

Too many facts and not enough theories: the rhetoric of the referendum campaign

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The campaign over the UK's referendum on our continued membership of the European Union is entering its final stretch, with numerous facts, figures, and assertions being thrown around with wilful abandon. Here, **Alan Finlayson** argues that both campaigns in are build on thin theories which utterly fail to understand each other.*



Credit: Gage Skidmore, CC BY SA 2.0

A common complaint about the referendum has been that there is a lack of reliable facts. It seems like a reasonable complaint. But it isn't true. There are too many facts. The problem is that there aren't enough interpretations.

Here, for example, are some facts: Tony Blair wears size nine shoes; Jean Monnet once sold Cognac for a living; Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson MP suffered sleepless nights over his failure to attain a first-class degree; the Romanian branch of the Leicester City fan club has 64 likes on Facebook; Foreign Direct Investment into Albania currently makes up 50% of GDP; the average temperature in Strasbourg in July is twenty degrees Celsius.

These are all facts. Do they help? Are they interesting? Are they useful?

An old philosophical saying, sometimes misattributed to Kant, states that 'facts without theory are blind'. The point is that for facts to be of use we need a conceptual framework to give them some order, to filter out the important from the merely interesting and to help us fit facts together with each other and with moral as well as political values. Without such a theory facts are just countless pieces from innumerable jigsaw puzzles with no image on a box to help us work out what goes where.

One of the things politics does is offer such frameworks (sometimes called ideologies). This is not necessarily a bad

thing. It is just one of the things that politics is for. But such frameworks can be more or less helpful. They can help people see things more clearly and so act well within the world. They can put people on narrow trains of thought which carry them away from reality. And the fact is that the mainstream of the referendum campaign has provided us with two such theories, neither of which is any good.

The Brexiteers (of both left and right) think with a form of conspiracy theory. I don't use that term just because it is rude. I don't think that Brexit campaigners believe the world is secretly run by lizards or the illuminati. But their rhetoric (the way they argue, the proofs they present, the thinking which guides their selection and interpretation of facts) has the unmistakable shape of conspiracy theory.

For example, for the Brexiteers no point made against them can be sincere or in anyway motivated by reason. It must be motivated by some hidden force or interest. When President Obama says Britain should Remain, Boris Johnson says it is because he can't suppress his innate Kenyan racial prejudice against the British. The International Monetary Fund, Bank of England and Institute of Fiscal Studies produce data indicating the high economic risks of Brexit and former cabinet ministers say this must be because they have been leant-on or paid to say it.

The idea that nothing is what it appears to be – because of hidden influences – is a hallmark of conspiracy theory. It is why Brexit campaigners see certain kinds of fact as highly significant: that somebody met with somebody shortly before a statement was made; that an institution received some funding from something to do with the EU; that at some point in the past a person said something different (as if their change of heart must be mysterious). Behind all this is a 'them' which is given various names according to taste: the 'establishment', 'faceless bureaucrats', the 'liberal intelligentsia', 'neoliberals', 'the Germans', 'capitalists', 'cultural Marxists'.

One of the fascinating things about conspiracy theories is that what they are most opposed to isn't whatever the alleged conspirators are trying to achieve; it is the conspiracy itself which appalls them. The conspiracy is a threat (to the people, to sovereignty, to freedom) just because it is a conspiracy. For this reason the weight of the theorist's argument doesn't fall on showing that any particular policy is ill-conceived but on showing that it is a product of the conspiring parties. This is why, for Brexit campaigners, any organized body expressing support for Remain is by definition illegitimate. An association of Economists, The University of Edinburgh, church leaders are all denounced for trying to exercise influence which is unjust because it's part of the conspiracy. Ultimately conspiracy theorists see all and any argument made against them as facts which prove their case. Each is an example of how wide the conspiracy goes, how deep are its roots and how anyone in its thrall will say anything. It is likely that some of you are thinking that about me right now (and about to Google to see who has paid me to say all this).

