Prolegomena to the Deep Sociology of Brexit: The Long Road Back to Pareto

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The most relevant sociologist for understanding Brexit—the recently successful British referendum to leave the European Union—may be Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), the Italian political economist who Talcott Parsons counted as one of the field’s modern founders. An older contemporary of Durkheim and Weber, Pareto was known in my schooldays as the ‘Marx of the Master Class’. Having (unwittingly) inspired Fascism, he was made a member of the Italian House of Lords by Mussolini towards the end of his life. Pareto’s legacy is perhaps most recognizable in C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, which was about the breeding of the US ‘military-industrial complex’ during the Cold War in terms of common education, social circles, etc. Of course, this applies even more clearly in the UK, where the much anticipated Tory leadership succession from David Cameron to Boris Johnson was forged on ‘the playing fields of Eton’. As of this writing, both major players are already off the pitch, but the dynamic remains in place.

**Lions and Foxes**

Pareto is best known for his theory of the ‘circulation of elites’ as the engine of social change, which is played out on the stage of democratic politics. His general sensibility is grounded in the volatile history of Italian politics, in which internecine warfare gradually morphs into political infighting between two kinds of parties, whose names are drawn from Machiavelli: ‘lions’ and ‘foxes’. The lions are the establishment and the foxes are the pretenders. Importantly, the military aspect of the struggle never quite disappears. Thus, ‘the people’ are at once targets, resources, pawns and casualties. It is a pre-welfarist political sensibility whereby the successful politician simply needs to placate the people sufficiently to achieve his/her goals. Such a sense of politics need not involve forcing people to do anything they don’t want to do. Indeed, it would be best if the people voluntarily bend in the direction of travel. But ultimately, the competent politician ensures they don’t get in the way of what amounts to an endless power game with other politicians.

Critics of Pareto accused him of harbouring a cynical attitude towards politics and people more generally. This is a bit unfair. It’s more like the sensibility that says ‘collateral damage’ with a straight face. The US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who popularized this phrase during the Iraq War (though it was used in the Vietnam War), is more the model. In Brexit, collateral damage will appear in the form of the riots in working class neighbourhoods which will take place once the non-elites who voted to leave the European Union realize that they were delivered on a plate from one set of elites to another. More specifically, we might think of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), with its four million voters in the last general election, as having unwittingly conducted an extended focus group that the Foxes (represented by Johnson) captured to hone their rhetoric in their quest to overturn the Lions (represented by Cameron). It was thus striking to see just how many of the more ‘respectable’ Brexiteers (e.g. Tory MEP Daniel Hannan) quickly rowed back from claims about immigration control, immediately after they won the referendum, much to the dismay of UKIP leader Nigel Farage.

And that’s how it will continue, unless Brexit is stopped altogether in Parliament, perhaps once people start to see the detailed implications of disentangling the UK from the EU. This
is why public opinion researchers should start plotting the ‘curve of regret’ among Brexit voters week by week. It’s fine to talk about a ‘Norway’ model of UK’s future relationship to the EU, except that Norway never joined and the UK did—and getting out is more complicated than not getting in, as any divorce settlement shows. Of course, the economic consequences of a potential Brexit may kick in more immediately, as UK politicians need to reassure uncertain markets around the world that the country is ‘open for business’, which will force them to reveal their liberal attitudes to immigration. Betrayed working class voters may then take to the streets, with new outbreaks of xenophobia, racism, hate crimes, etc. This would be very unfortunate but it is actually one of the more predictable features of the situation. The UK saw riots in Toxteth in 1981 and in Tottenham in 2011 in response to simmering economic distress matched by perceived police brutality. Riots may start hitting market towns in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire by the end of the year, if the migration issue appears to have been put on the back burner.

