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Understanding Brexit through the lens of history: an ideological reworking

By Alessandra Carraro[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper is an excerpt from the second chapter of my Master's thesis, titled "Brexit: historical reasons and constitutional consequences. How British history influenced the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum".[2] The main assumption guiding my thesis is that the British people is bound by a collective identity that makes them perceive the European context as an outgroup and thus a term of constant comparison. This implies the necessity to investigate two elements: i) why said collective identity is so strong and what its origins are – which is to be traced back to historical developments of the Country, and ii) why this results in widespread Euroscepticism. By solving these two dilemmas, not only can one understand the decision of the British people to leave the European Union in June 2016, but also the fact that the UK has been an "awkward partner" (George, 1990) to the European Union (EU) during the years of British membership.[3] I shall claim that the history of the United Kingdom (UK) explains a rooted perception of the European dimension that was exacerbated during the decades-long debate over Europe. For instance, the strength of the argument against immigration by some Brexiteers is the result of an historical fear of invasion born out of Hitler's plan to invade the country (Stratton, 2019). Furthermore, I will delineate how history was reframed and used in order to deliver a certain vision of the relationship between Britain and the Continent. In particular, it will be interesting to see how both the Eurosceptics and the pro-European rely on very similar historical argumentations to deliver opposite ideas.

IDENTITY-LED BREXIT, HISTORY-LED IDENTITY

The role of history in explaining the Brexit affair has been explored by many scholars that agree on the weight of Britain's past in determining its detachment from the European integration project. Quoting Hugo Young, Marzia Maccaferri recalls

1. Research Assistant at Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome.
2. Available at: http://tesi.luiss.it/30391/ .
3. See N.P. Ludlow, 2019, "The Historical Roots of the 'Awkward Partner' Narrative", *Contemporary European History*, 28, pp.35-38.

that "writing about Britain and Europe is writing of a struggle between an unforgettable past and an unavoidable future" (2019, p. 10). Indeed, Hugo Young writes a thorough analysis of British identity and its ambiguity when it comes to the relationship with the Continent. By looking at British political history 'from Churchill to Blair' Young recounts how Britain was the unchallenged moral victor of WWII and how the consequential feeling of superiority has hampered the emotional tie to Europe (Trauffler, 2013). Jon Stratton is even more specific when he speaks of an unresolved 'cultural trauma' resulting from the experience of the Second World War, stemming in particular from "fears evoked by Hitler's desire to invade and occupy the United Kingdom with the consequent loss of sovereignty" (2019, p. 2). Britain's 'nostalgic vision of the past' is also confirmed by Paul Beaumont, who argues that "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" (Beaumont, 2017, p. 3).

The first piece of evidence of the prominent role of history in shaping the EU-UK relationship is the importance of identity politics and national identity from the side of the British. This is rooted in Britain's past and had been fuelled by continuous references to the Country's allegedly lost greatness, both in political debates and in popular culture. National identity emerges as a determining explanatory factor in several studies and can already be sensed by looking at demographic data on voting behaviour in the 2016 referendum. As a matter of fact, those who voted to leave were more likely to identify themselves as English rather than British,[4] to the extent that the vote for Brexit was largely determined by those who placed most importance on English national identity (Henderson et al., 2017).[5] Consistently, while within the United Kingdom England voted in favour of Brexit by a margin of seven points (53.4% - 46.6%), those areas not influenced by the perception of an 'English identity' voted in favour of Remain: Northern Ireland and Scotland displaced a Remain majority of 55.5% - 44.6% and 62.0% - 38.0%, respectively. This is not the case for Wales, where people voted to leave with a majority of 52.2%, but this discrepancy is probably due to the history of migration patterns between Welsh and English territories. Since English occupation of Welsh lands in 1284, many English people moved across the border, and it is no chance that "those areas furthest from England and bordering the Irish Sea predominantly voted Remain" (Stratton, 2019, p.3).

These data also suggest further problematisation of the link between the perception of national identity and the choice to leave the EU. While 'Englishness' in England can be associated with higher rates of Euroscepticism, this does not hold for the other units of the United Kingdom (i.e., Scotland) where nationalist pushes were instead closer to a Europhile behaviour (Beaumont, 2017). As a matter of fact, in Scotland

4. According to a Lord Ashcroft's post-referendum poll, "In England, leave voters (39%) were more than twice as likely as remain voters (18%) to describe themselves either as 'English not British' or 'more English than British'". Available at https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
5. See also Bogdanor, 2019, chapter 6.

