A Revolutionary Moment Founded on Forgetting: How Narratives of the UK's Place in Europe and the World made Brexit Possible

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Introduction

The boiled-down story of British participation in European integration is that of initial disdain followed by an awkward, protracted period of seeking accommodation for national interests that led to a messy withdrawal from supranational institutionalism. Yet leaving the EU was, unlike previous notable episodes of negotiating special treatment such as Margaret Thatcher's budget rebate, John Major's Euro opt-out or David Cameron's pre-referendum renegotiation, an explicitly revolutionary act for which there was no precedent. It was revolutionary, in the words of the UK Brexit negotiator Lord David Frost, in the sense that it was

> "above all a revolt against a system – against as it were, an 'authorised version' of European politics, against a system in which there is only one way to do politics and one policy choice to be made in many cases".[1]

Sovereignty was thus at the heart of this revolution, whose supporters coalesced around a set of grievances that served to delegitimise EU membership and sought to will into existence a British political system that could decide independently on major economic and social policies such as immigration, trade, or state aid. Yet while British Euroscepticism excelled at finding flaws in the EU system, its ability to imagine a restored form of British sovereignty was, as this article argues, dependent on the use of selective historical narratives anchored in acts of historical forgetting or mis-remembering.[2]

EU institutions and their leaders had long been an easy target for acerbic British political rhetoric and the recurrent butt of newspaper ridicule.[3] However, the UK position towards the single market as a free-trade area promoting free enterprise was far more positive. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government had come to terms with the creation of a genuine single market via the elimination of national

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1. D. FROST, *Speech at the College d'Europe*, Bruges, 17.02.2020. Available at https://no10media.bl og.gov.uk/2020/02/17/david-frost-lecture-reflections-on-the-revolutions-in-europe/.
2. S. USHERWOOD, *The third era of British Euroscepticism: Brexit as a paradigm shift*, in: *The Political Quarterly*, 89(2018), pp.553-559.
3. P. COPELAND, N. COPSEY, *Rethinking Britain and the European Union: Politicians, the Media and Public Opinion Reconsidered*, in: *JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(2017), pp.709-726; P. ANDERSON, T. WEYMOUTH, *Insulting the Public? The British Press and the European Union*, second edition, Routledge, Abingdon, 2017.

vetoes that otherwise made agreement on common economic regulation virtually impossible.[4] By the time Tony Blair became UK Prime Minister in 1997, the UK had managed to achieve a multi-tiered level of EU integration as compared to those countries on course to join the single European currency, all the while earning a reputation as an "awkward partner".[5] Blair subsequently negotiated an opt-out of the Schengen border-free area and its associated common policies on asylum and immigration, counterbalancing British exceptionalism by also promoting cooperation in foreign and security policy.[6] On the surface at least, the UK seemed to know exactly what it did and did not want to obtain via European integration.

In reality, the decade preceding the Brexit referendum was characterized by defensiveness on the part of successive UK governments that tested to its limits opting out of EU policies. Behind this demand for special treatment lay a convergence of theoretical and practical considerations. The long-standing preoccupation with parliamentary sovereignty – which had almost derailed the ratification of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty – fused with the politicisation of migration from the EU. Unlike other large EU countries, the UK had not chosen to place temporary limits on workers from Eastern and Central Europe after the 2004 EU enlargement. The number coming to the UK for employment far exceeded the government's initial estimates and in the decade that followed, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) proved extremely successful at turning the sovereignty debate into one over immigration from Eastern Europe.[7] This message about the loss of control over migration policy and the perceived associated pressures on wages and public services clearly resonated with the British public: UKIP came ahead in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament with 27% of the votes cast.

Although confronted by rising domestic Euroscepticism inside and outside his own party, Prime Minister David Cameron was not exactly in uncharted waters. Numerous Eurosceptic parties across the EU gained traction in the same period, especially in countries confronted by the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis.[8] What was different in the UK context was political parties' apparent willingness to see the positive side of staking everything on an In/Out referendum. Whereas in France, for instance, François Hollande excluded the idea of resorting to direct democracy on issues of EU policy because of the deep scars left by the 2005 referendum on the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, this was not the case in the UK. Already in 2010, the pro-EU Liberal Democrats had campaigned on a policy of lin-

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4. S. WALL, *Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

5. S. GEORGE, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

6. S. WALL, op.cit.

7. R. FORD, M GOODWIN, *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain*, Routledge, London, 2014.

8. H. KRIESI, J. LORENZINI, B. WÜEST, S. HAUSERMANN (eds), *Contention in Times of Crisis: Recession and Political Protest in Thirty European Countries*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020.

king any new EU treaty to a membership referendum – an idea reprised by the Labour Party in the 2015 general election.[9] On the Conservative side, former Prime Minister John Major argued that an EU membership referendum could be cathartic for UK politics, an idea also supported at the time by Boris Johnson.[10] Cameron's suggestion that an In/Out referendum would settle an issue that bedevilled UK politics was also popular amongst the electorate.[11]

As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, revolutions do not necessarily start with revolutionary intent. When Louis XVI convoked the Estates General and charged them with compiling a list of grievances the objective was to remedy policy failures and not to overturn the social fabric.[12] The first indication during the 2016 referendum that the status quo was at risk of unravelling was the way senior Conservative Party figures came to advocate EU withdrawal for the sake of controlling immigration. The stump speeches of Michael Gove and Boris Johnson in effect replicated core UKIP arguments and sabotaged the government's economic message about the risks of leaving the EU.[13] The inability of Cameron to use economic and political risk, a tactic that had proved successful in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, to swing the vote tells its own tale of public grievances.[14] In particular, it was Cameron's economic policy of imposing deep cuts to public spending, whose effect was magnified in the already poorer regions of England, that made it so risky to bet on public support for the status quo. Austerity Britain was in effect in revolt, which meant opposition to the EU – an all-encompassing proxy for the country's ills – within the country at large, as well as within his own party, was far greater than Cameron had imagined.[15]

