



Waking up to Brexit

written by Paul Boyce
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On the morning of 24th June I had what I have since learnt to be a common experience. I lay in bed in conscious abeyance; Schrodinger's Brexit: 'If I don't know the result it has not happened.' I held the forestalled moment for some time. Yet somehow too I imagined that it would all be 'alright.' The Remain vote would prevail. Life would go on in the progressive security of the slim margin that the pollsters finally seemed to predict. The sun shone in the morning after a rainy day of voting. I turned on my laptop just at the moment when the balance was tipped. The vote had gone the other way.



The narrowness of the margin, the demographics of the voting profile, and the legitimacy of the referendum aside, what might this result reveal? How do those of us who felt so seemingly assured of the Remain vote as the prevailing rational national outcome relate to the weight, scale and logic of the now evidently opposite populist attitude?

And anyway why are we so surprised? We already knew from the polls that the potential Leave vote was sizable. The margin was always known to be narrow. Is the post-Brexit jolt really a realisation of how little we know one another?



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The starkness of the national post-Brexit divide, across age, class and region, mirrors the starkness of the referendum itself. At the moment of voting, presented with the ballot paper with its blunt 'yes' or 'no' options, I laughed – suddenly struck by the absurdity of the base options in the context of an otherwise factually



and intellectually devoid national debate. Maybe too my laugh betrayed an anxious connection to the wider absurdity of a question that would inevitably open wide social fault-lines.

I come from a Brexit heartland – the Medway Towns of Kent, a working-class, predominately Tory social-world of small businesses, builders, and weakly unionised and now all but defunct industries (cement and paper). I know that world well, and yet somehow I have again realised over the last few days I had forgotten or dislocated from it too. As I contemplated the seeming small-minded, racist, Imperial residues undergirding the Brexit decision I knew intrinsically and closely too of the disenfranchised anger or ambivalence of those that felt otherwise. So how could I not have taken that more into account? And if I failed in that what hope does an elite political class have of ever connecting to or realising such social-worlds?



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The political and populist connections did not happen of course – another socio-



economic fault-line. The politicians misjudged the nation. The nation revealed its mistrust of the politicians, in full glare. It was obviously coming: after the Scottish referendum and the SNP resurgence, the distance between the people and Westminster has never been more palpable. And yet, lead by a Prime Minister with a party-political issue to settle, we sleepwalked into it. And now we wake up, too late. Boris Johnson has gotten what he pretend to want – the unexpected lightening-rod for voters expressing dispossession. And he looks chastened.

Abandonment begets adornment. If those who voted Leave from a position of economic dispossession have expressed anything it does not feel like hope. Rather a [nihilistic kind of punishment](#). An unleashing of anger, already newly manifest in resurgent racism on the streets of the UK in the last few days. Brexit has not created this. It might have given it a mandate. More than that though it has offered up a moment in which to vent destructively at targets already assigned (migrants).

This is a moment of profound, globally resonant yet acutely local trauma; a Brexit psychopathology that we now cannot help but address – nationally and in the European project as a whole.

The illusion of European neo-liberal economic progress and social justice has burst *again*, just a short time after Greece. Probably it will be pieced back together for now in whatever deal whatever remains of the UK government will seek to trade off in negotiations with the EU. But the rupture of the moment will endure, a wake up call to take seriously the lives of others so easily abandoned and forgotten – on either side of the Leave/Remain divide.

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