**Immigration Points and Social Unrest**

To be sure, successive governments have always toughed out these incidents of social unrest. But a Brexit government in full throttle may provide a twist, at least if the popular Brexit idea of an ‘Australian-style points system’ for determining foreign entry is implemented. The thought here is that even if the UK can ultimately do relatively little to cut down its immigration figures, it can at least ensure that only high-skilled immigrants are allowed extended entry. There is a superficial attractiveness to the idea. However, it also means that British people will be left to do the jobs that the often demonised low-skilled immigrants currently end up doing. Indeed, this could itself provide a new basis for social unrest as the disparity in life fortunes between an upwardly mobile immigrant class and the native population becomes evident. It may result in the government redoubling its efforts—associated with the Tory former Work & Pensions Secretary, Ian Duncan Smith—that ties eligibility for welfare benefits to the securing of some form of gainful labour, however menial.

However, stepping back a bit, it’s worth recalling that racism and xenophobia don’t scale well. At least they don’t translate well across borders—almost by definition. Even Hitler proved not to be a ‘White Supremacist’ in any uniformly global sense, given the alliances he managed to forge with Muslim and Japanese leaders in the Second World War. Ironically, it’s only the European Union that enables Nigel Farage to join forces with Marine Le Pen and the other ethnic nationalists across Europe. All they really share is a common abstract foe—call it ‘globalization’, ‘universalism’, whatever. But there is really no common positive agenda because the countries are so different. These nationalists wouldn’t exclude the same people. French xenophobia is focused on Muslims who challenge the nation’s secular republicanism, whereas British xenophobia veers more towards the demonization of ‘Slavs’ (i.e. citizens of Eastern European states recently admitted to the EU) who allegedly take jobs from UK nationals. The former is political xenophobia, the latter economic xenophobia. In this context, it’s worth noting that UKIP’s membership includes a significant number of descendants of post-imperial migrants from Asia and Africa who have managed to thrive in the UK over the last 2-3 generations. Skin colour is only skin deep when trying to get a grip on these matters.
For this reason, the elites take notice of ‘racist’ movements, but only as potential resources and obstacles, not as prime movers of social change. Unfortunately, sociology as a discipline is oversubscribed to looking at things through the lens of race and ethnicity because these categories reflect people’s own sense of themselves. But what people think about themselves doesn’t necessarily determine what happens to them. Moreover, as people come to realize this point, they often start to think about themselves differently. (As Wilfrid Sellars would say, this begins the incorporation of the ‘scientific image’ into the ‘manifest image’—in this case, of oneself.) Indeed, this is what the whole cross-party ‘neo-liberal’ push towards ‘aspirationalism’ has been about from the post-war ‘rise of the meritocracy’, through Thatcher, Blair, etc. It’s basically a strategy to get more people to think about themselves in the way the elites already think about them—namely, as moveable feasts with shifting identities. Historically, education has been the main vehicle for this identity laundering, which is provided ideological cover nowadays via ‘postmodernism’.

The Circulation of Elites

Is what I am describing a just system? I suppose it depends on how many people end up succeeding under it. For those in a position to pass judgement, increasing the ranks of the elites matters more than reducing the gap between the elites and non-elites. Indeed, it is the basis for what welfare economists call the ‘Pareto optimality’ principle. This is where what one might call a ‘Left-Paretian’ differs from a true Marxist, a distinction which became evident within the Labour Party during the Blair-Brown years. Throughout its history (i.e. not only in the Blair-Brown years), the Labour Party has scored its biggest electoral successes when it conducted its campaign with Left-Paretian rather than Marxist scruples. Whereas Marxists diagnose societal conflict in terms of exacerbated class differences, Paretians diagnose it in terms of changes in the rate at which elites circulate. The Lions go for a relatively slow of rate of circulation—that is, a steady sense of upward mobility, so as to keep on board everyone who supported them in the past. In contrast, the Foxes want a faster rate of circulation because they benefit from a shakedown of the status quo, which then forces realignments, but perhaps making it harder for those already left behind ever to catch up.

