



**University of Dundee**

## **A psychoanalytic probe into Academic Othering of the United States**

Ulus, Eda

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## A Psychoanalytic Probe into Academic Othering of the US:

### Defenses of Splitting and Projection, Consequences, and Alternatives through Emotion Work

For this Special Paper Series of *Organization*, I work with a psychoanalytic perspective to scrutinize organizing processes as critical academics – specifically, unconscious dynamics of responding to US-based social crises. I contend that it is not feasible to organize effectively against the violent hate of right-wing populist movements sustained by Othering, without commitment to confronting academics’ individual and collective Othering and defensive processes. These defenses include splitting and projecting onto convenient Others, which can serve performative gratifications. Through analysis of critical academic declarations in 2017, I analyze Academic Othering of the US. Splitting the US off as the ‘bad’ Other of the ‘good’ UK/EU/non-US undermines critical analysis and potential for solidarity and relational concern. Without probing these uncomfortable dynamics, we damage opportunities as elite, privileged academics to make a difference for global struggles, and collude in exclusion. Undertaking emotion work on our academic identities to move away from the defense of splitting, and towards nuance with Klein’s depressive position, will support listening to affected voices and extending – not merely performing – concern and care.

Keywords: academia; activism; anxiety; Othering; US; splitting; projection; defense mechanisms; critical management; borders; solidarity; unconscious

In this submission for the *Special Paper Series of Organization*, I apply a psychoanalytic perspective to analysis of elite academic behaviors, which I contend are complicit in entrenching violent spaces in which we find ourselves. My critique here is the actions of academics who work in management and business schools, located in non-US ‘global North’ locations, and who identify with critical approaches to scholarship, such as critical management studies and/or other critical social science approaches. I endeavor to speak to the aim of ‘Turning the lens on our own community’ (Robinson and Bristow, 2017), in particular focusing on how we may ‘critically consider our role as researchers, educators and intellectuals in fostering *constructive debate*’ (Robinson and Bristow, 2017; Author emphasis). In the spirit of acknowledging that our embodied positioning in the world is a part of, not separate from, our observations and writings (e.g. Contu, 2017; Prasad, 2014), I offer

my analyses of Academic Othering from my positioning as an individual born in the US to migrants, with a Muslim heritage from both sides of the family.

By analyzing three academic incidents in England, with a psychoanalytic perspective's emphasis upon *unconscious processes* (Freud, 1955), I maintain that *anxieties* and accompanying *defenses* help to fuel Academic Othering of the US. Unconscious defenses, or defense mechanisms, refer to processes mobilized in response to both internal and external anxiety-provoking encounters and dangers (Freud, 1966), and defenses have been applied to analyze political dynamics affecting work and organizing (Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz, 2012). From a psychoanalytic approach, Othering the US helps to gratify narcissistic academic positioning in public performativity, and relieve anxieties about tackling interconnected global problems. These processes in critical academia may bolster one's presentation to self and to the public, with consequences such as enfeebling activism across academic borders, silencing alternative debates, and ignoring affected individuals and communities, manifestations contrary to performed critical aims.

A specific defense with resonance for Academic Othering is *splitting*. Drawing upon the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, splitting is a process of dividing objects into good and bad. This division, theorized by Klein for child development, has been applied to adult processes on wider scales:

Through splitting, 'idealization and vilification take hold of mental functioning and may affect whole groups or even nations; scapegoats are charged with every conceivable fault and attract collective hate, whereas idealized love objects are endowed with every perfection and, through introjection [a defense of psychically taking in an external experience to the self], result in narcissistic self-love' (Gabriel, 1998 p. 301).

Splitting is interconnected with the defense of *projection* – all that is not-good is split off and projected, or pushed outward, onto the Other; all that is good remains part of one's self. Splitting and projection can operate across individual, organizational, and wider political-cultural levels. Analyzing these defenses offers interpretations for actions that appear irrational on the surface, such as ongoing commitment to failing public health policies (Fotaki & Hyde, 2015).

In this analysis of Academic Othering, splitting as a defense can be undertaken in a range of ways, and with different consequences. The first example below illustrates that splitting can work by accessing a network of associations which have been built over time through biases. In this example, an accent is associated with a country-of-origin, which is associated with qualities like lack of criticality and stupidity. The second example, focusing on the travel ban, points to troubling manifestations of splitting, notably ignoring voices for whom critical scholarship ostensibly advocates. The third example links to the first, in that an entire country is associated with bad scholarship and subordinated to European social sciences. This splitting may result from unconscious envy of US journal and institutional dominance, with the disturbing consequence of ignoring marginalized scholarship within the US.

