Brexit is Only the Latest Proof of the Insularity and Failure of Western Establishment Institutions

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THE DECISION BY UK VOTERS to leave the EU is such a glaring repudiation of the wisdom and relevance of elite political and media institutions that – for once – their failures have become a prominent part of the storyline. Media reaction to the Brexit vote falls into two general categories: (1) earnest, candid attempts to understand what motivated voters to make this choice, even if that means indicting one’s own establishment circles, and (2) petulant, self-serving, simple-minded attacks on disobedient pro-leave voters for being primitive, xenophobic bigots (and stupid to boot), all to evade any reckoning with their own responsibility. Virtually every reaction that falls into the former category emphasizes the profound failures of western establishment factions; these institutions have spawned pervasive misery and inequality, only to spew condescending scorn at their victims when they object.

*The Los Angeles Times*’ Vincent Bevins, in an outstanding and concise analysis, wrote that “both Brexit and Trumpism are the very, very wrong answers to legitimate questions that urban elites have refused to ask for thirty years”; in particular, “since the 1980s the elites in rich countries have overplayed their hand, taking all the gains for themselves and just covering their ears when anyone else talks, and now they are watching in horror as voters revolt.” The British journalist Tom Ewing, in a comprehensive Brexit explanation, said the same dynamic driving the UK vote prevails in Europe and North America as well: “the arrogance of neoliberal elites in constructing a politics designed to sideline and work around democracy while leaving democracy formally intact.”

In an interview with *The New Statesman*, the political philosopher Michael Sandel also said that the dynamics driving the pro-Brexit sentiment were now dominant throughout the west generally: “a large constituency of working-class voters feel that not only has the economy left them behind, but so has the culture, that the sources of
their dignity, the dignity of labour, have been eroded and mocked by developments with globalisation, the rise of finance, the attention that is lavished by parties across the political spectrum on economic and financial elites, the technocratic emphasis of the established political parties.” After the market-venerating radicalism of Reagan and Thatcher, he said, “the centre left” – Blair and Clinton and various European parties – “managed to regain political office but failed to reimagine the mission and purpose of social democracy, which became empty and obsolete.”

Three Guardian writers sounded similar themes about elite media ignorance, stemming from their homogeneity and detachment from the citizenry. John Harris quoted a Manchester voter as explaining that “if you’ve got money, you vote in. If you haven’t got money, you vote out,” and Harris added: “most of the media . . . failed to see this coming. . . . The alienation of the people charged with documenting the national mood from the people who actually define it is one of the ruptures that has led to this moment.” Gary Younge similarly denounced “a section of the London-based commentariat [that] anthropologised the British working class as though they were a lesser evolved breed from distant parts, all too often portraying them as bigots who did not know what was good for them.” Ian Jack’s article was headlined “In this Brexit vote, the poor turned on an elite who ignored them,” and he described how “gradually the sight of empty towns and shuttered shops became normalised or forgotten.” Headlines like this one from The Guardian in 2014 were prescient but largely ignored:
Though there were some exceptions, establishment political and media elites in the UK were vehemently united against Brexit, but their decreed wisdom was ignored, even scorned. That has happened time and again. As their fundamental failures become more evident to all, these elites have lost credibility, lost influence, and lost the ability to dictate outcomes.

Just last year in the UK, Labour members chose someone to lead Tony Blair’s party – the authentically left-wing Jeremy Corbyn – who could not have been more intensely despised and patronized by almost every leading light of the British media and political class. In the U.S., the joyful rejection by Trump voters of the collective wisdom of the conservative establishment evidenced the same contempt for elite consensus. The enthusiastic and sustained rallying, especially by young voters, against beloved-by-the-establishment Hillary Clinton in favor of a 74-year-old socialist taken seriously by almost no DC elites reflected the same dynamic. Elite denunciations of the right-wing parties of Europe fall on deaf ears. Elites can’t stop, or even affect, any of these movements because they are, at bottom, revolts against their wisdom, authority and virtue.
In sum, the west’s establishment credibility is dying, and their influence is precipitously eroding – all deservedly so. The frenetic pace of online media makes even the most recent events feel distant, like ancient history. That, in turn, makes it easy to lose sight of how many catastrophic and devastating failures western elites have produced in a remarkably short period of time.

