After Brexit: Reckoning with Britain's Racism and Xenophobia

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Theoretically, there was a progressive case to be made for Britain exiting the European Union via the referendum held on June 23, 2016. But the campaign for Brexit – the infelicitous name given the political process – was, from the very first, fought on the grounds of xenophobia and racism. Moreover, what has transpired in Britain since the Leave campaign won has only shown how easily the veneer of civility and conviviality can be peeled back to reveal the virulence of racism and xenophobia seething under the skin of British social life.

Britain was never a part of the eurozone. Therefore, the extensive austerity measures that its Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–2015 put into place, and that the Tory government of 2015 ratcheted up, were its own doing. That said, the austerity measures emanating from the more financially powerful EU states – Germany and France – and imposed upon and massively affecting the economies of countries such as Greece and Portugal were on the forefront of every British progressive's mind before the EU referendum. It is possible to be a member of the EU and not part of the eurozone monetary sphere – as is the case with the UK, alongside Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Sweden.

The EU itself is a massive bureaucratic mechanism, institutional machine and ideological apparatus devised to facilitate the movement of capital, goods, services and people across its internal borders. The free – or relatively unrestricted – movement of goods and capital without encountering tariffs or protection barriers has resulted in the further consolidation of the power of the big manufacturers in Europe as well as unfettered growth in and institutional protection of the financial and banking sector. The EU legal bodies legislate around or regulate some of this free trade, but generally decide in favor of big business over trade unions.

The EU's 'empire of free trade' has been the target of the ire of both the right and the left; the right is incensed over the regulations seen to hamper businesses (especially environmental and health-and-safety regulations as well as the human rights charter) and the left is incensed over the unaccountability of the EU officials and its rigid neoliberal stance. This undemocratic power exercised by distant Eurocrats is the plausible basis of a progressive criticism of the institution.

But what has distinguished the EU free-trade pact from other free-trade pacts – notably the North American Free Trade Agreement – is the relatively unrestricted movement of people across internal European borders to seek jobs or residency elsewhere in the Union. And it is this free movement of people that has triggered a long festering xenophobia at the heart of British society.

Britain's insularity has been punctured throughout its history in moments where the need for migrant labor has trumped the Little Englander aversion toward foreigners. One such moment was the post-Second World War reconstruction era when the devastated country needed people to aid in the reconstruction of the national economy (much like the rest of Europe). The importation of guest workers from the colonies, followed by decolonization and the migration of former colonized subjects to the metropole have triggered virulent xenophobic and racist responses in Britain. That the British political classes have refused to reckon with the country's colonial legacy and their steadfast refusal to acknowledge the racism interwoven in its institutions have only exacerbated this xenophobia and racism.

This xenophobia takes different shapes according to the historical moment, but neoliberal policies have only ever intensified these sentiments. Migrants are today blamed for taking up places in housing and schools, burdening the country's publicly-funded universal health system and weakening the working class. Scant attention is paid to how, beginning with Margaret Thatcher's scorched-earth neoliberalism, policies of privatization and austerity – during both feast and famine – have led to a degradation of national life, a diminishing of social mobility and a growth in inequality in the UK.

In the 1990s, under the reign of Tony Blair's New Labour, Thatcher's policies continued in new guises: the fiercely beloved National Health Service (NHS) was funded, but often via public-private partnerships that have in fact burdened the NHS with serious debt and crumbling infrastructures, while enriching private investors and developers. Instead of preserving unused schools, local councils were encouraged to sell off

their school buildings in the 1990s, again benefiting property developers who turned these attractive Victorian structures into high-end housing without anticipating the acute future need for school buildings and school places. The sale of social housing, which had been a pillar of Thatcherite policy of privatization, has been exacerbated by wholly inadequate construction of new affordable housing and no effort to replace the stock of social housing lost under Thatcher.

The privatization of the efficient national rail, electricity, phone and water infrastructures has been a boon to profiteering private firms, while the basic transport and utility infrastructures have deteriorated, and their costs – especially of commuting – have become exorbitant. The replacement of manufacturing jobs with service jobs, the destruction of the mining and shipping sectors, and the weakening of trade union protections – particularly in the more militant sectors – have also had massively detrimental effects on vast swathes of Britain's industrial areas.