In analyzing incidents for this paper, I do not claim that these are representative examples of the academic demographic communities indicated. It is crucial that I'm vigilant not to come across as Othering myself in overlooking diverse academic views. The purpose here is to interrogate, with psychoanalysis, the possible meanings of several specific instances of Othering in academic exchanges. From my own positioning in the world, with inherited groups and personal experiences that do not neatly fit favored discourses, I've encountered Academic Othering that must be spoken out and interrogated. Ignoring declarations that may

not be representative allows academics in positions of power to perform stances with potentially negative consequences.

### **Academic Othering Incidents**

Incident 1 is offered to illustrate the concept of splitting:

Overheard at a dinner of all academics, England, 2017 Winter

*'Don't hold it against her that she has an American accent.*

*She is actually a critical academic! A great scholar!*

*And, one of her parents is English.'*

-White English Academic

This statement was made about an academic joining a university of many present at this dinner, and there was no objection to this pronouncement. The discussion appeared to be curiosity about this colleague, and I did not hear a prompt about her background or American-ness. This example is trivial, and from a psychoanalytic perspective, its triviality points to how such comments are unnoticed and normalized, manifesting defenses of splitting and projection. These defenses are *unconscious*, their traces appearing in surface talk, with the US split off as the noncritical, not-like-us *in-the-know* UK/European/white academics. But wait! This person has an American accent, *and* is a critical academic, a challenge to the network of accent-country-noncriticality associations, which supports splitting off the US Other. The challenge to this defense is met with the declaration that she is only *half* American – thus, on the same half-and-half, split figure, her Englishness enables some redeeming features. Suspicion, doubt, and intellectual inferiority are projected onto the bad half American through accent, preserving biased connections fueling splitting.

The narrowness of elite US-based mainstream business/management theories reflect dominance to which critical management scholars have made crucial responses, contributing

urgently needed perspectives. Yet, I contend that this splitting incident is *emotionally more* than a response to US theory hegemony, enacted by a selective group of mainstream US-based business/management academics. Psychoanalysis challenges rational assumptions, probing unconscious motivations for categorical manifestations. In a non-US academic gathering, an American accent – which can be shared by marginalized groups, activists, critical US theorists (they do exist) - becomes a manifestation of that inferior US Other, split off from the good self and its group/nation/critical community.

With further incidents below, I propose that splitting off the US as Other, from one's own location / origins in white privileged areas of the 'Global North', sustains a place on which to project indignation and distress. In the process, these interconnected defenses of splitting and projection satisfy performative gratifications - the academic who knows best how to respond to a social justice crisis. These defenses also respond to painful anxieties about global horrors, but this splitting *splits apart* coordinated responsibility to undertake difficult, nuanced solidarity efforts across academic and geographic borders. Such efforts inevitably demand facing anxiety-provoking experiences of uncertainty, and reflection upon defenses like splitting.

I will probe splitting further through two incidents: academic responses to the US travel ban, and UK academic public pronouncements against US social sciences. What emotional needs are being served by this academic denouncing through splitting, and what experiences are being ignored in consequence? When the next global outrage blows up on media, is it possible to do emotion work on our academic identities, including facing anxieties of doubt, to move from splitting to listening, superseding satisfactions of display?

To introduce academic responses to the travel ban, I first share an incident of US Othering, during an informal conversation in public space in Spring/Summer 2017. (In the

extract below, “A” indicates me, and “X” indicates the UK-based, white English person with whom I was talking.)

X: In the past decades my group has always shouted down any suggestion to have our next international conference in the US. If it’s going to be in North America, it will be in Canada. Never the US! Their foreign policy!

A: You know, I have found this very interesting, as a US citizen in the UK, hearing these declarations against the US – alongside this, I’ve been following UK foreign policy and its consequences for people’s lives.

X: Well – the US is the biggest bully!

Stunned into silence...

Why is this happening?

Splitting manifests as demonizing the US Other, the ‘bad’ place on the border with the ‘good’ Canadian neighbor,

*rather than considering diverse Americans, who are challenging oppressive US policies, actively fighting for domestic and international human rights, who could share experiences about injustice and resistance, and benefit from cross-border listening, solidarity, concern*

Scholarly activities can be attended on UK and EU soil, the ‘good’, without a second thought, because these are not the biggest bully lands.

