

The Fertile Ground of Bewilderment

by Charles Eisenstein

A summary by Elisa Graf

Turn on the news today and one is faced with a seemingly endless spectacle of shocks and surprises, from the unexpected outcome of the UK's Brexit referendum, to the meteoric rise of extremist politicians like Donald Trump around the globe. It might seem that we are heading in the wrong direction, one of increasing political divisiveness, social desperation and conflict. In his recent essay *The Fertile Ground of Bewilderment*, Charles Eisenstein suggests: "Something is different this time." He writes: "The Brexit vote marks a rare moment of discontinuity, when the usual normalizing narratives falter and a society experiences a fertile and frightening moment of bewilderment."

That moment, he suggests, "of stumbling, of humility, is precious".

Eisenstein posits that Brexit and the greater collapses it foreshadows are so potent, because they show that perhaps our politicians and the established systems that we depend upon don't have all the answers. Politics need to be enacted "from a different place". Eisenstein writes: "Our political reflexes are conditioned by a story that is deeper than politics. If we want to produce something other than endless variations of the same result, we have to transcend the customary terms of discourse and examine the false truisms that become transparent only when things fall apart."

In order to do this, we must examine the assumed narratives that underlie our conventional political discourse. At their root lies what Eisenstein calls "the Story of Separation, that holds us as discrete, separate individuals in a world of other, in opposition to random forces and arbitrary events of nature, and in competition with the rest of life". Through the news and entertainment media, we're immersed in this outlook, which he calls "fundamentally the mindset of war, in which progress consists in defeating the enemy", whatever political party, religious belief, race, sex or social class is the identified target. This leads us to a dangerously oversimplified analysis of the issues we face. Eisenstein cautions that to blame "the Leave vote (and Trump, and all



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the xenophobic know-nothing parties) on ignorance and unenlightened attitudes ... is to disregard the deep economic and social stressors that fuel both anti-EU sentiment and resentment toward immigrants."

"In other words," writes Eisenstein, "the middle-aged white Brexit or Trump supporter has legitimate grievances that cannot be dismissed as white entitlement just because things are even worse for people of color. If they feel betrayed by the system, it is because they have been. Look around at the world. We can do much better than this. Everybody knows it. We don't agree on what to do, but more and more of us have lost faith in the system and its stewards. When right-wing populists blame our problems on dark-skinned people or immigrants, the response they arouse draws its power from real and justifiable dissatisfaction. Racism is its symptom, not its cause."

According to Eisenstein, neoliberal capitalism also sources its power from this story, as "It depends on the idealization of competition, encoded in 'free markets,' as a law of nature and primary driver of progress; on the sanctity of private property (which is a primal form of domination) and, most of all, on exercising control over others through the creation and enforcement of debt.... [It

is, perhaps, Separation's culminating expression, threatening as it does the ecological basis of human existence." Most importantly, he notes that change in our selves and our institutions cannot come "without letting go of that story in all its dimensions".

He encourages us to step "outside the usual polarizing discourses in which both sides play the game of find-the-enemy", and instead engage, with sincerity, in a basic inquiry, what he calls "the essence of compassion". Abiding in a state of "openness and curiosity" we must pursue the question of those we demonize: "What is it like to be you?"

Noting the bewilderment caused by the Brexit referendum results, which "has prompted many in Britain to ask, perhaps with some anguish, 'Who are we?'" Eisenstein writes that now is the time to ask this in earnest. "What kind of England do you want? Is it one where the forces of racism are suppressed and politically defeated? Or is it one in which the source of racism has been healed? If we want the latter, we have to recognize the conditions that cause it."

(To read the full essay, go to: charleseisenstein.net)