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Brexit was not about the EU. It was about Britishness

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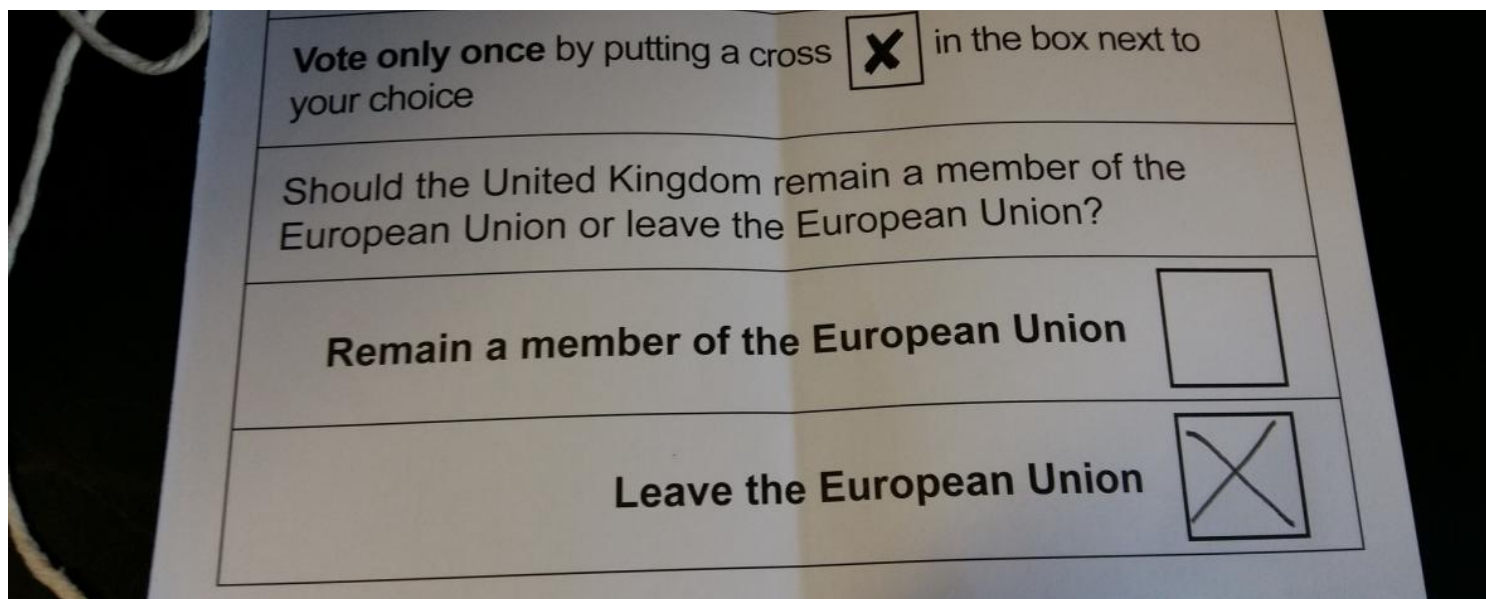
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Ideological arguments over Brexit, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, which passed with 52 per cent of the vote on June 23, have been mainly at odds on the classical right/left political divide.

From the right, Brexit was supported on the basis of British sovereignty over national matters and a refusal to abide by an EU-driven policy agenda, in a way on the premise of keeping "Britishness;" not only in terms of a protective labour market (i.e. British companies and British jobs) but also in terms of shutting down unwanted migration from Eastern European countries and stopping the latest wave of Muslim refugees and asylum seekers. Britishness is not seen to fit well with what is perceived as Eastern backwardness, nor with Muslim religiosity, hence also the anxiety about Turkey's possible adherence to the EU, which would not only pollute Europeaness but Britishness as well.

On the left, vocal supporters such as Yanis Varoufakis and others from Diem 25 (a movement led by the former Greek finance minister to democratize Europe, which comprise representatives of many leftist orientated European civic fractions) have argued for a vote to remain, on the premise of sticking together to reform the EU, to elect progressive governments and to block far right political ascensions.