However, rather than retelling the causes of these grievances, the puzzle this article seeks to solve is how multiple historical narratives about the UK and its place in Europe, as well as the wider world, made this revolutionary moment possible by virtue of their common acts of forgetting. Many existing accounts associate the

9. C. LEQUESNE, *La politique extérieure de François Hollande: entre interventionnisme libéral et nécessité européenne*, Sciences Po Grenoble, Working Paper no. 23, available at https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01063241/.
10. J. MAJOR, *The referendum on Europe: opportunity or threat?*, speech at Chatham House, London, 14.02.2013, available at http://www.ukpol.co.uk/sir-john-major-2013-speech-on-the-european-union/; B. JOHNSON, *Speech at Bloomberg*, London, 06.08.2014, available at bj-europe-speech.pdf.
11. *Internationalism or Isolationism?*, The Chatham House –YouGov Survey, 30.01.2015, available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/2015/01/internationalism-or-isolationism-chatham-house-yougov-survey.
12. A. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, trans. G. BEVAN, Penguin UK, Harmondsworth, 2008.
13. H. CLARKE, M. GOODWIN, P. WHITELEY, *Brexit! Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017.
14. C. PATTIE, R. JOHNSTON*, Sticking to the Union? Nationalism, inequality and political disaffection and the geography of Scotland's 2014 independence referendum*, in: *Regional & Federal Studies*, 27(2017), pp.83-96.
15. T. FETZER, *Did austerity cause Brexit?*, in: *American Economic Review*, 109(2019), pp.3849-3886.

2016 referendum with the rise of populism and the spread of particular anti-EU narratives grounded in Englishness,[16] the Anglosphere,[17] and nostalgia about former national glories, even if the latter has a rather mythologized component.[18] Yet such explanations have neglected to dwell on the common revolutionary intent behind seeking to sunder the UK's links to supranational integration. The objective here is thus to demonstrate how multiple historical narratives served to delegitimise European integration, both as inimical to UK democracy and as a source of noisome policy constraints.[19] Moreover, the analysis further demonstrates how these narratives of delegitimation in turn depended in various ways on a highly selective reading of British history and convenient acts of forgetting or misremembering the role of economic or political borders. It was precisely this combination of selective historical memory and a narrative of EU oppression that spurred the Brexit revolution on to success.

Eurosceptic narratives of difference and otherness prior to 2016

There is a rich historiography devoted to debating the nature of British exceptionalism in Europe, covering a period that stretches back far beyond the first stirrings of post-war supranationalism.[20] That there is, ideologically speaking, so much at stake in how the historical record of the UK's relationship with European states and societies is interpreted should come as no surprise. This is because generations of British politicians adopted a rhetoric of exceptionalism to justify their stance on questions of European integration, ranging from Winston Churchill's oft-repeated "we are with Europe, but not of it", to Cameron's assertion that the UK approa-

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16. A. HENDERSON, R. WYN JONES, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021.
17. B. WELLINGS, A. MYCOCK (eds), *The Anglosphere: Continuity, Dissonance and Location*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020; D.BELL, S.VUCETIC, *Brexit, CANZUK, and the legacy of empire*, in: *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(2019), pp.573-591.
18. P. GILROY, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004; R. SAUNDERS, *Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia*, in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48(2020), pp.1140-1174.
19. This account will not dwell on the Lexit narrative, which provided a socialist argument for leaving the EU (see A. CALLINICOS, *The Internationalist Case for Leaving the EU,* in: *International Socialism*, 148(2015), available at http://isj.org.uk/the-internationalist-case-against-the-europe an-union/), because this line of thinking crystallised only in the run-up to the referendum and was also inherently transnational. That is, its core claim was not that European integration was specifically problematic for the UK, rather that – as demonstrated by the EU response to the Eurozone debt crisis – the treaty-based system was inimical to radical redistributive policies.
20. J.G.A. POCOCK, *Enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, revolution and counter-revolution; a eurosceptical enquiry*, in: *History of Political Thought*, 20(1999), pp.125-139.

ches the EU "with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional".[21] British exceptionalism, however, has no single master narrative; rather, there are multiple strands that emphasise differences with European countries and highlight supposed British otherness in political, cultural, or even religious terms.[22] In the decades immediately prior to the 2016 referendum there are two main historical narratives, which partly overlapped at times, about British identity that deserve special attention. The first relates to the notion of an Anglosphere as an imagined community linking the UK's past and future; the second can be couched in terms of a form of identity politics inherently connected to memories of Britain's military power and imperial past, which was best expressed by Paul Gilroy as "postcolonial melancholia".[23] That is, a cultural pathology, which in his words,

> "is, at root, the morbid core of England and Englishness in remorseless decline, the same strain that feeds interminable and increasingly desperate speculations about the content and character of the shrinking culture that makes England distinctive".[24]

It was Churchill who most famously promoted the idea that there existed a special bond between "English-speaking peoples" that was a product of British settler imperialism.[25] This conceit tapped into a deeper intellectual tradition of British thinking about federalism that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, sought to address interlinked problems of imperial rule, relations with Ireland, and Britain's role in Europe.[26] A hundred years later, the existence of a shared space of values and common identity stretching from the mid-Atlantic to Australia and New Zealand with the mid-Atlantic as its centre served "to offer an alternative role for Britain in the world which was not defined by its membership of the European Union".[27] The neologism "Anglosphere" thus became a convenient lens through which to critique the EU as the wrong choice of political union.