In 2003, U.S. and British elites joined together to advocate one of the most heinous and immoral aggressive wars in decades: the destruction of Iraq; that it turned out to be centrally based on falsehoods that were ratified by the most trusted institutions, as well as a complete policy failure even on its own terms, gutted public trust.

In 2008, their economic worldview and unrestrained corruption precipitated a global economic crisis that literally caused, and is still causing, billions of people to suffer – in response, they quickly protected the plutocrats who caused the crisis while leaving the victimized masses to cope with the generational fallout. Even now, western elites continue to proselytize markets and impose free trade and globalization without the slightest concern for the vast
inequality and destruction of economic security those policies generate.

In 2011, NATO bombed Libya by pretending it was motivated by humanitarianism, only to ignore that country once the fun military triumph was celebrated, thus leaving a vacuum of anarchy and militia rule for years that spread instability through the region and fueled the refugee crisis. The U.S. and its European allies continue to invade, occupy and bomb predominantly Muslim countries while propping up their most brutal tyrants, then feign befuddlement about why anyone would want to attack them back, justifying erosions of basic liberties and more bombing campaigns and ratcheting up fear levels each time someone does. The rise of ISIS and the foothold it seized in Iraq and Libya were the direct by-products of the west’s military actions (as even Tony Blair admitted regarding Iraq). Western societies continue to divert massive resources into military weaponry and prisons for their citizens, enriching the most powerful factions in the process, all while imposing harsh austerity on already suffering masses. In sum, western elites thrive while everyone else loses hope.

These are not random, isolated mistakes. They are the by-product of fundamental cultural pathologies within western elite circles – a deep rot. Why should institutions that have repeatedly authored such
travesties, and spread such misery, continue to command respect and credibility? They shouldn’t, and they’re not. As Chris Hayes warned in his 2012 book *Twilight of the Elites*, “given both the scope and depth of this distrust [in elite institutions], it’s clear that we’re in the midst of something far grander and more perilous than just a crisis of government or a crisis of capitalism. We are in the midst of a broad and devastating crisis of authority.”

It’s natural – and inevitable – that **malignant figures will try to exploit** this vacuum of authority. All sorts of demagogues and extremists will try to re-direct mass anger for their own ends. Revolts against corrupt elite institutions can usher in reform and progress, but they can also create a space for the ugliest tribal impulses: xenophobia, authoritarianism, racism, fascism. One sees all of that, both good and bad, manifesting in the anti-establishment movements throughout the U.S., Europe, and the UK: including Brexit. All of this can be invigorating, or promising, or destabilizing, or dangerous: most likely a combination of all that.

The solution is not to subserviently cling to corrupt elite institutions out of fear of the alternatives. It is, instead, to help bury those institutions and their elite mavens and then fight for superior replacements. As Hayes put it in his book, the challenge is “directing the frustration, anger, and alienation we all feel into building a trans-ideological coalition that can actually dislodge the power of the post-meritocratic elite. One that marshals insurrectionist sentiment without succumbing to nihilism and manic, paranoid distrust.”

Corrupt elites always try to persuade people to continue to submit to their dominance in exchange for protection from forces that are even worse. That’s their game. But at some point, they themselves, and their prevailing order, become so destructive, so deceitful, so toxic, that their victims are willing to gamble that the alternatives will not be worse, or
at least, they decide to embrace the satisfaction of spitting in the faces of those who have displayed nothing but contempt and condescension for them.

There is no one, unifying explanation for Brexit, or Trumpism, or the growing extremism of various stripes throughout the west, but this sense of angry impotence – an inability to see any option other than smashing those responsible for their plight – is undoubtedly a major factor. As Bevins put it, supporters of Trump, and Brexit, and other anti-establishment movements “are motivated not so much by whether they think the projects will actually work, but more by their desire to say FUCK YOU” to those they believe (with very good reason) have failed them.

