

Making sense of the Brexit tide of reaction and the reality of the racist vote

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The Leave / Brexit vote in the referendum came in the end as a surprise, a narrow win for Remain was expected. This may be because the core Leave vote was in the run-down white working class communities of the now desolate English and Welsh industrial zones. A population trapped in conditions of long-term unemployment and poverty who no one really pays much attention to anymore.

Some on the left have seized on the makeup of this core vote to suggest that there was some progressive element to the Brexit vote despite the campaign being led by racist hatemongers and wealthy US-oriented neoliberals. Mostly that's a mixture of wishful thinking and post hoc justification for having called for a Leave vote in the first place, but it is true that a section of the working class, C2DEs in marketing speak, voted to Leave in close to a 2:1 ratio. Is the class composition of that vote enough to automatically make it progressive regardless of content? And what does it tell us that a section of the radical left seems to think the answer to that question is yes, that it is enough to be anti-establishment?

Or was it that this is the story of a sizeable enough, but still minority of the working class, with reactionary ideas being energized and mobilized by the toxic racist nationalism of the English colonial project. Essentially a whipping up of all those older racist relatives that turn up at family events and that everyone wishes would just shut up? Something like Donald Trump has managed to do, using similar rhetoric about migrants and elites, in the USA, 'Take our Country Back' could well be a Trump slogan, 'Make Britain Great Again' could well have been the Leave slogan.

From anecdotal stories, geographic voting and most importantly actual polling of 12,000 voters it becomes clear that these communities, who were smashed by neoliberalism from Thatcher to Blair, were successfully tricked into taking aim at the wrong target in order to 'take our country back'. But it goes deeper than trickery, the poll results make clear that many of the Leave voters hold a toxic blend of reactionary views, glued together by the common cement of English colonialist nationalism. And 'English' is the correct term, one fascinating aspect of one voter survey is that 79% of Leave voters identify as English rather than British, while 60% of Remain votes identified as British not English.

The geographical breakdown of votes indicates that with important exceptions (Scotland, Wales, London) the areas with the highest Leave votes were those hardest hit by the neoliberal restructuring of the UK economy. According to the Times (article behind paywall)

- 86% of Local Authorities (LAs) with a high number of manufacturing jobs voted Leave
- 82% of LAs where more than 25% of the population lacked good GCSEs voted Leave
- 77% of LAs with average weekly earnings below 452 pounds voted Leave
- 75% of LAs where more than 87% of the population is white voted Leave

We can dig into the motivations of those who voted further because of polling of 12,000 people who had voted by Lord Ashcroft Polls. Michael Ashcroft is an interesting character, the former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party and the 74th richest man in Britain, the Sunday Times reckons he was worth 1.32 billion in 2015. The polling seems to be part hobby, part philanthropy, or as he puts it "if it doesn't sound too pompous, there is an element of public service in keeping politicians on their toes". He is pro Brexit so the damning nature of some of what follows isn't a result of bias against Leave voters since he is one.

In any case it's frequently the case that after an election or referendum you wish you had information about who voted which way and why they did so. Endless arguments go on based on people's presumptions about this. Ashcroft did us a huge favour. "On referendum day I surveyed 12,369 people after they had voted to help explain the result." Political parties do this sort of polling all the time but seldom release results unless they can make particularly favourable stories out of them. And this isn't a favourable story.

Class and Leave

The first interesting finding is the breakdown of Leave votes by class. Definitions of who belongs in what class are enormously controversial and could be fought over all day. Left groups tend to use the term working class in both a broad sense that includes almost everyone (if they are trying to recruit you) and in a narrow sense (if they want to denounce you). We'd offer the health warning that we are not so keen on the classification Ashcroft uses. But it's way better than nothing.

He uses the 50 year old NRS system, a common market research classification. NRS standing for National Readership Survey at its origins lie in advertisers' desire to know what sort of people read different publications in order to crudely target their advertising on that basis. Broadsheets often boast of having a high ABC1 readership to attract high value advertising as that segment has much greater disposable income.

