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‘It’s the democracy, stupid’

Certain Remainers’ claims that the Brexit referendum result should be discounted display a lack of democratic faith

Like divine power in wars of the past, democracy in the Brexit debate is always ‘on our side’. The basic question of democracy is about who has power, to do what and under what conditions. Democracy is called upon to justify any position - from a hard Brexit to a second referendum.

But in all the debates over Brexit, one question remains. What does Brexit reveal about the country’s faith in democracy? The fact that this question has been overlooked itself suggests an absence of this faith and strangely it seems particularly acute among those who proclaim the need for greater democracy: progressive Remainers - of which I am one. Their reactions to the vote have often been passionate, at times exhibiting outrage and indignation. At worst, they seem blind to their own social and cultural capital.

The emphasis here is on progressives because of their stated belief in democracy and equality, and the political gulf between the middle and the working class that Brexit has exposed. This gulf long precedes Brexit, but the referendum has only widened it. Social class is a slippery concept, but it would be a mistake to overlook its contemporary power.typo3/#_ftn1 Understanding the causes of Brexit requires a thoughtful analysis of class - particularly the questions of culture and identity which surround it.

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Certain Remainers’ claims that the referendum result should be discounted display a lack of democratic faith. There were attempts to depict Leavers as naive and ignorant, easily deceived by figures and slogans.

The notorious bus suggesting we divert the '£350 million every week' spent on the EU to fund the NHS was used to show Leavers as gullible rather than focusing on the falsehoods of the Leave campaign.typo3/#_ftn3 If you could discount a result due to lies in a

campaign, it would rule out most elections in history. But the bus served the convenient purpose of revealing Leavers to be easily led and, for some, not deserving of a vote.

Political ideals vs. economic self-interest

Such arguments lie just beneath the common claim that Leavers 'voted against their own interests'. Many repeat the supposed irony that regions that voted for Brexit are likely to be the economically hardest hit. As Joan C Williams has pointed out in her US study, the working class are used to being told that they're bad patients, bad spouses or bad parents by middle class doctors, lawyers and teachers.typo3/#_ftn5 If the working class cannot make good choices about their own lives, how can they be trusted with the fate of the nation?

But progressives may have missed a chance to examine a phenomenon they'd long argued for: that political ideals can trump economic self-interest. Some undoubtedly recognise that certain groups felt excluded from, as well as impoverished by, the political process. And they can see that Brexit is a response to legitimate grievances. But the demand may not have been just 'to be heard'; it may have been an assertion of power, a questioning of authority and a demand for respect. It is frustrating not to be heard, but it is worse to be heard and then ignored. Worst of all is to be heard and told that you're ignorant or bigoted.

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A binary vote is a crude method of deciding political debates. But it was a political last resort for some voters, the rare opportunity to wield a blunt political instrument. As a political panic button, voting is quite effective. Ideally, a ballot should be the final democratic act in a careful process of deliberation and dialogue. In this case, that conversation never got beyond a shouting match, in which both sides talked past each other for a few chaotic months.

But for once everyone's vote counted equally. The tragedy was that the referendum was used to answer a very complex question under difficult conditions. Yet the roots of post-referendum divisions lie not in the campaign itself, but much deeper, in a society still riven by class. The shock of Brexit was for many Remainers as much about a perceived loss of power as about leaving the EU.

Brexit as a serious political position

It would be inaccurate to characterise the Leave vote as purely working class. Large numbers from social classes A, B and C across the country voted out - mostly in rural areas or small towns - and not all working class voters voted to leave. Yet cultural identity and class affinities nonetheless helped determine our vote, on both sides.typo3/#_ftn7

Perhaps most alarming for progressives was that most predominantly working class areas rejected the official Labour Party position and voted Leave. Historically, progressives have only ever gained power when they brought together middle class and working class supporters. Yet in recent years, the most prominent alliance of this kind was the Leave Vote.

For some in the Remain campaign, equality did not seem to feature in their thinking. They did not acknowledge that the EU may have benefited some citizens more than others or foresee the scorn which met their economic warnings (as one woman put it, 'that's your bloody GDP. Not ours').

Remainers should treat Brexit as a serious position rather than discrediting Leavers; too often Leavers have 'concerns', not 'opinions'.

Progressives who claim to care about democracy should accept the need for a transfer of political power, even if this means ceding some of their own influence. Democracy is about enabling people to make important decisions for themselves, even ones you don't always agree with. This does not discount deliberation - but in a democracy, we accept a collective fate determined by equal input.typo3/#_ftn9 We should move to a proportional system in which votes always matter equally, a measure that may even increase participation. When it really counted, three million non-voters went to the polls, the majority backing Leave.

Remainers should treat Brexit as a serious position rather than discrediting Leavers; too often Leavers have 'concerns', not 'opinions'. We should not dismiss a result as beyond the pale by labelling it bigoted rather than engaging with underlying causes and motivations. This demands that we seek more social contact with people from different classes - social segregation breeds mistrust.

Democratic faith can only be restored when we're only ever as powerful as our fellow voter. If they disagree with you, it's time to put in the work to change their minds - or change your own.

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