55% of *remainers* were more prone to define themselves as "Scottish not British" or "more Scottish than British".[6] Hence, the link between a strong national identity and Eurosceptic-led Brexit holds for England in particular. Nevertheless, in the pages that follow I will refer to 'British' history, to Britain and to the United Kingdom, since these are the terms employed in the studies and documents that support this thesis, and because the United Kingdom is still so – united. But the reader should bear in mind that most of the discourse around British identity refers to an English identity in particular, which clashes with the European one. Furthermore, national collective identity in this article should be understood – unless specified otherwise – in light of a 'British' v. 'European' confrontation, rather than a 'British' v. 'English' one. In line with this premise, I will outline how the distinction between a British Self and Continental Other, which is deeply permeated by the perception of Britain's own history, informs the debates over Europe, and can partially explain the higher rated of Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom. A study of Noah Carl, James Dennison and Geoffrey Evans (2019), who elaborate on data from European-wide surveys to capture Eurosceptic flows within English society, shows how Britain displays a weaker sense of European identity to the advantage of a stronger national self-identity.

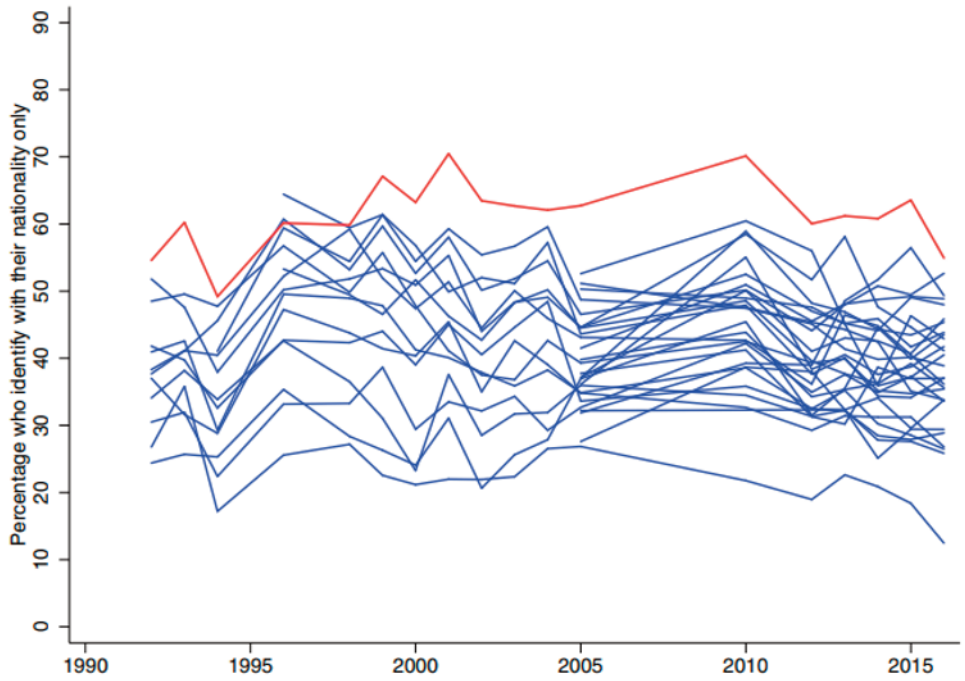

Figure 1 – Percentage of those who answer 'nationality only' to the question of whether they see themselves more as members of their nationality or more as Europeans. British data are referred to by the lighter line. Data from Eurobarometer. Source: Carl et al., 2019, p. 290.

6. Lord Ashcroft's "How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday… and why", available at https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ [last accessed on 24 May 2021].