The argument of the proponents of an Anglosphere union rested on two components. The first revolved around the historical continuity of democratic institutions in supposedly kindred, English-speaking countries. The idea of a common democratic heritage emanating from the mother country was the running thread in

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21. Winston Churchill in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 15.02.1930, quoted in R. COUDENHOVE-KALERGI, *An Idea Conquers the World*, Hutchinson, London, 1953, pp.162-163; *David Cameron's EU speech*, in: *The Guardian*, 23.01.2013, available at https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jan/23/david-cameron-eu-speech-referendum.
22. C. METHUEN, *The Reformation and Brexit. History, historiography and the position of the United Kingdom in Europe*, in: *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, 108(2018), pp.185-204.
23. B. WELLINGS, H. BAXENDALE*, Euroscepticism and the Anglosphere: Traditions and Dilemmas in Contemporary English Nationalism*, in: *JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(2015), pp.123-139; P. GILROY, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, op.cit.
24. P. GILROY, *Joined up Politics and Post-colonial Melancholia*, in: *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 18(2001), pp.151-167, esp. p.162.
25. W. CHURCHILL**,** *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Dorset Press, New York, 1990.
26. D. BELL, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.
27. A. GAMBLE, *The Brexit Negotiations and the Anglosphere*, in: *The Political Quarterly*, 92(2021), pp.108-112 (quotation p.109).

Churchill's four-volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.[28] This narrative was subsequently adapted for Eurosceptic purposes to make parliamentary democracy and the common law tradition stand out as distinctive features of a common "Anglo" identity that made for an unflattering contrast with European struggles with authoritarianism.[29] By extension, the risk was that European integration – a necessary step to make Europe safe for democracy and reconstruct the nation-state – in turn eroded Britain's democratic fabric via the creation of a super-state, just as Thatcher warned against in her 1988 Bruges Speech.[30] The second element of this anti-EU critique was that membership of this club prevented closer trade and political ties with the Anglosphere at a time when the Indo-Pacific was becoming the centre of the world economy and the crucible of a host of security issues.[31] Taken together, the overriding message was that the UK was simply in the wrong club.

The construction of this imagined Anglosphere community points to the significance that self-government and associated notions of control played in British critiques of the EU well before 2016. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the articulation of an "open seas" alternative to European integration went hand in hand with the rise in English nationalism. Support for the Anglosphere was typically couched in emotive terms linked to identity more than cold economic calculation, as in Boris Johnson's argument that the UK had "betrayed our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand" by joining the European Economic Community (EEC).[32] By the time of the 2016 referendum, political scientists were able to identify a notable link between support for Brexit and Englishness as a primary self-ascribed national identity.[33] In other parts of the UK, notably Scotland and Northern Ireland, national identity was more compatible with seeing the positive aspects of the EU, or at least accepting of its constraints. By contrast, Europe, in the words of Henderson et al., "appears to have developed as Englishness's "other"', precisely because of a sense of the equation between the EU and a loss of control and even status.[34]

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28. W. CHURCHILL, *A History…*, op.cit.
29. R. CONQUEST, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, Norton, New York/London, 1999; J.C. BENNETT, *The Anglosphere challenge: Why the English-speaking nations will lead the way in the twenty-first century*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2007.
30. A. MILWARD, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, Routledge, London, 1992; M. THATCHER, *Speech to the College of Europe*, 20.09.1988, available at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332.
31. J.C. BENNETT, op.cit.; M. KENNY, N. PEARCE, *Shadows of empire: The Anglosphere in British politics,* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018.
32. B. JOHNSON, *Britain must look "beyond" the EU and focus on links to the Commonwealth*, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 25.08.2013.
33. M KENNY, N. PEARCE, *After Brexit; The Eurosceptic dream of an Anglosphere*, in: *Juncture* 22(2016), pp.304-307; A. HENDERSON, C.JEFFERY, R. LINEIRA, R. SCULLY, D. WINCOTT, R. WYN JONES, *England, Englishness and Brexit,* in: *The Political Quarterly*, 87(2016), pp.187-199.
34. A. HENDERSON et al., op.cit., quotation p.198.

The ability of populist politicians, notably Nigel Farage as leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), to tap into English nationalism in the early twenty-first century was undoubtedly linked to the cultural construction of grievances in the decades prior to the referendum. Tempting though it is to equate nationalist criticism of the EU with nostalgia for the days of British imperial glory, the reality is more nuanced because of the way myths of empire could be fused with myths of Europe.[35] That is, proponents of British participation in European integration had from the 1960s onwards sought to portray this move as a continuation of power projection and maintaining global influence in keeping with the sanitised idea of the imperial project. This legacy was still present when, during the 2005 UK rotating presidency of the Council, the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown used the slogan of "Global Britain, Global Europe" to invoke the UK's global outlook as the model for making the EU more of an international player.[36]

