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## Brexit, Donald Trump and the liberal arts

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## Quad 136

### Brexit, Donald Trump and the Liberal Arts

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## Brexit, Donald Trump and the Liberal Arts



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Last week the people of the United Kingdom shocked the world, and many of their fellow citizens, by voting in favor of leaving the European Union. Brexit, as the policy was nicknamed, was expected to be close, but polls and financial markets all indicated that the referendum would fail. It did not. 51.9% voted “leave” and 48.1% voted “remain.”

What has been most interesting to me, in the aftermath of the vote, is how the media and commentators have responded to this admittedly surprising and very important outcome. I would have thought that the first thing any media coverage would focus on would be, “Why did this happen?” Instead, the coverage was a combination of, first, how this decision was an unambiguous disaster for the UK, Europe and even the world, and, second, how incredibly ignorant the referendum’s supporters were.

NPR’s *Morning Edition* spent most of their “analysis” explaining how this would hurt British citizens and harm the EU enterprise. **One reporter** told of crying in the shower when she heard the news. (I think her neutral journalistic mask might have slipped a bit there.)

**Others** focused their attention on British voters.

*Appearing on NBC’s Today, analyst and Daily Beast editor Christopher Dickey launched into a tirade against Britain’s vote to leave the European Union: “...(what) they claim it says, right off the bat, is that they were tired of all the bureaucracy of the European Union, they didn’t want all the constraints, they want their sovereignty. But what this was really about is fear, xenophobia, in some cases, certainly racism.”*

*Dickey concluded by touting more outlandish fearmongering: “In fact, the president of the European Council said this doesn’t just threaten the European Union, this threatens western civilization. He may have been overstating it, but that’s the mood.”*

Brendan O’Neill, in analyzing the reactions to Brexit at the libertarian website **Reason.com**, wrote:

*A recurring theme in the elitist rage with the pro-Brexit crowd has been the idea that ordinary people aren't sufficiently clued-up to make big political decisions. We have witnessed a "populist paeon to ignorance," says one observer. Apparently populist demagogues—like Nigel Farage, leader of the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), and Boris Johnson, everyone's favorite bumbling, toffish politician—preyed on the anxieties of the little people and made them vote for something bad and stupid. For these little people, "fear counts above reason; anger above evidence," opined a writer for the Financial Times. A writer for The Guardian suggested that for anti-E.U. types, emotions "play a larger part than rationality."*

The *Washington Post* tweeted, "Brexit is a reminder that some things just shouldn't be decided by the people."

Strangely, perhaps, all of this reminded me of the importance of and need for the liberal arts. There are lots of different ways of thinking about the liberal arts, but, for me, an education based on the liberal arts does at least two important things:

1. A liberal arts education stimulates and nurtures intellectual curiosity about the world and meaning. That includes both the natural/physical world—the sciences—and the social/human world—the social sciences and the humanities.
2. Related but separable, a liberal arts education develops the capacity for empathy—the ability to understand others and how they view themselves, their interests and the world. The humanities are central to this outcome, but the natural and social sciences also play a role.



Photo: Tommy O'Laughlin '13

Most of the reactions to Brexit seem to me to be a failure both of curiosity ("How and why did this political outcome happen?") and empathy ("How and why might a steel worker in the British Midlands come to have a different view of this referendum than I do?").

If one wants to understand the world better, it would seem obvious that trying to answer these questions is important. But even from a narrow, self-interested perspective, this kind of introspection would be helpful: "I want people to understand me and my views, so I should extend the same courtesy to them."

The lack of curiosity and empathy are not limited to Brexit—it is only the most recent example. Our political life is full of such responses. Many Americans think Trump supporters are xenophobic and racists. Others think Sanders supporters are naïve communists. The list of examples goes on.

**Those** who resort to simple and simplistic explanations of the behavior of others are at best deeply uncurious and, at worst, examples of the allegedly shallow narrow-minded people they decry.

The way out of this intellectual balkanization and move toward genuine engagement with others is to encourage curiosity and practice empathy—in other words, to embrace the lessons of the liberal arts.

## About the Author: **Michael Hemesath**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).