Carl and colleagues stress that Briton's weaker sense of European identity is a partial explanation of UK's strong Euroscepticism at least since the early 1990s. Indeed, the Brexit affair has shifted the political cleavages of the United Kingdom from those on economic ideology to issues of identity (Bogdanor, 2019). And national identity is also the reason why the European question has always been so contentious in the British debate, for it raises the question of what it means to be British, and whether this is compatible with being European (Bogdanor, 2019). I will later elaborate on how British and European identity are often presented in the public discourse as different – and for the Eurosceptics, incompatible. These claims are often accompanied by references to distinct historical paths. At the end of the nineteenth century, the United Kingdom was still very much linked to its imperial past, and the Commonwealth was its main realm for its action and thought. The British were perched on what is known as 'splendid isolation' (Bogdanor, 2019; Maccaferri, 2019) and had no commitment with the Continent. With increasing involvement in the European affairs, which reached its peak in the twentieth century with the role of Britain in the First, and most of all the Second, World Wars, the British found themselves embroiled in the European post-war integration process without being ready to become an active part of it. When they finally made up their minds in the 1970s, it was too late to play a leading role. According to this brief account, it seems like the UK has in fact rolled down towards its role in the European Union: from being an Empire to ceding sovereignty to Brussels. This kind of narrative is indeed very much present in British politics and debates around Europe, as will become evident soon.

The study of Carl et al. (2019) confirms that in the UK the higher the importance placed on national identity, the greater the perception of the EU as a 'bad thing'. Figure 2 shows how the strength of national identity is positively correlated with Euroscepticism (measured through percentage of those who consider EU membership a 'bad thing' and of those who imagine their country better off outside the EU).

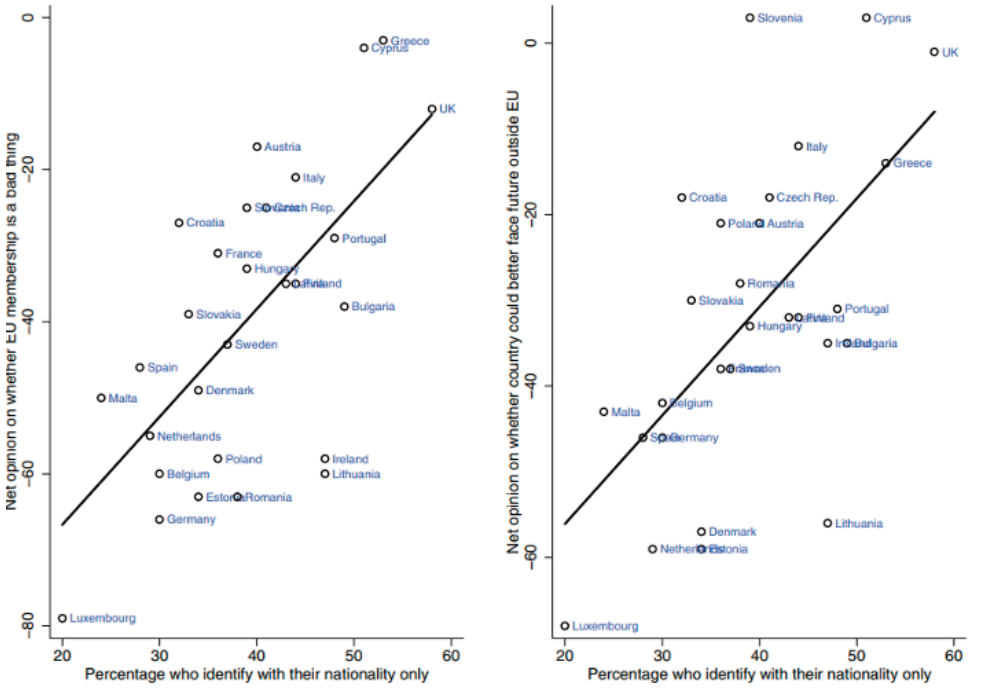

Figure 2 – Relationship between Euroscepticism and strength of national identity. Source: Carl et al., 2019, p. 296.

The question that remains to be settled is *why* English nationalism is associated with higher Euroscepticism. In the next section I will try to explain how this collective identity generated from the United Kingdom's past, and in particular its imperial past and its role in the Second World War, eventually resulted in aloofness from and distrust towards the Continent. Then, I will provide for an explanation of why strong British identity resulted in Euroscepticism, which ultimately hampered the permanence of the country in the European integration process.

THE IMPERIAL PAST

"Perhaps that period of Imperial isolation, though it has long gone, still leaves some of its impact upon the British psyche" (Bogdanor, 2019, p.21). By looking at the history of the United Kingdom from the nineteenth century, when the British Empire was at its peak, one can already acknowledge that Britain's entry into contemporary times occurred very differently from the other major European powers. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was arguably a leading actor in the global scene and a precursor of the times that would come. In a world that was by then 'genuinely global', thanks to the development of railways and steamships that made it geographically smaller, and to the telegraph which shortened the time for communication, Britain was close to having the monopoly of global industry from 1815 to 1873 (Lagrou, 2009; Hobsbawm, 1994).

