Referenda are terrible mechanisms of democracy. As a case in point, the recent British referendum over the United Kingdom’s membership in the EU was a reckless gamble that took a very real issue—the need for more open and legitimate contestation in the EU—and turned it into a political grotesquerie of shamelessly opportunistic political elites. The raucous debate over the United Kingdom’s continued membership in the EU was riven with lies and misrepresentations, some of which are now being explicitly rolled back by Brexit advocates; even the British press rues its bombastic support for the Leave side. Unfortunately, many British voters appear not to have known exactly what the EU is, validating other recent research demonstrating a lack of factual knowledge about the union.

Observers of the referendum should therefore be wary about drawing conclusions about broader globalization efforts, the Western order, the inevitability of the rise of populist anti-immigration parties, or the viability of the EU project overall. The answer to the breathless question posed in the New York Times on Sunday—“Is the post-1945 order imposed on the world by the United States and its allies unraveling, too?”—is simple. No, it is not. And yet the emotions and cultural chasms brought to bear in the Brexit vote cannot and should not be ignored.

Brexit’s real lesson is that there is a consequential divide between cosmopolitans who view the future with hope and those who have been left behind and have seen their economic situations and ways of life deteriorate. The same story may well play out in the United States and elsewhere, with important electoral effects. But the Brexit story also speaks to the uniqueness of the EU as a new kind of polity with a profound impact on the lives of all within it. History has shown that the development of new political formulations rarely goes smoothly. The divisions between those who can imagine a better life in the new system and those who cannot will likely continue to drive politics in the EU and elsewhere for years to come.

CLASS CONSCIOUS

Although the Brexit referendum was a highly imperfect form of democratic representation, the emotions voiced by Leave voters were very real. They echo important and valid feelings of other populations across the Western democracies. There are two worlds of people, as analysis of Brexit voting patterns clearly indicated, that are divided in their experiences and their visions of the future. Educational attainment, age, and national identity decisively determined the vote. Younger voters of all economic backgrounds and those with a university education voted overwhelmingly in favor of Remain. Older
voters, the unemployed, and those with a strong sense of English national identity sought to leave.

One way of thinking about the division is to see it as cosmopolitan versus parochial thinking, rooted in deeper social and economic trends that create their own cultural dynamics. Cosmopolitanism, a sense of belonging to a global community beyond one’s immediate borders, requires confidence in one’s place in the world and implies a hope about the future beyond the nation-state. The parochial view is tinged with fear about that future and a sense that societal transformation will leave the common voter behind. In part, that fear reflects the opening of markets, but it is equally due to changes in technology and broader shifts in capitalism away from protection of both the middle and the working classes. These shifts can’t be blamed solely on globalization; they also have much to do with domestic politics and policy decisions. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, political choices have accelerated deindustrialization while decimating social safety nets and doing little to put the brakes on rising inequality.

Given this harsh reality for the unemployed, the older, and the uneducated, the Remain campaign’s warnings about the economic disaster of Brexit carried little weight; many voters believed that their opportunities were closed off long ago. The clever marketing of the Brexit campaign, including the mantras “Take Back Control” and “Breaking Point,” spoke to very real senses of exclusion but offered few solutions; the reality is that British political dynamics, more than the EU’s rules, have created the United Kingdom’s social and economic problems.

The economic divide and the social effects of it pushed immigration to the forefront of the debate. Voters were right that immigration of both EU nationals and non-EU immigrants has risen tremendously, particularly since the financial crisis. Whereas other states within the EU have struggled with immigrants from Syria and Iraq, however, the United Kingdom has had a tiny number of asylum claims. And studies show that immigrants pay far more in taxes than they take out in benefits. Nevertheless, the underlying fears made such facts unimportant. Indeed, the areas with the most foreigners voted overwhelmingly for staying in the EU. They are regions already integrated into a new cosmopolitan world.

NEW POWER, NEW PROBLEM

The fight over Brexit is a reflection of the social exclusion that arises in a world of stark economic inequality. But the referendum should also be viewed in terms of a much longer history of political development and state building. The EU is far beyond a simple international organization or trade treaty, since it has accrued significant political authority across a wide range of areas. The rulings of the European Court of Justice, for example, supersede national law, and the laws of the EU have transformed everyday life in Europe, even as the Brussels bureaucracy and its fiscal presence remain tiny.

Historically, new political authorities have emerged and evolved in messy, ugly, and often violent ways. National projects of unification have involved coercion, civil wars, and the brutal exercise of power. Questions of federalism in the United States are still being fought today. Although the nation-state seems universal and natural, there have been many other forms of government in Europe alone: the Hapsburg monarchy, Italian city-states, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Hanseatic League, for example, have all come and gone. The EU, for all its faults, is an innovative new form, a polity in formation. Those under 45, and particularly those under 30, embrace it and see it as a natural and positive thing, a backdrop to their changed everyday lives that creates more opportunities than it closes down.
Given history’s guide, we should not be surprised that the deepening of the EU has created a backlash. But we can be appalled by the craven opportunism and lack of political leadership in the United Kingdom and on the European continent in guiding this development. The EU will only work if all its citizens can imagine themselves part of a cosmopolitan, thriving democratic polity, one that balances local, national, and EU powers and creates economic opportunity. Listening to those on both sides of the cultural divide, and working to ease the economic inequality that underlies the division between the hopeful and the excluded, is the only way forward for the EU—and the rest of us.

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