The frustrations that helped fuel English nationalism can thus be traced back to both the disappointment that EU membership did not live up to out-sized British expectations as well as to the longing to revive older imperial ties in the name of self-government. As a broad church encompassing those on the left as well as on the right, English Euroscepticism was very much grounded in what Gilroy dubbed "post-colonial melancholia".[37] This melancholy was notably visible in the run-up to Brexit in the discourses surrounding immigration, which reflected the way the UK ceased to be an emigration state – as it had been from 1850-1980, except for the 1930s – the phenomenon that created the possibility of an Anglosphere in the first place.[38] The long-standing racialized attitudes towards migration from the former British empire that had spawned the post-war Commonwealth Immigration Acts intersected with new forms of differentiation triggered by the neoliberal decades of Thatcher and Blair.[39] Migration was not just considered from the perspective of racial or cultural homogeneity, but also in terms of individual contributions to the national economy in which the distinction between good/bad, wanted/unwanted, and skilled/unskilled migrants took on huge significance. Farage played explicitly on this theme during the referendum campaign by claiming that ditching free

35. R. SAUNDERS, *Yes to Europe!: The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018.
36. A. GLENCROSS, D. McCOURT, *Living Up to a New Role in the World: The Challenges of "Global Britain"*, in: *Orbis*, 62(2018), pp.582-597.
37. P. GILROY, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, op.cit.
38. F. FOKS, *Emigration State: Race, Citizenship and Settler Imperialism in Modern British History, c. 1850–1972*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(2022), pp.170-199; J. BELICH, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Rise of the Anglo-World 1783-1939*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.
39. D. DEAN, *The Conservative government and the 1961 Commonwealth Immigration Act: the inside story,* in: *Race & Class*, 35(1993), pp.57-74; R. HANSEN, *The Kenyan Asians, British Politics, and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968*, in: *The Historical Journal*, 42(1999), pp.809-834.

movement of EU citizens in favour of a skills-based migration policy would allow "more black people [to] qualify to come in [to the UK]".[40]

A key factor in the sedimentation of this type of social stratification in public discourse was the highly successful politicisation by UKIP of free movement of people from EU countries after 2004. Alone among the larger member states, the UK did not impose temporary restrictions on free movement of citizens from the eight Eastern and Central European countries (A8) that joined in 2004. Tony Blair's government dramatically under-estimated the resulting migratory flows to the extent that the original prediction of a yearly net total of up to 13,000 extra migrants per annum was wrong by a factor of nearly 10 as in 2007 112,000 A8 citizens moved to the UK, combined with 77,000 from other EU countries.[41] The political costs of free movement rose again following an upsurge in EU migration after 2012, when the UK economy proved more robust than that of the Eurozone and functioned, alongside Germany but not France, as an employment market of last resort.[42] The diplomatic and economic benefits of this liberal immigration policy were offset by its political costs – former Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw, whose ministry commissioned the estimates on A8 migration, later described the failure to impose immigration restrictions as a "spectacular mistake".[43] Philip Hammond, Theresa May's former Chancellor, echoed this sentiment by claiming that

> "if you were to take a single decision in this whole [Brexit] saga that has led to where we are now, it would be Tony Blair's decision not to impose transitional controls in 2004".[44]

The principle of free movement was impugned as proof of the UK's loss of sovereignty and in particular as a "free for all" that prevented the government from choosing "good" migrants over "bad" ones. Hence UKIP's signature migration policy for a post-Brexit world, which was adopted by the Conservative government of Boris Johnson, was modelled on the Australian notion of "points-based" migration to privilege skilled workers or those who can fill key gaps in the economy. The melancholy conclusion, which resonated with voters on the right and the "Blue Labour" side of the left, was that EU membership meant the UK's economy and public services were at risk of exploitation.[45] That is why David Cameron, during

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40. *More Black people will be allowed into Britain if we leave the EU and immigration will become a "non-issue" says Nigel Farage*, in: *Daily Mail*, 08.06. 2016, available at https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3630847/More-black-people-allowed-Britain-leave-EU-immigration-non-issue-says-Nigel-Farage.html.
41. J. SALT *International Migration and the United Kingdom: Report of the United Kingdom SOPEMI Correspondent to the OECD*, Migration Research Unit, London, 2015.
42. H. THOMPSON, *Inevitability and contingency: the political economy of Brexit*, in: *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(2017), pp.434-449.
43. *Jack Straw regrets opening door to Eastern Europe migrants*, in: *BBC News*, 13.11.2013, available at https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-24924219.
44. *UK in a Changing Europe, Philip Hammond*, available at https://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexit-witness-archive/philip-hammond/.
45. R. JOBSON, *Blue Labour and nostalgia: the politics of tradition*, in: *Renewal: a Journal of Social Democracy*, 22(2014), pp.102-117.

the referendum campaign, claimed he had successfully renegotiated the terms of EU membership to prevent EU migrants getting "something for nothing".[46] Another aspect of the Eurosceptic take on the otherness of EU migrants as unskilled workers attracted by higher welfare and wages was the way it implicitly acknowledged the existence of a more optimistic multi-ethnic narrative of UK nationhood as best captured perhaps by the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony.[47] Advocates of the official Vote Leave campaign were at pains to point out that ending free movement of people would entail removing the legal preference for European migrants. Priti Patel, a Leave-backing Conservative MP and future cabinet minister, inveighed against a supposedly biased pro-EU migration policy that was discriminatory because it meant "temples and gurdwaras have difficulties bringing priests in. Our communities struggle to get visas for kabaddi players".[48] In other words, ending free movement – part of the authorised version of politics the Brexit revolution sought to do away with – was at times presented as a way to enable a post-racial reconfiguration of UK immigration policies more geared towards the Commonwealth.[49]