The European economy was still very much linked to agriculture, which employed the majority of workers in almost all European states. This was not the case in Britain, where agriculture was the occupation of about one-sixth of the workers (Hobsbawm, 1994). The lack of a crowded agricultural sector allowed the British to keep their role as the bulwark of unrestricted free trade and economic liberalism, being the greatest exporter of industrial products and capital and commercial services and given the absence of a protectionist peasantry. Moreover, when the 1873-1890s depression hit the agricultural sector most acutely, Britain was able to avoid large revolts. In the following decades Britain witnessed the rise of other powers such as the USA and Germany, and the world economy became an increasingly pluralist environment.[7] Yet, Britain was only relatively declining in terms of industrial output to establish itself as the hegemon of the financial sector. London and the pound sterling were the fuel of the international capital market.

These were also years of colonial expansion. In the 1880s, the European continent was tellingly the world hegemon, even stronger than America in terms of industrial output and of technical progress, but European states continued to be in a conflictual relationship with each other rather than with the rest of the world (Lagrou, 2009). The conquer and exploitation of colonies was a source of and answer to rivalries among European empires – indeed, imperialism emerged with an economic capitalistic connotation. Even in this realm Britain was a world leader. In this period, British territories increased by 4 million square miles, which was more than what France, Germany and the USA conquered between 1875 and 1915 (Hobsbawm, 1994). British foreign investments focused on its developing colonies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – the latter being the "world's greatest gold-producer" (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 67). Imperialism was driven by economic and strategic rationales: colonies were to complement the metropolitan economies of the motherland, and to grant control on critical areas of the land and sea. For Britain, India was the most important strategic hub. As Eric Hobsbawm recounts: "India was the 'brightest jewel in the imperial crown' and the core of British global strategic thinking precisely because of her very real importance to the British economy" (1994, p. 69).

The author of *The Age of Empire* also writes of a social dimension of imperialism, according to which colonial expansion could mitigate domestic turmoil. It is probably with 'social imperialism' that the building of British collective identity begun. The world of the early twentieth century was one divided between developed societies and savages, where races were listed upon hierarchy and where identification with the great imperial power could nudge masses to recognise the legitimacy of their government – in other words, imperialism could offer "the voters glory rather than more costly reforms" (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 70). Attempts to fuel the pride for the Empire were blunt in Britain through the so-called 'colonial days' and expositions which celebrated the imperial strength and power. The most famous is probably the

7. "In 1913 the USA provided 46 per cent of this total [the industrial and mining production], Germany 23.5 per cent , Britain 19.6 per cent" (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 51).

great British Empire Exhibition held from 1924 to 1925 – a massive installation with displays and national pavilions designed to strengthen the ties of the imperial 'family' and to show the public the might of the Empire's potential (Clendinning, 2012). These exhibitions also displayed a number of 'native villages' in such a way that some pavilions resembled human zoos. This was precisely done to "show off the quaint, the savage, the exotic, to offer living proof of the onward march of imperial civilisation" (John MacKenzie as quoted in Stanard, 2009, p. 35). Most importantly, in 1902 the first Empire Day was celebrated with the aim of cementing a patriotic feeling in schools throughout the Empire, and "to nurture a sense of collective identity and imperial responsibility among young empire citizens" (English, 2006, p. 248). In 1905, 6,000 school children participated, a number that more than doubled in two years and raised to 80,000 in 1922 (Stanard, 2009). Hence these are the years when first attempts were made to build a proud British society, and this tendency will continue with different means in the decades to follow, as we will see in the next paragraphs. As a matter of fact, the Empire Day still continues today under the name of the Commonwealth Day.

The necessity to promote unifying symbols was also given by the emergence of pushes for democratization that shook liberal societies. With a much-enlarged British electorate,[8] new strategies were devised to control the voting masses, such as the institutionalization of cultural symbols to conquer at least the pride and loyalty of the working class. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm: "As the ancient ways – mainly religious – of ensuring subordination, obedience and loyalty were eroded, the now patent need for something to replace them was met by the *invention* of tradition, using both old and tried evokers of emotion such as crown and military glory, and […] new ones such as empire and colonial conquest" (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 105. Emphasis original).

