The Oppositional Politics of Race and Class in the Brexit Debate

Posted on March 21, 2019 by Sweta Rajan-Rankin

I live in a relatively affluent predominantly white neighbourhood in the South of England. One day in the city centre I am approached by an older white homeless man; he is weaving, unwashed, I can smell alcohol on his breath. He asks me for money and I politely refuse, as I feel uncertain and unsafe. He advances towards me, and says he doesn't believe I don't have the money to spare, calls me a 'Bloody Paki', and when I refuse again, he protests "why don't you all go home!". Apart from this being personally traumatic, it is sadly all too common an experience of people of colour in today's Brexit Britain.

I am struck by the positional politics of race and class in this example. In many ways I have considerable advantages: I come from an upper-middle class family in India, both my parents had doctorates, I have a stable employment in a privileged academic job. The homeless man is clearly vulnerable to the harsh realities of poverty, unemployment, and potentially substance abuse and mental health impacts from living rough on the streets. Yet my privileged class status is undone

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through racism, even though class-based inequalities play out in this conversation.

These kinds of racial tensions and everyday microaggressions have become exacerbated since the Brexit referendum result. Since 2016, hate crimes, xenophobia, Islamaphobia and Anti-Semitist slogans and attacks have increased around the country. *The Guardian*reported a record five-year increase in race and faith-related hate crime. As Liz Fekete, the Director of the Institute for Race Relations (IRR) observes, the Brexit vote emboldened people and created spaces for 'floating hate' to manifest and flourish. Race and racism have been intimately tied with anti-immigration campaigns in the Brexit vote, and these need to be unpacked further. How do these tensions over race and immigration intersect with class, especially given growing attention to the so-called 'white' working class?"

We need to take a closer look at both the referendum results and the political propaganda that led up to the Brexit vote. British geographer Danny Dorling's excellent analysis of exit poll data on the referendum shows that while the working class did vote Leave, the results were far from homogenous. For example, a notable Southern middle-class vote also supported Brexit. While Dorling's analysis was based on a six class scheme classification, other scholars such as Swales (2016:2) have arrived at similar conclusions, identifying three categories of Leave voters to be "affluent Eurosceptics, the older working class and a smaller group of economically disadvantaged anti-immigration voters".

Viewing the Brexit vote as a 'white working-class' phenomenon is fundamentally problematic. As Tim Strangleman points out, the polarisation of 'them' and 'us' in the Brexit debate needs to be understood in relation to the very real isolation of the working class in relation to de-industrialisation and declining industries, especially in Labour strongholds. It is tying these class-based inequalities to a *'white'* working class category that is the falsehood. As we know, working-class communities in Britain are multi-ethnic, and more importantly, they include women and men, single mothers and families, disabled and able-bodied workers, and people on welfare. The homogenous portrayal of the working class as 'white' erases the class-based multi-ethnic solidarities that are prevalent within these communities. As a white cab-driver in London told me about the Punjabi cab driver waiting in a queue for a passenger "*oh him! He's not a foreigner, he's my mate, he lives in the East End, known him all my life*". Whether race no longer matters when the cab driver is his mate, or whether there is a difference between the familiar 'other' who does not pose a threat and the unfamiliar other who does is not clear. Who then is the 'other'? And how was the anti-immigration campaign so helpful in creating a racist

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logic for Brexit?

Some useful insights can be gained by analysing iconic imagery of the political campaigning leading up to Brexit. Nigel Farage's iconic 'Breaking Point' poster successfully constructed an image of a homogenous (white) Britain whose national security and sovereignty was threatened by uncontrolled immigration.

Photo by Neil Theasby

The elision of race through a focus on nationhood, or indeed defining Britain *as a* white nation, became an efficient ploy to simultaneously show solidarity with the disenchanted working class who have long lost faith in government and offer an easily digestible image of unnamed 'others' who posed a threat to the British way of life. Images like this define the working class as 'white' and disrupt potential alliances between racialized groups and working-class communities. These tactics allowed the Leave campaign to demonstrate leadership by seemingly addressing what the British people *want* while actually stoking what they *fear.*

The Leave campaign and the rhetoric it fostered must also be seen in relation to the rise in new populism and the extent to which far right politics have been mainstreamed and how this intersects with other contextual factors such as neoliberalism and the decline in working-class solidarity as well as rising racial tensions. This has given the right-wing press the traction to promote the 'white working class' as a political tool, by which "working class men and women now understand and make sense of the real economic pain they suffer through such a

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racialised frame of white working class victimhood" (McGeever and Virdee, 2018). As Gurminder Bhambra suggests, conflating socio-economic class with race in this way undermines the very distinctive ways in which racism has structured the modern world. This is exemplified through institutional racism as well as everyday racism in people's lives. It also deflects attention from the deepening of class-based inequalities and the role of austerity in worsening these conditions.

It is not clear what will happen on 'Brexit day' (29th March 2019), but we need to be alive to the ways in which racism, racialisation, and class inequalities have been politically engineered in this debate. Those of us who are committed to social justice need to refocus our energies on building consensus and coalitions to tackle deepening inequalities, by challenging such oppositional politics of race and class.

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