

'We don't exist to them, do we?': why working-class people voted for Brexit



Working-class people were more likely to vote for Brexit. Lisa McKenzie (Middlesex University) takes issue with the notion that these people were 'turkeys voting for Christmas'. They saw Brexit, with all the uncertainties it would bring, as an alternative to the status quo. De-industrialisation and austerity has taken a heavy toll on working-class communities – one which the middle-class often fails to grasp.

It's 22 June 2016. I'm sat in a café in the East End of London with two local women, 'Sally' – who is 23, has two small children, and has been on the council house waiting list for four years, along with over 19,000 other people – and Anne, who is in her sixties and calls herself a 'proper Eastender'. Her children and grandchildren had recently moved out of the area and into Essex because of the lack of an affordable home. It's the day before the EU referendum, and we are talking about all the politics of the day, including footballer David Beckham's recent intervention in the debate: he has recently declared his support for the Remain campaign. The women are not happy. The conversation goes:

'What has that **** Beckham got to say about this?'

'He hasn't ever got to be worried about where he is going to live, unless it's which house.'

'Well him and Posh can go and live where they want when they want, it's not the same for us, I've been homeless now for two years.'

'We don't exist to them, do we?'

'Well all of us ***** who don't exist are voting out tomorrow'.

Before the referendum, I had been working with a group of local working-class men and women in London's East End as part of ['The Great British Class Survey'](#) at the LSE. I have collected hundreds of stories about working-class life in the last four years in the East End, and thousands over the last 12 years. These small stories can often seem unrelated to the big political debates of the day, if you don't understand the context to them. As a working-class woman, I value the art of storytelling: I know that a story is never just a story. It is used by working-class people to explain who they are, where they come from, and where they belong. These small stories are too often missed in wider political analysis in favour of macro trends, which has often meant that the poorest people in the UK go unrepresented.



Waxwork David and Victoria Beckham at Madame Tussauds. Photo: [Cesar Pics](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Fortunately – as an ethnographer, a working-class academic, the daughter of a Nottinghamshire striking miner, and hosiery factory worker (and I have lived in council housing for most of my life) – I rarely focus on the macro. My life and my work is rooted within working-class communities; my focus and my politics are about exposing those inequalities that are invisible to many, but sit in plain sight.

Having collected these narratives since 2005, I knew something different was happening around the referendum. The debates in pubs, cafes, nail bars, and the hairdressers in working-class communities seemed infectious. People were interested, and argued about the finer points of the EU, but also made broader points about where power rested in the UK, making links between the two. However, for most working class people like 'Sally' and the other women, the debates were centred upon the constant struggle of their own lives, and they connected those struggles to their mothers' and grandmothers' hardships, but also to their children's future. They saw little hope that life would become fairer for them. The referendum was a turning point for the women in east London. They had not voted in the 2015 General Election: they had little interest or faith in a political system seated only three miles away when their daily and immediate situation needed constant attention. When 'Sally' told me she was going to use her vote for the first time to leave, I asked her if she thought things would change for the better if we were to Brexit. She said she didn't know, and didn't care. She just couldn't stand things being the same.

Since the vote, interest in what has been happening to the 'left behind' has sharpened, along with stigmatising and cruel rhetoric about those from working-class communities who voted to leave or didn't vote at all. They have been derided as 'turkeys voting for Christmas' – as 'stupid', 'spiteful' and racist. My [most recent research](#) with the International Inequalities Institute at the LSE has taken me to the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire mining towns where I was born and raised. These communities overwhelmingly voted to leave the EU, and their reasons were varied and broad. This part of the UK was decimated during the 1980s and 1990s. They are proud places and people who kept the lights on with their labour down the 'pits', and kept the good people of the middle-class and middle England in their nice Marks and Spencer undies. These communities were heavily industrialised, and filled with skilled manual labour jobs for both men and women. They were wiped clean by de-industrialisation, and left void of work and investment for decades. In the last ten years, particularly since the 2008 banking crash, new jobs have emerged in warehouse and distribution work, payday loan companies, and slum landlordism. De-industrialised areas are fertile ground for exploitative industries. Land, people and labour are cheap. Warehouses can be constructed in days and disassembled and taken somewhere else if the land, the people or the labour ask for more.

Migrant workers from eastern Europe have been recruited into the area to work and live in these exploitative industries. Women like 'Sally' from east London have been socially cleansed out of the expensive land of the global city and are being rehoused in the privately owned and rented 'pit houses' owned by slum landlords in the deindustrialised North and Midlands.

Despite the obvious geographical differences between both groups – one lives in a global city that has great wealth and is an economic powerhouse on the world stage, while the other group live in small isolated communities – there is a commonality in experience. They knew they were at the bottom, they knew they had been at the bottom for generations, and rather than being 'left behind' – a term that suggests they could not keep up – they knew they had been 'left out' of the purposeful act of wealth being redistributed upwards.

Working-class Leavers were derided as turkeys voting for Christmas, but it is the middle-class Remainders who have been running around like headless chickens since the vote. Like Henny Penny, they think the sky is falling in, but whether the sky falls in or not, Brexit has made a difference to working-class people dubbed 'the left behind'. They have become visible for the first time in generations, and to some extent feared. In January 2018 few could deny that the government's Brexit plans are chaotic. But for working-class people all over the UK, the chaos of the NHS, Universal Credit, social cleansing and housing is their priority. And in truth, the UK's middle class has been left relatively unscathed by eight years of austerity. Those who don't fear the shame of the foodbank, or the looming prospect of a job in the warehouse/workhouse for their children – and instead think the crisis is about the colour of passports – should think themselves lucky.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is based on [The class politics of prejudice: Brexit and the land of no-hope and glory](#), British Journal of Sociology 68 (Sup.1).

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