The word 'invention' used in the excerpt anticipates one of the topics that will be further discussed below. I will later claim that the British tend to engage in an *ideological reworking* of history with the aim of delivering a specific vision for the present and the future. The fact that tradition was 'invented' in the early twentieth century to ensure loyalty suggests that the contemporary ideological reworking has long traditions. Indeed, the cultural imaginary that was being strategically reinforced since the early twentieth century is a legacy that will remain deeply entrenched in the collective identity of the British society for the generations to follow. This begins to explain how the process of building a strong British national identity is at least century-long and how it was secured through decades with a continuous process of ideological reworking. As a matter of fact, in line with similar tendencies in other European states, in the interwar years imperial propaganda targeted the youth in particular. Public schools in England promoted ideas of patriotism, Empire, and militarism not only through textbooks, but also with extracurricular activities such as the Empire Youth Movement and the Boy's Brigade (Stanard, 2009).

8. After the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 the English franchise was almost quadrupled (Hobsbawm, 1994).

This confirms and elaborates on the assumption that history is always an important component of individual and collective identity of a state (Daddow, 2006). Indeed, British imperial past still plays a major role in the contemporary imaginary of the British people, and there is evidence that this has played a role in the Brexit outcome. A 2014 YouGov survey found that among the British public, 59% think the British Empire is something to be proud of.[9] Among the over 60s this rate raises to 65%, while only 48% of the 18-to-24-year-olds tend to feel more pride than shame about the Empire.After the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 the English franchise was almost quadrupled (Hobsbawm, 1994).[10] "Indeed, this corresponds to the generational divide on Brexit: 60% of over 60s voted for Brexit, the highest leave-voting age group" (Beaumont, 2017, p. 12). David Cameron, among others, said that "here is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British empire did and was responsible for" (Watt, 2013). In detail, the generational watershed was the age of 50. For those between 25-49 years old, the Remain vote was the majority (54%). But for 50-64-year-olds the ratio swaps, with only 40% voting Remain (Stratton, 2019). As Jon Stratton further argues, this confirms that Leave voters, being generally older than 50, with lower educational attainments and with a tendency to support the Conservative Party,[11] "were likely to have a less critical and more rosy view of the United Kingdom's past, a nostalgia for a mythic lost time when Britain had a homogeneous population, an empire, and when there was little violence and poverty" (2019, p. 5).

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In the Europe that emerged immediately after the Second World War, the idea of a golden imperial past was still deeply entrenched in the minds of the nations and divided the political landscape, even if by the 1960s the era of colonial empires was over. The immediate post-war years marked a period where European states were still undecided about the path to follow, and indeed some of them were still prone to keep pursuing their imperial grandeur (Lagrou, 2009). Examples are King Baudouin of Belgium, who during the first years of his reign (1951-1993) devoted his attention to the Congo colony rather than to projects of European integration, but most interestingly Queen Juliana of the Netherlands (reigning 1948-1980), who was mainly dreaming of an Indonesian empire to only lose it one year later. Reading Lagrou's pages (2009), the Dutch example seems to pave the way for an interesting comparison with the British case. The Netherlands was only accidentally European and had been focused on its own maritime business since the seventeenth century. The nation's wealth depended mainly on trade, which was inexorably tied to its imperial landscape, and it paid great attention in not being involved in European conflicts

9. Available at: http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/6quatmbimd/Internal_Results_140725_Commonwealth_Empire-W.pdf [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
10. *Ibid*.
11. 70% of those with a General Certificate of Secondary Education or lower voted to leave; 61% of Conservatives voted to leave (Stratton, 2019).

or affairs. Suddenly, it lost its colony in 1949, but in few years, it would be clear that the loss paved the way for the country's economic miracle in the mid-1950s, which eventually made The Netherlands willing to be involved in European economic affairs; in this respect, the country was a 'European precursor' (Lagrou, 2009, p. 317).

The isolationism of The Netherlands can be compared to the British one. And yet, when the British Empire became progressively irrelevant in the post-war years, the country was much more reticent in committing to the European project. Indeed, the Dutch episode pushed many in Europe to query the soundness of the imperial alternative. Colonies were expensive, they required administrative burdens and huge costs for control. Both French and British politics, non-surprisingly, were torn between those who wanted to invest on colonial ties and those who looked at the booming European economy and intra-European trade (Lagrou, 2009). As a matter of fact, even if the 1932 system of 'imperial preference' still held after WWII,[12] in the 1950s Britain perceived the necessity to develop trade in the Continent. The British Conservative Party, so Lagrou goes, "was increasingly divided on international politics between the colonial lobby, unshakable in its imperial creed, and a younger generation of pro-European, pro-business politicians, comparing with envy and desolation British stagnation to the Continental economic miracle" (2009, pp. 318-319). Colonies were seen and depicted as 'golden gooses' capable of making the motherland large, stronger, and richer (Stanard, 2009). The admiration for the imperial realm will inform the British debate also in the years to come, in the same process of 'ideological reworking' that will be further developed below.

