

Brexit Is Only the Latest Proof of the Insularity and Failure of Western Establishment Institutions

Glenn Greenwald

June 25 2016, 10:48 a.m.

<https://theintercept.com/2016/06/25/brexit-is-only-the-latest-proof-of-the-insularity-and-failure-of-western-establishment-institutions/>

THE DECISION BY U.K. voters to leave the EU is such a glaring repudiation of the wisdom and relevance of elite political and media institutions that — for once — their failures have become a prominent part of the storyline. Media reaction to the Brexit vote falls into two general categories: (1) earnest, candid attempts to understand what motivated voters to make this choice, even if that means indicting their own establishment circles, and (2) petulant, self-serving, simple-minded attacks on disobedient pro-Leave voters for being primitive, xenophobic bigots (and stupid to boot), all to evade any reckoning with their own responsibility. Virtually every reaction that falls into the former category emphasizes the profound failures of Western establishment factions; these institutions have spawned pervasive misery and inequality, only to spew condescending scorn at their victims when they object.

The *Los Angeles Times*'s Vincent Bevins, in [an outstanding and concise analysis](#), wrote that “both Brexit and Trumpism are the very, very wrong answers to legitimate questions that urban elites have refused to ask for 30 years”; in particular, “since the 1980s the elites in rich countries have overplayed their hand, taking all the gains for themselves and just covering their ears when anyone else talks, and now they are watching in horror as voters revolt.” The British journalist Tom Ewing, in [a comprehensive Brexit explanation](#), said the same dynamic driving the U.K. vote prevails in Europe and North America as well: “the arrogance of neoliberal elites in constructing a politics designed to sideline and work around democracy while leaving democracy formally intact.”

In an [interview with](#) the *New Statesman*, the political philosopher Michael Sandel also said that the dynamics driving the pro-Brexit sentiment were now

dominant throughout the West generally: “A large constituency of working-class voters feel that not only has the economy left them behind, but so has the culture, that the sources of their dignity, the dignity of labor, have been eroded and mocked by developments with globalization, the rise of finance, the attention that is lavished by parties across the political spectrum on economic and financial elites, the technocratic emphasis of the established political parties.” After the market-venerating radicalism of Reagan and Thatcher, he said, “the center left” — Blair and Clinton and various European parties — “managed to regain political office but failed to reimagine the mission and purpose of social democracy, which became empty and obsolete.”

Three *Guardian* writers sounded similar themes about elite media ignorance stemming from homogeneity and detachment from the citizenry. John Harris quoted a Manchester voter as [explaining](#), “If you’ve got money, you vote in. If you haven’t got money, you vote out.” Harris added: “Most of the media ... failed to see this coming. ... The alienation of the people charged with documenting the national mood from the people who actually define it is one of the ruptures that has led to this moment.” Gary Younge [similarly denounced](#) “a section of the London-based commentariat [that] anthropologized the British working class as though they were a lesser evolved breed from distant parts, all too often portraying them as bigots who did not know what was good for them.” Ian Jack’s [article](#) was headlined “In this Brexit vote, the poor turned on an elite who ignored them,” and he described how “gradually the sight of empty towns and shuttered shops became normalized or forgotten.” [Headlines](#) like this one from *The Guardian* in 2014 were prescient but largely ignored:



Though there were [some exceptions](#), establishment political and media elites in the U.K. were vehemently united against Brexit, but their decreed wisdom was ignored, even scorned. That has happened time and again. As their fundamental failures become more evident to all, these elites have lost credibility, influence, and the ability to dictate outcomes.

Just last year in the U.K., Labour members chose someone to lead Tony Blair's party — the authentically left-wing Jeremy Corbyn — who could not have been more intensely despised and patronized by almost every leading light of the British media and political class. In the U.S., the joyful rejection by Trump voters of the collective wisdom of the conservative establishment evidenced the same contempt for elite consensus. The enthusiastic and sustained rallying, especially by young voters, against beloved-by-the-establishment Hillary Clinton in favor of a 74-year-old socialist taken seriously by almost no D.C. elites reflected the same dynamic. Elite denunciations of the right-wing parties of Europe fall on deaf ears. Elites can't stop, or even affect, any of these movements because they are, at bottom, revolts against their wisdom, authority, and virtue.

