The New Politics of Cosmopolitans and Locals

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The EU Referendum result has dramatically foregrounded a series of shifts which have been underway for some time, and in the process created a new and contradictory landscape which will shape the organization of politics in the coming years. The class, educational, regional, micro-regional and generational pattern of voting (Cutts, 2016; Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016) reveals an overarching distinction that can be framed in terms of that between what the sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1958) called 'cosmopolitans and locals'. Gouldner developed these concepts in the context of organizations, and they broadly denoted a distinction between those 'locals' whose primary identification and loyalty was with and to the organization they worked for, and those 'cosmopolitans' who were relatively disengaged from the organization with which they work and identified with external, professional reference groups.

Translated to the wider political context, cosmopolitans are educated and skilled, comfortable with different cultures, travel widely and have a global frame of reference. They most likely voted to remain in the EU. Locals are poorly educated, travel little, feel uncomfortable with difference and have a national or even regional frame of reference. They most likely voted to leave the EU. Unsurprisingly, immigration is a key differentiator here, in two connected ways. First, locals are more hostile to immigration because it disrupts national frames of reference and, second, they are less likely to have direct experience of immigrants. By contrast, cosmopolitans routinely interact with immigrants and are relaxed about immigration.

Like all political distinctions this one creates strange alliances and tensions, as indeed Gouldner's study showed, and yet for themselves and others these differences can be glossed over so as to plausibly and meaningfully yield 'us' and 'them' distinctions. Thus cosmopolitan remainers encompass big business, finance and the professions along with liberal and left-leaning intellectuals and internationalists, including 'civic nationalists' in Scotland. In the eyes of local leavers these groups do indeed belong together (even if, as Morgan's contribution to this volume shows, from other perspectives they are fissured), and can all be subsumed into an amorphous notion of 'the elite', whether that elite be 'corporate' or 'liberal'. This also explains how it is possible for leavers to denounce the EU as both a socialist super state ('the EUSSR') and as a tool of global neo-liberalised capital.

The local leavers are also a diverse amalgam, running from the remnants of the industrial working class through to empire-lamenting nationalists and hard left opponents of global capital. They may also be collectively lumped together by remainers as backward-looking and xenophobic. What is particularly striking is that the leaders of this group tend to be ardent global free-marketeers, whose objection to the EU is that it is not global enough and overly attached to employment rights and environmental standards. In this way the leavers are reminiscent of the Thatcherite coalition of the 1980s in contradictorily combining elements of nationalist traditionalism with economic globalization (see Krieger, 1986).

Indeed, it is ironic that it was the Thatcher regime which enacted and championed the European single market which brought with it increased immigration and deeper political integration. The Referendum result in some ways represents the long-term unwinding of the consequences of the

contradictions within Thatcherism. No less does it represent the consequences of the New Labour administrations' embrace of globalization on the back of a core vote which was suspicious of or hostile to this but which, it was assumed, would remain loyal to Labour (see Heffernan, 2001). All of these contradictions and tensions, which have been building for years, have now been brought to a dramatic head by the Referendum.

Thus, crucially, the cosmopolitan-local distinction cuts right across traditional political parties, so that a swathe of 'pragmatic' Tories and the liberal-left and 'new labour' segments of the Labour party are cosmopolitan remainers, whilst nationalist and Eurosceptic Tories, UKIP and many parts of 'old Labour' are local leavers. As a microcosm of this, the distinction also cuts through the Green party which divides between seeing the EU as providing an international framework for tackling climate change or as undermining local and sustainable economies. Overall, the consequence of the Referendum has been to brutally expose the disjuncture between the shape of political institutions and parties on the one hand and of socio-political divisions amongst the electorate on the other.

What is therefore now in prospect is a truly remarkable and perhaps unprecedented situation. The Referendum was in a sense a defeat for what leavers call the elite or the establishment (ironic though this is considering the social background of its leaders). But it has not displaced that establishment. On the contrary it is the business leaders, university leaders, civil servants and – much derided in the campaign – experts who are now faced with enacting a policy which, by and large, they did not vote for and do not agree with or even think realistic. If the result was a revolution of the locals, it is a half-completed one which the vanquished cosmopolitans are charged with delivering.

