The EU Referendum and the Shaming of Leave Voters

By **Anqi Chen**, *first year sociology undergraduate student*

A day right after EU referendum result came out, my Facebook page exploded. Full of words of anger and shock, almost all of my friends were expressing their frustration and disappointment. This is very easy to understand because most of my Facebook friends are university undergraduates. Young and well-educated, they are statistically perfect remain voters. Unlike my remain-oriented sample, the EU referendum told us the fact that almost 52% of the population wanted to leave. It was more than a shock to us, after all, the people in our lives including parents, peers, teachers – and to some extent Londoners – were overwhelmingly supporting remain. What made our prediction wrong? Who is it to blame?

A significant trend is to blame the populists. According to this analysis, they are the ones who supported to leave, aiming to get immigrates and refugees out of the country in the dream of making a sovereign Britain great again; they are also the least educated, least reasonable people who can totally dismiss economic reasons to remain. The winning of the Leave campaign is mocked as 'the winning of populism'. When the result gets disappointing, people now cry that too much democracy ruins the country because the majority of people don't even understand what they are doing, or that they just chose to do the 'wrong thing'. And the people who made the 'wrong' choice are depicted as idiots who are either without the capacity to reason (especially economically reason) or feeling regret right after. A video shot by a man called Brad Holmes interviewing his girlfriend who voted to leave became hugely popular. In this video liked by 140k people, the girl looked inarticulate and gave reasons of her voting that are obviously ridiculous to most of us, such as 'I don't want to watch the Euros next year'.

What some remain people are doing is identifying a group of people, depicting, demonising, infantilising, mocking and shaming them for making a stupid decision, showing a somehow elitist attitude. Without trying to understand why some people voted to leave, and what caused them to make the decision, all these mocking and shaming posts only reflect the widening gaps in morality and value consensus. Attacking Leave 'idiots' also provides a psychological isolation by drawing a clear line between us and them, but is it really working? Or is it just a way to deny our responsibility to understand each other and to be critical to social problems in the wider context?

Maybe social inequality is the reason that should be blamed. Elites blame leave voters of lacking the capacity to reason, but as sociologists, we know the causes to vote to leave are associated with people's unsatisfactory living standards, whether this refers to the lack of education and healthcare funding, unemployment, inability to access political debate, or even xenophobic ideas. These all have a wider social cause, and the leave campaign can be seem as expressing these frustrations. It's totally reasonable to be furious by the fact that the EU referendum may lead to a future that we do not want to have, but the solution of political divergency certainly needs us to understand its cause, and shaming populism does not help.

July 8th, 2016 | Brexit | 0 Comments

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