In anticipation of the same dynamics that would resume some 65 years later, the lines that divided the pro-Empire from the pro-European were not the same that partitioned the benches in Parliament, since the Labour Party was also torn by the question of which ambitions to pursue. To some in the Labour Party, the Empire and the Commonwealth appeared as a more suitable realm for the post-war British role in global politics, while the Europe that was displayed in the 1950s was seen as "conservative, clerical, staunchly anti-communist and conformist" (Lagrou, 2009, p. 319). Some of the 'Lexit' stances for Brexit might owe their origin to this historical sliding-door period, when some in the Labour Party already saw the European project as "the failure of hopes for participatory democracy, social emancipation and international solidarity" (Lagrou, 2009, p. 319).

The turning point came in 1956 with the Suez crisis. Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal triggered the reaction of the United Kingdom, France and Israel who wanted to regain control on the area and who had to withdraw soon after the invasion under pressures of the international community – i.e., the USA. Derek Brown (2001a) describes the episode as "Britain's last fling of the imperial dice" and he states that "the end of the imperial era was greatly accelerated by the squalid little war in Egypt".

12. The UK Parliament adopted the Import Duties Act in 1932, which marked the end of an era of free trade and imposed a 10 per cent tariff on most goods coming from countries that were not part of the Commonwealth.

By then, the choice between the defence of the declining imperial dream (India, the 'brightest jewel in the imperial crown', had been lost for independence in 1947) and the newly born European project had to be resolved. The Suez Crisis convinced other European states that imperial ambitions were not a viable alternative anymore. It is no chance thus that the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) was signed one year later. As for the British, Maccaferri (2019) speaks of the Suez crisis as a momentous event in the "formation of the post-imperial British national identity and its relationship with the idea of Europe" (p. 3). Here we can find a first explanation of why Britain's imperial nostalgia links to Euroscepticism. In a moment when the former European empires were abandoning their colonial ambitions and turning instead to a project of European integration, Britain remain attached to its colonial past and ambitions. "Only Great Britain indulged in imperial nostalgia and refrained from drawing drastic conclusions from its military and economic decline. The fact that Britain never wholly abandoned the empire, the Commonwealth and the sterling zone explains its belated entry into the EEC in 1973 and its aloofness towards the common currency and later the euro" (Lagrou, 2009, p. 319).

After the humiliating retreat from Egypt, the other former empires surrendered to the idea of the fatal decline of imperial aspirations and started to build the bedrock for what will be the European Union, but the United Kingdom was not yet ready to waive the Commonwealth project and acknowledge the end of its great imperial past. When the country will finally resolve to become a major player in the European integration process, it was too late to influence the rules of the game.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Imperial legacy is not enough to explain how British collective identity informed the decision to leave the European Union. In fact, other European states like France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Portugal, and The Netherlands have colonial roots and engaged in persistent imperialistic propaganda in the years between the two World Wars, in such a way that one can speak of a real 'European colonial culture' (Stanard, 2009). The attitude towards Britain's own imperial past is necessary to understand the role of history in cementing and explaining British Euroscepticism, but not sufficient to realize why the Country was *the* awkward partner. The advantage of choosing history as an explanatory variable for the Brexit vote is that it suggests that Brexit is unique and not replicable. Consequently, the logic must also detect those pieces of history that are uniquely British. The analysis will thus continue with an emphasis on the role of the United Kingdom in the Second World War as an exclusive discriminating factor that will finally put us on the right track to gain a full comprehension of the reasons behind the "awkward partnership" which finally culminated into Brexit.