This splitting relieves responsibilities for facing nearby violence... *I can’t imagine that those experiencing slaughter, maiming, death of loved ones have the luxury to sit back and seek possible comfort about which big bully was responsible for their devastation...* (e.g. reports of UK funding tragedies in Yemen: Dearden, 2017; caat.org.uk).

This splitting blocks engagement with lived experiences which may markedly differ from one’s own, protecting from painful anxieties about tragedies legitimized on familiar land... *I can’t imagine that asylum seekers and refugees who for years have been subject to violent UK and EU border policies would find this labelling of a different global player as ‘the biggest bully’ reassuring to their circumstances* (e.g. Kingsley, 2016; McDonald-Gibson, 2016; Webber, 2012) ...

Why does this splitting process occur, manifesting as performing refusal to be in the US? Psychoanalysis beckons us to remember that we are not consistently rational as we would hope (e.g. Fotaki, 2010), and our irrationality may particularly be exposed when we

are wearing our academic credentials. Actions ostensibly for concern may be attempts to satisfy deeper unconscious emotions and alleviate anxieties, supported by defensive processes like splitting and projection. It is concerning that such academic pronouncements surfacing from splitting may display to observers, including other academics, policy makers, and marginalized groups, stark betrayal of critical pronouncements that are made.

Academics' Calls for Conference Boycotts:

Solidarity? or Performativity and Coloniality?

In this example, I propose that splitting is important to consider as an unconscious process in some academic behaviors publicly calling for boycotts to the US in 2017, following the Trump travel ban. I wish to emphasize that I am not interrogating the decision about whether or not to boycott a conference, or how to respond to conference bodies' public statements about the travel ban. What I'm questioning is some declarations that a US conference boycott was *the* only correct choice in response to the travel ban, with implicit and explicit derisive messages about anyone deemed to be falling out of line from this verdict. Splitting and projection are crucial here, because these defenses make neat separations of good and bad, uniformly Othering the chosen bad, and washing out any work with complexity. Despite critical performativity about alternatives, alternative views to widen the debate about how to respond to border regimes were in some instances dismissed – they were not the right answer. These dynamics point to deeper defensive processes, where splitting leads to either/or, good/bad, critical/noncritical divisions. Maintaining a stance of certainty, sustained through this-*not-that* processes of splitting, may risk academic collusion in exclusion.

Efforts such as learning from those affected by both the travel ban and the proposed boycotts, and analyzing possibilities and limitations of academic responses, were missing in



some spaces where a splitting manifestation of *boycotting-correct*, and *not boycotting-immoral*, erupted in noise following the travel ban. Why does this splitting occur? This defense may bolster display of credentials for emotional satisfaction, and suppress difficult reflection about one's privileged actions and the limits of one's knowledge. These defensive responses may have material effects, such as further isolating students and academics within the US affected by the ban, unable to travel and build international scholarship, and distancing potential new members from critical scholarship who perceive Othering and narrow proclamations.

Making declarations from positions of comfort is a particularly disturbing manifestation of this splitting, reverberating dynamics of assuming colonial superiority – speaking on behalf of others, without giving space to listen, learn, understand, explore alternatives. Critical management approaches seek to contest Eurocentrism, US centrism, white dominance, suppression of voice – as led for instance by the courageous, groundbreaking work of this journal (e.g. Alcadipani et al., 2012; Mir and Mir, 2013), yet public Othering undermines these strides. I embrace Contu's call in this journal for intellectual activism, 'asking us to be accountable to [social justice]' (2017, p. 3). I propose that psychoanalysis provides a way of probing beneath the surface performance, in order to work towards meaningful activism. Learning from psychoanalysis helps to reflect upon individual and collective anxieties, emotional motivations for performative investments, and defenses, which have ramifications for ongoing processes of organizing.

Directives from some critical corners about *the morally correct* action (e.g. – 'Boycott all US conferences, And do this, And don't do that'), were not accompanied by vehement action calls to parallel border entrance refusals, and horrors and devastation at borders globally (e.g.. Fazackerley, 2017; Goodwin, 2017; Malmström, 2012; Nyabola, 2017; Webb, 2017). I did not notice for instance calls to boycott or otherwise disengage from UK academia

or travel, in response to indefinite immigration detention (Lousley and Cope, 2017), the ‘Windrush Scandal’ (see Gentleman, 2019 and British Library, ‘Windrush Stories’ page, as examples for details), or the official ‘hostile environment’ policy for migrants (The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants & Liberty, 2018). Active engagement with voices directly affected (e.g. Eggert, 2017) was missing for me, and informal conversations with some academics from countries on the travel ban included shock about calls to boycott. These points are not deflections, but a probe of how splitting occurs to support public acts of making denunciations, deciding on behalf of others what is *the right act*, in response to the split off Other. Splitting may ward off anxieties about horrors on one’s own lands, which may require closer interaction with individuals affected by injustice, challenging of comfortable discourses, and risk of exposing what an academic may not know.

