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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Why blaming the poor for Brexit is wrong.

As the struggle to understand the Brexit vote continues social class appears to be at the heart of it but in a traditional and surprisingly conventional way. What everyone wants to know is why “they” voted to leave. The working class expressed their discontent by focusing on immigration, which “we” all know isn’t a “real” issue and ignored the positive benefits of EU membership. In this they were prisoners of a range of diseases, from a dangerous populism, an out-dated sense of patriotism, opportunistic politicians to the manipulations of a tabloid press. The less well off turn out yet again to be their own worst enemy and “we”, the white, well off and educated, have to understand why they did it and patronise and demonise them in the process. What we can’t allow is that their vote may have been as rational or as emotionally based as the vote to stay, indeed in many ways it may have been more so.

The great virtue of blaming the poor for what happened is that it lets the rest of the population off the hook and suppresses a question of equal importance, namely why did 48% of the British population vote to Remain. After all at the moment the EU has little to recommend it. It has become a damaged and morally bankrupt institution. Whatever about the values that originally gave it a purpose and that it used to embody it does not do so any more. Two issues in particular show this. One is the manner in which it ensured that the less well off paid the costs of the reckless banking of institutions located in some of its biggest countries during the crash. The other is the manner in which it has tried to suppress the movement of refugees that many of the EU countries created by their ill-considered foreign policies in North Africa and Syria. It could be argued that the EU is saveable and that is a reason to vote for it. But there is little indication that this is the case. I haven’t read anything in the pronouncements of Jean-Claude Juncker that he even understands the problem.

So it doesn’t really make sense that if the educated middle classes are as clever and as cosmopolitan as they like to present itself why did they vote to stay in? Currently the EU represents all they should be against. Most likely they were

misled by the range of the range of pronouncements of the media experts, think tanks, and politicians. They were the prisoners of dead institutions, dead sources of information and dilapidated habits of thought.

The first dead institution is the traditional media. The main ones that “we” read wanted the UK to stay, though there were splits in the Tory press reflecting the divisions in the Tory Party. The papers that “they” read – The Sun, the Daily Mail and the Express - predictably enough was for Leave. What was common to both media camps however was the belief that media endorsements were important and could make a difference.

What the media haven’t figured out yet is that we now live in an age of post media politics. Most people no longer get their political information or their political views from the media, if they ever did, and for the most part they do not trust or believe what they read there. The media are dead as a source of trusted and reliable information. The problem is that “they” have realised this and “we” haven’t. The young have moved to so-called social media as sources of information and political opinions though it is often difficult to see what is “social” about discussions in these fora. The older and less educated have simply detached from the public sphere and rely for their information on the informal networks of family, friends and the local pub.

There is a similar problem with “experts”. The Leave vote increased in direct proportion to the pronouncements of “experts” urging them to stay in, whether this was the Bank of England, the economists who signed letters to the newspapers, the warnings from stockbrokers and other financial soothsayers, and the pronouncements of various London Based Think Tanks. Increasingly over the decades their influence has waned and it was dealt a final deathblow with the 2008 meltdown, something which none of them had predicted. Their pronouncements no longer have the credibility to be the outside rational standard against which we check the reality and viability of other proposed solutions. They haven’t come to terms with the fact that they are now part of the problem rather than arbiters of what is the “correct” solution.

The pronouncements and predictions of stockbrokers, banks and academic economists now belong in the same dustbin of history to which theories about the earth being flat or the infallibility of the Cork County Board have been consigned. The problem is that they haven't realised it yet.

The final factor is the way "we" respond to politicians who are off the dominant message. People like Nigel Farage and Donald Trump have become the object of satire and it makes "us" feel good. Quite why this should be the case is unclear. They are no more or less inane or untrustworthy than other politicians and again their popularity in particular circles increases with each satirical depiction of them. "We" think laughing at them is politically sophisticated but if they are so stupid compared to us, why did they win the debate?

The Brexit victory can be seen as a crisis of legitimacy and in many ways it is but not in the way that it is being presented. A majority of the UK population have shown that they have become detached from the dominant institutions of society that previously could rely on their largely unquestioned support and on being trusted with some reluctance by them. This is not the people's problem but a problem for the institutions themselves.

We in Ireland have the same problem. We, like the UK, just haven't realised it yet.

Dr. Ciaran McCullagh was a lecturer in sociology in University College Cork and is the author of books on Crime in Ireland and on the power of the media.