

## **Brexit, xenophobia and left strategy now**

**Jamie Gough**

The economic consequences of Brexit are dire. But an even more serious problem for the left thrown up by the vote to Leave is what it shows about working class consciousness regarding ‘immigrants’, and how the anti-immigration Leave campaign has shifted working class opinion to the right. It is this aspect of Brexit that I focus on in this article.

In England and Wales the majority of the working class (in the everyday rather than Marxist sense) voted for Brexit. Many Remain voters, of both right and left, have seen this as a sign of a deep, inherent xenophobia and racism amongst British-born working class people, or as evidence of their inability to understand economic questions. I wish to argue, to the contrary, that the working class Brexit vote was a logical coping strategy *in the circumstances*, that is, given the political economy of Britain over the last forty years and its present configuration. Correspondingly, the vote was not *based in* xenophobia and racism as such, but rather an opposition to further net immigration because of its perceived impacts on access to jobs, public services and housing. This view, however, blames another section of the world working class and thus removes culpability from capital and capitalism. The left can change this economic view and challenge xenophobia only by leading a struggle based on a different economic strategy, one which opposes capitalist austerity, proposes measures which benefit the majority of the population materially, and which breaks through in practice the mystifications of capitalist value relations.

Explaining popular consciousness requires going beyond a description of dominant ideologies; analysis of discourses in themselves cannot explain their hold on people’s imagination. Rather, we need to see them as part of praxis, the unity of material practice and consciousness. Widespread ideas – ideologies – do not arise simply from discursive interventions; they develop over long periods through lived experience. Thus my focus is on everyday life and its structuring by political economy and class relations. I use a pragmatist approach to how people choose their behaviour, including its moral aspects: that these are not an unmediated result of their intrinsic personal interests, but are rather framed within materially-feasible strategies whether personal or collective.

The view that immigration is the problem rather than neoliberal capitalism is, in Marxist terms, based on ‘appearance’ rather than ‘essence’. However, in the Marxist approach ‘appearance’ is not mere illusion or mystification, but is rather rooted in real materially-based social relations. This is a further reason for my emphasis on working class coping strategies.

### **The vote to leave and its motivations**

The majority of the working class in the everyday sense, standard classes C2, D and E, in England and Wales voted for Brexit. The majority of classes C1, B and A voted to remain. (I will use the term Working Class (capitalised) in the Marxist sense, meaning all those directly or indirectly dependent on wages over their life time. This includes the majority of standard classes E to B and some of A.) The majority of the working class appears to have voted to leave mainly on two bases. First, scepticism that the state, governments and ‘elites’ are capable of ameliorating people’s material lives. The EU was here a stand-in for the state in general. The Leave campaign’s slogan, ‘Take back control’, and its attacks on ‘the establishment’ and ‘experts’, appealed to this anti-state sentiment. The roots of the latter lie

both in the *ideology* of neoliberalism, which has preached for forty years that the state cannot solve economic problems, and in the *experience* of those decades in which the state has manifestly failed to meet working class economic and social needs.

The second main reason for the leave vote, on which I focus in the rest of this article, was that ‘immigrants’ are to blame for lack of jobs, poor wages and conditions, inadequate public services and shortage of decent affordable housing. Opinion polls during the referendum campaign and since, and vox pop reports such as John Harris’s pieces in *The Guardian*, show that most working class leavers believed that Brexit would reduce immigration to Britain and thereby reduce competition for jobs, public services and housing. How do we explain the majority adoption of this view?

### **The roots of the xenophobic Leave vote**

British imperialism since the 17C has fostered a deep xenophobia and racism in the British-born working class, and continues to do so. And working class hostility to immigrants is nothing new. In the 19C many English workers were hostile to Irish immigrants, in the late 19C east London trade unionists were hostile to east European Jewish migrants, and in the 1950s and 1960s immigrants from the Caribbean and south Asia were met with hostility and exclusion. In the last few decades, surveys of British working class opinion have consistently shown high levels of hostility to immigration. In the last ten years, this feeling has been expressed in substantial working class membership of, and electoral support for, UKIP, whose only known policy is ending immigration (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). UKIP is now the second party in the majority of Labour-held constituencies.

Hostility to immigration is not only about the perceived effects of immigrants in the present: for older British-born working class people (who voted particularly strongly to leave), the growth of visible ethnic minorities in Britain is *correlated* with the decline in economy, public services and housing since the 1970s. The disappearance of the good times of the post-war boom is associated with, and then blamed on, the increase in visible minorities.

The ‘organic’ xenophobia of the British Working Class has been ably nurtured in the long term by sections of the British ruling class which seek actively to foster popular xenophobia and racism as a permanent stabiliser of class relations in Britain. Since the late 19C this has been the specific mission of the Tory rightwing and of the majority of the press with its continuous stream of anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and blatantly racist ‘stories’. In the *Sun*, *Mail* and *Express* these completely dominate coverage of politics (column inches, front pages), with the implication that ‘immigrants’ are the dominant cause of people’s problems. The referendum was a gift to this unholy coalition, which together with UKIP formed the shock troops of the Leave campaign. This campaign doubtless substantially deepened working class xenophobia.