However, the nationalist right was not the only one supporting a Brexit. Softer voices on the left, represented by radical and critical thinkers such as Tariq Ali and many writing for *Jacobin*, vociferated their support for a Lexit (i.e. Leftist exit), on the premise that EU is an anti-democratic and autocratic decision-making body, an institutional vessel of neoliberalism, dominated by Germany and France at the expense of Southern European countries, the same body that not that long ago imposed draconian austerity measures on Greece. Hence Brexit, like Grexit, is subsequently seen as a political statement against the EU and the overall public disenchantment with its neoliberal politics.

Yet the two are not as easily comparable (other than both being exits). While Grexit was directly about fighting austerity measures, hence indirectly about the EU, Brexit was directly about the EU and indirectly about Britishness. Brexit was the consequential result of a xenophobic approach to protect borders and to fight the rights of free movement within EU. It was less about subtracting from an autocratic, undemocratically run EU, but rather about imposing Britain as Britain, in relation to everything else. Étienne Balibar argued that the existence of political communities implies not only a relationship to themselves but also an external recognition by the others as such. Brexit was about affirming the right to Britishness as a political community, the right to exclude those who do not fit in; the right to outline who is part of Britain, who is out, who is included, who is excluded and who are the excluded that should be included.

Let's be honest here: unlike Greece, Britain was not a weak player at the EU table. The sovereignty of the weak can hardly be on equal foot with that of the powerful. Britain always had the power to impose its rules to play by within the EU. We can only look at the current refugee crisis, where the U.K. had an opt-out right under the Lisbon Treaty (it was bound only if it chose to participate) in relation to the European Commission relocation program of transferring displaced refugees across its members states.

In the Brexit case, it was the immigration topic that dominated the referendum debate. Between 2004 and 2014, immigration from Eastern bloc countries spiked, despite the fact that the U.K. introduced transitional curbs for the A2 nationals that joined in 2007 (i.e. Romanians and Bulgarians). There are over 800,000 Polish people in the U.K., about 175,000 Romanians and about 65,000 Bulgarians. The public rhetoric was for years opposed to Eastern Bloc migration, which was seen to have a negative impact on the British labour market (i.e. stealing jobs), the British state (i.e. claiming welfare benefits) and the British value system (i.e. engaging in illegal activities).

While the austerity argument has also been floating around in progressive leftist circles, it is impossible to know if austerity proper is what caused the xenophobic "symptom" that propped the Brexit. So far we



neoliberalism and the 2008 austerity measures. We can think of the race riots of 1958 or the 1970 racist attacks against the Pakistani community, as examples; the Commonwealth Immigrant Act from 1968 which limited the right of entry to those with substantial connection to the U.K. by birth or descent and which ended up differentiating between black and white Commonwealth subjects, the Immigration Act of 1988 which controlled the entry of immigrant workers' families, or the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1996 which restricted the number of asylum seekers.

Over the years, both governments, Conservative and Labour, have systematically favoured restrictive immigration controls, on the pretext of deterring bogus asylum seekers and, lately, on premises of organized crime and terrorism.

Brexit was not about the EU nor against the EU. It was about British citizens representing their common and shared belonging, and about the affirmation of such belonging. It was about containing the British imaginary of the national as an ideal community, about confining the priority of nationals, in Balibar's terms, as an *a priori* guarantee against the degradation of their current (imagined as distinguished) status.

And it is Britishness indeed that only gave certain voters the sole right to cast their ballot on the matter, despite the hundred of thousands of migrants living in U.K. and supporting its economy. The right to vote was delegated to British and Irish citizens living in the U.K., commonwealth citizens residing in the U.K., and British citizens living overseas. A Canadian living in U.K. could vote, but not a migrant, who did not yet have the right to indefinite residency.

And when a vote becomes about assertions of citizenship, belonging and ideal societal imaginings, it makes for hard to sell point to talk about a socialist, anti-austerity exit, Brexit or Lexit for that matter.

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