

The social roots of Brexit: Europe's economic integration has fostered social disintegration

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*The UK's decision to leave the EU has forced European decision-makers to take stock of the integration process. **Dennis J. Snower** writes that Brexit should be viewed as only the latest symptom of a process of social disintegration across Europe brought on by the impact of globalisation. He argues that Europe is now at a dangerous point in its history and that feelings of exceptionalism, victimhood and disaffiliation must be tackled to reverse the current trajectory.*



Brexit has put Europe on a dangerous course. Europe has been here before, but, for most of its people, such periods of turmoil took place too long ago for them to be personal memories. Nevertheless, the early symptoms of the crisis are recognisable.

First, there is a large and growing segment of the disadvantaged – regular people, doing routine jobs – that finds itself unable to participate in the fruits of globalisation. Meanwhile an identifiable segment of advantaged people, benefiting from globalisation, are cushioned from the insecurities of the disadvantaged.



Riots in Komotini, Greece, 2008. Credits: Joanna / Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

There is a growing perception by the disadvantaged that their failures and insecurities are due to external circumstances – the financial crash of 2008 and tax-financed bail-outs followed by austerity measures hitting regular people. This is leading to a rising sense of disempowerment. Alternatively, there is a growing perception by the advantaged that economic and social successes are attributable to personal achievements.

There is presently blind opposition to an increasingly ineffective governance structure – the apparatus of Brussels – which is deemed remote, overbearing and illegitimate. Alongside this is an indifference to the veracity of political pronouncements, fuelling a cycle of mistrust and alienation. And there is a sense of impatience with liberal democratic processes, including checks and balances, as well as safeguards for the protection of minorities.

A sense of social exceptionalism, leading to greater importance being attributed to cultural or national identities, is beginning to dwarf the importance of economic issues. The situation has cultivated a sense of victimhood, enabling the disadvantaged to ascribe their misfortunes to others, and motivating a general search for scapegoats.

The rising appeal of populist politicians and media who give legitimacy to expressions of narrow nationalist or cultural sentiments is a symptom of this. There is now a broad disaffiliation from people who are different in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity or nation, manifesting itself in a withdrawal of tolerance, respect, consideration and empathy for foreigners; while the scapegoating of foreigners and a desire to purify oneself from their influence has become prominent.

Social disintegration

It is tempting against this backdrop to draw parallels with the Europe of previous generations. We have seen this kind of phenomenon before: in many respects these developments were the social face of fascism in the early to mid-20th century. Today we tend to associate fascism with its political face: the mere mention of the word conjures up images of authoritarianism, dictatorships, corporatism, right-wing stances and militarism. But this acts as a way of disassociating ourselves from the same forces by projecting them on to the interwar period and the governments responsible for the Second World War. In doing so, we have blinded ourselves not only to the social basis that fascism was grounded in, but to the relevance these social forces continue to have for contemporary politics.

The most important of these social forces are exceptionalism, victimhood and disaffiliation. They are interrelated. In the simplest terms, we think we are superior to others, but we are victims of other groups who seek to take advantage of us; thus we sever our affiliation to the others, enabling us to be unmoved by their joys and sufferings. This leads inevitably to social conflict.

In the UK itself, [reports of hate crimes](#) rose substantially in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, reflecting a rise in hostility to migrant groups, including verbal abuse, racist graffiti, social media abuse and physical assaults. But this certainly does not mean that all Brexit voters are racists. On the contrary, most are undoubtedly well-meaning, hard-working British citizens with strong loyalties to their country's traditions of fair play, trustworthiness and civility.

Those who face hopeless job prospects, despite their best efforts, have reason to be angered that they have been excluded from prosperity. They are, by and large, good and honest people, who are powerless not only economically, but also socially. They are caught in social pressures that arouse their sense of identity and sovereignty. Against this backdrop, who they really are has become more important than how much they earn. These pressures encourage them to define themselves in opposition to people who do not share their heritage. The result is that some people have been led into social conflicts that they generally cannot foresee.

Undoubtedly, the Brexit vote would not have been achieved without a sense of British exceptionalism, without a sense that the country is being undermined and exploited by other groups, and without a psychological disassociation from foreigners. These forces have been awakened with a vengeance in many other European countries. In France, Marine Le Pen is riding this wave of discontent. Her declaration, '*Long live free nations! Long live the United Kingdom! Long live France!*', makes this clear. Some polls suggest that she now may have a realistic chance of winning the presidential election. Her anti-immigrant, anti-Brussels, Front National is the most popular party among the working classes.

Austria also faces a rerun of its presidential election, nearly won last time by a right-wing, anti-immigrant candidate. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom, also opposed to immigrants and Brussels, leads in the opinion polls. Italy faces political and economic turmoil, with Matteo Renzi fighting for his political survival and the anti-Brussels Five Star Movement winning control of Rome and Turin in recent mayoral elections.

These social forces are also present in the successes of Donald Trump in the US, and the popularity of Vladimir Putin, alongside the increasingly harsh and ruthless relations among differing ethnic and religious groups in the

Middle East and Far East. Suddenly the geopolitical world is looking increasingly unstable, propelled toward internal and external conflict through the grievances of the powerless classes and the indifference of the advantaged.

A time for action

The time has come for us to awaken from this impending nightmare. We have already seen where it can lead. It is high time we address its root causes. Integration of the global economy cannot succeed without some form of social integration. It is not sufficient for globalisation to raise average incomes in a country. Each EU member state requires employment, training, education and social security systems that permit the benefits from globalisation to be reaped by all citizens. We must dismantle policies that permit advantaged segments of the population to become sequestered from the fortunes of their country.

Politicians and the media must also avoid pretending that social and economic success is always a measure of personal achievement, thereby legitimating the status quo. Nor must they pretend that social and economic failure is always a product of external circumstance, thereby disempowering the disadvantaged. We must get serious about creating equal opportunities for all our citizens, continually challenging the power of special interests, and dismantling the protection of insiders at the expense of outsiders.

Ultimately, the EU needs to ensure that its initiatives for political and economic integration are matched by initiatives for social integration. This means giving all school leavers the opportunity to work in other EU member states, eliminating obstacles to labour mobility for all working-age citizens of the EU, promoting the portability of welfare benefits and pensions, and encouraging wide-ranging cultural exchanges.

After all, there are two potent ways to overcome the plague of exceptionalism, victimhood and disaffiliation: to promote equal opportunities and to bring people into contact with one another in settings that help them understand each other's perspectives.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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