IN SUM, THE West's establishment credibility is dying, and its influence is precipitously eroding — all deservedly so. The frenetic pace of online media makes even the most recent events feel distant, like ancient history. That, in turn, makes it easy to lose sight of how many catastrophic and devastating failures Western elites have produced in a remarkably short period of time. In 2003, U.S. and British elites joined together to advocate one of the most heinous and immoral aggressive wars in decades: the destruction of Iraq; that it

turned out to be [centrally based on falsehoods](#) that were ratified by the most trusted institutions, as well as a complete policy failure even on its own terms, gutted public trust.

Ten Years of Krauthammer Days

by HENRY on APRIL 22, 2013

It's now been exactly a decade since Charles Krauthammer [told us that](#)

Hans Blix had five months to find weapons. He found nothing. We've had five weeks. Come back to me in five months. If we haven't found any, we will have a credibility problem.

In 2008, their economic worldview and unrestrained corruption precipitated a global economic crisis that literally caused, and is still causing, billions of people to suffer — in response, they quickly protected the plutocrats who caused the crisis while leaving the victimized masses to cope with the generational fallout. Even now, Western elites continue to proselytize markets and impose free trade and globalization without the slightest concern for the vast inequality and destruction of economic security those policies generate.

The screenshot shows the NPR website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with the NPR logo and links for 'find stations', 'news', 'arts & life', 'music', 'programs', and 'shop'. Below this is a section for an audio player. On the left, there is a play button icon, a '+ Queue' button, and links for 'Download', 'Embed', and 'Transcript'. To the right of these controls, the word 'ECONOMY' is displayed above the article title 'Greenspan Admits Free Market Ideology Flawed'. Below the title is the date and time 'October 24, 2008 · 6:00 AM ET' and a small photo of the host 'BRIAN NAYLOR'. The main text of the article begins: 'Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan told a House committee Thursday that the banking and housing crisis is a "once-in-a-century credit tsunami." When asked if his ideology pushed him to make bad decisions, Greenspan said he found a "flaw" in his governing ideology that has led him to re-examine his thinking.'

In 2011, NATO bombed Libya by pretending it was motivated by humanitarianism, only to ignore that country once the fun military triumph was

celebrated, thus leaving a vacuum of anarchy and militia rule for years that spread instability through the region and [fueled the refugee crisis](#). The U.S. and its European allies continue to invade, occupy, and bomb predominantly Muslim countries while propping up their most brutal tyrants, then feign befuddlement about why anyone would want to attack them back, justifying erosions of basic liberties and more bombing campaigns and ratcheting up fear levels each time someone does. The rise of ISIS and the foothold it seized in Iraq and Libya were the [direct byproducts](#) of the [West's military actions](#) (as even Tony Blair [admitted](#) regarding Iraq). Western societies continue to divert massive resources into military weaponry and prisons for their citizens, enriching the most powerful factions in the process, all while imposing harsh austerity on already suffering masses. In sum, Western elites thrive while everyone else loses hope.

These are not random, isolated mistakes. They are the byproduct of fundamental cultural pathologies within Western elite circles — a deep rot. Why should institutions that have repeatedly authored such travesties, and spread such misery, continue to command respect and credibility? They shouldn't, and they're not. As Chris Hayes warned in [his 2012 book *Twilight of the Elites*](#), “Given both the scope and depth of this distrust [in elite institutions], it's clear that we're in the midst of something far grander and more perilous than just a crisis of government or a crisis of capitalism. We are in the midst of a broad and devastating crisis of authority.”

It's natural — and inevitable — that [malignant figures will try to exploit](#) this vacuum of authority. All sorts of demagogues and extremists will try to redirect mass anger for their own ends. Revolts against corrupt elite institutions can usher in reform and progress, but they can also create a space for the ugliest tribal impulses: xenophobia, authoritarianism, racism, fascism. One sees all of that, both good and bad, manifesting in the anti-establishment movements throughout the U.S., Europe, and the U.K. — including Brexit. All of this can be invigorating, or promising, or destabilizing, or dangerous: most likely a combination of all that.

The solution is not to subserviently cling to corrupt elite institutions out of fear of the alternatives. It is, instead, to help bury those institutions and their elite mavens and then fight for superior replacements. As Hayes put it in his book, the challenge is “directing the frustration, anger, and alienation we all feel into building a trans-ideological coalition that can actually dislodge the power of the post-meritocratic elite. One that marshals insurrectionist sentiment without succumbing to nihilism and manic, paranoid distrust.”

Corrupt elites always try to persuade people to continue to submit to their dominance in exchange for protection from forces that are even worse. That’s their game. But at some point, they themselves, and their prevailing order, become so destructive, so deceitful, so toxic, that their victims are willing to gamble that the alternatives will not be worse, or at least, they decide to embrace the satisfaction of spitting in the faces of those who have displayed nothing but contempt and condescension for them.