A	upper middle class	Higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	middle class	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	lower middle class	Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional
C2	skilled working class	Skilled manual workers
D	working class	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers
E	non working	Casual or lowest grade workers, pensioners, and others who depend on the welfare state for their income

Wikipedia table of the NRS

The NRS class classification system is flawed, apart from anything else the ruling class are invisible in it, presumably because although the power and wealth of that group is enormous their numbers are too few to make a distinct division worthwhile. The classification being 50 years old is rather tied to old ideas about the relative merits of manual labour and desk jobs, desk jobs are middle class as it appears are retail and service workers.

You can see the problem with the classification when you look at the raw numbers of those polled and see how many are in each category

5148 = A+B
3179 = C1
1653 = C2
2360 = D+E

In other words, if you took the working class / middle class labels of the CRS system at face value then, for this poll, voters in the UK referendum were 33% working class, 67% middle class with no ruling/capitalist class, not even as the often over stated 1%. These figures are partially so low because voting is always disproportionately dominated by ABC1s with relatively larger numbers of C2DEs staying at home. The C2DE composition in the UK population is considerably higher than in the vote poll, the NRS classification in 2015 gave 46% in their C2DE definition of working class and 54% as middle class.

Instead we would work off looking at whether people have to make a living through working for others (the working class), have enough skills, tools and space to independently work for themselves (the middle class) or have so much wealth that most of their income comes from having the rest of us work for them. For the UK that would give you more of a 80%+ working class, 20%- middle class and 1%- ruling class, with the actual section of that class that rules being more like the top 0.01%.

But in any case what the Ashcroft polling tells us is that for the C2DE categories, which are working class by any definition, 64% of those who voted chose Leave. This is way ahead of the national average of 51.9% for Leave.

National averages are broad categories that can disguise a lot of important data so let's not confuse that 64% as 'the working class'. It's not, it's just a big segment of that part of the class that depends on doing manual work. Importantly a big section of this part of the working class didn't vote on the day – the Ashcroft poll only talked to people who had voted and as we shall see this is an important distinction.

What was the turnout of C2DE voters?

Voter turnout was around 72%, differing a bit by region. But as we already recognised, voter participation is not equal across classes, far more ABC1s vote than C2Des, arguably because the C2DEs understand that politicians in power only listen to the As. So we can be fairly sure less than 72% of C2DEs voted, the question is how much less. The Ashcroft poll enables us to make a good guess at this. C2DEs are 46% of the UK population but only 33% of the Ashcroft poll, that missing 13% indicates the scale of the higher non-voting rate.

Using that gap a reasonable quick estimate would be that turnout for C2DE was possibly slightly less than 52% of those registered. (Ben Pritchett did some proper maths on this) But we also need to do a few final subtractions. The first is of people entitled to vote but not registered, that number I haven't been able to estimate but it's probably not huge. The second is those not yet of voting age, who I'm going to ignore beyond noting that because the young overwhelmingly voted Remain it's probably the case that most of these would have been Remain.

The third subtraction is far more politically important: migrants who were not from the former colonies (the Commonwealth and Ireland) and who therefore did not get a vote. In terms of migrants from other areas of the EU that's over 2 million people excluded from the vote – a shocking figure when you consider the vote was essentially on their future. And migrants not

from the Commonwealth or Ireland also number in the hundreds of thousands. Remember less than 1.3 million votes separated Leave from Remain, if the 2.5 million plus migrants had been allowed to vote on their own future Brexit probably would not have happened. It's an important aside, and the point to make here is that these migrants are overwhelmingly working class and therefore their exclusion from the vote reduces further the proportion of the C2DE working class that actually voted leave.

How many C2DE working class Leave voters were there?

Some very crude maths now. The population of the UK at the time of the last census was 63 million. If 46% were C2DEs this gives about 30 million people, about 23% of whom were below voting age, so about 22 million. From this we need to subtract the C2DE immigrants who can't vote, let's guess about 1 million people. Of the 21 million remaining we've worked out above that about half voted, so 10.5 million, or 1/3 of the total voters. Out of that the Ashcroft poll suggests 64% voted Leave, that's 6.7 million people. 6.7 million is also about 39% of the total Leave vote. As the Leave vote totaled 17.4 million we see Leave was also mostly ABC1s even though it captured almost 2/3 of voting C2DEs.