Narratives of Oppression with a Common Feature: the Delegitimation of the EU

Even if the historical narratives of UK difference varied in origin and emphasis, they shared a distinctive common complaint: a sense that EU membership was oppressive, an external imposition of ill-suited rules alongside an alien identity. As shown above, it was above all the founding principles of European integration that had to be rejected, whether in the form of free movement of people or, more broadly, EU legal supremacy that reduced the UK's democratic autonomy. This commonality can also be expressed in terms of a shared revolutionary intent to upend a particular legal-political order in order to restore British sovereignty. The justification for this revolt came from specific historical narratives that denied the legitimacy of the EU order by drawing on notions of the Anglosphere, English nationalism, and of post-colonial melancholy. The idea of challenging the legitimacy of the international status quo has been a feature of modern European history from the French revolution onwards, which ultimately makes it the appropriate analytical framework on which to ground Brexit, as compared with challenging the EU from

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46. A. GLENCROSS, *Why the UK Voted for Brexit: David Cameron's Great Miscalculation*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.
47. C. BAKER, *Beyond the island story?: The opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games as public history*, in: *Rethinking History*, 19(2015), pp.409-428.
48. PICKARD J., *Vote Leave woos British Asians with migration leaflets*, in: *The Financial Times*, 19.05.2016, available at https://www.ft.com/content/94adcefa-1dd5-11e6-a7bc-ee846770ec15.
49. E. NAMUSOKE, *A divided family: Race, the Commonwealth and Brexit*, in: *The Round Table*, 105(2016), pp.463-476.

within.[50] Whereas policy differentiation, which typically takes the form of opt-outs such as not using the Euro, is a process of negotiating differences within a settled order, Brexit was based on a narrative of oppression that rejected the basic principle of pooling sovereignty.[51]

A handy conceptual guide for understanding the importance of these narratives of oppression can be found in Henry Kissinger's account of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe – the body dedicated to re-establishing a stable international order in post-Napoleonic Europe.[52] Of course, the allied powers that assembled in Vienna in 1814-15 to redraw Europe's borders and associated spheres of influence were primarily interested in the military equilibrium that could remove threats to peace, whereas recourse to force is unthinkable in the EU-UK relationship. However, intimately nestled within nineteenth-century Europe's balance of power consideration was the issue, as Kissinger masterfully demonstrated, of the legitimacy of the settlement. It is precisely on this point that parallels with the origins of the UK-EU split emerge.

What the Congress of Vienna needed to achieve, in Kissinger's reading, was an outcome that gave neither total satisfaction nor total dissatisfaction to any of the major powers (Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia). Reaching this goal was not a mechanical calculation based on an abstract formula for how to carve up Europe in a manner that could reconcile competing interests. Rather, it was a negotiation centred on accepting a legitimizing principle that allowed each major power to accept the existence of the others and their associated claims. The key to success was finding a consensus over territory, rights, and obligations that was compatible with each of the great power's historical and cultural understandings of their standing and interests. In Kissinger's memorable words, the Vienna settlement that lasted the best part of fifty years was "a stage in a process by which a nation reconcile[d] its vision of itself with the vision of it by other powers".[53] The UK referendum of 2016 was nothing if not a debate over the UK's vision of itself in relation to Europe and the world. The dominant narratives surrounding re-engaging with the Anglosphere, controlling migration, or those giving voice to English nationalism were framed in terms of how far British identity and public policies should be defined by European influence. Indeed, taken to its logical extreme, the narrative of British otherness rejected the very notion that a comparison with European states was legitimate, meaning the project of supranational integration was itself redun-

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50. M. BELISSA, *Repenser l'ordre européen (1795-1802). De la société des rois aux droits des nations*, in: *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 343(2006), pp.163-166), available at https://journals.openedition.org/ahrf/10122?lang=en.

51. F. SCHIMMELFENNIG, T. WINZEN, *Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020.

52. H. KISSINGER, *The Congress of Vienna: A Reappraisal*, in: *World Politics*, 8(1956), pp.264-280; B. De GRAAF, *Fighting Terror after Napoleon: How Europe Became Secure after 1815*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020.

53. H. KISSINGER, op.cit., quotation p.264.

dant from a UK perspective. As the Eurosceptic commentator Gwythian Prins wrote,

> "the success of the British nation-state both in itself and as a global role model must not be tarred with the transcontinental failures of Austria-Hungary, Russia, the Balkan states, imperial and later Nazi Germany – or France".[54]

Critics of Kissinger's historical analysis have pointed to the somewhat fuzzy definition of what the legitimising principle really was in the case of the Vienna settlement. Claiming that an order whose structure is accepted by all major powers is "legitimate" begs the question of why those same powers have come to this conclusion. Where Kissinger's thesis is much more analytically precise is on the subject of what constitutes a break with established principles of legitimacy, i.e. a revolutionary creed, which is one that is open-ended and not self-limiting. For Kissinger, the development of a revolutionary intention of upending an existing order is associated with the feeling within a country that the existing international order is "oppressive" or inimical to its interests. He contrasted this revolutionary intention with the more limited goal of negotiating differences over a "just arrangement" within a settled regional order.[55]

This distinction between working out policy differences whilst accepting a regional order and seeking to upend the foundations of that order can be applied to the logic of pre-2016 Eurosceptic narratives in the UK. A central feature of the narratives of UK/English difference was the notion that major policy and ideological differences simply could not be settled from within the EU system. The Anglosphere or open seas project entailed regaining sovereignty over trade policy and associated regulatory policies such as product standards or how to secure consumer data, which was incompatible with the EU common commercial policy as well as legal supremacy. Similarly, critics of EU migration rules demanded wholesale reform in the shape notably of quantitative restrictions, which ran counter to the Treaty of Rome. By articulating such maximalist objectives – that the EU by definition could not concede ground on without calling into question its founding treaties – these narratives reinforced the Eurosceptic slogan that the EU was "unreformable". The Leave-supporting Northern Ireland Secretary, Theresa Villiers, used that exact term in a stump speech to argue that the EU is

> "unreformable because it always has been […] and always will be […] primarily a political project. However hard we work, whatever we say, whatever we do […] that will never change".[56]

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54. G. PRINS, *Beyond the Ghosts: Does EU Membership Nourish or Consume British Interests and Global Influence*, in: P. MINFORD, J.R. SHACKLETON (eds), *Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Britain and Europe's Dysfunctional Relationship*, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 2016, quotation p.62.