Splitting off the bad from the good can provide feelings of comfort, such as propping up ‘good’ Canada in juxtaposition to the ‘bad’ US; yet, celebrating a ‘good’ for one’s own emotional investments has damaging effects for marginalized groups. For instance, a proposal by some non-US academics to migrate US conferences from the ‘bad’ land to its ‘good’ neighbor up North, did not consider Muslim students and academics currently living in the US, who could not simply drop everything and ‘go to Canada’ as they would have been unable to return. This splitting of good/bad also neglects Canada’s own history of settler colonialism and genocide (e.g. Preston, 2013), discrimination and violence against indigenous women (e.g. Kassam, 2018), and contemporary silencing practices of minorities (e.g. Ziadah 2017). The storm of emotions unleashed by US border inhumanity is intensified by social media platforms to perform the academic who knows best, creating anxious circumstances ripe for splitting. The designation of a ‘good’ place in juxtaposition to ‘bad’ through splitting simplifies in neglectful, potentially harmful ways.

Splitting preserves academic privilege by providing a convenient space for performing concern. One could, for instance, propose ceasing conferencing altogether, acknowledging economic exclusions of European conferences with high fees. Conferences make attendance from poorer countries or institutions with limited resources, disproportionately from the 'Global South', a struggle or impossible. Projecting all that is 'bad' onto the US Other evades working through tensions such as elite academic travel to non-US countries with daily documented human rights abuses.

The expansive use of splitting protects against the discomfort of regularly facing one's place in historically-entrenched structures of privilege. As institutional racism is at the very core of Western universities, practicing activist concern could be engaging in collective resignation, as a powerful statement of distancing from benefitting from racist structures until the University is fully decolonized.

No?

Whose needs are being served by public moral declarations?

UK Academic Declarations against the US –

From Declarations about Foreign Policy, to Condescension about all US Social Science

I share a third incident which occurred in the Autumn of 2017, at a research training/seminar in England. During what unfolded as a Eurocentric discussion of theories for studying management and organizational studies, a White English academic said:

'I am interested in any theory, as long as it's not American!'

This example, like the first one, is trivial, and revealing in its triviality. My own response was being thrown. Shocked. Yet this statement did not generate noticeable disagreement or discomfort. The previous incident analyses the US split off as the biggest

bully, the convenient bad Other to take all projections about global wrongs, a splitting interconnected with an array of unconscious dynamics, and now the territory of scholarship is Othered. The non-US, specifically Europe, offers ‘good’ scholarship, and the US is so ‘bad’ – that it offers nothing.

With this splitting off of *all* US scholarship as imperialist or dominating, ironically *academics are colluding in white, masculine US domination*, by refusing to recognize the diversity of US thought and marginalized scholarship from US spaces. US women of color social scientists, US feminists fighting marginalization in the Academy and in society, US-based minority groups, US privileged allies committed to social sciences in service of global social justice... Tragically, the splitting off of US academia or social sciences as uniformly ‘bad’ in this way ends up reinforcing the very hegemonic US acts which non-US academics criticize: openly stereotyping the Other, with consequences of neglecting oppressed groups.

Avowed critical academic concerns about anti-fascism, solidarity, alternatives, challenging of power structures do not have anything to learn from bad US-based theory, and it is only European theory that is good, admirable. Only European social sciences have the potential to transform global living conditions. These claims don’t stand up to rational scrutiny, and as above, I argue that *emotionally deeper* dynamics are occurring under the surface, here the possibility of envy (Jalan, 2013). Envy about US institutional dominance and its privileges may manifest through charged stereotyping, with escape to humor if questioned (‘It was only a joke!’). Indeed, Gabriel (1999) refers to *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which ‘Freud (1905a) argued that jokes provide a temporary liberation of repressed energy... It allows repressed resentment, envy and hostility toward’s one’s superior to be expressed in an exhilarating moment’ (1999: 198). Here the ‘superior’ is the intrusive and stupid split off US, separate from all that is academically worthwhile. The

discomfort of facing envy and other emotional investments has the reward of recognizing and listening to voices ignored and vilified through splitting.