The Second World War is key in the process of shaping British national identity (Beaumont, 2017), and it does so in two ways, which eventually result in a feeling of distrust or superiority with regards to the European states. The first is that Britain's martial past reawakens negative feelings and fears. Jon Stratton (2019) argues that three are the elements that link the English cultural imaginary with Eu-

roscepticism: invasion, occupation, and loss of sovereignty, which taken together explain the psychological impact of WWII on the British people and thus the role of the War in shaping British collective identity (Stratton, 2019). In detail, Stratton (2019) argues that Hitler's plan to invade England resulted in a cultural trauma, which was prepared for and propagated by elements of popular culture, such as novels and later tv series and movies. Consistently, the theme of loss of sovereignty occupied a prominent position in the debates on Europe from the 1970s onwards. Mintchev and Moore (2019) confirm that Eurosceptic nationalist discourses played on the wish to recover a 'fantasy structure of the nation-state': "The experience of loss in turn serves to foreground the threat of others – immigrants, minorities, refugees, urban cosmopolitans, the political establishment, etc." (p. 466).

Eventually, the fears which have been latent in British culture exploded in the Brexit debate, which is filled with war-related references. One above all, in a 'dramatic' interview with The Telegraph, leave campaigner Boris Johnson suggested that EU bureaucrats had the same goal of Hitler and Napoleon – i.e., unifying Europe under one single authority (Ross, 2016). In the debate over Europe, Eurosceptic discourse has often referred to war anecdotes. Eurosceptics often associate the 'take back control' from Brussels slogan to defeating dictatorships in the Second World War, with leader of UKIP's Nigel Farage on top of this attitude (Beaumont, 2017). In the same fashion, but with the opposite aim, David Cameron in what will later be known as the 'World War III speech' (Shipman, 2017, p. 239) claimed that peace and stability 'on our continent' cannot be guaranteed 'beyond any shadow of doubt' if the UK were to leave.[13]

If Hitler's planned invasion has determined a "traumatisation of the fear of invasion which has surfaced in the rhetoric of those arguing for the United Kingdom to Leave the European Union" (Stratton, 2019, p. 13), this is mostly evident in the success of anti-immigration arguments by Brexiteers. Indeed, since the late 1940s the link between immigration and invasion became standardized in the press (Stratton, 2019). Before that, the popular culture tended to represent an ethnically homogeneous British society in an allegedly idyllic 'Old England'.

> "In cultural trauma the anxiety and depression can manifest in, as Cartland puts it writing about the impact of Brexit in England, a retreat from Brexit anxiety into repetition and melancholy, a longing for a mythical idyllic past which existed before the traumatising event, in this case before the United Kingdom entered the Common Market/European Union and, indeed, before the Second World War, when things seemed to be simpler and better" (Stratton, 2019, p. 17).

This first line of reasoning does not yet provide for a satisfactory explanation of why the UK was the awkward partner. It is very much likely that Second World War was a traumatising experience for other European states, which did not experience a 'fear

13. "PM speech on the UK's strength and security in the EU: 9 May 2016". Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-the-uks-strength-and-security-in-the-eu-9-may-2016 [last accessed on 24 May 2021].

of invasion', but a real invasion by the Nazis. The discriminating factor thus lies on the second effect that history has in cementing British national identity, which is that of instilling positive pride in the minds of the British. Indeed, Britain's vision of its past is highly influenced by those events occurring before the end of the Second World War, rather than after it (Daddow, 2006). From France's occupation to Dutch and Belgian infringed neutrality, the United Kingdom is the only European country that emerged from the rubble of the Second World War as a victor and a saviour. It is no chance that the six signatories of the Treaty of Rome (Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Belgium) all experienced the disruptive potential of nationalism, enemy occupation or both. Arguably, the very seeds of European integration and identity emerged from the common experience of loss and defeat in the Second World War. Britain, in contrast, had suffered none. At the end of WWII, the British could still be proud of their history and their patriotism: "[N]ot having suffered the shock of occupation or defeat, Britain drew very different lessons from the Second World War. For Britain, the war seemed to have shown not the weakness of nationalism and the need for supranational organizations; rather, it had shown the beneficent value of British patriotism." (Bogdanor, 2019, p. 5)

Britain's perception of itself owes much to the experience of the Second World War, which has been repeatedly evoked in the popular culture with glorifying nuances. As a matter of fact, the press tends to refer to British history in the first half of the twentieth century as one of military successes, with a stress on the 'island status' of the Country which increasingly marks the difference between the United Kingdom and the continental combatants. Military history is one of the favourite British cultural genres, and the history industry is very often prone to depict belligerent episodes in a more captivating fashion (Daddow, 2006). "The dour signature ceremony in 1972 when Britain finally joined the EEC would hardly make for a spectacular visual accompaniment to a documentary film about Britain's relations with Europe since 1945", he writes (Daddow, 2006, p. 82).