55. H. KISSINGER, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1957.

56. T. VILLIERS, *Vote Leave and Take Back Control*, speech at the *Financial Times* Future of Europe Conference, London, 14.04.2016, available at https://www.theresavilliers.co.uk/news/vote-leave-and-take-back-control-speech-theresa-villiers.

David Cameron was nevertheless caught out by his failure to appreciate that revolutionary demands of this magnitude could not be satisfied by limiting his negotiating demands to cosmetic or legalistic modifications. The referendum result was an explicit disavowal of his strategy of renegotiating the terms of membership in the European Council prior to the 2016 vote. A reformist approach was plausible to the degree that the UK, as a member state, sought to find a "just settlement" within the EU system, as it had done previously with policy opt-outs, the budget rebate, or Harold Wilson's renegotiation.[57] Indeed, the ability to find such an arrangement is the hallmark for Kissinger of a legitimate order, i.e. one in which all states are somewhat unsatisfied with the outcome. The principle of finding a just settlement within an order that is accepted by sovereign states as legitimate stands in stark contrast to revolutionary claims made by a country that feels particularly oppressed and seeks to overturn that order. Most importantly, for Kissinger, a "legitimate order limits the possible by the just; a revolutionary order identifies the just with the physically possible".[58] Brexiteers, both during and after the referendum, pushed for an absolutist vision of UK sovereignty that would secure certain economic benefits of integration shorn of any political constraints. Compared to these revolutionary demands, the lacklustre results of Cameron's diplomatic efforts confirmed Brexiteers' assumptions that the existing EU order was oppressive and inimical to UK interests.

   In other words, the electoral coalition behind Brexit was predicated on calling into question the legitimacy of the EU order, at least from the perspective of British interests that apparently could be much better served under a completely new framework, or even none at all. This approach was a fundamental departure from the traditional UK method of negotiating differentiated integration on the basis of finding what Kissinger would have called a just arrangement via consensus and self-limitation on the goals advocated. For in these earlier episodes covering notably the budget rebate or the Euro opt-out, the British government voluntarily agreed to limit the scope of conflict – Thatcher refused to withhold contributions to the EEC budget to force Brussels' hand while Major accepted the principle of EMU – and avoided questioning the whole institutional edifice or its legal foundations. Instead, the UK embarked on differentiation by presenting its preferences within the framework of the existing order that accepted both the legitimacy of the institutional order and the need to find consensus to reform it. Given the relative success of this reformist approach, therefore, why did narratives of oppression via European integration take root in UK political culture? The solution to this puzzle, as argued below, can be found in the process of (mis)remembering and forgetting that characterised British Eurosceptic narratives.

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57. S. WALL, *Stranger in Europe…*, op.cit.
58. H. KISSINGER, *A World Restored…*, op.cit., quotation p.172.

A Revolution based on Forgetting

Theresa May referred to Brexit as a "quiet revolution", an observation that allowed her to pinpoint a key source of the sentiment of oppression that came to define Eurosceptic narratives.[59] As part of the justification for triggering the formal start of withdrawal talks, her government published a Brexit White Paper claiming that "whilst Parliament has remained sovereign throughout our membership of the EU, it has not always felt like that".[60] This explicit appeal to the authority of feeling was in keeping with the Conservative Party's traditional worldview "which privileged the certainty of experience over the abstractions of reason".[61] Yet the actual process by which feelings came to replace facts in the British discussion over EU membership can be linked to the way historical narratives about the UK's place in Europe were highly selective in what they remembered or memorialised. In particular, the importance of economic and political borders – alongside the inherent trade-offs in the process of removing them that successive UK governments struggled with – were obscured in the main Eurosceptic narratives.

The UK's relationship with European integration was from the beginning an inherently bordered one. A particular concern was that joining an exclusive and protectionist grouping of West European countries organised as a customs union would damage the UK's other economic relationships and hinder US attempts to liberalise trade globally. This fear was spelled out in a much less-quoted speech by Churchill when, in response to the signing of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, he argued that

> "if […] the European trade community were to be permanently restricted to the six nations, the results might be worse than if nothing were done at all – worse for them as well as for us. It would tend not to unite Europe but to divide it".[62]

Concerns about economic bordering related to trade thus overlapped with worries about political bordering, i.e. the fear of how the UK would be perceived, especially in Washington, if it joined this trade bloc. Already in the late 1940s the Foreign Office was wary of uncritically accepting American plans for economic reconstruction in Western Europe on the basis that this approach would diminish the UK's claim to be a privileged partner in Washington.[63] Hence UK exceptionalism in the face of European institution-building manifested itself initially via a strategy of

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59. T. MAY, *Speech at Tory conference*, in: *The Independent*, 05.10.2016, available at https://www.in dependent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-tory-conference-2016-in-full-transcript-a7 346171.html.
60. *UK government policy paper: The United Kingdom's exit from, and new partnership with, the European Union*, 15.05.2017, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-united-k ingdoms-exit-from-and-new-partnership-with-the-european-union-white-paper/the-united-kingdo ms-exit-from-and-new-partnership-with-the-european-union--2.
61. E. ROBINSON, *The authority of feeling in mid-twentieth-century English Conservatism*, in: *The Historical Journal*, 63(2020), pp.1303-1324, quotation p.1304.
62. W. CHURCHILL, *Complete Speeches*, vol.8, Chelsea House, London, 1974, p.8681.
63. A. MILWARD, *The European Rescue…*, op.cit., quotation p.351.