The impact of ruling class propaganda is not, however, an independent ‘factor’ in creating anti-immigrant sentiment. Messages from the media and politicians are not indifferently and passively absorbed by people; a message is powerful to the extent that it chimes with people’s views based on their own personal and collective strategies. In this case, anti-immigrant propaganda from above resonated with a strategy of excluding immigrants developed by working class people themselves and in which they are active participants.

To understand this strategy, a theoretical starting point is a pragmatist view of justice and social practice (Gough, 2010). Most political discourse, including on the left, proceeds on the basis that social actors have ‘interests’, determined more or less by their existing lives, on which their political views and values are based. The task of political parties is then to promise to meet some of those interests - a consumer view of politics. But ‘interests’ have no meaning outside of a feasible means of achieving them; thus everyone in England might want to live in a pretty cottage in the Lake District, but this is a meaningless ‘interest’. So in examining social values and views, we need to look at what *feasible* strategies are available for people to achieve them. The feasibility of the strategy depends on the social-political situation and the resources and power that social groups have within it. It is this moment to which I now turn.

### **Working Class strategies**

What are the underpinnings of the competition between workers articulated by nationality and visible difference? Here, we need to step back and consider the most basic relations of capitalist society as such (in all times and places), the position within this society of the Working Class (Lebowitz, 2003), and the consequent strategies available to workers to improve their lot. There are three basic strategies to maintain or improve employment and consumption positions available to Working Class people (Gough, 2010):-

#### (a) Liberal and neoliberal strategy

This is to compete with other workers for *given* jobs, public services and housing. The supply of these things in liberal ideology is determined by market forces which are not susceptible to political influence. This competition is therefore a zero sum game.

Workers’ competitiveness can be developed in two modes, respectively individual and collective:-

(1) First, cultivating the competitiveness of the individual worker or their household against all others. This is done by making one’s labour power better for potential or actual employers, through for example working hard, ingratiating oneself with the boss, or through undertaking training. It can also be done through individual craftiness or cash in the use of public services or within housing markets. This is the ‘aspirational’ or ‘enterpreneurial’ individual promoted by neoliberalism.

(2) A second mode of competition is to compete as a group: to unite with others constructed materially and ideologically as ‘the same’ against groups constructed as the Other; the Other is to be excluded, through essentially political means, from jobs, public services and housing. This divide can be based on gender or age. It can also be based on ethnicity or ‘race’. The history of capitalism internationally is depressingly replete with examples; indeed, one can say that this type of competition between workers has been and is the rule rather than the exception. This mode of competition is in contradiction to the fundamental wish of capital to have free access to the entire world working class, to render all labour power abstract - abstracted, that is, from social distinctions like gender, age, nationality, ‘race’, ethnicity or religion. The dominant group of workers thus has to use *political* means, acting against a ‘free’ labour market, to carve out or maintain their privilege: sometimes trade unions controlled by the dominant group (men, whites, etc) imposing discriminatory agreements and practices on employers, sometimes the state (for example immigration controls, or white

citizens' influence over local authority housing or housing markets). In this sense, this strategy is against liberalism and neoliberalism by restricting the 'free' labour markets desired by capital. But it *also* reinforces liberalism and neoliberalism by weakening the solidarity of the Working Class as a whole and consequently its ability to resist capital.

#### (b) Social democratic strategy

Workers actively collaborate with capital, partly mediated by the state, to construct a more productive economy, better quality public services and a better housing stock. This is pursued partly within workplaces, firms and industries, with workers receiving respect and decent wages and conditions from the employers in return for active commitment to the labour process. The influence of workers here is often, though not always, through trade union representation. It is pursued partly through the state: substantial levels of taxation of capital, and good quality public services which benefit both capital and citizens. The housing market, and property and land markets more generally, are strongly regulated by the state, and forms of cooperative and social housing play a major role. Social democratic parties, whose electoral base is the working class, play an important role in the state. This strategy, in sharp contrast to the liberal ones, involves collective organisations of the Working Class. But these collective organisations do not aim to fight capital, but on the contrary to collaborate with it for shared aims. 'Efficiency' and 'fairness' go hand in hand.

#### (c) Socialist strategy

This proceeds through struggle by collectives of workers against capital, and against the state to the extent that it expresses the logic of capital. Better jobs, public services and housing are to be obtained either at the expense of capital, through greater controls over capital, or through public provision. These collectives include trade unions, social movements, residents' groups, one-issue campaigns and socialist parties. This class strategy is based on the premise that competition between workers, (a), is a zero sum game. It also notes that social democratic strategy leads to highly uneven benefits to workers (socially, spatially) which are, moreover, vulnerable to capitalist crises at scales from the workplace to the global.

### **Working Class strategies in Britain since the 1970s**

How does this analysis help us to understand the referendum campaign and result, in particular the appeal to so many people of opposing 'immigration'? Here one needs to consider the period since the 1970s during which neoliberalism has become dominant.