This has had an immediate effect and one which will define the contours of political debate in the coming months and years. Although the vote was to 'leave the EU', neither the ballot paper nor the leave campaign specified what leaving actually meant. The leave campaigners themselves had very different views about this, the principle fault line being between those who want what is now being called 'Brexit-lite', meaning remaining within the single market, and those wanting 'hard Brexit' involving exiting the single market and creating a free trade agreement with the EU (or trading under WTO terms). These models are often denoted in terms of the examples of Norway and Canada respectively (see Grey, 2015). Brexit-lite would almost certainly entail free movement of people, paying into the EU budget and abiding by most EU rules with little input. Hard Brexit would avoid these but have massive effects on, in particular, the UK service sector as well as on the viability of British science, the land border between Northern Ireland and the EU (in terms of the Republic of Ireland) and the likelihood of Scottish independence.

These two broad options are, like the EU decision itself, understandable as relatively cosmopolitan (Brexit-lite) or relatively local (hard Brexit), principally because of their different effects on immigration. Given that it is the cosmopolitans who must enact the Referendum result, there is therefore a strong impetus to Brexit-lite, and there will be intense lobbying from powerful voices, especially in finance, for this. In this context, the parliamentary politics become very complex. The three ministers primarily charged with negotiating Brexit were all part of the leave campaign but have, or appear to have, different views about what Brexit means. Meanwhile, a sizeable minority of Tory backbenchers are implacably hostile to Brexit-lite, although there is likely to be a cross–party parliamentary majority for it (given that there is a majority for remaining in the EU), reflecting again the disjuncture between the existing party system and the emergent political division.

The outcome of this is obviously unknowable at the present time, but the shape of the political argument is clear enough, as are some of the consequences. The Referendum, partly because the

result was so close and partly because it voted against the EU but not for anything definite, has not in any way settled the issue. If the outcome is Brexit-lite then there will be vociferous cries of betrayal from leavers, and undoubtedly a surge in support for anti-EU politicians. However, a hard Brexit would prove no less problematic for them given that almost all informed opinion suggests the result would be highly economically damaging, implying unemployment and public spending cuts. In these circumstances, which will impact most upon local leavers, anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment is also highly likely to intensify.

As for cosmopolitan remainers, Brexit-lite might be a (barely) tolerable outcome but hard Brexit would lead to bitter resentment and, precisely because of the global mobility of many remainers, the departure of businesses and individuals from the UK. Gouldner's work is again illuminating here, suggesting that cosmopolitans are less loyal to their organizations (or, here, countries) and that localism flourishes most in insecure and threatening circumstances (here, economic crisis). Thus, whichever Brexit model emerges, the underlying conflicts will persist.

Since the consequences of the Referendum will unfold over years, and probably decades, and will impact upon all policy areas, it is quite possible that in time the party structures will transform so as to reflect more closely the cosmopolitan-local distinction. This is made all the more likely if it is indeed the case that it forms the basis of a durable and meaningful sense of 'us' and 'them', as the heat of the campaign and its aftermath suggests may be so. There has already been some talk of a new 'centrist' remain party or national coalition, and there seems some likelihood that UKIP, or something like it, will build on the Referendum result to displace Labour in its de-industrialized former heartlands, just as SNP civic nationalism has already displaced Labour in Scotland. Meanwhile, the division within the Tory party over the EU, which has riven it for almost 30 years now, makes a split perfectly conceivable. Thus the old structure of two main parties representing, roughly, capital and labour that dominated the 20th century now seems precarious, if not doomed. Indeed, it has been frayed at the edges for some time as voting patterns have fragmented. What the Referendum has done is to point, embryonically, to what the new structure might be; one that directly and explicitly represents the underlying politics of a nation passionately split in almost equal numbers between cosmopolitans and locals.

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