



Brexit, Retrotopia and the perils of post-colonial delusions

Paul Beaumont 

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway

ABSTRACT

Brexit shocked liberal elites across Europe, instigating a burgeoning new field of research. Brexit scholarship tends to puzzle over two questions: what happened? What will happen now? This article addresses the latter and builds upon scholarship that suggests that “identity” mattered as much as economics. Digging deeper into British identity, this essay borrows from social-psychology to analyse how temporal status comparisons contributed to Brexit. It argues how the peculiar qualities of British identity narrative make Eurosceptic complaints about sovereignty, Brussels and “control”, particularly salient to nationalists. In short, negative temporal status comparisons with Britain’s former self underpins its long-term Euroscepticism: When Brits learn they once “ruled the world”, the European Union’s practices of compromise compare poorly: Cooperation is easily presented as subordination. Brexit can thus be understood as a radical attempt to arrest Britain’s decline by setting sail for a future based on a nostalgic vision of the past.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 November 2017
Accepted 16 May 2018

KEYWORDS

Brexit; European Union; identity politics; status seeking; foreign policy; British politics

Introduction

Brexit sent shockwaves around liberal circles within Britain and beyond.¹ For instance, Martin Wolf (2016) in *The Financial Times* declared that Brexit is “probably the most disastrous single event in British history since the Second World War”. While polemic, Wolf’s view reflects a consensus amongst a liberal editorial-class struggling to comprehend the UK’s vote to “Leave” the EU. Indeed, “Leavers” motivations are hard to place within ordinary rationalistic frameworks. For instance, economists coalesce around the view that Brexit will prove bad for the UK economy. As the LSE’s Centre for Economic Performance puts it, the question is not *whether* Britain will suffer economically, the “only question is exactly how much?” (Dhingra et al., 2017). Moreover, Britain enjoys special treatment within the EU unrivalled by other members: it has more opt-outs than any other member and receives a rebate of approximately 66% of its annual net contribution. Britain, if anything, had the “best deal” in terms of “sovereignty”. In light of this apparent contradiction, it is not surprising that scholarship investigating the causes and consequences of Brexit has exploded.²

This essay builds on the growing body of work that addresses the Brexit enigma. In particular, it seeks to flesh out and provide theoretical ballast to several statistical studies

pointing to “identity politics” as a key contributing factor to Brexit. While these studies flag-up a statistical relationship between variables capturing the degree and type of national identification and likelihood of voting for Brexit, they rarely dedicate much space to *understanding* it. As Henderson and colleagues lament, these studies often lack “discussion or analysis of these identities and why they might be significant”, instead identity variables tend to “pop up’ in the analysis, rather than driving it” (2017, p. 5). Indeed, it is too often taken for granted that voters with strong national identity will be more Euro-sceptic. Yet, nationalist sentiments are associated with pro-EU outlook in some contexts and not others: it is the quality of nationalism rather than nationalism per se that informs attitude to the EU (Daddow, 2006; Henderson et al., 2016; Wellings, 2010). Therefore, this essay does not treat nationalism and Brexit as natural bedfellows, but a puzzle in need of unravelling. It problematizes the peculiar *qualities* of British identity narratives that make Eurosceptic complaints about sovereignty, “Brussels bureaucrats” and “taking back control”, particularly salient. Embarking on this task, this essay draws upon social-psychology theory pertaining to social-group status. Recently introduced into International Relations, a growing body of research suggests that the desire to generate self-esteem via positive comparisons with out-groups can be used to explain otherwise puzzling foreign policies. In particular, this essay builds upon Freedman’s (2016) introduction of *temporal* status comparisons: that states not only seek out positive comparisons vis a vis others within their community but also base their collective self-esteem upon comparisons with their former national self (also see Clunan, 2014).

Drawing on Freedman’s temporal status approach this article argues that one important reason why British identity is often associated with Euroscepticism is because EU membership is *especially* threatening to Britain’s historical *narrative of the self*. In short, because Britain’s identity narrative relies upon glorifying its former empire (and lamenting its loss) together with obsessing over victory Second World War, devolving power to the EU is experienced as especially destabilizing to nationalists’ sense of self-esteem and progression. To a country that once boasted (and still learns) how “the sun never set” on its empire, to accept rule from Europe can be mobilized as especially threatening to a significant number of Brits’ collective identity. This enables oppositional leaders to present a narrative of decline that demands urgent arresting, for instance, via Brexit. While post-colonial legacies are usually investigated as problems associated with former colonies, Britain also arguably suffers from its colonial past. Indeed, Brexit embodies a vision that the late Zygmund Bauman might have diagnosed as *retrotopian*: a nostalgic vision for the future based upon a lost but undead past (2017, p. 4).³ By relying on narratives that glorify Britain’s history, or at least fail to take responsibility for the horrors of British colonial rule, large swathes of the Britain’s population still view its history through rose-tinted goggles. This essay argues that the collective memory of Britain’s perceived former greatness, underpins the Eurosceptics’ sensitivity to “sovereignty”, and ultimately, Britain’s long-term hostility to membership of the EU that Brexit manifested.

