SOCIO-ECONOMICS, POLITICS AND THE BREXIT VOTE: WHY THE RISE IN RACIST INCIDENTS WON’T JUST GO AWAY

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Regardless of when and how exactly the UK will formally withdraw from its current EU status, the outcome of the referendum on 23rd June 2016 will remain a critical juncture in the political history of the UK, Europe and possibly beyond. Social scientists working in the UK now find themselves in the slightly paradoxical situation that, on the one hand, the referendum result is likely to have negative consequences for their research funding (Gaunt, 2016), while on the other it also provides a number of new, interrelated topics to analyse, including *inter alia* the scope of a likely economic recession in the referendum aftermath (O’Brien and Ichikura, 2016; Ward and Ryan, 2016); the implications of a probable deepening of already existing socio-economic inequalities (Springford, 2015); the future status of English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh nations in the UK (Kettle, 2016); and the referendum’s role in a broader trend towards the far right in European politics (BBC, 2016a). From this potential plethora of topics, one already visible consequence of the Brexit referendum is particularly concerning and thus will be the focus of this piece: the reported rise in racist incidents in the UK since 23rd June that, for socio-economic and political reasons outlined below, is likely to worsen if left unchecked.

Admittedly, the lack of comparable precedents and the complex interactions between economic, social and political issues that will form part of the Brexit process (both domestically and internationally) make it difficult to predict what may happen next. Yet somewhat unexpectedly I find that, without being an expert on the British far or radical right, my own research area – the civil wars literature – provides several key insights that seem very applicable to the current situation in the UK. To be clear: The UK is currently not at civil war nor is it likely to be in the near future. However, borrowing concepts and causal assumptions from the civil wars literature (without actually talking about the risk of civil war in the UK) helps to understand how the interplay of certain socio-economic and political factors has contributed to the recent rise in racist incidents in the UK, and why it is unlikely to be reverted unless there will be extensive efforts to address it. To add another clarification: It may very well be that the 42% increase in hate crimes in the last two weeks of June and 20% increase in the first two weeks of July compared to the same periods in 2015 (BBC, 2016b; 2016c) represent a statistical peak that will be followed by a series of temporary downward- and upward trends (cf. also Ford and Lowles, 2016). I would, however, not be surprised if a longitudinal comparison of racist incidents in the UK 10-15 years from now would show that their overall rise has been significantly higher post- compared to pre-2016.

To explain my reasons for this speculation, let me first address arguments which imply that individuals like Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove are personally to blame for both the referendum result and the subsequent rise in hate crimes (Cowburn, 2016; Komaromi and Singh, 2016). In the civil wars literature, this argument that the key factor for what we are trying to explain lies in the behaviour of certain individuals – typically members of the political elite and/or political entrepreneurs – and their manipulation of public sentiment is known as *instrumentalism* (Varshney, 2002). While instrumentalism helps to understand parts of some political stories – think Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia (Gagnon, 1994) or the aforementioned UKIP and Tory politicians in the run-up to the EU referendum –, it also has a major flaw in that it focuses too much on political leaders and not on why members of the public make a conscious choice to follow them (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). On its own, instrumentalism does not give us a complete picture of why the Brexit referendum was followed by a dramatic rise in racist incidents: It helps to explain how prominent Leave campaigners legitimised anti-immigration discourse and instigated racist sentiment, but not why so many people decided to follow this rhetoric and translate it into racist action, with the announcement of the referendum result serving as an apparent catalyst.

To address this last point and get a fuller picture of the link between the UK’s EU referendum and the rise in racist incidents, we need to look at socio-economic conditions and the role of further crucial concepts in the civil wars literature: *grievances* and *relative deprivation* (Gurr, 2000). The grievance concept is used not only in the civil wars literature, but represents one of its most prominent devices. In a nutshell, grievance-based arguments (used here as a synonym for Relative Deprivation Theory) state that violence is a form of “justice-seeking” behaviour that is rooted in “socially derived inequalities in group members’ material well-being or political access in comparison with other social groups” (Harff and Gurr, 2003, p. 103). This sense of relative deprivation – whether based on objective fact or subjective perception – is expected to cause anger and resentment among members of social groups that feel economically, politically and/or socially disadvantaged compared to others (Gurr, 2015). Depending on their ability to mobilise – for which the aforementioned role of political leaders might be crucial –, these grievances can translate into violent action (Gurr, 2000).