Obviously, those who are the target of this anti-establishment rage – political, economic and media elites – are desperate to exonerate themselves, to demonstrate that they bear no responsibility for the suffering masses that are now refusing to be compliant and silent. The easiest course to achieve that goal is simply to demonize those with little power, wealth or possibility as stupid and racist: this is only happening because they are primitive and ignorant and hateful, not because they have any legitimate grievances or because I or my friends or my elite institutions have done anything wrong. As Vice’s Michael Tracey put it:

> Elites’ reaction to Brexit mimics their reaction to Trump: blame the amorality of ordinary people rather than reckon with elite failure

Because that reaction is so self-protective and self-glorifying, many U.S.
media elites – including those who knew almost nothing about Brexit until 48 hours ago – instantly adopted it as their preferred narrative for explaining what happened, just as they’ve done with Trump, Corbyn, Sanders and any number of other instances where their entitlement to rule has been disregarded. They are so persuaded of their own natural superiority that any factions who refuse to see it and submit to it prove themselves, by definition, to be regressive, stunted and amoral.

Indeed, media reaction to the Brexit vote – filled with unreflective rage, condescension and contempt toward those who voted wrong – perfectly illustrates the dynamics that caused all of this in the first place. Media elites, by virtue of their position, adore the status quo. It rewards them, vests them with prestige and position, welcomes them into exclusive circles, allows them to be close to (if not themselves wielding) great power while traveling their country and the world, provides them with a platform, fills them with esteem and purpose. The same is true of academic elites, and financial elites, and political elites. Elites love the status quo that has given them, and then protected, their elite position.

Elites are usually elite for good reason, and tend to have better judgment than the average person.

#confessyourunpopularopinion

Because of how generally satisfied they are with their lot, they regard
with affection and respect the internationalist institutions that safeguard the west’s prevailing order: the World Bank and IMF, NATO and the west’s military forces, the Federal Reserve, Wall Street, the EU. While they express some piecemeal criticisms of each, they literally cannot comprehend how anyone would be fundamentally disillusioned by and angry with these institutions, let alone want to break from them. They are far removed from the suffering that causes those anti-establishment sentiments. So they search and search in vain for some rationale that could explain something like Brexit, or the establishment-condemning movements on the right and left, and can find only one way to process it: these people are not motivated by any legitimate grievances or economic suffering, but instead they are just broken, ungrateful, immoral, hateful, racist and ignorant.
Of course it is the case that some, perhaps much, of the support given to these anti-establishment movements is grounded in those sorts of ugly sentiments. But it’s also the case that the media elites’ revered establishment institutions in finance, media and politics are driven by all sorts of equally ugly impulses, as the rotted fruit of their actions conclusively proves.

Even more important, the mechanism that western citizens are expected to use to express and rectify dissatisfaction – elections – has largely ceased to serve any corrective function. As Hayes, in a widely cited tweet, put it this week about Brexit:
But that is exactly the choice presented not only by Brexit but also western elections generally, including the 2016 Clinton v. Trump General Election (just look at the powerful array of Wall Street tycoons and war-loving neocons which – long before Trump – viewed the former Democratic New York Senator and Secretary of State as their best hope for having their agenda and interests served). When democracy is preserved only in form, structured to change little to nothing about power distribution, people naturally seek alternatives for the redress of their grievances, particularly when they suffer.

More importantly still – and directly contrary to what establishment liberals love to claim in order to demonize all who reject their authority – economic suffering and xenophobia/racism are not mutually exclusive; the opposite is true: the former fuels the latter, as sustained economic misery makes people more receptive to tribalistic scapegoating. That’s precisely why plutocratic policies that deprive huge portions of the population of basic opportunity and hope are so dangerous. Claiming that supporters of Brexit or Trump or Corbyn or Sanders or anti-establishment European parties on the left and right are motivated only by hatred but not genuine economic suffering and political oppression is a transparent tactic for exonerating status quo institutions and evading responsibility for doing anything about their core corruption.