I wanted to do these calculations because it's going to become clear that the many Leave voters are pretty damn reactionary and not just on migration. And a section of the left that foolishly advocated a left Leave vote are now defensively trying to exaggerate the 'working class' composition of the Leave vote as a form of strange self-justification. The reality is that a significant section of the white English working class buys into English colonial nationalism and has backed some terrible right wing figures from Enoch Powell to Margaret Thatcher as part of that. The core of the C2DE Leave vote seems to be an expression of that bloc, not an expression of the C2DE working class as a whole. The relatively high percentage of C2DE voters voting Leave (64%) is as much because the campaign mobilised those hostile to migrants whereas there would be few C2DEs with any love for the EU.

From the calculations above we see that even if we restrict the working class to C2DEs, only 23% of the C2DE working class actually mobilised to tick Leave. If we exclude those too young to vote that rises to about 32%. So, for a variety of reasons, including being denied a vote, 68% of the C2DE working class of voting age did not vote Leave. We'd speculate that amongst that number are a substantial amount who were horrified by the racist nonsense of their neighbors and relatives but who were not going to save the establishment by voting Remain. Perhaps a major motivation for the 18% who did vote Remain was opposing those racist neighbours, in particular as that 18% was probably drawn from the sizeable number of C2DEs that are not white.

Even of those C2DEs who were allowed to and did vote, some working class areas of London, for instance Tottenham and Walthamstow, voted overwhelmingly for Remain. The same may well be true of Scotland, and some of the bigger cities of the UK. From the referendum returns it appears the Leave C2DE vote was concentrated in smaller cities, towns and villages, and the further out suburbs.

What was the ‘working class’ Leave vote?

When you compare his data with the geographical results it becomes clear that the huge working class Leave vote was a citizen white C2DE working class from those areas that have been decimated by neoliberalism, in particular the once industrial and mining north of England and Wales and the agricultural counties of the south. Of course the north of England and Wales have comparatively fewer migrants than in Remain-voting London because there aren't that many available jobs. This maps onto a common observation that in electoral terms the far right tends to do well in areas where there are not actually as many migrants as the areas they do badly in. Its racist fear rather than reality that garners them support. In the agricultural south, a much grimmer story is found as agricultural work is sometimes dominated by gangster capitalists with groups of insecure migrants under illegal pay and conditions under their control. This is typical of agricultural work in the wealthier countries where regardless of migration controls the state allows situations that create pools of very cheap insecure labour with raids and deportations serving to maintain that insecurity and prevent organising.

So what has caused a large enough section of the C2DE working class to scapegoat migrants in the process of siding with one particular gang of rich white neoliberals? Yes there is competition for jobs & houses but not only is the scarcity that creates competition a product of capitalism it's also the case that the worst racism is not found in the areas where there is greatest competition. Housing is at its most expensive in Leave voting London, costs are not only lower in the old industrial zones but in many cases there is a large amount of empty housing stock visually demonstrating that a shortage of decent housing is not down to a lack of buildings.

So what is it that can glue some of those living in the poorest and more marginalised districts to rich white millionaires like Farage and Boris? Clearly racism was one of the mechanisms used, in particular by Farage but the answer is deeper than that and quite visible in the Ashcroft polling and the referendum material produced by the Leave side. The answer is in ideology and in particular the toxic ideology of English nationalism, a nationalism steeped in ideas of colonialism, empire and monarchy.

Just before the referendum The Daily Mail produced a Leave poster for its windows of a 100m high Norman crusader knight with the St George cross on his shield gazing with hostility out to sea from the cliffs of Dover. His speech bubble reads, “We demand our country back.” When a friend first shared this on Facebook I presumed it was a piss take, but nope it was the real thing. It stands in as a good visual representation of the sort of hyper masculine, militaristic English nationalism that has such a deep hold over English workers, one that has always been used to bind them to their masters. But enough of symbolism, on to some figures about what Leave voters think, 39% of whom are C2DE workers.

The heart of reaction

We can start by repeating the very direct figure that “79% of Leave voters identify as English rather than British”. But the post vote polling gives us a load of information on what voters thought about some key reactionary / progressive dividing lines.

This bit of Ashcroft's polling data is presented in a way that's easy to misread. It's not showing the percentage of those who “voted Y who thought X”, it is showing the percentage of people

who “thought X who voted Y”. A lot of people have read this the wrong way around, which would make the Leave voters a bloc so reactionary that we’d be talking of a mass actual fascist movement coming into being, thankfully it’s not quite that bad.