There is no single, unifying explanation for Brexit, Trumpism, or the growing extremism of various stripes throughout the West, but this sense of angry impotence — an inability to see any option other than smashing those responsible for their plight — is undoubtedly a major factor. As Bevins put it, supporters of Trump, Brexit, and other anti-establishment movements “are motivated not so much by whether they think the projects will actually work, but more by their desire to say FUCK YOU” to those they believe (with very good reason) have failed them.

Obviously, those who are the target of this anti-establishment rage — political, economic, and media elites — are desperate to exonerate themselves, to demonstrate that they bear no responsibility for the suffering masses that are now refusing to be compliant and silent. The easiest course to achieve that goal is simply to demonize those with little power, wealth, or possibility as stupid and racist: *This is only happening because they are primitive and ignorant and hateful, not because they have any legitimate grievances or*

because I or my friends or my elite institutions have done anything wrong. As Vice's Michael Tracey put it:

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Elites' reaction to Brexit mimics their reaction to Trump: blame the amorality of ordinary people rather than reckon with elite failure

[5:25 PM - 24 Jun 2016](#)

Because that reaction is so self-protective and self-glorifying, many U.S. media elites — including those who knew almost nothing about Brexit until 48 hours ago — instantly adopted it as their preferred narrative for explaining what happened, just as they've done with Trump, Corbyn, Sanders, and any number of other instances where their entitlement to rule has been disregarded. They are so persuaded of their own natural superiority that any factions who refuse to see it and submit to it prove themselves, by definition, to be regressive, stunted, and amoral.

INDEED, MEDIA REACTION to the Brexit vote — filled with unreflective rage, condescension, and contempt toward those who voted wrong — perfectly illustrates the dynamics that caused all of this in the first place. Media elites, by virtue of their position, adore the status quo. It rewards them, vests them with prestige and position, welcomes them into exclusive circles, allows them to be close to (if not wield) great power while traveling their country and the world, provides them with a platform, and fills them with esteem and purpose. The same is true of academic elites, financial elites, and

political elites. Elites love the status quo that has given them, and then protected, their elite position.

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[Josh Barro](#)

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Elites are usually elite for good reason, and tend to have better judgment than the average person. [#confessyourunpopularopinion](#)

[11:08 PM - 3 Dec 2013](#)

Because of how generally satisfied they are with their lot, they regard with affection and respect the internationalist institutions that safeguard the West's prevailing order: the World Bank and IMF, NATO and the West's military forces, the Federal Reserve, Wall Street, the EU. While they express some piecemeal criticisms of each, they literally cannot comprehend how anyone would be fundamentally disillusioned by and angry with these institutions, let alone want to break from them. They are far removed from the [suffering that causes](#) those [anti-establishment sentiments](#). So they search and search in vain for some rationale that could explain something like Brexit — or the establishment-condemning movements on the right and left — and can find only one way to process it: *These people are not motivated by any legitimate grievances or economic suffering, but instead they are just broken, ungrateful, immoral, hateful, racist, and ignorant.*

Inequality is ruining Britain - so why aren't we talking about it more?

The vast and growing disparity in wealth in the UK should be the number-one election issue, but the main parties just aren't that interested, argues Alex Proud



Of course, it is the case that some, perhaps much of the support given to these anti-establishment movements is grounded in those sorts of ugly sentiments. But it's also the case that the media elites' revered establishment institutions in finance, media, and politics are driven by all sorts of equally ugly impulses, as the rotted fruit of their actions conclusively proves.

Even more important, the mechanism that Western citizens are expected to use to express and rectify dissatisfaction — elections — has largely ceased to serve any corrective function. As Hayes, in a widely cited tweet, put it this week about Brexit:

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[Christopher Hayes](#)

✓@chrislhayes

I don't want a future in which politics is primarily a battle between cosmopolitan finance capitalism and ethno-nationalist backlash.

[10:22 PM - 23 Jun 2016](#)

But that is exactly the choice presented not only by Brexit but also Western elections generally, including the 2016 Clinton v. Trump general election (just look at the powerful array of [Wall Street tycoons](#) and [war-loving neocons](#) that — *long before Trump* — viewed the former Democratic New York senator and secretary of state as their best hope for having their agenda and interests served). When democracy is preserved only in form, structured to change little to nothing about power distribution, people naturally seek alternatives for the redress of their grievances, particularly when they suffer.