While broadly speaking the “post-colonial” argument presented here is not entirely new – it resembles an older, broader literature explaining British Euroscepticism (Daddow, 2006; Wellings, 2010) – it has yet to feature in the scholarly explanations for Brexit. The essay begins to rectify this in three moves. Move one situates the argument within extant Brexit-literature, and suggests it is complementary with most of the alternative explanations. Move two elucidates how temporal status comparisons may inform attitudes

to the EU within the UK. Move three draws on polling, discourse and secondary literature to establish preliminary evidence for the argument that temporal identity comparisons with Britain's former self do indeed contribute to the UK's historically strong Euroscepticism and thus helped make Brexit possible.

The Brexit post-mortem: explanations and remaining puzzles

Britain has long led Europe in terms of Euroscepticism (Figure 1.), indeed it is where the word originated. If Brexit might have *shocked* Europe, it was not necessarily *surprised*: if any country was to leave the EU, most would have predicted it would be Britain, “the awkward partner”. Nonetheless, the causes of Brexit are complex; there are already several (often complementary) explanations for *why Brexit, why now*. It is thus important to stress that the leave vote comprised of an eclectic coalition; there is not one type of Brexiteer (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017; Swales, 2016). Watkins (2016, p. 7) is therefore correct to exhort researchers to avoid “solipsisms and global abstractions” and instead use “mid-range conceptual tools” for understanding Brexit. With Watkins’ advice in mind, the following section elaborates the candidate explanations for the referendum result before demonstrating how temporal status concerns can contribute.

Amongst the most compelling explanations for Brexit is the “left-behind” thesis. According to this narrative, EU membership has created winners and losers within British society. Those with high levels of education have benefited from the EU’s single market which allows them to traverse the continent selling their human capital to the highest bidder. In contrast, “left-behinders”, suffer a “double whammy” of low education and the misfortune of living in a community with low opportunities (Goodwin & Heath, 2016b, p. 1). Members of this group often find themselves in competition with low skilled EU migrants for limited jobs. Seeing their opportunities dwindle and perceiving migration

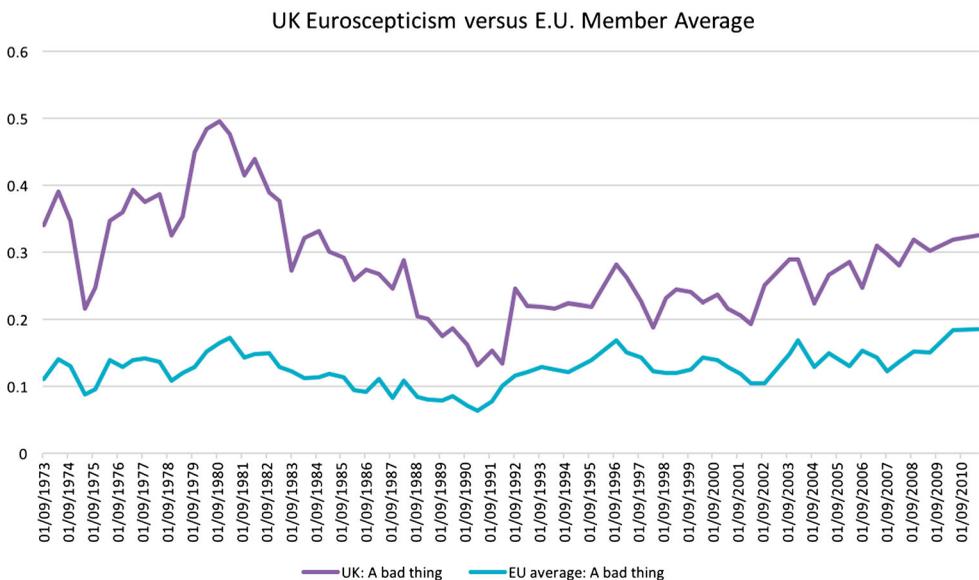


Figure 1. Is the EU “a bad thing”? UK versus EU member average. Source: Eurobarometer.

