

# Who Understands the European Project?

by Theodore Dalrymple

No result of an election or referendum in Britain during my lifetime has produced such an excess of rhetoric among those on the losing side as that concerning Brexit. One survey found that nearly half of young people who voted for Britain to remain in Europe either cried or felt close to crying afterwards. This survey suggests either their depth of feeling or their emotional incontinence. I think the latter is probably the more accurate interpretation.

Certainly, many young people selectively interviewed by the media said that they felt that their future had been stolen from them by those who voted for Brexit. (The fact that the youth unemployment rate in Belgium and France was 25 percent, in Portugal 30 percent, in Italy 39 percent, in Spain 45 percent and Greece 49 percent did not seem to worry them. They were not of the youth-unemployment class.) And it was the old, who predominantly voted to leave, who had snatched their glorious future from them.

Actually, this is not the whole truth. The proportion of the electorate who voted in the referendum increased sharply with age, those over 80 being more than twice as likely to vote as the young, despite it requiring much more of a physical effort for them to do so. It seems, then, that the elderly care more about the future of their country, or have a greater sense of civic responsibility, than the young. Had the young voted in the same proportion as the old, and voted to predominantly remain, the result would have been different. If anyone snatched the future from the young, therefore, it was the young themselves.

The statistical correlation between both age and relatively low levels of education, on the one hand, and a vote to leave on the other, was much remarked upon, not only in Britain but throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Age and lack of education were usually taken by commentators as a proxy for stupidity. The majority vote to leave was therefore a triumph of stupidity: for those who vote the right way in any election or referendum have opinions, while those who vote the wrong way have only prejudices. And only the young and educated know what the right way is.

While age is certainly not a guarantee of political wisdom, the ever-increasing experience of life might be expected to conduce to it. But in the wake of the vote, there were even suggestions that the old should have no vote because they wouldn't have to live as long with the consequences of it. The reaction to the referendum exposed the fragility and shallowness of that each person's vote should count for same.

The relation between political wisdom and levels of education is far from straightforward. It was educated people who initiated and carried out the Terror in the French Revolution. The Russian Revolution, and all the great joy that it brought to the Russian people, was the denouement of decades of propaganda and agitation by the educated elite. There was no shortage of educated people among the Nazi leadership. And the leaders of the Khmer Rouge were also relatively highly-educated, as it happens in France. The founder of Sendero Luminoso, who might have been the Pol Pot of Peru, was a professor of philosophy who wrote his doctoral thesis on Kant.

There is no doubt that the campaign to leave the European Union appealed to xenophobes, and indeed that there have been xenophobic incidents since the referendum; but it is an elementary error of logic to argue that if xenophobes voted for leaving, then those who voted for leaving were xenophobes. The fact that so many commentators and supporters of Britain remaining in the European Union *did* make precisely this error

suggests that education and the ability to think are not necessarily identical.

The implied corollary of this error of logic was that there was nothing to choose between continued support for and submission to a corrupt and self-serving political elite on the one hand, and beating up foreigners on the street on the other. And the purpose of the corollary was to be able to deny that there could be any good reasons for voting to leave the Union.

Oddly enough, the Europhile voters in Britain would probably not have read what three former French government ministers, of the economy, of European affairs, and of foreign affairs, said of the European Union in the French newspapers. M. Montebourg said that the European Union had been constructed not for, but *against*, the European peoples; M. Wauquiez said that anyone could see that the European Union did not work by walking down the corridors in Brussels; M. Védrine said that since the Treaty of Lisbon, 'we are definitely not in a state of democracy.'

While none of these former ministers – not minor figures in French political life – suggest that the European Union should break up, their solutions include the re-establishment of frontiers, the power of national governments to issue money, the reduction of the number of European bureaucrats by 97 per cent, the expulsion of at least 17 of the Union's members, and the reduction in the powers of the Union to regulate and interfere in most of the matters in which it does interfere. The sceptical person might wonder, then, what the need for a union was at all, other than as a free-trade area: which it was when it was mendaciously sold to the British electorate as being in 1975, when the country's first referendum on membership was held.

Of course, it is significant that French ministers say these things only *after* they have left office, but that counts in

favour, not against, the truth of what they say. Are they just to be dismissed as small-minded, ignorant xenophobes – these people who saw the European Union up close? M. Védrine says:

I remember interviews in which Chancellor Kohl and later Chancellor Schröder complained about the abusive intrusion of the [European] Commission and the complicity of the Commission and the European Court of Justice.

But however many times these complaints are made, however many calls for reform are heard, nothing ever changes: because the abuse and the complicity, the secretive rule by decree by career politico-bureaucrats without any real oversight, is not the consequences of the so-called European Project, it *is* the European Project.

Irrespective of whether the vote to leave the Union was wise or not, or whether it would have been better to remain and wait until the Union fell apart because of its own flawed political logic, no one except the British educated class and commentators could say that there were no *reasons* or *arguments* for leaving, that it was nothing but an eructation of primitive prejudice. Here is the end of a typical article in the left-liberal mouthpiece of *la pensée unique*, the *Guardian*:

On the slipstream of empire, I've always thought – to the point of treason – of my British passport as a “burden of shame” as UB40 so eloquently put it, “a British subject, not proud of it”. Now, trying to cling on in “the continent”, it is just a downright embarrassment – not only a badge of shame, but also, worse in a way, of pointless, bellicose imbecility.

And they call those who voted for Brexit stupid!

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