

Brexit and Multiple Britains, Hypocrisy and Hope

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Britain's game-changing, paradigm-shifting decision this week to exit the European Union teaches us a great deal about globalization. Here are just a few take-aways:

Fracture and Fragmentation: Is there any such thing as Britain or is it just a bunch of Cultural Time Zones?

People commonly think of Britain as consisting of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. This is true but only to an extent.

Instead of thinking about Britain as a cluster of four countries or macro-spaces, it is far more illuminating to analyze Britain as a constellation of micro-spaces or Cultural Time Zones (CTZs). Globalization has fractured the unitary macro-space of the nation and splintered it into multiple CTZs which are culturally, politically and economically divided.

This became perfectly obvious when looking at the referendum results. London is its own distinct CTZ and hence 60% of Londoners voted to remain in the EU (28 of its boroughs voted to remain but five voted to leave. Even London is fractured and divided into even tinier CTZs). However, practically all the other CTZs in England voted to leave the EU thus tilting the vote in favour of Brexit, 52% to 48%.

One of the reasons why the political, bureaucratic and investor classes, the media and academics, university-educated professionals and the pollsters mistakenly believed that the vote would go their way is because they mostly live in and identify with the CTZ of London or some of England's other big cities which also voted to remain. They are part of the global elite and London is a global city with more in common with other global cities like New York or Tokyo or Berlin.

In other words, London is culturally closer to these cities than it is to some of the regions just next to it. In the days since Brexit, there have been multiple petitions and social media calls by dismayed Londoners who want to declare the

“international city” of London which recently voted in a Muslim mayor an independent state separate from the rest of England. They are convinced that London has a completely different culture than the CTZ of say Great Yarmouth which is geographically only about 140 miles from London, so much closer than New York but culturally very, very far away. (Ever heard of NY-LON? It refers to New York and London as one cultural space although separated by the Atlantic Ocean. In other words, today we have to think not in geographical terms when we talk about distance but instead, measure cultural distance/proximity). In working-class Great Yarmouth in eastern England, over 70% voted to leave the EU.

But not only is London a very different CTZ than the rest of England, it also has a completely different economy.

There is not one British Economy, there are multiple British Micro-Economies

The global elite wanted to stay in the EU for what their experts declared were very sound economic reasons. To convince the British people that they should vote to remain in the EU, they brought out four British Prime Ministers, former and present: John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. All of them warned of the dire economic consequences that leaving the EU would have on the country's GDP. This is true but only to an extent. In London's micro-economy which is heavily populated by financial services industries, Brexit has serious consequences because their god – the markets – “do not like uncertainty” as all the talking heads keep on insisting. When the markets tumble, London breaks a stiletto.

But in the micro-economies of other English CTZs, especially in those where globalization has meant de-industrialization and the loss of factory jobs, Brexit appealed to the ordinary worker-citizen not just as a good idea but as salvation. GDP, negative market reaction and even the pound's plummeting value can seem like vague abstractions for people who haven't had a proper job or a living wage in years.

Bad Week for Immigrants

The vote for Brexit was not just a repudiation of the elite, globalization and the other 27 member states of the EU and their Brussels-based bureaucracy. It also represents the triumph of an insidious and dangerous fear of immigrants because voters wanting to leave the EU were overwhelmingly in favor of stopping more migrants coming to Britain. Too many Romanians, Bulgarians and god forbid, Syrians! We want to go back to a white Britain that we imagine existed some time last century!

The pro-Brexit politicians shamelessly stoked up the voters' terror of potential terrorists and more immigrants straining Britain's resources. They were not subtle

in their racist use of imagery and white nostalgia. Voters fell into the trap, scapegoating migrants for their socio-economic woes. Instead of grappling with the much more abstract structural inequities built into the globalization process which have actually led to their very legitimate grievances, they chose a tangible target equipped with a face - the immigrant.

Meanwhile, the day before Brexit, President Barack Obama's immigration program was halted by the Supreme Court leaving four million undocumented migrants in a precarious purgatory hiding from the government.

It's been a bad week for immigrants.

Sadly, Britain forgets that it sent settler-colonist immigrants to all corners of the earth for centuries during imperialism. Many of them colonized the United States of America, displacing and eliminating the indigenous population. They never seem to remember what they took from the Native Americans. They only think about what they think this newest wave of migrants is trying to take from them.

Not just ironic. Hypocritical.

Economists and experts didn't just fail to understand Britain's complexity as a constellation of radically diverse CTZs, they also failed to make clear how much immigrants contribute to Britain's multiple micro-economies.

Some important but hope-inducing factoids: There was a generational rift amongst voters with the British youth voting to remain in the EU by some 75% in some CTZs. They see their future as progressively multicultural and globalized.

Secondly, many of the CTZs which voted to leave and listed immigration fears as their driving impetus for doing so were regions with very few immigrants. In other words, they are voting against what they think they have to fear. Some CTZs with large populations of migrants voted to remain in the EU.

There is only one way forward in today's world. Migrants and natives, old and young, have to work together for a more equitable globalization which distributes its economic benefits more widely and justly.

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