More importantly still — and directly contrary to what [establishment liberals love to claim](#) in order to demonize all who reject their authority — economic suffering and xenophobia/racism are *not mutually exclusive*. The opposite is true: The former fuels the latter, as sustained economic misery makes people more receptive to tribalistic scapegoating. That's precisely why plutocratic policies that deprive huge portions of the population of basic opportunity and hope are so dangerous. Claiming that supporters of Brexit or Trump or Corbyn or Sanders or anti-establishment European parties on the left and right are motivated only by hatred but not genuine economic suffering and political oppression is a transparent tactic for exonerating status quo institutions and evading responsibility for doing anything about their core corruption.

Part of this spiteful media reaction to Brexit is grounded in a dreary combination of sloth and habit: A sizable portion of the establishment liberal commentariat in the West has completely lost the ability to engage with any sort of dissent from its orthodoxies or even understand those who disagree. They are capable of nothing beyond adopting the smuggest, most self-satisfied posture, then spouting clichés to dismiss their critics as ignorant, benighted bigots. Like the people of the West who bomb Muslim countries and then express confusion that anyone wants to attack them back, the most simple-minded of these establishment media liberals are constantly enraged that the people they endlessly malign as ignorant haters refuse to vest them with the respect and credibility to which they are naturally entitled.

BUT THERE'S SOMETHING deeper and more interesting driving the media reaction here. Establishment journalistic outlets are not outsiders. They're the opposite: They are fully integrated into elite institutions, are tools of those institutions, and thus identify fully with them. Of course they do not share, and cannot understand, anti-establishment sentiments: They are the *targets* of this establishment-hating revolt as much as anyone else. These journalists' reaction to this anti-establishment backlash is a form of self-defense. As NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen [put it](#) last night, "Journalists today report on hostility to the political class, as if they had nothing to do with it," but they are a *key part* of that political class and, for that reason, "if the population — or part of it — is in revolt against the political class, this is a problem for journalism."

There are many factors explaining why establishment journalists now have almost no ability to stem the tide of anti-establishment rage, even when it's irrational and driven by ignoble impulses. Part of it is that the internet and social media have rendered them irrelevant, unnecessary to disseminate ideas. Part of it is that they have nothing to say to people who are suffering and angry — due to their distance from them — other than to scorn them as hateful losers.

Part of it is that journalists — like anyone else — tend to react with bitterness and rage, not self-assessment, as they lose influence and stature.

But a major factor is that many people recognize that establishment journalists are an integral part of the very institutions and corrupted elite circles that are authors of their plight. Rather than mediating or informing these political conflicts, journalists are agents of the forces that are oppressing people. And when journalists react to their anger and suffering by telling them that it's invalid and merely the byproduct of their stupidity and primitive resentments, that only reinforces the perception that journalists are their enemy, thus rendering journalistic opinion increasingly irrelevant.

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Brexit was a tantrum -- British voters had good reason to be angry, but what they did won't make anything better.<http://www.businessinsider.com/brexit-implications-what-happens-2016-6> ...

[12:07 PM - 24 Jun 2016](#)

Basically, Brexit was a tantrum — what should we do about it?

The strangest thing about Brexit is that, of all the members of the European Union, Britain had the weakest case that it would be better off leaving.

[businessinsider.com](#)

Brexit — despite all the harm it is likely to cause and all the malicious politicians it will empower — could have been a positive development. But that would require that elites (and their media outlets) react to the shock of this repudiation by spending some time reflecting on their own flaws, analyzing what they have done to contribute to such mass outrage and deprivation, in order to engage in course correction. Exactly the same potential opportunity was created by the Iraq debacle, the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of Trumpism and other anti-establishment movements: This is all compelling evidence that things have gone very wrong with those who wield the greatest power, that self-critique in elite circles is more vital than anything.

[24 Jun](#)



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But reducing Brexit to "far-right got its day" not only neglects all this, also ensures huge EU problems continue being swept under the rug.

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Anyone who cares about European project should stop blaming capricious/emotional voters & take seriously the EU's many fundamental problems.

[1:50 PM - 24 Jun 2016](#)

But, as usual, that's exactly what they most refuse to do. Instead of

acknowledging and addressing the fundamental flaws within themselves, they are devoting their energies to demonizing the victims of their corruption, all in order to delegitimize those grievances and thus relieve themselves of responsibility to meaningfully address them. That reaction only serves to bolster, if not vindicate, the animating perceptions that these elite institutions are hopelessly self-interested, toxic, and destructive and thus cannot be reformed but rather must be destroyed. That, in turn, only ensures there will be many more Brexits, and Trumps, in our collective future.