leadership that first took the form of seeking to negotiate a different type of commercial agreement to undermine ostensibly the EEC, which was establishing a common external tariff. The UK's brainchild was the Free Trade Association: a proposition made in 1956 to members of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and which Charles de Gaulle rejected two years later, forcing the UK to switch track in the form of establishing the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) with six other OEEC countries in 1959.[64]

The pre-history of the UK's EEC membership thus hinged on economic competition and political friction between differently bordered spaces.[65] Yet the failure of UK attempts to counteract the EEC and then to seek leverage over the terms of trade via EFTA is hardly something dwelt upon by supporters of the twenty-first century Anglosphere, open seas narrative of a great trading nation shackled by EU protectionism. Instead, the preferred narrative of Leave-supporting Cabinet Minister Michael Gove was to emphasise the way Brexit would enable the UK to take "an optimistic, forward-looking and genuinely internationalist alternative to the path the EU is going down".[66] When EFTA was referenced, it was in a tendentious fashion as illustrated by the pamphlets penned by Daniel Hannan, the Conservative MEP dubbed "the intellectual godfather of what became the Leave campaign."[67] Without dwelling on its origins, he portrayed EFTA as a mechanism for obtaining the benefits of free trade without constraints on sovereignty, arguing in his 2005 *The Case for EFTA*, published by the Eurosceptic Bruges Group, that Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein "have found a way to have their cake while guzzling away at it". The purpose was to present the single market not as an "all-or-nothing option" because it is "more accurate to think of integration on an issue-by-issue basis: defence, fisheries, free movement of people and so on".[68] Thus Hannan did not dwell on the multiple trade frictions arising from these countries being outside the customs union or the preference of the EU's neighbouring states to find alternative mechanisms to avoid frictions in trade with the single market.

The unwillingness to confront the question of why the UK's alternative to the EEC had failed was an implicit yet essential component of the Anglosphere narrative. By writing off the UK's period of EEC/EU membership as the wrong choice that brought an unwelcome loss of sovereignty especially over trade, it was possible to imagine a simple reversal of what Boris Johnson once called the "betray[al] [of] our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New

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64. L. WARLOUZET, *De Gaulle as a Father of Europe: The Unpredictability of the FTA's failure and the EEC's Success (1956-1958)*, in: *Contemporary European History*, 4(2011), pp.419-434.
65. N.P. LUDLOW, *Dealing with Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
66. M. GOVE, *Full Statement on Why I'm Backing Brexit, The Independent*, 20.02.2016, available at https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-michael-gove-s-full-statement-on-why-he-is-backing-brexit-a6886221.html.
67. T. SHIPMAN, *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain's Political Class*, William Collins, London, 2016, quotation p.7.
68. D. HANNAN, *The Case for EFTA, The Bruges Group*, 2005, available at https://www.brugesgroup.com/media-centre/papers/8-papers/771-the-case-for-efta, quotations pp.3 and 14.

Zealand".[69] The Anglosphere narrative thus rested on avoiding engaging with the historical legacy of the complex debates that had led the UK to forego imperial trading preferences and the EFTA alternative before joining the EEC in order to promote growth and competition. Similarly, while advocates of this option such as David Davis suggested that "after Brexit, the UK should become more like Canada, not Norway or Switzerland", they neglected to take account of how after 1973, Australia and New Zealand had reconfigured their political economies.[70] Rather than escaping geography, as desired in many ways by the Anglosphere model, these countries adapted by focusing on the Pacific region for the same reason that the UK joined the EEC.[71]

Whereas the open seas imaginary of post-Brexit Britain relied on a gross simplification of the UK's original choice to pursue supranational integration in Europe, identity-based narratives of Euroscepticism traded essentially on a theory of UK passivity. That is, the common trope of how EU migration damaged British identity and quality of life was founded on the UK having no agency in managing questions related to migration as an EU member state. The Leave campaign had at its heart a slogan – "take back control" – that made sense only by ignoring the way the UK had shaped EU policy-making in line with its preferences. This was symbolised by two iconic elements of the anti-EU referendum campaign refracted through the lens of migration policy.

Just days before the referendum, UKIP leader Nigel Farage unveiled an anti-EU political poster depicting a long line of non-white, mostly male migrants with the slogan "breaking point". This was an explicit reference to the 2015 refugee crisis in the EU, which had caused division and a scramble for policy responses across national capitals and the EU institutions. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the EU's migration plan was the Commission's proposal for a mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers to ease pressure on certain host countries. However, the UK opt-out from the Justice and Home Affairs component of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union meant that the UK could not, unlike other EU member states (except Ireland), be forced legally to participate in the redistribution scheme. In other words, this identity-based messaging about the threat posed by EU membership worked by eliding the historical fact of the UK's ability to use its clout to avoid sharing an immigration regime for asylum with the rest of the EU.