Because it is the conspiracy which is the problem its theorists are not really concerned with what happens once it is defeated. Some vague gestures aside, the Brexit campaign has little to say about how things will work post-EU. Their primary goal is simply to name the conspiracy: to point at and expose the 'guilty men'. This gives the Brexit campaign a certain strength. It can stitch together very different positions, across the left and the right, since supporters are free to imagine whatever future they like while pointing to whatever group they most dislike as at the head of the enemy.

Remain, in contrast, is dominated by a theory that is nowhere near as interesting and imaginative as a conspiracy theory. It is the thinnest of thin utilitarianism. For the Remain campaign everything must be judged against a calculation of advantage, a measure of what will increase our happiness or avoid the risk of pain. A problem for this theory is that people aren't made happy or upset by the same things. Consequently the Remain campaign is reduced to listing facts about specific things which are better with the EU in the hope that individuals will see at least one they like. These are all real examples of things campaigners have said are at risk if we leave the EU: jobs, wages, the cost of shopping, research into malaria (or cancer or Alzheimers), animal rights, apprenticeships, the environment, workers' rights, farm grants, the British landscape, scientific excellence, pig herd health, the UK watch industry, curries, ice cream.

There may well be merit in some or even all of these claims. But the longer the list gets the less convincing it is. It feels like a random list of facts with no meaningful political or ethical theory behind it. The much mocked Remain advert 'Votin', which tried to convince young people that being in the EU is literally more fun than leaving it, is a case in point. It seems like a narrow and cynical appeal to a narrow and cynical self-interest. It also exposes the narrow world-view of the campaigners behind it: one in which young people are ravin', chattin' and travellin' and never worried about paying off their ever-increasing student loan, keeping up with the rent and remaining in precarious employment.

Because they think that sourced measurements of advantage and harm are the essence of reason Remain campaigners find it hard to fathom their opponents. They cannot understand that people value things which are not measureable – a sense of identity, getting one over on smug politicians, feeling like you have some control over your life. Because they can't conceive of people so committed to a value or principle that they are willing to take a hit to GDP, Remainers can only think of Leavers as irrational dupes. And because they think themselves committed to reason they don't really know how to deal with an opponent that will say whatever it needs to say to win.

We are left with two sides equally convinced of their insight and perspicacity, unable to see any merit in the opinions of their opponents or to formulate a strategy for speaking across the divide.

There are better ways of thinking about all this. There are voices out there – on both sides – making cases that rely on theories about who we, the British, might become or on moral values such as solidarity. But these voices receive little coverage from British news media which are focused on the personalities and relationships that amuse journalists rather than on the ideas and values which matter to the rest of us. We ought to have more interpretations on offer – more ways of generating, organizing and understanding the facts which would also be more choices about the kind of future we want to make together.

But this is where our politics is now.

On the one side are various fantasies of evil and of the heroism of those who claim they can vanquish it. On the other side are spiritless technocrats busy pulling the levers on the state machine but so far away from the front line they cannot see how few of them work or hear how their language is not one the rest of us speak. Both are so wrapped up in their own theory of the world that they can't hear let alone understand what anybody else has to say and think that all contradictory evidence must be a fabrication or a delusion. But the truth is that each is now dedicated primarily to maintaining and protecting their own delusion – far more so than they are dedicated to understanding the rest of us and working out how to persuade us of something. Whatever happens in our little referendum this will not change much. The ideological intensity may increase, the gulf between them widen and the political culture fragment further.

The collapse is yet to come.

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Alan Finlayson is Professor of Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia. His research is particularly concerned with the theory and practice of democratic politics, the study of political ideologies and also with political rhetoric. As part of a project supported by The Leverhulme Trust he has developed the website www.britishpoliticalspeech.org and is working to promote the theory, analysis and improved practice of political speech, oratory and argument in the UK.