as the cause, these voters become susceptible to Euroscepticism. Considerable evidence supports the “Left-behind” thesis. For instance, *ceteris paribus* support for leave was 30 percentage points higher among those lacking education past the age of 16 than among graduates (Goodwin & Heath, 2016b, p. 1). Meanwhile, the leave-vote tended to be concentrated in areas of relative deprivation, low skills and where the local population is largely white (Goodwin & Heath, 2016a, p. 325). This economic marginalization goes hand-in-hand with subjective feelings of cultural marginalization: not only do left-behinders feel economically insecure, their values have increasingly become seen as “parochial” or “intolerant” (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 277). Again, this feeds into a hostility towards the “establishment” pro-EU position.

The “left-behind” thesis is clearly a big part of the Brexit story, but as Goodwin and Heath (2016a, p. 331) note, it “cannot explain the whole Brexit vote”. While Jonathon Hopkins (2017) offers the most sophisticated left-behinder thesis yet – he draws on Polanyi to link Brexit to a broader European-wide backlash against marketization – he does not account for *why* said-backlash would target the EU. Indeed, Hopkin’s admits it is “paradoxical” that resentment to marketization should manifest itself in Euroscepticism, noting that the “exposure of British society to market forces has been driven predominantly by decisions taken by successive British governments, and European integration has been reconciled with high levels of social protection elsewhere in the EU” (2017, p. 473). At the very least, this would suggest that seeking to leave the EU should not be understood as a natural response on behalf of the left-behinders to their material predicament. In addition, there were large numbers of Brexiteers who were definitely *not* “left-behind” that also voted leave (Swales, 2016). Ultimately, Brexit cannot be reduced to economics.

Related, but analytically separable from the “left-behind” thesis, is the argument that migration concerns were a short and medium-term factor that catalysed Brexit. Using the European Social Survey, covering 21 European countries, Lubbers and Scheepers (2007) found fears around migration were strongly associated with stronger Euroscepticism across the continent – including Britain. Post-Brexit analysis confirms that concerns around migration and refugees constituted a key factor motivating leavers (Goodwin & Milazzo 2017). Rather than absolute levels of migration, Goodwin and Milazzo find that the *change* in the level of migration was associated with voting leave. However, this cannot account for the *longue durée* of Britain’s peculiarly staunch Euroscepticism, which long pre-dates EU-expansion and the associated migration concerns. Indeed, several qualitative analyses suggest virile Euroscepticism was perceptible from the beginning of the European integration process. (Todd, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2013; Wellings, 2010) The Eurobarometer cross-country polling confirms this interpretation: Measuring the ebbs and flows of Euroscepticism amongst EU member states across time, particular policies and/or events – like enlargement, Maastricht, etc. – correlate with changes in attitude to Europe across countries. However, Britain remains consistently top the pile; a significantly higher proportion of Brits have perceived EU membership as “a bad thing” since polling began in 1974 compared to the EU average (Figure 1). While migration concerns were a key factor driving the Euroscepticism leading up to the 2016 referendum (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017), Brexiteers could rely on a latent Euroscepticism to latch anti-migration sentiments on to. Thus, if we can assume that Britain’s underlying Euroscepticism made leaving the EU more likely in the UK than elsewhere, the question becomes not why Brexit, but why *so* Eurosceptic?⁴

Given that factors relating to migration and economic marginalization offer an incomplete explanation, several scholars have begun to investigate how national identity is linked to Euroscepticism and Brexit. Most of this research seeks out correlations between the extent individuals identify with a social group – usually one’s nation – and Euroscepticism. This research has proven fruitful: for instance, Goodwin and Milazzo (2017, p. 458) find that strong British and English identification is associated with voting to leave the EU. Elsewhere, Henderson and colleagues (2017) found that voters that identified as English rather than British were strikingly more likely to vote for Brexit than the inverse. It is worth noting that this complements rather than contradicts the analysis below because the key distinctive characteristics of *English* nationalism concern pride in the “British Empire” and Britain’s victory in the Second World War (Corbett, 2016; Wellings, 2010).⁵ However, for the sake of avoiding a semantic minefield, the following analysis refers to “British” identity narratives.⁶

While successful in illuminating the significance of identity in explaining Brexit, the quantitative research produces as many puzzles as it does answers. Strongly identifying with national identity sometimes produces anti-EU feelings, yet it does the opposite in others. For instance, Scottish and Welsh nationalism is associated with Pro-EU preferences, while English national identity correlates significantly in the other identity (Henderson, Jeffery, Wincott, & Wyn Jones, 2017). This non-linear relationship is reflected in Europe; strong national identities can be associated with both pro-EU and anti-EU sentiments (Hooghe & Marks, 2004, p. 416; Maier & Rittberger, 2008, p. 245). Indeed, as the authors of the most in-depth study on Brexit to date note, the way identity informs beliefs about European integration seems strongly “influenced by the specific national context” (Clarke et al., 2017, pp. 64–65). Thus, statisticians may not like it, but to get a handle on how national identities inform attitudes to the EU also requires closer inquiry into countries’ specific identity narratives and how they relate to the EU.