It is no matter that the Tory Party (under its official name the Conservatives) is ostensibly a party of both fiscal and social conservatism, that the Liberal Democrats are ostensibly a party of social liberalism and fiscal conservatism, and that Labour is a self-avowed socialist party (though subjected to neoliberal reforms under Tony Blair, New Labour moved to the center as did many other social democratic parties in Europe). In the face of rising popular discontent with this abasement of social life in the UK, it has been easier for politicians across the political spectrum to displace the blame for these policies to vulnerable migrants rather than to acknowledge the role not only of the Conservative (Tory) Party (and for a while, its Liberal Democratic coalition partners), but also of the Labour Party in bringing about this turn of events. In this regards, Labour has been wholly complicit in pandering to xenophobic sentiments in order to deflect blame from New Labour policies.

These policies of austerity and attendant anti-migrant sentiments have occurred in the context of ever more intense hysteria around the question of 'terror'. We live in a time of legislations on radicalization, particularly the absurdly authoritarian 'Prevent' laws, practices of surveillance not only of Muslims, but also of 'suspicious' talk in schools, universities, hospitals and public places, and counterterrorism operations. These government measures – and particularly the Prevent legislation, which makes it mandatory for school and university teachers to spy on their students and any public official to look out for signs of 'radicalization' among Muslim youths in particular – have led to criminalization of entire communities, and an increase in the sense of vulnerability among British citizens and residents of Muslim origin.

This convergence of anti-migrant xenophobia and Islamophobic racism has now become the most recognizable feature of politics in Britain and have shaped successive election campaigns. Parliamentary elections, especially since 2010, have often pivoted around the question of migration. Although in the 2015 elections, Nigel Farage's right-wing anti-immigration and Eurosceptic party, UK Independence Party (UKIP), only secured one seat in the parliament, he nevertheless picked up millions of votes and Farage managed to define the discourse around migration. So much so, that in pandering to UKIP's base, David Cameron announced the EU referendum.

The London mayoral election, held a scant eight weeks before the EU referendum, was another example of this ignominious turn. The campaign between Labour's Sadiq Khan, a liberal Muslim leaning toward New Labour, and the Tories' Zac Goldsmith, until then best known for his environmental campaigning, showed the extent to which even the more ostensibly liberal members of the Tory Party would appeal to this seam of racism and Islamophobia in order to win votes. This all came to a head with the referendum, where all other issues faded into the background and migration and anti-Muslim sentiments (the latter of which does not have a logical relation to the EU in any case) became the central axis around which the referendum pivoted.

Although the outcome was not really foreseen, and although the end result of the referendum was fairly close (52 percent for Leave; 48 percent for Remain), the win for Eurosceptics took even Leave voters by surprise.

The most prevalent cliché of post-referendum analysis has been that the vote for exit should be read as a 'working-class revolt'. Setting aside the unspoken assumption that this rebellious working class must by definition be white, the post-referendum exit polls actually indicate the 'working-class' characterization of the Leave vote is inaccurate. It is true that a higher percentage of working-class voters voted for exit than did upper- and middle-class voters – 46 percent versus 64 percent. But once turnout by class was taken into account, the numbers looked different. As Ben Pritchett's calculations (along with his caveats about the turnout numbers including anomalies) have shown, the far greater turnout of the middle and upper classes, versus the working class – 90 percent versus 52 percent – meant that in absolute numbers, a far higher number of middle- and upper-class voters (around 10 million voters) actually voted to Leave the EU than the working class (approximately 7 million voters), many others of whom abstained from voting.

Lord Ashcroft's exit polls showed that if voters thought that multiculturalism, feminism, social liberalism, the environmental movement and immigration are forces for ill, they voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU. The same polls showed that while 53 percent of voters who described themselves as white and 58 percent of those who described themselves as Christian voted to leave the EU, more than two-thirds of

Asian voters, nearly three-quarters of Black voters and 70 percent of self-identified Muslims voted to remain in the EU.