What this presents is the percentage of Leave voters who thought each of the following were a ‘force for ill’, and the remainder out of 100 being Remain voters who thought that item was a force for ill. So to take the first one

Multiculturalism – 81%

Of those voters polled who thought multiculturalism was a force for ill 81% voted Leave and 19% voted remain. Again this doesn’t translate into 81% of the people who voted Leave, Fredrik deBoer checked the original data and says this is actually “14% of Leave voters think multiculturalism is “very much a force for ill.””

And so on for

Social Liberalism – 80% Leave

Feminism – 74% Leave

The green movement – 78% Leave

Immigration – 80% Leave

While there is room for argument around what people might have understood by some of those terms I’m going to say on aggregate that thinking any of these as a ‘force for ill’ is a reactionary position. And of the voters polled, those with a reactionary position were consistently falling on the Leave side in enormous 3:1 and even 4:1 ratios.

Again don’t misunderstand these numbers, it’s not that 74% of Leave voters were anti-feminists. It’s that 74% of those who identified as anti-feminist voted Leave. Ashcroft is a political pollster that used to do polls for the Tories – hence what seems at first to be a strange way of presenting the data, this is designed to identify blocs of opinion that can be easily mobilised. It identifies people hostile to feminism as a good target group to mobilise for a Leave vote.

MORI also did some polling on attitudes to immigration and they presented their data in the more obvious form of how many Leave voters thought immigration has had a bad impact. They found 65% of Leave voters said it has had a bad impact, against only 20% of Remain voters. Confirming that the Leave vote didn’t just attract reactionaries but was also largely composed of reactionaries, at least when it came to the free movement of people. However 19% of Leave voters thought immigration had a positive impact, again a warning that it would be an error to assume all Leave voters were racist, we just need to recognise that some people with progressive attitudes ended up in the Leave camp, perhaps partially as a result of some of the radical Left parties pushing the Leave vote as well, in a de facto Red-Brown alliance.

Ashcroft asked those who voted if they thought Capitalism was a force for ill. Leave and Remain voters who thought it was were split about 50:50 (51 to 49 to be exact). In other words we can be certain that neither vote can be considered anti-capitalist, not really a surprise given the choice was between capitalism under Westminster alone or Capitalism under Westminster with some EU oversight. But this lack of difference on capitalism coupled with the extreme differences seen above nail the myth that there was any significant progressive component to the Brexit vote. It’s by far the worst terrain in which to try to build any sort of progressive movement, even if for one rotten moment we’d allow you to throw migrants under the bus for movement building purposes.

Now someone might hope these reactionary views were very concentrated in the ABC1 Leave vote but a quick look at the Ashcroft poll data tables suggests this isn’t the case and in fact

unfortunately it's the reverse. If anyone has the time and inclination it would be useful to use his data tables to do a C2DE class breakdown of attitudes. A PDF of his data tables.

A side note on the Remain vote

I'm not going to dissect the Remain vote beyond noting that it also includes some racists, anti-feminists etc. My own perspective is that if I'd had a vote I'd have abstained or spoiled it because although the problem with the referendum was that it mobilised and energised racists the legalistic reality of it is that it offered only a choice between a rock and a hard place. The choice between being ruled from London or being ruled from London with some EU supervision isn't much of a choice at all.

One of the factors that Trump, and Bush before him, were able to use in the US is an entirely fake identification with the 'common man' who lives outside the artsy intellectual bubble of New York City. So New England liberals sneering at their way of communicating, or ill informed remarks, became a way of bringing out a reaction from those who felt that they were also being sneered at. Remain commentators seem shocked that Leave votes were concentrated in areas that get the largest EU funding but this expectation of the poor to be grateful misses the that is the reason 'Take our Country Back' has such appeal.

The Remain campaign reaction to the vote brought out the worst in elitist and unthinking class snobbery precisely because it refused to recognise that neoliberal capitalism has been a disaster for very many Leave votes. You'll find my more detailed thoughts on all this expressed in Observations on Brexit and Lexit in the UK EU membership referendum and 10 point guide for post Brexit resistance as racist right wins EU referendum

The working class is not a monolith

The Ashcroft polling also showed up important differences by race and religion amongst those who voted. "White voters voted to leave the EU by 53% to 47%. Two thirds (67%) of those describing themselves as Asian voted to remain, as did three quarters (73%) of black voters. Nearly six in ten (58%) of those describing themselves as Christian voted to leave; seven in ten Muslims voted to remain."