Indeed, building on the above studies, but digging deeper into the identity “variable”, this essay seeks to go beyond showing a correlation between identity factors and Brexit, to ask, *why* would strong English or British identity lead to growing Euroscepticism? Answering this question, I argue, can help provide answers to that complement most of the research discussed above. While it is true that the so-called left-behinders voted disproportionately for Brexit, it is less clear why they tend to scapegoat the EU (rather than say Tony Blair’s government, which ignored an EU sanctioned option to limit Eastern European migration immediately following Enlargement). Similarly, while post-Brexit polls suggest that the cost-benefit analyses conducted by voters for Brexit often indicated a preference for sovereignty over economic considerations, it is less clear why these concerns about sovereignty would become so salient in Britain compared with the rest of the EU. The rest of the essay argues that part of the answer stems from how many nationalistic individuals increasingly developed – with the help of the right wing press, and political cues – negative comparisons with Britain’s former self engendering a deep-seated desire to rectify what they perceived to be Britain’s decline from greatness.

Brexit, status and temporal comparisons

While Brexit baffles economists, social-psychologists will not have been surprised to witness Brexiteers risk diminished economic well-being for seemingly intangible identity

reasons. Indeed, understanding how, when and why individuals pursue goals associated with their social group, rather than their immediate material self-interest, has been a central line of inquiry for more than half a century. One of the most established and pertinent social-psychology theories for understanding Brexit is Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT suggests that individuals generate their “social identity” from the “social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). National identity is one important social category to which a person may identify. According to SIT theory, individuals strive to “maintain or enhance their self-esteem” by making positive comparisons with other social “out-groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). This has been used to explain in-group favouritism and why people may sacrifice their own self-interest to improve the in-group’s status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Translated into international relations, SIT has been used to explain foreign policies that seem puzzling from conventional rationalist perspectives: how states seek high status while forgoing economic gain and security (e.g. Larson & Shevchenko, 2003). It should be immediately clear how provisionally SIT may relate to Brexit: voting “Leave” could be understood as a radical strategy for making their national social group more positively distinct from Europe.

Yet as intuitively appealing as it is, there is a snag with the standard SIT model. While the UK public may possess sufficient information to make comparisons with the EU and its other member states, it is unclear why nationalists would consider Britain to compare poorly with other EU members in terms of what Brexiteers themselves considered important: sovereignty and migration control (Swales, 2016). Indeed, Britain enjoys more opt-outs from EU policy than any other country. Britain opted out of the Euro monetary union, Schengen area, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Justice and Home Affairs pillar of the EU, and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. Meanwhile, before Tony Blair came to office, Britain had negotiated an opt-out of the Social Chapter. Given that the UK’s opt-out of Schengen means the UK also has more control over its borders than most of the EU, again any inter-group comparisons UK citizens make with other member states should come out positive. Indeed, when comparing Britain’s “sovereignty” with the rest of the EU’s members, Britain does *uniquely* well; as Anand Menon and John-Paul Salter note, “[t]o a significant extent, the EU’s awkward partner [had] carved out a privileged position for itself” (2016, 1301).

While the standard SIT model founders, introducing a temporal dimension can help illuminate what underpins Britain’s status concerns. Indeed, an offshoot of the Social Comparison Theory that SIT is based upon, Temporal Comparison Theory (TCT) suggests that individuals do not just compare themselves to their peers but also to their former self. According to Albert (1977) people seek to maintain a coherent narrative of the self that shows self-improvement over time. When one struggles to make favourable comparisons with the past self, it can prompt low self-esteem in the manner that unfavourable comparisons to peers can. Indeed, contemporary social-psychology now considers social *and* temporal comparisons to be two of the “most fundamental information sources upon which the self-concept is constructed” (Zell & Alicke, 2009, p. 225). Introducing TCT into IR status research, Joshua Freedman (2016) uses it to solve the puzzle of China’s contemporary status dissatisfaction. He argues convincingly that China’s obsession with Taiwan cannot be understood without understanding how it has come to symbolize China’s “century of humiliation”. Until China manages to reclaim what it perceives it lost, it will be unlikely to be fully satisfied with its status despite its rising relative position

within international society today. Elsewhere, Ann Clunan (2009, 2014) reworks SIT along temporal lines, to argue that Russia's switch from liberal-internationalist foreign policy, to a nationalist-statist foreign policy was because Russian elites perceive the latter as offering the best "fit" for regaining Russia's historic great power status and avoiding negative comparisons with Europe and the West.

