

This Editorial looks at the issue of British racism and xenophobia around the 'Brexit' referendum in 2016 and problems of political membership through Michael Walzer's analysis of distributive justice, fundamental issues for the future of the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Opinion - 'Brexit'; *the* political membership problem.

The idea of a 'Brexit' referendum was born from the passionate rejection of a definition of political membership enforced by a distant, unelected body – the European Union (EU). In *Membership*, Michael Walzer discusses distributive justice, and themes of political membership (where it is denied) through the case study of guest workers. A rejection of the EU's definition of political membership, which had allowed for the free movement of economic labour into the United Kingdom (UK) (in the form of guest workers such as fruit pickers, hotel staff and the like) led to the racism and xenophobia used by pro 'Brexit' media and politicians. Walzer's writing about guest worker oppression relates to this rejection of EU membership because he highlights how morally flawed the capitalist system of advanced economies has become. This is the case firstly because of their huge reliance on economic exploitation, but also because of the role this exploitation plays in creating an atmosphere of inflammatory nationalist, populist and xenophobic political rhetoric.

Clear historical and philosophical principles do not govern relationships and interactions with strangers. Therefore, international bodies like the EU and their decisions regarding immigration admission are not held to a widely accepted standard, and so are rarely criticised. Yet, 'Brexit'- fundamentally a political membership challenge - provided the biggest threat to the EU that it has, or ever will, face. Michael Walzer's writing on political membership as a foundation for distributive justice is a useful philosophical standpoint for addressing 'Brexit' and its socio-political implications. Walzer argues that the primary good we distribute to one another in society is membership, and what we do concerning

membership structures all our distributive justice choices. Without membership, you are a stateless person – as he suggests, “a condition of infinite danger”.¹

Walzer aims to show a relationship between being accepted or rejected membership to a state and the experience we all have of being accepted or rejected into smaller communities or groups. The most appropriate of Walzer's analogies, in terms of that which best represents a state, is a club; one which regulates admissions but does not bar withdrawals. The distribution of membership in any society is a political decision, as states are clubs with sovereign power over their selection processes. However, though sometimes ultimately up to the states, international bodies and their regulations often govern border policies, such is the case with the EU. As a result, the EU is criticised for damaging state sovereignty. Pro ‘Brexit’ campaigners often asked the same question Walzer proposes: although the state owes something to its inhabitants (according to Hobbes because the state’s right to jurisdiction comes from the individual’s right to place), the question remains: is a state bound to take in foreigners?

On 23 June 2016, British voters opted to leave the EU by a slim majority after a referendum campaign that will be best remembered for the lies told by leading campaigners. Issues of political membership, fuelled by a racist media, were influential in facilitating misleading and fear-mongering campaign narrative, but also in shaping people's responses and increasingly divisive opinions towards the political agenda of the ‘Brexit’ issue. Many who argued to remain in the European Union cited the multiple connections between the UK and the continent throughout history and used supporting arguments which evoked how broadly intertwined Britain is with continental Europe. One example of this ‘intertwined relationship’ was that in the case of the European Union, international intergovernmental relationships and ideological affinity in terms of a shared institutional focus generated bonds

¹ Walzer, *Membership*, Page 32.

of economic immigration across state lines. The debate around European immigration appeared to centre on the earlier question: does citizenship go with residence? The answer is often no. Without a guarantee of membership, one is a stateless person, unable to benefit from the civil liberties and societal benefits that a state guarantees its citizens. Immigrants become servants, freeing the citizens from hard and unpleasant labour. Arguably this is tyranny, and in modern economies, these immigrants are known as guest workers.

The substantial pro 'Brexit' force was supported by a barrage of xenophobic patriotism used by the Leave campaign and pro-Brexit media against these immigrant labourers: Walzer's 'guest workers'. Leave voters would argue that Brexit was driven by more immediate and critical concerns than those which could be defended by heralding the value of a mere historical European relationship. Voices in support of this nostalgic position claimed, often with false statistics or racist rhetoric, that although the EU had got so much more important in people's lives, they had very little control over what it does. Immigration and border control were their case in point. The 'Leave' decision, four years ago now, to split from the European Union was fuelled by a surging nationalistic sense that the UK has always been fundamentally separate from its continental neighbour's – a sceptred isle, rather than a European power – and as such should not be tied to the EU's policies, particularly surrounding the sovereign governance of one's own borders. The controversial political dilemma that arises from the existence of guest workers in modern economies, and the racist stigma associated with immigration more broadly, fuelled much of the 'Brexit' divide in the UK.

The predicament of guest workers dominates current discussions of immigration and membership in political communities. Walzer states that today "Often the states control immigration loosely but naturalisation very strictly"², meaning economic migrants to

² Walzer, *Membership*, Page 52.

advanced economies such as the UK ultimately become resident aliens. Not only do “these guests experience the state as a pervasive and frightening power”³, they are often persecuted by self-interested politicians and a nationalist, xenophobic media. In the UK’s case, the perceived let down and failures in the relationship with the European Union were blamed on a small minority, scapegoated as a societal ailment benefitting from its open borders policies. Much of the ‘Brexit campaign’ narrative focused on immigration and guest workers. Moore and Ramsey, in their study for Kings College London regarding media coverage of the 2016 referendum, wrote that “The campaign leading up to the vote to remain or leave the EU on 23 June 2016 was the UK’s most divisive, hostile, negative and fear-provoking of the 21st century.”⁴ This following example highlighted their findings. During the heat of the Brexit debate in 2016, the *Daily Mail* newspaper published a front-page story showing migrants getting out of a lorry in Britain with the headline ‘WE’RE FROM EUROPE. LET US IN.’ However, police footage clearly showed the migrants saying they were from Iraq and Kuwait. Despite a small correction on the inside page, by then, the false stories had become ingrained in the collective consciousness of readers. As such, through dangerously bias media framings, and purposely inflammatory political rhetoric, a longstanding grumbling against the European Union was exploited and catapulted onto the national political stage as a racist and xenophobic political membership challenge. This was not a rare or hard to find example.

In the case of guest workers, the government is tyranny because it is the exercise of power outside its sphere over men and women who resemble citizens but are barred from citizenship. This is an injustice of membership, one ever-present in the United Kingdom’s struggle with the ‘Brexit’ phenomenon. Solving this injustice is integral to the future health of Britain’s democracy, as no real democratic state can tolerate the permanent establishment

³ Walzer, *Membership*, Page 59.

⁴ Moore, Martin, and Ramsay, Gordon, *UK media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign*. King’s College London, 2017.

of a fixed status between citizen and foreigner – especially when those ‘foreigners’ are men and women who live within a state’s territory, work in the local economy and are subject to local law. Through his presentation of the plight of guest workers, Walzer illustrates that any democratic state which determines the lives of economic migrants differently to their own citizens, as strangers, engages in oppression. Therefore, any theory of distributive justice must begin with membership rights, for it is only as a member of a political community that humans can hope to share in all other public goods. As the ‘Brexit’ years have highlighted, the denial of membership is always the first of a long train of injustices.

The consequences of the EU Referendum campaign are still unknown throughout the period that Britain negotiates its departure and beyond. But, the implications of a divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan campaign, focused on the economic immigration that has shaped the nation in modern history, are set to direct British politics for the foreseeable future. It has created an atmosphere ripe for effective manipulation, exploiting political membership debates to divide Britain. As a result, ‘Brexit’ continues to fray the bonds tying the four nations, and the future of *a* United Kingdom is uncertain.

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