Although the grievance-based argument outlined above is borrowed from the civil wars literature, it seems very applicable to the current rise of racist incidents in the UK, which include both non-physical and physical violence (Komaromi and Singh, 2016): Preliminary findings show that racist incidents since 23rd June have been especially prevalent in those areas that strongly supported Brexit (Stone, 2016), and that the areas that most strongly supported Brexit in turn are the ones where feelings of economic and political marginalisation are particularly widespread (Goodwin, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016). This is far from saying that supporting Brexit equals racism, but as far as preliminary findings go, this is a pretty strong indication that inequalities and related feelings of socio-economic and political deprivation likely are a relevant factor in explaining not only the referendum result but also patterns of racist incidents. Following the logic of the grievance-based argument, this is not surprising, as we would expect inequalities (and, crucially, the sense of relative deprivation they can cause) to foster feelings of anger and resentment which may find an outlet in non-conventional politics. In this case, racist action.

At this point, two things should be noted:

a) The EU referendum did not invent racism in the UK, as (like in many other countries) it has a long history with changing degrees and forms of political salience (Panayi, 2014). Going back to points already discussed above, the key reason why the causes of racism deserve more attention now than ever is because we are at a critical juncture in which far right views are gaining strength in numerous “developed” countries, and the EU referendum campaign has unveiled the intensity of anti-immigration and defensive nationalist views in the UK. As political culture in the global North seems to be polarising, we need to pay closer attention to why this is happening in order to address it.

b) We need to put more blame on the exclusionary character of the UK’s countrywide political institutions to help understand the rise in racist incidents. The UK’s majoritarian electoral system, its unitary state structure and the EU referendum itself are all political institutions that concentrate rather than disperse political power, and consequently reduce political representation and inclusiveness compared to their proportional and federal counterparts (see e.g. Cohen, 1997). Without going into too much detail, there is strong evidence to suggest that exclusionary institutions may be one of the root causes for issues of inequalities and relative deprivation outlined above: Not only do exclusionary institutions fail to provide an accurate reflection of interests in society (Lijphart, 1999) and are thus likely to lead to feelings of political deprivation (think e.g. about the fact that UKIP won just one House of Commons seat in the last elections despite gaining 12.6% of the national vote, and how their voters may have felt about this). Exclusionary institutions – especially majoritarian electoral systems – are also associated with lower public spending (see e.g. Clark *et al.*, 2013) that may increase socio-economic inequalities and thus contribute to feelings of socio-economic deprivation.

In sum, key factors that seem to have contributed to the rise in racist incidents in the UK include inequalities, associated with feelings of relative socio-economic and political deprivation, fostered by exclusionary institutions and exploited by political leaders that capitalised on defensive nationalist rhetoric.

So why do I think that we are at the beginning of a long-term rise in racist incidents in the UK? Because the issues discussed above are unlikely to be solved unless there will be some radical changes to the UK’s market, welfare and political system. Given the uncertainties of the Brexit process alone, and despite Theresa May’s promise to tackle inequalities (May, 2016), it seems improbable that the fundamentals of the UK’s economy and politics will be changed any time soon by reigning in neoliberal policies, overhauling the British welfare system and introducing more representative institutions such as federalism and PR. Although these last points could be pivotal in reducing socio-economic and political inequalities, I dare to doubt that the current and subsequent government will tackle them beyond mere rhetoric while dealing with the details of EU withdrawal – but would be very happy to be proven wrong on this.

Instead, with a likely recession that may deepen already existing socio-economic inequalities, no clear programme to make the UK’s political institutions more inclusive, and the charismatic leaders of the Leave campaign that capitalised on defensive nationalist rhetoric still hanging around the media spotlight in one form or another, the cocktail of factors that seem to have contributed to the recent rise in racist incidents may become even stronger in the future.

This is not to say that nothing can be done about it, on the contrary. Given government’s likely reluctance to introduce fundamental reforms and the party infighting that has prevented Labour from offering a clear and viable vision for the future, the biggest hope to stop the spread of racist discourse and action could be the UK’s civil society. The recent rise in racist incidents won’t just go away, but the wind could be taken out of its sails if civil society actors are a) willing and b) able to engage in non-violent, large-scale, concerted and sustained efforts to tackle socio-economic inequalities, give a voice to the ones who feel left behind, and demand more social spending and more representative politics.

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