It should be clear by now that TCT is well placed to shed light on Brexit. If we assume that individuals often rest their self-esteem upon temporal comparisons with their social group's past self, then what does this illuminate about Brexit? The following section suggests TCT does not explain the entire Eurosceptic phenomenon within the UK, but in conjunction with the specificities of its dominant national identity narrative, it can help explain why Euro-scepticism has manifested itself *more* in the UK than in the rest of the EU. As such it might be understood as a necessary background condition that made Brexit possible. This argument rests on three pillars. First, the way key formative experiences in the UK's narrative of the self – Second World War and the former British Empire – are understood by large numbers of the population make the UK's membership of the EU appear ignominious by comparison. Second, consistent with TCT, polls show that the members of the British population – the over 60s – that grew up with the Empire and in the aftermath of Second World War, tend to be the keenest Brexiters. Third, the number one reason voters gave for voting Brexit (Swales, 2016) – regaining sovereignty – is what one would expect if one's goal was to rectify negative temporal status comparisons with Britain's former self.

Brexit: seeking lost status

It scarcely needs stating that a central component in the UK's national self-narrative is the Second World War. From English football fans singing about winning the Second World War, to the omnipresence of documentaries and films about the Second World War (and Hitler) on British television, it is difficult to underestimate the extent to which the war permeates Britain's national consciousness (Daddow, 2006). Indeed, as Eley writes, "official and popular cultures were pervaded by the war's presence, via citations, evocations, stories, and commentaries ... became worked into public discourse in inspiring, insidious, and enduring ways, making an active archive of collective identification" (2001, p. 819). In a similar vein, Hedetoft notes that "WWII and its impact on the mental cultural and political climates" was "a determining factor in the state and development of national identity in the post war epoch" (1993, p. 282). Indeed, several scholars from across disciplines note the formative importance of Second World War in shaping the UK's national identity. While suggesting that the Second World War remains central to British notions of the self is not controversial, what we need to draw out here, is how this collective memory and the usual self-understanding sits uneasily with the membership of the EU and functions as a rhetorical resource for Euroscepticism.

Within British debates over the EU, references to the war have long featured heavily in Eurosceptic arguments. Tracing the European debate from the first in/out referendum to the run-up to the 2016 referendum, John Todd finds that the Second World War has been an "essential reference point" since the 1970s (2016, p. 88). Indeed, Eurosceptics frequently draw parallels between defeating the authoritarianism in the Second World War and escaping "control from Brussels". For instance, the former leader of The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage was especially fond of the Second

World War imagery when denouncing the EU on the campaign trail for the Brexit referendum. According to *Reuters*, Farage would ride into town in a purple campaign bus playing the soundtrack from classic Second World War film *The Great Escape* (Shirbon, 2016). He would then begin his stump by exclaiming: “That’s what we need, isn’t it? A great escape from this European Union!” This offers just a glimpse of the extent to which historical analogies to the Second World War serve to underpin Eurosceptic arguments against Brussels. Yet, Brexit may just be the latest incarnation of how the Second World War continues to inform British foreign policy; as Hedetoft argues, that the way the Second World War is understood within Britain’s post-war discourse contributes to the “reluctance to enter into forms of international cooperation that do not align with British interests and power” (1993, p. 294). This is in marked contrast to how memories of the war function across continental Europe, where representations of Europe’s bloody history tend to underpin and enable EU cooperation (Diez, 2004). Indeed, if some might wonder why France’s lost empire does not prompt similar level of Euroscepticism to Britain’s, one answer would be that their different experiences with the Second World War and subsequent co-founding of the European project probably led to their temporal status concerns manifesting themselves in a different form. Instead, France has found other means try to bolster its *Grandeur* and live up to its former glories. For instance, France’s expensive and independent nuclear weapons programme (Sagan, 1997, p. 78) and its contemporary African interventions (Utley, 2002), have both been linked to concern with prestige and performing great power status.

