

Uncovering 'the political' in political psychology: Realist reflections on social intuitionism.

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Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist model of moral and political judgment has attracted substantial popular and professional attention in recent years, commonly cited not only within the academic literature but also among policy analysts and think tanks. His empirical findings highlight the predominant role of intuition in human judgment and the deep affective roots of value pluralism, presenting specific challenges to idealist political theories that advance strongly rationalist models of human agency, according to which people always reason inferentially to conclusions about moral questions. As such, Haidt's theory reinforces certain lines of critique advanced by so-called political realists (Williams 2005, Geuss 2008, Galston 2010), who criticize political idealists for being aloof from the realities of the political. They argue that the idealist emphasis on reason displaces the substantial and sometimes commendable role of 'unreason' in political thinking and action.

Yet social intuitionism, with its positivist underpinnings, makes for an uneasy alliance with political realism. In short, the danger for any political theory that orientates itself toward 'the real' is to replace one kind of overconfident objectivism—the assumption of objective moral truths—with another—the assumption of objective truths about human nature and psychology. In this paper, however, I will demonstrate that political realism, in its more critical and agonistic moods, can facilitate a sophisticated analysis of empirical psychology, as theory and practice, and its relationship(s) to the political.

Specifically, I begin with what Bernard Williams (1995) calls 'the representation problem', the problem of how innate inhibitions relate to the cultural prohibitions that human beings express through their unique faculties for discursive, conceptual, and reflexive thought. This is an issue Haidt slides over, but once we recognize the complex and fluid relationship between affect and discursive thought, we uncover the indeterminacy of the political psychology advanced by Haidt and, moreover, the extent to which the political and the psychological are shaped by their engagement with the other. This includes the extent to which the political commitments of psychologists (Haidt included) inform their interpretations of their empirical findings, and the way that psychology informs political agents' interpretations of their own agency, thereby influencing their thoughts and actions. By illuminating these exchanges, I want to explore the possibilities for not only a psychologically realistic political theory, but also a realist political psychology, a psychology that remains realistic about its epistemological limitations and its practical effects.