Trump's election represents the popular rejection of an unreachable American Dream

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Last night Donald Trump won the US presidential election in a shock upset, defying both the political establishment and the pollsters. Here, Mary Evans of the LSE Gender Institute looks at how Trump voters feel excluded from joining the middle class and disillusioned with the American Dream.

To say the result of the Presidential Election is less than welcome to many of us is being widely said. The question, however, is how to explain it.

The usual suspects in this case are those of misogyny, racism and the fury of those 'left behind'. All, I would suggest, reasons that are partly responsible for the election of Donald Trump, but the important word here is 'partly'. It seems – on the morning after – that 63% of white men and 52% of white women voted for Trump; figures that in part support the 'usual suspects' argument. What is against the adequacy of this explanation is the complexity of the 'left behind' argument ; some aspects of which are obscured by reliance on the more common references to economic and social insecurity. It is not that these explanations are not very important, it is more that they do not quite capture the degree of betrayal, abandonment and envy that also exist.

These feelings relate to the real circumstances of millions of citizens of the USA. But at the same time it is possible that these sentiments are magnified by a sense that what they see as 'their' world is being taken over by people who , like Hillary Clinton, have benefitted by those aspects of US life which are supposed to be available and effective for everyone. Central to this argument is that of education, and particularly higher education. Go to college, get an education has been a constant theme of the American dream because it will get you a well paid and secure job. The only problem with this is that it no longer always does this and more than that 'others' (notably women and racial minorities) seem to get those scarce good jobs. Even if the statistics do not support this view the point is that enough of the dream fails for enough people.

Set this against the view explicitly expressed by Hillary Clinton in her book Hard Choices that: 'The global middle class is a natural constituency for America. It is in our interest to see it grow to include more people. We should do everything we can to expand it at home and around the world'. Now this sentiment explicitly links national well-being with an aspiration that many people have found unreliable. Entry – and success – at an Ivy League university might make access to a prosperous future likely but for others, who go to other colleges, what they acquire is less assured. Equally important – and not just in terms of the United States – is the word 'global'. The quotation above conveys a sense that this 'global middle class' not only knows what is best for the world, but is also a socioeconomic class apart from its national and local links within the US. Something of a backlash has emerged in response to this mindset, namely the refusal and the negation of other forms of expertise. At its most ridiculous this view surfaces in Michael Gove's rejection of 'experts' and Trump's validation of the 'uneducated'.

Yet for many Trump voters – and notwithstanding the possibility that they may have voted for racist and/or misogynist reasons – it is also possible that there were two other underlying themes. One, that the 'global middle class' benefits only itself and the rich; and second, that the ideal citizen is acquiring an ever more restrictive presence: highly (and expensively) educated, metropolitan, and dismissive of the worlds outside. We can point out – and lots of people did – that Trump is as ruthless as any other robber baron; the problem was that he was perceived as a liberation from the dreams that failed.

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Mary Evans is LSE Centennial Professor at the Gender Institute. Prior to coming to the LSE as a Visiting Fellow she taught Women's Studies and Sociology at the University of Kent. The primary focus of Professor Evans' work is those narratives (be they fictional or otherwise) through which we construct our social identity. Professor Evans is particularly interested in the part that gender and class play in these narratives and the ways in which narratives of ourselves are a essential part of what we define as the modern.

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