Post-colonial nostalgia is the second major facet of British nationalism that underpins Britain’s reluctance to cooperate with Europe. Polls suggest a majority within the UK continue to valorize the empire and consider it “something to be proud of” (YouGov, 2014). Thus, David Cameron only reflected the British conventional wisdom when he suggested in 2014 that “there is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British Empire did and was responsible for” (Watt, 2013). This should not be surprising given the British national history curriculum generally avoids adequately addressing either the effects of the Empire on the colonies nor the colonizers (Tomlinson & Dorling, 2016). Indeed, Daddow (2006), reviewing the way British history is understood in the public sphere, argues that Euroscepticism partly results from an ironic *lack* of scepticism about British imperial and martial history. If one relied upon these partial narratives to make distinctive positive comparisons to one’s past, the UK’s membership of the EU can easily be presented as symbolizing Britain’s regression from its former self. When one learns that Britain used to “rule the world”, the EU’s practices of negotiation and compromise compare poorly: Cooperation is easily presented as subordination. In the aftermath of Brexit, Susan Watkins explains it thusly, “Ever-mindful of its historic status as a great off-shore power which had, in its time, dictated terms to each of the others, post-imperial Britain struggled to be part of a project it could never wholly dominate” (2016, p. 11). Indeed, Britain’s present situation – regardless of how much economically better off it may be than before, regardless of how much “more” sovereignty it retains vis a vis its fellow members – no longer rules the world, but has in-fact begun to accept rule from that world. Perhaps most ignominiously, from this perspective, Britain ceded power to the very countries it fought off in the Second World War.

It is worth noting that Britain’s press – dominated by right wing newspapers – has long been happy to stoke this narrative. Almost immediately upon joining the EU, the right wing press began “mythmaking” about “Brussels bureaucrats” banning bendy bananas

(Corbett, 2016, p. 20). The long-term Euroscepticism of the British print media was reflected in their coverage of the 2016 referendum. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2016) found that 41% of articles about the EU were negative and just 27% were positive, while 6 out of the 9 national newspapers took a pro-leave stance. But for our purposes here, what is important is the content of that Euroscepticism: how opposing the EU was systemically linked to British patriotism and history. A typical example is *The Sun*'s front page less than a fortnight before the referendum, which ran the headline "BeLEAVE in Britain: Vote to Quit the EU" ("Believe" was coloured with a Union Jack pattern), while opening line of the leader began: "We must set ourselves free from dictatorial Brussels" (Sun, 2016). This is just one example, but it is scarcely controversial to suggest that the right wing press helped (re)produce, facilitate and circulate the association of leaving the EU as a matter of national pride.

The sketch above indicates plausible reasons why those strongly identifying with this British narrative of the self could prove susceptible to negative temporal comparisons with the past, and why the EU would become symbolic of Britain's new lowly status. While Britain's nostalgia industry is powerful, we would expect those that actually grew up with the pink map of the British empire on their classroom walls to feel the loss of the Empire most. We would expect the older generation, those who remember life outside the EU, and remember the empire positively to be most susceptible to "take back control" and anti-Brussels rhetoric. Indeed, this corresponds to the generational divide on Brexit: 60% of over 60s voted for Brexit, the highest leave-voting age group. While pollsters have yet to ask questions regarding the Empire in the same poll as questions about Brexit, we can use UKIP voters as a reasonable proxy (95% of UKIP supporters voted to Leave). A 2016 poll shows that among all the major parties UKIP supporters were most likely to believe "we" should be "proud" of the Empire (YouGov, 2016), meanwhile UKIP has long drawn disproportionate support from the over 60s (YouGov/Prospect, 2015). Not only are over 60s more likely to view the Empire in a positive light when asked, they are also more likely to make temporal comparisons more generally than younger people (Brown & Middendorf, 1996, p. 326). So, given the Britain's narrative of the self, discussed above, in which the Second World War and the Empire feature heavily, we would indeed expect that the over 60s would prove *particularly* (though not exclusively) susceptible to negative temporal status comparisons and thus to Eurosceptic arguments about national sovereignty.

Finally, the explanations leave voters gave *themselves* support this argument. Indeed, in a survey of more than 12,000 people following the referendum, nearly half (49%) of leave voters reported that their main reason for wanting to leave the EU was "the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK" (Ashcroft, 2016). Moreover, such concerns were highest amongst the over 65s, 56% of which considered this to be their primary reason. That sovereignty concerns were so central, and this was strongest amongst the older generation, is again consistent with the thesis that negative temporal comparisons to Britain's former self contributed to its peculiarly fervent Euroscepticism and ultimately Brexit.

