

Lest we forget: Trump, Brexit and the 'elites'

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There is nothing anti-elite about Trump and Farage's supremacist positions. So just how helpful is the elite/masses binary for making sense of the societies we live in?



Nigel Farage & Trump. Evan Vucci AP/Press Association Images. All rights reserved. As the reality of Trump's victory starts to sink in, many Britons feel sympathetic to the confusion and soul searching going on across the Atlantic. How did this happen? Why were we so unprepared? How did the 'elites' fail to understand the 'masses' so badly?

Asking such questions is critical if we are to move on from the rifts they have exposed. Those who did not see the Brexit or Trump vote coming certainly need to reflect on how they see the society in which they live, and their own role within it. But how helpful is the 'elite'/'masses' dichotomy to that process?

Who are the 'elites' here? At the most basic level they are the 'haves', or maybe even more clearly, not the have-nots. These are the people who have not been left destitute by the collapse of social welfare, or industrial production and the rise of free market economics. This is a large and diverse group, including of course the 1% but also middle class professionals, bringing in what to many are large salaries but who find themselves priced out of the housing markets around the areas in which they work; public sector workers who are working longer and longer hours, for less and less pay; young people working in the charity sector, often providing critical social services that were once funded by the state, now forced to live at home well into their 30s in order to do what they see as a worthwhile job that doesn't pay them enough to rent a place of their own; artists and musicians (both aspiring and more successful) who juggle a host of unskilled, low paid jobs in order to secure a livelihood that allows them to pursue their dream careers.

These situations cause stress and upset for the people in them, but these stresses are often offset by other benefits, most notably job satisfaction and a sense of making some recognised contribution to the world around them. There are many, in both Britain and the US, for whom such stresses would seem like luxuries. For them paid employment, a sense of career path and of any choice over one's life are a distant dream. At the very end of this spectrum are those who do not know if they will be able to find the money to feed themselves and their families each week.

But economic differences alone do not explain the Brexit and Trump vote. Many poor non-whites backed Remain in the UK and voted overwhelmingly for Clinton in the US. And for Trump and Brexiteers like Farage, the term 'elite' goes beyond a reference to material wealth. It refers to a particular kind of world view – a world view that is sympathetic to the principles of feminism and racial and sexual equality. These ideologies are caricatured as the stuff of middle class dinner party chit chat but in fact they originate in the much less tranquil and comfortable experiences of war.

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The First and Second World War blew holes in the racial and gendered hierarchies that had come to underpin social order. Though the wartime campaigns were hardly egalitarian in their organisation, they put colonial subjects, African Americans and Native Americans, Jews and Muslims alongside white 'Christian' soldiers – both poor and wealthy – on the battle field. In the face of global conflict it became much harder to give different values to a soldier's body on the basis of where he had been born or what he looked like. As women became responsible for the Home Front and took over the very same jobs that men had done previously, it became much harder to argue that their labour was worth less than that of a male counterpart. To put it more simply, the horrors of total war brought home the reality that, before a barrage of machine gun and tank fire, we are all equal.

Processing this experience took time, particularly as peace brought a return to many pre-war institutions and social expectations. It was not until the 1960s and '70s, and another conscription war – Vietnam – that the disconnect between the idea of equality, made palpable by conflict, and the inequalities of everyday life became the subject of more widespread debate. In universities, a new generation of often non-white, female or non-heterosexual scholars looked at their experience of thinking and writing in the overwhelmingly white, male, hetero-normative academy, and raised profound questions. On the streets, the civil rights movement turned a discussion about the history of social oppression into a demand for state action to make gender, racial and sexual equality a reality.

These demands were framed primarily in terms of gender, race and sexuality. This has remained the case, even as, from the 1980s onward, economic inequality has grown more extreme. Today, we have a whole raft of initiatives that are intended to challenge social privilege but which pay too little attention to the problems of economic disparity. Of course, the two issues are not really distinct. In the US, 26% of working-age Black women live in poverty, compared to a national average of 11%. But this fact also helps to explain why, even as Hilary Clinton faced sometimes breath-taking misogyny in the presidential debates,

the argument that her election would help to 'shatter the glass ceiling' and end discrimination against American women failed to gain much traction. For poor white men, and women, Clinton seems to exist in a world so privileged that discussion of the discrimination she faces as an educated woman feels more like a smack in the face than a cry around which to rally.

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Clearly this is an important lesson to draw from Brexit and the Trump election; we must not give up on our commitment to reduce inequality but we must rethink the processes by which we do so. We need to see poverty as the product of the structural inequalities of capitalism – rather than of idleness and dependency – in the same way that we recognise sexism and racism as structural problems.

Doing so is not an act of charity or a 'concession' to our political opponents. As these election results show clearly, the current gap between the richest and poorest of our society is something that harms us all, not just the poor. Failure to change this gap will lead to a continuation of the attitudes that have shaped this year's election campaigns: the principles of social equality will come to be meaningless to many of those who stand most to gain from them and will be weaponised by those who oppose them.

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And at the present there are many who do oppose them. In engaging in this self-criticism, let us be very clear that neither Trump nor Farage is a champion of the poor. Both these men have profited greatly from the neoliberal order. In dodging taxes and through complete inactivity in the European Parliament, neither man has used his powers and privileges to address the problems poor Britons and Americans face.

The anger that these men feel and project into their political campaigns stems not from destitution but from a violent rejection of the idea that all human beings are equal, regardless of race, gender and sexuality. They, and their wealthier, middle class supporters, have no interest in addressing economic inequalities; they want instead to entrench the social hierarchies and prejudices that were exposed by the wartime sacrifices of many brave men and women. There is nothing anti-elite about this position which goes far beyond elitism to become supremacist. It is a world-view that should be rejected and opposed with full force.

It is vital that the UK referendum and US election do not sound the death knell for the ideas of human equality and universal empathy that emerged, at great cost, from all the suffering of the twentieth century.