The creation of a feeling, therefore, of a loss of sovereignty related to immigration policy required a careful exclusion of the historical record of UK agency in this domain. What was remembered was the absence of temporary migration restrictions after the 2004 EU enlargement, not the government's decision to resort to

69. B. JOHNSON, *The Aussies are just like us so let's stop kicking them out*, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 23.08.2013, available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10265619/The-Aussies-are-just-like-us-so-lets-stop-kicking-them-out.html.
70. Quoted in M. KENNY, N. PEARCE, *After Brexit: the Eurosceptic dream of an Anglosphere*, in: *Juncture*, 22(2016), pp.304-307, quotation p.306.
71. D.BELL, S.VUCETIC, *Brexit, CANZUK…*, op.cit., pp.573-591.

them in 2007 when Bulgaria and Romania joined. The fact that enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe was a key UK policy objective – connected to the UK's political economy as well as its desire to avoid being subjected to greater Franco-German coordination – also went unrecognised in this particular Eurosceptic narrative.[72] Yet the prospect of further enlargement played a role in a second memorable episode of the anti-EU campaign that also involved a political poster.

The Vote Leave camp used an image of an EU passport with its pages pulled apart to represent an open door with a trail of footprints leading through it. The slogan appended to the poster read "Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU. Vote Leave, take back control". This message worked on at least two levels: it reinforced the connection between the EU and a loss of control over immigration while also serving as a direct personal challenge to the Prime Minister, David Cameron. The latter was personally on the record as being an advocate of Turkish membership, precisely for reasons associated with the UK approach of favouring EU widening over deepening. Hence it was extremely uncomfortable for Cameron to explain the inherent agency the UK had (as did all member states) to veto Turkish membership if ever the tortuous Commission-led negotiations were concluded favourably. He refused to follow advice from his inner circle that he should state publicly his willingness to veto Turkish membership on the basis, as described in his memoirs, that he was "caught between being a campaigner and being a Prime Minister, and I chose the latter […]. I made the wrong choice".[73]

Conclusions

This article has shown the existence of multiple Eurosceptic stories about Britain's place in Europe and the world that curated a shared narrative of oppression that targeted not just migration policy but economic statecraft in general. These narratives delegitimised EU membership by portraying sovereignty as the freedom to choose better policy options not available when obliged to compromise with other EU countries. Yet the narratives promoting a return to unbridled British sovereignty ignored historical facts either by refusing to acknowledge complex trade-offs involved in the decision to pool sovereignty or by conveniently glossing over UK agency in EU decision-making. It was precisely this combination that gave birth to a revolutionary moment that by delegitimising European integration as an oppressive burden on the UK made the alternative project of taking back control seem preferable. That is why, drawing on Kissinger's reading of nineteenth-century European politics, the analysis insisted that the Brexit impetus followed a different logic from previous UK-EU treaty or policy disputes. Indeed, Brussels recognized the revolutionary intent of the 2016 referendum from the outset: the European Council never

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72. H. THOMPSON, *Inevitability and contingency…*, op.cit.
73. D. CAMERON, *For the Record*, William Collins, London, 2019, quotation p.669.

committed itself to compromise for the purposes of ruling out a chaotic exit as an illegitimate endpoint. The first phase of the Brexit negotiations between 2017-19 was conducted on the basis of the April European Council guidelines stating explicitly that the EU "will prepare itself to be able to handle the situation also if the negotiations were to fail".[74]

Of course, the policy debates over the promise of an Anglosphere alternative to the EU, or those – notably on immigration – that followed in the wake of English nationalism and post-colonial melancholia cannot be understood purely in terms of British historical narratives. The Anglosphere concept was the product of a transnational political elite that drew on a deep imperial history anchored in global economic practices as well as socio-cultural ideas about race or belonging.[75] Hence it will be important for future research to uncover the global connections of Brexit and its revolutionaries in the same way that fascism or populism have inherently globalised trajectories.[76] In this way, the global history of Brexit can be emplotted properly into accounts of the political history of Europe and supranational integration that increasingly eschew treating Europe as a motor of historical change, preferring instead to treat it as one site amongst others of global reconfigurations of power, culture, or trade.[77] Yet the Turkey episode during the referendum also illustrates another essential feature of the Brexit revolution: the unwillingness at various times of key actors to challenge Eurosceptic narratives. Hence any global historical study of what led to the 2016 referendum result will also need to be complemented by a more detailed micro-examination of how acts of forgetting or mis-remembering were left unchallenged at critical moments. The quiet revolution often had noisy cheerleaders, but the silence of their opponents helped amplify anti-EU narratives. From a British and EU perspective, therefore, the question arises of whether stories about the problems associated with Brexit will be told as loudly as those that prompted the Brexit revolution in the first place.

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74. European Council (Art. 50) guidelines for Brexit negotiations, 29.04.2017, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/29/euco-brexit-guidelines/.

75. S. VUCETIC, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2011.

76. F. FINCHELSTEIN, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, University of California Press, Oakland CA, 2019.

77. S. CONRAD, *Conjonctures mondiales: la nouvelle fabrique de l'histoire politique européenne*, in: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 76(2021), pp.685-700; P. HANSEN, S. JONSSON, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonisation*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014.

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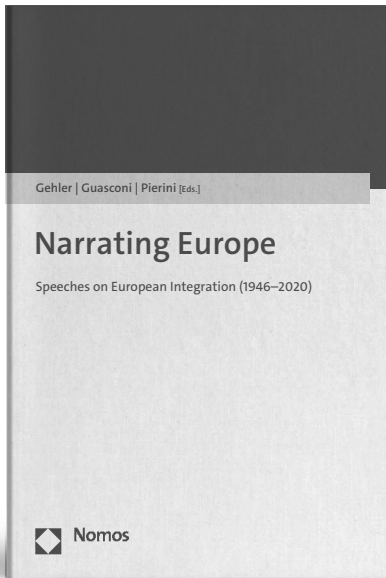
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