

The Elite BS That Helped Pave the Way to Brexit and Trump

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Since Donald Trump’s upset victory in the U.S. presidential election, I have read a number of articles and blog posts discussing media failures that ended up contributing to the outcome of the election. But there is a media failure that has received very little attention.

It has become standard practice to refer to experts—specifically, economics experts—as members of an “elite.” I never took the time to count how many times the word elite is used on average in articles, essays, and blog posts that talk about economists—be they academic economists or not—but references to the “elite” are all over. Often, economists are not only portrayed as part of an intellectual elite, but also associated with economic or class-status elite—routine participants in exclusive meetings at Davos or other fancy locations.

The image of us that emerges from this barrage is one of children of arrogance and privilege, completely disconnected from reality, ivory-tower dwellers who leave the tower occasionally only to enjoy rubbing elbows with bankers and industry barons while discussing the newest way to help them screw the working class. I have yet to see an article, blog post, or essay that does anything serious to dispel this image.¹ Even essays that the authors will claim are “pro-expert” actually do *nothing* of this sort—and instead happily continue to toss around the word elite and our presumed association with Davos, privilege, and what-have-you.²

Journalists, bloggers, biographers, assorted “elite” pundits, and even colleagues who enjoy riding the wave of popularity that comes with bashing your own profession³ (except, of course, yourselves and your favorite group of colleagues, because you were always right): If you don’t think this aura of privilege and arrogance is a big part of the image of the economics profession that your articles and blog posts have been propagating, you are at least as out of touch with reality as the economists you enjoy so much to lambast. And if you don’t think that your barrage of portraying the economics profession as a frigging elite had something to do with how little economists are trusted nowadays, you are far worse than out of touch with reality.

Sure, economists made some bad mistakes. We have been making mistakes for centuries—that’s the beauty and the curse of trying to explain, forecast, and measure something that ultimately depends on the vagaries of human behavior. For whatever reason, we seem to be held to a higher standard than, say, doctors—who are not routinely lambasted as peddlers of a failed discipline and members of a detached, snotty elite for not yet having found a cure for all

¹ Finally, *The Economist* published an article that takes issue with the wholesale use of the word “elite” on December 17, 2016: “[The world has become obsessed with elites.](#)”

² In this respect, Sebastian Mallaby’s October 20, 2016 essay in *The Guardian*—“[The Cult of the Expert and How It Collapsed](#)”—is a great example: Mallaby claimed in a tweet exchange we had that the essay is “pro-expert.” Much of it focuses on Ben Bernanke. There is absolutely *no information* on [Bernanke’s rather humble beginnings](#) in the essay. Instead, there is a final paragraph where experts end up associated with the notion of a “rootless cosmopolitan elite, unburdened by any sense of obligation to a place of origin, its arrogance enhanced by the conviction that its privilege reflects brains and accomplishment, not luck and inheritance.” I am not exactly sure how those words, part of the essay’s *concluding paragraph*, can be construed as pro-expert.

³ In Italy, we refer to this as “spitting in the plate you have been eating from.”

types of cancer, or for having to scramble when a new disease (let's call it "crisis") emerges and it takes decades to find a cure.

Substantive errors in research and policy advice were costly and eroded our collective credibility, but you contributed quite a bit to the erosion with the *elite BS* in your articles and posts. I am sure it got you clicks, likes, followers, and more opportunities to write more elite BS in all those outlets that so happily give top-visibility space only to your side of this conversation—but that's what it is: *elite BS*. (Among the pinnacles in this category, I even remember Paul Mason writing that we economists—or at least those whose approach Mason doesn't like—contributed to making the world more dangerous⁴—truly a great comment in the era of ISIS and company, and of insane people showing up on campuses with guns ready.)

If you really didn't want Brexit to happen and Trump to win, it should have dawned on you that constantly painting the entire economics profession (except maybe your favorite few) as a bunch of elites too busy being aloof and sipping drinks with bankers and industry barons would not help your (and our) cause. It should have dawned on you that the perception of our profession that you hammered into the public with article after article would make it hard for us to communicate with that same public even on those things on which—maybe, just maybe—you will concede we have something reasonably intelligent to say. It didn't dawn on you. Big, big failure.

I will not bore you with too many details of my own life experiences. Suffice it to say that, yes, I have a high salary and I travel to conferences in beautiful cities. I even had the opportunity to participate in policy conversations, and to do research that had an impact on policy advice. "Luck," as Mallaby's essay referenced above would have it, certainly played a role in getting me to this point—in the form of wonderful teachers, starting from elementary school and high school (*public* elementary school and *public* high school in the very non-fancy suburb of Milan where I grew up), and then at Bocconi (the—yes—private university I attended) and Berkeley. "Inheritance"? BS. Elite BS. I am the first member of my father's family to get a university degree, and he supported my education by working his butt off, same as I worked mine off as a student and beyond. My mother's family, certainly more educated folks, did not provide any material support.

I am willing to bet I have more blue-collar friends than most of you—esteemed elite pundits followed by thousands and thousands on Twitter. I am pretty sure many of my colleagues have similar backgrounds and friends to mine: ordinary folks who face all the difficulties of ordinary life. I am also pretty sure that—in contrast to Mallaby's idea of the "rootless cosmopolitan elite, unburdened by any sense of obligation to a place of origin"—all of us *care* about all these folks in our lives, and that our relatives and friends teach us a lot on the struggles of those who do not have the privilege of tenure at a prestigious university.⁵

Esteemed elite pundits, you want to criticize economists, including me, on the substance of our work? Please go ahead, be my guest. But it'd be great for many reasons if you quit the elite BS. It is offensive (at least for some of us), and (more important) it is counterproductive.

Thank you.

⁴ "[It's time to junk the flawed economic models that make the world a dangerous place](#)," *The Guardian*, September 19, 2016.

⁵ I am currently spending a de-facto sabbatical in the small Italian village where my father grew up—instead of any of the beautiful, cosmopolitan cities where I could have gotten an office—because I want my children to become familiar with those roots, place of origin, and ordinary folks that so many of your articles and posts explicitly or implicitly presume people like me do not care about.