartheid. West Germany's Chancellor Willy Brandt spontaneously fell on [his knees](#) on his first tour to Poland's Warsaw Ghetto in 1970, silently acknowledging Nazi war crimes and commemorating millions of victims. In Ta-Nehisi Coates's "[The Case for Reparations](#)" in *The Atlantic*, describing hundreds of years of slavery and continuing injustices against African-Americans, he writes, "Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole." These illustrations represent the necessary healing for progress. Society, the people and communities within it require reparation to work through divisions and discontent.

Bryan Stevenson, director of the Equal Justice Initiative, argues the [shadow of racial injustice](#) in America "cannot be lifted until we shine the light of truth on the destructive violence that shaped our nation, traumatised people of colour, and compromised our commitment to the rule of law and to equal justice". This is true for all forms of social injustice and marks a symbol of civilisation and its discontent. Francisco Goya's work graphically portrays my point in its title: *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Is it time for us to wake up?

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About the author(s)

Michael Jarrett is Professor of Management Practice in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He is also Programme Director of the [Strategy Execution Programme](#), one of INSEAD's Executive Education programmes, and a programme director for the [Executive Master in Change](#).

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