

The Other

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The term “Brexit” now carries with it enormous emotional baggage. That’s certainly true for those of us who are directly affected by it. However, it’s also true for many across Europe. I have on more than one occasion come across the view that the UK (or, more pertinently, England) should be treated as hostile.

Within the UK, the terms ‘snowflake’ and ‘remoaner’ are used by some ‘leave’ voters to refer to those who voted ‘remain’ in a derogatory manner. “We won, you lost”, appears to be a surprisingly common attitude. The fact that this was a political decision and not a sporting event, which all of us – irrespective of how we voted – will live with the consequences of, does not seem to have sunk in. The favour, incidentally, is amply repaid by some of the sneering derision with which ‘remain’ voters see ‘leavers’.

I firmly believe that this level of emotional engagement is profoundly unhelpful. At its most fundamental it contributes to a form of ‘othering’[\[1\]](#) – the belief that entire groups of people are somehow ‘other’ or ‘alien’ and “not one of us”. In general, this reinforces the notion that said others are in some sense inferior to ourselves. I commonly see this on Twitter (other social networks are available), for example.

Yet this does not stand up to scrutiny and some facts are in order. Most ‘remain’ voters live in leave-voting areas. Let that sink in: the overwhelming majority of remain-voters do not live in Scotland or Northern Ireland or London or any of the local authorities where a majority voted ‘remain’. It isn’t conceptually clear why we should treat voters in one jurisdiction differently from another.

To my European friends, I would suggest that it certainly isn’t obvious why one group of remain-voters should be seen as in some sense ‘hostile’, simply because they live in a place where the majority of the population voted ‘leave’, whilst another group are not.

Equally, this gives the lie to the myth that remain-voters are somehow the 'elite'. The UK's "elite" are split – pro-leave Boris Johnson is every bit as privileged as pro-remain David Cameron was. Millions of remain voters live in areas that have been characterised as 'left behind'. It's easy to forget in the furore over independence, but almost 40% of Scottish voters voted to leave the EU: hardly a tiny minority. Leaving the EU might be off the agenda for other EU countries now that they've seen the omnishambles that is Brexit, but that was not true back in 2016.

Let's be honest: the UK is profoundly European. Like the rest of the EU, it has its own specific history and culture but it is no less European because of that. Brexit was not about British exceptionalism or Empire. The latter might be relevant for the public-school educated elite now running the country, but it has hardly figured in the wider debate (myths about the Second World War, on the other hand, figure quite prominently, particularly amongst older voters).

An equally serious fallacy is the perception that to vote to leave the EU is somehow a result of hatred or dislike of (non-British) Europeans. Certainly, there are a shocking number of instances of this. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that such beliefs and behaviours are a more general reflection of 'leave' voters. In my own work I have come across a wide number of opinions and beliefs. Some are outwardly racist and offensive but make up a minority.

To give some anecdotes – one individual (who busts stereotypes on a number of levels, being highly educated and conversant in multiple European languages) expressed concern that the UK should be either fully 'in' or fully 'out' rather than the halfway house it has hitherto lived in (certainly since Maastricht). He did not want to be 'fully in', he felt that a more principled position was for the UK to withdraw from the entire edifice.

Others expressed concern over the rapidity of immigration into their local communities, raising particular concern over local services, whilst vociferously defending immigration in general – "we've hugely benefitted from other people moving here". Others raised a perception that other EU countries "don't play by the rules" and that therefore there was no level playing field within the EU. The common thread

running through all of these was that ultimate control should lie with national parliaments.

This might be economically suboptimal, and it might not be realistic (most evidence suggests that the UK had far more control over standards and policy as an EU member state than it will do outside) but it is not a morally abhorrent perspective. Likewise, wanting greater control over the pace and nature of migration is common across Europe – it is not a peculiarly British (or even English) phenomenon. Leaving the EU might not be a very sensible way of achieving this, but that is a separate issue.

Certainly, since the referendum the UK has experienced an upswing in racism and hate-crimes, particularly directed at Europeans. This is unacceptable and deserves our condemnation. Nevertheless, the evidence does not support the assertion that the UK is more racist or less tolerant than other European countries. The cold reality is that most victims are ethnic minorities, not white Europeans and this is true across Europe, not just in the UK.

Indeed, “this would never happen in [...]. Not to Europeans. Africans, yes, but not Europeans” is a sentiment I was quite shocked to come across. Is it somehow okay that African migrants (often poor and with little realistic recourse to the law) are the target of abuse whilst white Europeans should be spared such unpleasantness? Similar is the notion that ‘I pay my taxes’, indirectly implying that somehow the wealthy should be spared the abuse that might be meted out to the poor.

Let us be honest: Brexit was a manifestation of a much broader movement that exists across Europe. It was not some manifestation of British exceptionalism but instead mirrored discussions and debates occurring across the continent at the time. We cannot say how other countries would have voted had there been a similar referendum in 2016, but it is certainly clear that the vote to leave would have been substantial in many (or even most) of them. Let us be honest: there is little difference between a country that votes 52-48% to leave and one that votes 52-48% to remain.

I see little obvious distinction between the populist opposition to European migration of Nigel Farage and Geert Wilders’ xenophobic

views on Polish migrants to the Netherlands. It is a great irony that both many Brexit voters and their most vociferous opponents believe the UK (or at least England) to be a country apart. For better or for worse this is not true: they are us and we are them. Whoever 'the Other' may be.

[1] I am using the term in a very general and intellectually slightly inaccurate sense. In actuality, the term typically refers to the 'subaltern native' and the subordination of non-whites. It is widely used when discussing 'Orientalism', regarding which the interested reader is referred to Edward Saïd's famous book of the same name.