Only hours after their win, the Eurosceptic leaders had already back-pedaled on some of their most major promises. Nigel Farage claimed that he never agreed with the claim – emblazoned on the side of a campaign bus used by Eurosceptic leaders – that the £350 million weekly payments formerly paid to the EU would actually be used to fund the NHS. Iain Duncan-Smith's weaker claim was that only after the EU agricultural subsidies (to the Tory heartlands) were replaced would any leftover funds be divided between the NHS and other needs. The irony was of course that many of those agricultural heartlands had been in receipt of more handouts from the EU than other places in the UK.

Claims that the UK fisheries could benefit from a post-EU deregulation were similarly walked back. Even on migration, which had played such a decisive and divisive role in the referendum, the Eurosceptic leaders were already tempering their claims. These retreats from promises have been so blatant that the Leave campaign has simply wiped the archive of all their opinion pieces and documents from the web.

Even more astonishing is how the Leave camp seems not to have planned at all for an eventual exit. There is no certainty as to when – or even whether – Article 50 (a provision of Treaty of Lisbon which provides for EU member countries leaving) will ever be invoked, setting into motion two years of negotiations that will allow Britain to unravel its legislations, trade arrangements, migration processes and regulations from the EU.

Perhaps the most worrying fallout of the referendum vote, however, has been the extraordinary spike in violence against migrants and non-white British citizens and residents. Although many – if not most – of those who voted for Leave did not do so out of xenophobic or racist reasons, the vote seems to have legitimated an extraordinary outburst of such attacks against migrants – especially those from Poland– and non-white British citizens, residents, and visitors.

There is very little that promises an abatement of such racism. The immediate economic fallout of the Leave vote will only exacerbate the sense of economic uncertainty, possibly leading to a recession. The weakening of the pound will inevitably lead to a rise in price of imports (which will be exacerbated by the implementation of tariffs once the UK leaves the EU). Massive losses in the stock market have wiped vast amounts off pensions, giving yet more alibis to the state and private pension providers for reducing what is available to retirees. Rating agencies' downgrading of UK's ability to borrow will lead to higher borrowing costs for the UK government and a growth in UK deficit, which of course provides an excuse for further austerity measures and an increase in taxes (which Tory governments of course will not levy against the corporations or the richest earners). The revocation of EU protections for migrant workers means that while the UK will continue to see migration from the EU countries, these workers will not be protected from the worst depredations of unscrupulous employers. As labor studies scholar Roland Erne has argued, this degradation of migrant worker rights will only accelerate the race to the bottom for *all workers*, both migrant and British. Nor will parliamentary politics in England provide any respite.

Already, politicians from Scotland and Northern Ireland (both of which voted overwhelmingly to Remain in the EU) are talking of a second independence referendum and a reunification of Ireland, respectively, in order to remain in the EU. The rump state that would remain if such fragmentation occurred would likely have a much strengthened Tory government and a Labour Party that would have difficulty winning.

In a coming recession, with intensified inequality, rising poverty and stalled social mobility, under a Tory government which has no stakes in egalitarian social policies, racism and xenophobia, right-wing populism, ultranationalist ideologies, even fascism will find a fertile soil. The horrifying racist and xenophobic attacks of the last week are haunted by the 'rivers of blood' racism of yesteryears. In a now notorious 1968 speech, the Tory MP Enoch Powell promised rivers of blood to a country in which migration had led to 'the Black man [having] the whip hand over the white man'. UKIP's Nigel Farage has never hidden his admiration for Enoch Powell, and even the anti-immigrant views of many in the Tory Party are shaped by Powell.

The long and brutal history of British colonialism and empire lies at the heart of so much British insularity and racism. The deep roots of this racism will likely influence the politics of tomorrow, as it has already done that of today. To counter such a bleak future, mass mobilization is necessary – and any form of progressive mass mobilization has to recognize that class politics are always articulated through a politics of race. Reckoning with Britain's racism and xenophobia across time, place, parties and social classes is the necessary first step in such mobilization.