

Brexit and the Crisis on the British Left - “The Brexit vote represents a right-wing tidal wave”

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Taking a position on the EU Referendum was not easy. The in/out choice was essentially an argument inside the political and corporate elite about what was best for British capitalism. We do not wish to be ruled by either the City of London or the European Central Bank. Both are run by bankers. Both are hard-wired for financialisation, privatisation, and austerity. Both are mechanisms for hoovering wealth upwards to the 1%.

One could have made a strong argument for abstention. It would have run like this. This is a dispute between two rival factions among our rulers about how best to organise exploitation and the accumulation of capital. It is an argument about how best to make profits. Either way, we get ripped off and they get richer. Working people are deluded if they think that either side represents them, or that either choice, in or out, benefits them.

In theory, this argument is sound. But, as Goethe said, theory is grey and the tree of life is green. What is true in an abstract sense – that there is nothing to choose between the City of London and European Central Bank – is not true when you translate it into the concrete terms of a live political debate. I will come back to this. Before doing so, I want to say something about Lexit.

While one could have made a strong argument for abstention – albeit an abstract one – the same cannot be said for the argument for voting Leave. It did not matter that the EU is a bankers’ club, that the EU is undemocratic, and that the EU is imposing austerity and privatisation. All true, and all irrelevant. Because exactly the same can be said for the alternative: the City of London.

A somewhat more sophisticated version went like this. The EU is the mega-project of Europe’s political and corporate elite, including its semi-detached British syndicate. Brexit will throw this project into crisis. The crisis of their system will be our opportunity. We welcome the crisis of European capitalism caused by the breakup of the EU.

Similar arguments have been presented in the past. The German Communist Party, under orders from Moscow, welcomed the crisis of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s, refused to form an alliance against fascism with the German Social-Democratic Party (dubbed ‘social fascists’), and claimed that a Hitler dictatorship would be a stepping-stone to socialist revolution. We know the outcome.

Let me spell out the basic underlying mistake here: it is to assume that any crisis – and any outbreak of mass discontent – must somehow benefit the Left. In fact, as Lenin explained, the ruling class can survive any crisis if the workers let it, and, as Trotsky explained, there are two parties in a crisis, the party of revolutionary hope (the socialists) and the party of counter-revolutionary despair (the fascists).

I cannot condemn comrades on the Left who got this wrong during the Referendum campaign. They include many friends whose commitment, idealism, and decency are beyond question. But they must now stare reality in the face. So too must any abstainers who sought refuge in abstraction.

If the monster of nationalism and racism incubating inside the Brexit camp was less than wholly apparent during the campaign, it is undeniable now. Yet I have seen revolutionaries whose opinions I used to respect claiming that the EU Referendum result represents 'a class vote' and that, because working-class communities voted heavily against the Remain camp, we are witness to a popular revolt against austerity and inequality.

This is breathtaking stupidity. It is to make a nonsense of any distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself': a vital distinction for Marx, who knew the great difference there was between the mere fact of class position – a matter of sociological description – and conscious mass struggle by working people acting for themselves to change the world. Indeed, in some sense, the whole of socialist activity is accounted for by this distinction.

For socialists to think that millions of working people voting for Johnson, Gove, and Farage – who conducted the most racist election campaign in recent British history – can somehow be interpreted as 'a class vote', or, as the Lexit website claims, that the result constitutes 'a left-wing victory' leaves me struggling for the words.

In a crisis, the Centre cannot hold, and popular discontent can be captured and channelled by the Right or by the Left. The Left has no hope if it cannot even tell the difference. So let me spell it out.

The Brexit campaign was an anti-EU, anti-Westminster, anti-Establishment campaign – just as Hitler's campaign was anti-Weimar in 1932. The Brexit campaign drew upon great pools of bitterness among those at the bottom of society, the victims of globalisation, neoliberalism, and austerity – just as Hitler was supported by the unemployed, the unorganised workers, the broken small businesses, the 'little people' who felt forgotten, ignored, and abused. And the Brexit campaign fanned a great upsurge of anti-immigrant racism – just as Hitler blamed the Jews.

So the Brexit victory means a sharp lurch to the right. UKIP is surfing a wave. The Tory Right will take the leadership. New Labour has its slow-motion coup to get rid of Corbyn back on the rails (and those who doubt the right-wing trajectory of British politics should note that the line here is that Corbyn is disconnected from the Labour base because he is soft on immigration). Across Europe, the Far Right is toasting Brexit and demanding their own in/out referenda. The EU may well break up (pulled apart, please note, not by 'the party of revolutionary hope', but by 'the party of counter-revolutionary despair').

We are living in dangerous times. Despite the *juggernaut* of corporate power, the grotesque greed of the rich, and the mounting social crisis afflicting working people and the poor, resistance is minimal and the Left – blighted by autonomism, sectarianism, and, in some quarters, a blank refusal to face reality – effectively irrelevant.

Yet the Left must act. The global crisis is deep, intractable, and set to get worse. The historical stakes have never been higher. The Left has to build a fighting alternative based on mass struggle from below. A good start might be the simple recognition that the Brexit vote represents a right-wing tidal wave – a triumph of Trumpism – and that if we don't get our act together soon, the danger is that the Far Right, here and across Europe, will harden into all-out Fascism.

Neil Faulkner, 26 June 2016

P.S.

* <http://leftunity.org/fact-and-fiction-about-the-referendum-2/>

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