Again these specific figures are also useful for preventing us falling into the trap of constructing false monoliths. Given the nature of the campaign there were a sizeable number of black and Asian Leave voters. And a substantial minority of whites voted Remain. But in general the Leave voters, including the working class Leave voters, were very disproportionately white in the voter population and even more disproportionately white in comparison with the actual population. Likewise the 'force for ill' questions do show that Leave was where the mass of reactionary voters were found but not all of them, a quarter to a fifth of reactionary voters were on the Remain side, not that much of a surprise since many, if a minority, of Tory voters went Remain.

The Ashcroft polling also confirms that Leave voters tended to be those whose lives have been destroyed by the neoliberal restructuring of the British economy while Remain voters tended to be those who are doing better, or at least expected to. Remain was a 57% majority in the A and B NRS class division, which includes the sections of the working class doing better economically

under neoliberal restructuring, and those sections of management doing so well that they are properly part of the middle and ruling class.

In general Leave voters were far, far more likely than Remain voters to think that for children growing up in Britain today life will be worse than it was for their parents, and to think that life now is worse than 30 years ago. The gap between the two is enormous on these measures although it's significant that there is a smaller 2:1 gap when that question is narrowed down to the economic 'more threats to my standard of living than there will be opportunities to improve it.' In other words, in terms of their expectations Leave voters are 2:1 of those who feel left behind but other fears (i.e. of the influence of immigration, feminism and environmentalism) in addition to the economy make far more Leave voters fearful of the future and nostalgic for the past.

We have a problem

This leaves those on the left with a difficult problem. What is a substantial minority of the C2DE working class in England and Wales have taken up a range of solidarity-destroying stances, that amount in total to an ideological link to the right and far right. This in itself isn't a new problem as that minority has always existed: a segment of reactionary working class opinion that identifies with the Monarchy, Empire and the colonial project. The new problem is that this reactionary minority has been mobilised by the referendum and energised by the result. That has been seen in the events of the days after the referendum where there has been a huge upsurge in both verbal and physical attacks by racist white people on what are perceived to be migrants. Although many feared this consequence the scale of it has come as a surprise. Very often these attacks are based around, or accompanied by, the demand that people 'go home', or are from the organised far right groups calling for deportations.

In the short term the immediate need is to drive those carrying on these attacks off the streets by physical defence where possible and by mass mobilisations to make it clear that there isn't a popular licence for racist attacks. In the longer term the left needs to take a lot more seriously the impact the ideology of English nationalism has in creating and sustaining a reactionary core in the working class. Given how deeply it's rooted in a colonial project of conquest, empire and slavery, there is an argument that English nationalism is of a similar reactionary nature to the confederate nationalism still too common among white workers in the southern USA. This parallel has grown stronger in recent years as racism has shifted somewhere from being expressed based on people's skin colour to being expressed based on their religion. In case you haven't noticed the English flag is the same Crusader Cross that the armies that slaughtered the population of Jerusalem and other cities bore as they sought to expel muslims.

Past experience shows that intense economic struggle can win over people wedded to such a deeply rooted reactionary ideology, for at least short periods. The orthodox left loves stories of this in struggle and sometimes makes the mistake of thinking repeating them is a solution. But that sort of intense economic struggle has been thin on the ground since the Miners' Strike and Poll Tax. So while actual intense economic struggle is part of an alternative, the act of advocating it is not in any significant way. What was completely unacceptable was the left versions of anti-migrant rhetoric coming from the Socialist Party leader – this sort of populism doesn't combat racist views, it simply confirms and entrenches these attitudes.

If there is a silver lining to the referendum it is in providing a strong example to the left that it needs to shift from an economistic analysis to an intersectional one. The economistic analysis of parts of the radical left led them to back Brexit as an anti-establishment movement and ignore (or worse, deny) the reality that Leave brought together the most reactionary elements of British society including the most reactionary section of the working class. Doing so involved only focusing on the fact that a significant section of workers were backing Leave and ignoring the views of many of that section, but also the consequences of energising that vote for migrants in the UK, the vast majority of whom did not even have a vote.

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