For the examples shared in this piece, I have worked with psychoanalysis as a theoretical invitation to reflect upon deeper impulses and emotional needs that may manifest through splitting, impairing stated aims of academic activism. In the Conclusion, I propose emotion work with Klein's depressive position as a possible way forward.

### **Psychoanalysis and Global Social Struggles – Doing Emotion Work on our Academic Identities, Striving Towards the Kleinian Depressive Position**

In Representations of the Intellectual, “[Edward Said] defines the intellectual as an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message.... to, as well as for, a public... it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and *dogma* (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or *swept under the rug*. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously....”

-Lazarus (2011: 197; Author emphasis).

It is crucial to question how academics can organize from places of privilege to fulfill these responsibilities, to practice activism against hate fueled through Othering, when academics' own splitting processes manifest Othering, including within official research training spaces. There is opportunity with psychoanalysis to interrogate how critical academics' own '*dogmas*' (2011: 197) block the ability to learn from the marginalized – with the potential consequences that marginalized experiences are '*swept under the rug*' (2011: 197) through splitting.

A possible way forward draws upon Craib's work on identity (1998), and the significance of 'intense emotional work' (1998: 113). In Craib's application, emotion work refers to individual and private experiences that occur within expected socialized roles and often in contradiction to stereotypes, elaborating with gender in his analysis. Adapting to this

context, putting academic identities on the couch, so to speak, encourages recognition of stereotypes, and commitment to working through individual and collective emotional investments that block engagement and stimulate splitting. It is uncomfortable to admit uncertainty if academics are socialized as being in the know, within masculine structures. Alongside collective shaping of identities, probing a range of private individual-relational emotional needs demands significant resources. These efforts are important, as persistent splitting and avoidance have extensive consequences: for self, for the legitimacy and development of one's discipline, and for others.

Klein's depressive position is a theoretical resource for emotion work on academic identities. Craib (1997) explains Klein's 'developmental theory in which the crucial movement is from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position. The central notion is that of "containment", the ability of the ego to experience, contain and tolerate a wide range of ideas and feelings' (1997: 2). Striving towards Klein's depressive position opens up paths to alternatives, and moves away from ready use of defenses like splitting and projection, which eclipse nuances, fortify unconscious needs, and reinforce consciously-expressed stereotypes.

Resistance to acknowledging the limits of one's discipline (Craib, 1997), and troubling anxieties and emotions like envy (Clarke, 2003) can block movement towards the depressive position. It seems that cultural transformations are one of the steps needed in privileged academic circles to create the spaces for working through, for being and feeling differently as academics with the depressive position, in ways nourishing for the sector and those whom we ostensibly try to serve. Structures that reward listening, limit competition, and destabilize hierarchies would support nuanced relating in the spirit of intellectual inquiry, in turn creating different academic identity expectations and ranges for emotion work.

The resources of psychoanalysis offer challenging, and transformative, ways to reflect on organizing in response to global tragedies. We can benefit from psychoanalytic studies of

diverse human struggles, including organizational traumas (Fischer, 2012; Gabriel, 2012), psychological experiences of colonialism (Nandy, 1982); immigration (Ainslie, Tummala-Narra, Harlem, Barbanel, & Ruth, 2013; Volkan, 2017), and gendered exclusions (Fotaki, 2011). Drawing upon this framework for our own academic spaces helps to analyze with depth contemporary global dynamics, including complex, less visible struggles and experiences, in service of solidarity during difficult decisions such as how to respond to border regimes. Moving from splitting to the depressive position helps to recognize that there may be more than ‘one right way’, that two individuals can undertake different actions of solidarity and both have sound reasons for doing so. Splitting ruptures the solidarity that can be meaningfully offered within and outward.

Accountability for consequences of the public pronouncements we make, and embracing ‘humility to know that there is much we do not know’ (Contu, 2017: 9), are ways to enrich the service we can offer to others through privileged academic positionings. Psychoanalytic understanding can help with the anxieties of sitting with the not knowing, integral to being present meaningfully (Stein, 2007). Craib (1997) notes that ‘movement into the depressive position involves standing still, psychologically and socially’ (1997: 11). As a community, in doing this difficult emotion work on our academic identities, endeavoring to be in the depressive position, we could improve receptivity of non-academic audiences to critical academic views, and enhance our modeling of criticality to students, our current and future critical advocates. We could find ways to connect with global solidarity – starting from an impulse to listen.

Acknowledgements





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