

On post-Brexit London: difference doesn't have to break us

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I first lived in London ten years ago and, with a few diversions, have been trying to make my way back ever since. To me, London is a place where difference is par for the course. Its much-vaunted multiculturalism leads to a kind of oblique acceptance which I can actually perceive, and have struggled to find anywhere else. I recognize that this is my experience only, and that this acceptance is conditional and highly imperfect; it helps a lot that I'm white and middle class and that, though I was born in Poland and am an EU citizen, I speak English with an American accent because I grew up there. Nevertheless, in London I have a truly international friend group, including my first Polish friends who aren't related to me. It's one of the few places that people don't ask me where I'm from as soon as they hear my ethnic name. This is a relief, particularly because there's no straightforward answer in my case. I love my super-diverse neighborhood, which reminds me of **Washington, DC, pre-development**. Though making a home out of this city is trying in a thousand other ways, the ability to blend in, so to speak, and to live together with people very different from you, is worth it.

Or, it was. The EU referendum has raised difference to a new level of visibility, and now that Brexit is a fact, there is an expiration date on my stay here. I'll be fine: I can go back to America, and besides, what I loved most about this place is threatening to sink into the past. I grieve mostly for the young people who grew up here and don't remember their countries of birth, and for the many who don't know where else to go. They know for certain, however, that their British neighbors have voted against them. I'm sorry for **the young Brits who turned out to vote Remain** and now have to live with a future they don't want. Mostly, even though I know that the referendum was a (failed) gambit by elites, I worry that the result signals that the only on-the-table political response to suffering and precarity is contraction.

A handful of people have already written that for a strained and insecure British working class, Brexit arose as the best choice. I'm not surprised that the political left's exhortation to vote for the lesser evil did not find purchase this time around. One of the implications of this position is that time and space have to be won in order to find alternatives and to fight the transformative battles against capitalism, racism, sexism, and so on. In my dissertation research with leftist activists, I have seen that there are many wonderful and inspiring people working hard toward these transformations right now. Overall, however, I do not see a strong left oriented toward meeting the immediate material needs of the country's vulnerable. I see many stressed charity workers who

can't take political stances for fear of losing what little funding they have left. I see leftists struggling to **endow Brexiters with existential dignity**. In this context, in which people who have little can only anticipate that more will be taken away from them, the protective impulse is understandable, if tragic. For the record, everything I've written is true in the American context—just replace “Brexiters” with “Trump supporters”.

What the EU promised to provide—imperfectly—were the very conditions for building alternatives. It's almost a cliché to say that greater openness, not less, is needed to solve the world's problems; but really, climate change, the refugee crisis, and growing global inequality (Panama Papers, anyone?) all demonstrate the arbitrariness of our boundaries. It's simplistic to quote Audre Lorde saying that “difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic”, and leave it at that. And yet, in my research and in **other unexpected places**, it is emerging that groups that accept and handle difference, with all the difficulty that attends that project, are more creative and effective than those that try to ignore or control it. Given the new relationship to difference anticipated with Brexit, the greatest loss will be of potential and of utopic promise.

We must understand, though, that this promise has been dead to many for some time. Of course, I refuse to accept this, as do many others. We're out there. Come find us.

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