Socialist practice was strong in Britain from the late 1960s up until the mid-1980s: trade union and workplace actions, social movements, collective struggles over public services and housing. But since the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985, these struggles have been much weaker, with the partial exception of ecological struggles. Crucial in this evolution has been the deepening rule of value in the Marxist sense. Workers have accepted wage cuts and job losses because the firm is not making sufficient profits. Public spending cuts have been accepted because the fiscal deficit 'has to be reduced' and the public debt 'has to be paid off'. The invisible nature of surplus value has enabled corporations and the rich to hide their rapidly-increasing wealth, extracted from the working class, and to remove it from states' taxation. Thus the idea of opposing capital has appeared increasingly unrealistic. In consequence, the ideals of solidarity across the working class have been weakened, and new generations have hardly encountered them.

Mild social democratic government interventions have appeared in partial opposition to neoliberalism, responding to Working Class dissatisfaction as well as contradictions of neoliberalism for capital (Gough, 2002). When Major replaced Thatcher after the poll tax revolt and Tory tensions over the EU, he initiated ‘community-led’ and ‘holistic’ urban programmes. The Labour government of 1997-2010 introduced a large number of social-democratic measures: the minimum wage, Sure Start, area-based poverty programmes, devolution to Scotland and Wales, the English Regional Development Agencies, Regional Spatial Strategies, and neighbourhood empowerment. But these were hobbled by their feeble funding and by their neoliberal integument; many of these were anyway abolished by the coalition government in 2010. Blair’s promise of ‘stakeholder capitalism’ appeared to offer something to workers, but proved a chimera. The Working Class in recent decades has therefore had little encouragement to rally behind a social democratic strategy.

The decreasing credibility of socialist and social-democratic strategies among the Working Class has left only liberalism. Most people are pragmatic rather than ideological in their approach to economic questions, and liberal strategies have increasingly appeared as the only feasible ones. The individualistic approach, (a)(1) above, has appeared feasible for the middle class and some of the upper working class. But it has held no promise for the C2DEs. Training, self-advancement and self-promotion are useless in an economy of deskilled, low paid casualised jobs. Public service cuts cannot be got round by guile, nor by going private. House purchase is impossible. Thus the anti-immigrant strategy, (a)(2), becomes *the only apparently feasible one* for the working class. Thus ABC1s mainly voted Remain, while C2DEs mostly voted Leave. Both groups seek to compete with other workers for jobs, services and housing; but whereas the ABC1s can aim to compete as individuals, the C2DEs can see no option but to compete by nationality.

### **Implications for the left now**

The Labour Party in the referendum campaign used an economic argument regarding immigration to support its Remain position. It argued that immigrants from the EU and elsewhere over the last few decades have contributed strongly to economic, and thus employment, growth, and contribute more in taxes than their use of public services; they do not therefore deprive British-born people of jobs, public services or housing. This argument is true for the country as a whole. But as I suggested above, it is not true in particular sectors and localities. At any rate, the argument failed to convince the majority of working class voters.

Corbyn, and others on the left, argue that freedom of movement of the world’s workers is a right, an argument with which I agree. But my analysis shows that, *unless they are convinced of a socialist economic strategy*, most working class people will reject the Open Borders argument out of hand, as they did in the referendum. I have argued that the hostility of most working class people to immigration is not primarily based on ideology or discourse. It has been adopted as a survival strategy because socialist militancy, social democratic reforms, and individual aspiration and enterprise have failed to deliver the goods, whereas on the surface of things restriction of immigration promises to deliver. There is no chance now that working class people will be shifted from this view unless they become convinced that *a different political economic strategy is feasible*.

A Labour Party that actively and aggressively campaigns on its economic and social programme would make an important contribution to developing this alternative praxis. Equally important, all the collective organisations of the Working Class, at all spatial scales, need to develop the struggles against austerity and for decent jobs, public services and housing. These struggles can gradually demystify the reifying rule of value I referred to earlier: the ‘need’ to reduce the fiscal deficit; the ‘impossibility’ of taxing corporations and the rich; the greater efficiency of private firms than the public sector; the imperative of the profit rate and payment of dividends by industrial and commercial firms. To the extent that even limited victories are won, more people can be convinced that this is a viable strategy for dealing with their problems. A long period of struggle around concrete material issues can then make a socialist approach, of solidarity and collective good across national and ethnic divisions, hegemonic in the Working Class.

## References

Colletti, L. (1972) Marxism: science or revolution?, in Blackburn, R. (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science*, London: Fontan/Collins: 369-377

Ford, R. and Goodwin, M. (2014) *Revolt on the Right*, London: Routledge

Geras, N. (1972) Marx and the critique of political economy, in Blackburn, R. (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science*, London: Fontan/Collins: 284-305

Gough, J. (2002) Neoliberalism and socialisation in the contemporary city: opposites, complements and instabilities, *Antipode*, 34 (3), 405-26

Gough, J. (2010) Workers’ strategies to secure jobs, their uses of scale, and competing economic moralities: rethinking the ‘geography of justice’, *Political Geography* 29 (3) 130-9

Lebowitz, M. (2003) *Beyond Capital: Marx’s political economy of the working class*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan

Ollman, B. (1993) *Dialectical Investigations*, New York: Routledge