Part of this spiteful media reaction to Brexit is grounded in a dreary combination of sloth and habit: a sizable portion of the establishment-
liberal commentariat in the west has completely lost the ability to engage with any sort of dissent from their orthodoxies, or even to understand those who disagree with them. They are capable of nothing beyond adopting the most smug and self-satisfied posture, then spouting clichés to dismiss their critics as ignorant, benighted bigots. Like the people of the west who bomb Muslim countries and then express confusion that anyone wants to attack them back, the most simple-minded of these establishment media liberals are constantly enraged that the people they endlessly malign as ignorant haters refuse to vest them with the respect and credibility to which they are naturally entitled.

But there’s something deeper and more interesting driving the media reaction here. Establishment journalistic outlets are not outsiders. They’re the opposite: they are fully integrated into elite institutions, are tools of those institutions, and thus identify fully with them. Of course they do not share, and cannot understand, anti-establishment sentiments: they are the targets of this establishment-hating revolt as much as anyone else. These journalists’ reaction to this anti-establishment backlash is a form of self-defense. As NYU Journalism Professor Jay Rosen put it last night, “journalists today report on hostility to the political class, as if they had nothing to do with it,” but they are a key part of that political class and, for that reason, “if the population — or part of it — is in revolt against the political class, this is a problem for journalism.”

There are many factors explaining why establishment journalists now have almost no ability to stem the tide of anti-establishment rage, even when it’s irrational and driven by ignoble impulses. Part of it is that the
internet and social media have rendered them irrelevant, unnecessary to disseminate ideas. Part of it is that – due their distance from them – they have nothing to say to people who are suffering and angry about it other than to scorn them as hateful losers. Part of it is that journalists – like anyone else – tend to react with bitterness and rage, not self-assessment, as they lose influence and stature.

But a major factor is that many people recognize that establishment journalists are an integral part of the very institutions and corrupted elite circles that are authors of their plight. Rather than being people who mediate or inform these political conflicts, journalists are agents of the forces that are oppressing them. And when journalists react to their anger and suffering by telling them that it’s invalid and merely the by-product of their stupidity and primitive resentments, that only reinforces the perception that journalists are their enemy, thus rendering journalistic opinion increasingly irrelevant.
Brexit was a tantrum -- British voters had good reason to be angry, but what they did won't make anything better.

businessinsider.com/brexit-implica...

1:07 PM - 24 Jun 2016

Basically, Brexit was a tantrum — what should we do about it? The strangest thing about Brexit is that, of all the members of the European Union, Britain had the weakest case that it would benefit from leaving.

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Brexit – despite all of the harm it is likely to cause and despite all of the malicious politicians it will empower – could have been a positive development. But that would require that elites (and their media outlets) react to the shock of this repudiation by spending some time reflecting on their own flaws, analyzing what they have done to contribute to such mass outrage and deprivation, in order to engage in course correction. Exactly the same potential opportunity was created by the Iraq debacle, the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of Trumpism and other anti-establishment movements: this is all compelling evidence that things have gone very wrong with those who wield the greatest power, that self-critique in elite circles is more vital than anything.
But, as usual, that’s exactly what they most refuse to do. Instead of acknowledging and addressing the fundamental flaws within themselves, they are devoting their energies to demonizing the victims of their corruption, all in order to de-legitimize those grievances and thus relieve themselves of responsibility to meaningfully address them. That reaction only serves to bolster, if not vindicate, the animating perceptions that these elite institutions are hopelessly self-interested, toxic and destructive and thus cannot be reformed but rather must be destroyed. That, in turn, only ensures that there will be many more Brexits, and Trumps, in our collective future. 

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British Exit From EU Not Inevitable, Despite Referendum

IN THE FIRST HOURS after the British public voted to exit the European Union, amid all sorts of triumphal statements and recriminations, one declaration was notably absent: the formal notification to the EU that the United Kingdom intends to leave the organization, which is required to start the clock on negotiations for a departure.

Prime Minister David Cameron, who led the failed campaign to convince voters to stay in the EU, told the public that an exit would not happen soon, as he intended to resign in three months and leave it to his successor to decide “when to trigger Article 50” of the union’s basic agreement, the Lisbon Treaty, which says that a member state has two years after declaring its desire to leave to negotiate the terms of its exit.
Speaking to the press a short time later, the man considered most likely to be prime minister in October, Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London, also seemed in no hurry to get the process started.