Conclusion: Brexit as a roadmap to Retrotopia

This essay has argued that negative status comparisons with what made Britain "great" in the past (Second World War and Empire), provided fertile ground for the long-term

Euroscepticism that enabled Brexit. Indeed, the notion that temporal status concerns underpin Euroscepticism in Britain fits with the intuition of several observers. For instance, Tomlinson and Dorling (2016) in the *New Statesman* end their article on Brexit with:

The Brexit referendum is the last death throes of Empire working its way out of our system. From one canal to another, from the Suez crisis of 1956 through to the Panama Papers 60 years later, the stories of our lives in Britain have largely been a story of just how hard some of us find it to adjust to no longer being top dog.

This explanation does not contradict the extant literature, but helps address lingering puzzles in the Brexit post-mortem. Certainly, the old, sometimes affluent, and the nationalist voted for Brexit in the highest numbers, but until now, research has lacked a theoretically informed understanding of *why*. This essay has introduced temporal status concerns as a potential answer and presented plausible if preliminary evidence of how they contributed to Brexit. However, more rigorous works are needed.

Nonetheless, if this essay's thesis pertains, it implies a profound lesson for contemporary politicians. Glorifying the past might prove useful to solidify national cohesion; after all, if a nation is just a series of stories we tell about ourselves, why not make those stories good ones? Yet, long term, fetishizing the past risks undermining the economic well-being in the present. Indeed, in what would be his final book, Zygmund Bauman (2017) observed that an increasing number in late modern societies are succumbing to *retrotopian* longings. Disillusioned with the prospect of "progress", Bauman wrote, "it is the genuine or putative aspects of the past, believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode, that serve as main orientation/reference points in drawing the roadmap to Retrotopia" (2017, p. 9). At the time of writing, Brexit risks becoming an infamous allegory for the perils of following retrotopian dreams.

Notes

1. "Brexit" refers to the referendum held on 23 June 2016, when 51.9% of the United Kingdom electorate voted to leave the European Union (EU).
2. A recent Special Issue of *Journal of Politics and International Relations* contained no less than 17 articles on various aspects of Brexit.
3. The notion of replacing the EU with an "Anglosphere" amongst Britain's former dominions EU, popular with Eurosceptics, is probably the most obvious example of this tendency.
4. None of this is to deny that the EU suffers several institutional and systemic dysfunctions (a severe democratic deficit, inefficiency, etc.) or that the grievances Eurosceptics have with the EU are irrational or illegitimate.
5. By virtue of the UK's system of government, in which parliament in London is sovereign over rest of the UK, English nationalists are "forced" to speak "the language of Britishness" when making Eurosceptic arguments about regaining sovereignty.
6. It is worth clarifying that this is not posited as the only narrative available, clearly many Scottish, Welsh and Irish national narratives differ considerably, while alternative narratives for Englishness and Britishness are in circulation; I merely suggest the one outlined below has been dominant across large parts of Britain, especially England.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Paul Beaumont  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3778-2355>

References

- Albert, S. (1977). Temporal comparison theory. *Psychological Review*, 84(6), 485.
- Ashcroft, L. (2016). How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday ... and why. Retrieved from <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>
- Bauman, Z. (2017). *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brown, R., & Middendorf, J. (1996). The underestimated role of temporal comparison: A test of the life-span model. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 136(3), 325–331.
- Clarke, H. D., Goodwin, M., & Whiteley, P. (2017). *Brexit: Why Britain voted to leave the European Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clunan, A. L. (2009). *The social construction of Russia's resurgence*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Clunan, A. L. (2014). Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47(3), 281–290.
- Corbett, S. (2016). The social consequences of Brexit for the UK and Europe: Euroscepticism, populism, nationalism, and societal division. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 6(1), 11–31.
- Daddow, O. J. (2006). Euroscepticism and history education in Britain. *Government and Opposition*, 41(1), 64–85.
- Dhingra, S., Huang, H., Ottaviano, G., Paulo Pessoa, J., Sampson, T., & Van Reenen, J. (2017). The costs and benefits of leaving the EU: Trade effects. *Economic Policy*, 32(92), 651–705.
- Diez, T. (2004). Europe's others and the return of geopolitics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17(2), 319–335.
- Eley, G. (2001). Finding the people's war: Film, British collective memory, and World War II. *The American Historical Review*, 106(3), 818–838.
- Ford, R., & Goodwin, M. (2014). Understanding UKIP: Identity, social change and the left behind. *The Political Quarterly*, 85(3), 277–284.
- Freedman, J. (2016). Status insecurity and temporality in world politics. *European Journal of International Relations*, 22(4), 797–822.
- Goodwin, M., & Heath, O. (2016a). The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: An aggregate-level analysis of the result. *The Political Quarterly*, 87(3), 323–332.
- Goodwin, M., & Heath, O. (2016b). Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities. Retrieved from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation website: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities>
- Goodwin, M., & Milazzo, C. (2017). Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1369148117710799
- Hedetoft, U. (1993). National identity and mentalities of war in three EC countries. *Journal of Peace Research*, 30(3), 281–300.
- Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Liñeira, R., Scully, R., Wincott, D., & Wyn Jones, R. (2016). England, Englishness and Brexit. *The Political Quarterly*, 87(2), 187–199.
- Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D., & Wyn Jones, R. (2017). How Brexit was made in England. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1369148117730542
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2004). Does identity or economic rationality drive public opinion on European integration?. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 37(3), 415–420.
- Hopkin, J. (2017). When Polanyi met Farage: Market fundamentalism, economic nationalism, and Britain's exit from the European Union. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1369148117710894.
- The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2016). *UK press coverage of EU Referendum campaign dominated by pro-leave*. Retrieved from The Reuters Institute Oxford: <https://>

reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/uk-press-coverage-eu-referendum-campaign-dominated-pro-leave

- Larson, D. W., & Shevchenko, A. (2003). Shortcut to greatness: The new thinking and the revolution in Soviet foreign policy. *International Organization*, 57(01), 77–109.
- Lubbers, M., & Scheepers, P. (2007). Explanations of political euro-scepticism at the individual, regional and national levels. *European Societies*, 9(4), 643–669.
- Maier, J., & Rittberger, B. (2008). Shifting Europe's boundaries: Mass media, public opinion and the enlargement of the EU. *European Union Politics*, 9(2), 243–267.
- Menon, A., & Salter, J.-P. (2016). Brexit: Initial reflections. *International Affairs*, 92(6), 1297–1318.
- Sagan, S. D. (1997). Why do states build nuclear weapons? Three models in search of a bomb. *International security*, 21(3), 54–86.
- Shirbon, E. (2016). Brexit debate brings out Britain's World War Two fixation. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-worldwartwo/brexit-debate-brings-out-britain-s-world-war-two-fixation-idUKKCN0YP1XO>
- Sun, T. (2016, June 10). Sun Says: We urge our readers to BeLEAVE in Britain and vote to quit the EU on June 23, Editorial. *The Sun*. Retrieved from <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1277920/we-urge-our-readers-to-believe-in-britain-and-vote-to-leave-the-eu-in-referendum-on-june-23/>
- Swales, K. (2016). *Understanding the leave vote*. London: NatCen Social Research. Retrieved from https://whatukthinks.org/eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NatCen_Brexplanations-report-FINAL-WEB2.pdf
- Tajfel, H. E., & Turner, J. (1979). An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Todd, J. (2016). *The UK's relationship with Europe: Struggling over sovereignty*. Switzerland: Springer.
- Tomlinson, S., & Dorling, D. (2016). Brexit has its roots in the British Empire – so how do we explain it to the young? *New Statesman-The Staggers*< Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/05/brexit-has-its-roots-britishempire-so-how-do-we-explain-it-young>>
- Utley, R. (2002). 'Not to do less but to do better...': French military policy in Africa. *International Affairs*, 78(1), 129–146.
- Vasilopoulou, S. (2013). Continuity and change in the study of Euroscepticism: Plus ça change? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51(1), 153–168.
- Watkins, S. (2016). Casting off? : New Left Rev Ltd 6 Meard St, London W1V 3HR, England.
- Watt, N. (2013, November 15, 2017). David Cameron defends lack of apology for British massacre at Amritsar. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/feb/20/david-cameron-amritsar-massacre-india>
- Wellings, B. (2010). Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 16(3), 488–505.
- Wolf, M. (2016). Brexit will reconfigure the UK economy. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/29a7964c-3953-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7>
- YouGov. (2014). The British Empire is “something to be proud of”. from YouGov. Retrieved from <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire/>
- YouGov. (2016). *YouGov poll*. Retrieved from https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/95euxfgway/InternalResults_160118_BritishEmpire_Website.pdf
- YouGov/Prospect. (2015). You Gov Poll of UKIP. from YouGov. Retrieved from https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/owc2a5orpr/Establishment_Extra_Variables_Website.pdf
- Zell, E., & Alicke, M. D. (2009). Self-evaluative effects of temporal and social comparison. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(1), 223–227.