From this standpoint, Jeremy Corbyn is not fit for purpose to lead the UK Labour Party because his rather pedestrian Marxism blinds him to the Paretian playing space, which is endemic to the ever shifting formal and informal alliances and coalitions of party-based parliamentary politics. Corbyn’s response to all this is an endless litany of protest and complaint, often delivered from the House of Commons despatch box as correspondence from alienated constituents. The problem is that Corbyn and his grassroots-based version of the Labour Party appear to be just as alienated, which makes it difficult for them to operate as an effective positive force for parliamentary change. However, this ‘outsider’ mode suits the ‘critical’ attitude of the academics and students who have rallied around him. However, I fear sociology as a discipline could suffer Corbyn’s fate by staying so close to the ‘grassroots’ that it buries its head in the sand, ostrich-like, to what’s really going on.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see why Corbyn and his comrades haven’t seen the need for his removal. It’s all to do with ‘populism’, a key indicator of which is the shift in the modus operandi of the Labour Party from a vehicle for winning elections to an extended fan base.
Thus, Corbyn managed to massively increase Labour Party membership, which remains the base of his support. This is in contrast to the Parliamentary Labour Party, which has voted ‘no confidence’ in his leadership by more than a 4:1 margin. Whereas party members are accountable to each other, the parliamentarians are accountable to the voters, who are not obliged to vote Labour. To be sure, this difference is somewhat blurred in the history of Labour Party by the role that unions traditionally played in delivering bloc votes of members at election time.

For a more general sense of the ‘populist’ character of UK democracy today, consider that the UK’s sovereign body is Parliament, not the people. Legally speaking, the EU referendum was not a plebiscite but a consultation exercise, albeit one that was massively hyped, which resulted in unprecedented turnouts. Among all the falsehoods spouted during the campaign, the biggest one was that the referendum result would compel the politicians to implement the will of the people. The experienced liberal Tory Ken Clarke made this point immediately after Cameron addressed the House of Commons for the first time post-Brexit, but it largely fell on deaf ears.

Of course, some anti-Brexit politicians are calling for a second referendum, arguing that the electorate were sold a false bill of goods by the Brexiteers during the campaign. However, the whole point of a parliamentary democracy is to expect such hijinks to happen in any sort of political contest, which then leaves it to the elected members of Parliament to sort matters out in more careful collective deliberation. But to highlight this point would be to place the vox populi in an unfavourable light—if not outright stupid, too easily flattered into knowing more than they really do. In this respect, it was a stroke of PR genius for the Brexiteers to depict the expert-heavy pro-EU side as ‘Project Fear’, when the experts were just laying down the most likely scenarios—but importantly, these happened to clash with the Brexit imaginary. Otherwise ‘Project Fear’ would have been more naturally attached to the Brexit preoccupation with border control. Overall, pace the readers of such libertarian Brexit-friendly organs as Spiked and the Institute of Ideas, the respect that has been accorded the Brexit referendum outcome amounts to ‘political correctness’ taken to a near transcendent level.

Social Scientists and Humanists

Finally, returning to Pareto, one way to think about the contest between Lions and the Foxes in the contemporary British case is as being between social scientists and humanists, once we move from the playing fields to the classrooms of Eton, Oxford, etc. For purposes of what follows, Cameron is a Blairite. Harking back to the Fabian origins of the Labour Party, Tony Blair was all about doing as much empirical research as possible to gauge public policy initiatives. His was the golden age of ‘think tanks’, a Fabian invention. Indeed, this ended up leaving the impression that Blair’s ‘policies’ were no more than trial balloons, waiting to be shot down by adverse reaction. From a certain vision of social science is actually quite responsible, since it reflects a desire to ‘bring people along’. Nevertheless, the phrase ‘government by focus group’ stuck as a popular slur in the Blair-Brown years.

In contrast, the dominant Brexiteers—represented by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove—are literary journalists who push big ideas (‘independence’, ‘democracy’, ‘sovereignty’) which they think can unite politicians and ordinary people in a common vision, the details of which
will be worked out later. Many failed revolutions in the modern era across the world, from 1848 to 1905, have been fuelled by such Foxes. Bluntly put, they’re great at building up a rhetorical head of steam that can overturn the established order—in, say, a referendum—but they can remain in power only through continuous destabilisation because they have nothing solid to put in its place. However, this normally only lasts so long before some outside force overtakes the situation or a version of the default position represented by the Lions comes to replace them.

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