Hence, this section presents the twofold effect of WWII on the Brexit affair. The first is negative and gained more importance on the weeks of the Brexit referendum campaign, when war-related references were used to trigger a latent fear of invasion in the British minds – be that from immigrants or from some authoritarian supranational authority. The second, instead, has a more positive outlook and served to make the British feel superior vis-à-vis the defeated nations of the Continent. This has determined the awkward partnership of the United Kingdom during the years of membership in the EU. This twofold significance of Britain's martial past in the twentieth century, coupled with an already fuelled pride for its imperial past which was boosted in the weeks of the referendum campaigns, are key in understanding the structural reasons for Brexit. Indeed, the ideological reworking that took place since the accession of Britain in the EEC contributed to cement a sense of distrust and Euroscepticism from the side of the British, which eventually culminated in the outcome of the EU 2016 referendum – Brexit.

TEMPORAL COMPARISON THEORY

With the elements offered so far, the link between Britain's past and Euroscepticism can be easily detected. First, Britain's imperial legacy has determined a strong national identity in the manner described above. Second, the entry into the European integration process marked for the United Kingdom the failure of its cherished imperial aspirations and has thus been perceived negatively. Third, the cultural importance of WWII-related references keeps reminding the British that the threat of invasion comes from the Continent, and that the country has been superior vis-à-vis other European states with which it ended up collaborating. Hence, British identity is seen in contraposition with the European one. If we assume that European collective identity was built on the common war experience, for example, it goes without saying the Britain should not be included in such identity. But these are just assumptions which – while plausible – still lack a theoretical support that definitively explains why English nationalism is linked with Euroscepticism and why the history of the United Kingdom eventually made the country suspicious towards the process of European integration.

In order to fill this gap, I shall introduce a psychological argument which bears the advantage of bridging the collective dimension of national identity and the individual voting behaviour at the EU 2016 referendum. The Social Identity Theory (SIT), an offshoot of the Social Comparison Theory, can be helpful in this respect. According to the concept of social identity first developed by the Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel, individuals acknowledge that they belong to a certain group and attach to this membership some emotional significance (Hogg and Terry, 2000). The concept also rests on the idea that to strengthen ingroup cohesion, *comparison* with an outgroup will be performed to confirm or enhance ingroup distinctiveness and reinforce self-esteem (Mintchev and Moore, 2019; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Finally, it is the way in which the groups relate to each other that influence the way individuals pursue social identity (Hogg and Terry, 2000). This means that social identity is constructed both from social categories which an individual perceives he belongs to and from the results of the comparison with an outgroup. Furthermore, the SIT implies that individuals are often willing to renounce to economic gain to improve the status of their social group and thus generate pride (Beaumont, 2017). This explains why the so-called 'project fear' from the Remain camp did not appeal to a relevant number of voters.

These assumptions are confirmed by the analysis of Mintchev and Moore (2019), where they adopt a psychoanalytic approach to understand the reasons behind Brexit. In line with the previous reasoning, they argue that the individual dimension is highly intertwined with the economic and cultural context. In the British case in particular, individuals were mainly divided along a new social cleavage, the one between 'nationals' and 'cosmopolitans', where the former group is mainly represented by Brexiteers (Mintchev and Moore, 2019). Following the reasoning of the SIT, the individuals belonging to each group reinforce their identity not only by common values shared within the community, but also by comparison with the outer group.

As a matter of fact, the leavers perceive immigrants and Remainers (the 'cosmopolitans') as representing the pro-European 'liberal elite' (Mintchev and Moore, 2019). According to this view, imperial nostalgia is perceived by Leave supporters as a solution to contemporary economic and social changes which favour a cosmopolitan dimension rather than a nation-centred perspective.

With the SIT, Tajfel and Turner (1979) seek to present a theory on intergroup conflict drawing from the assumption that conflicts among group interests not only create competitive intergroup relations, but also reinforce the identity of the Self in accordance with his own ingroup. Their starting point is that intergroup comparisons are the main source for individual feeling of satisfaction or deprivation, which in turn is supposed to trigger different behaviours (Brown and Zagefka, 2006). The conflict arises – so the SIT argument goes – when a dominant and a subordinate group clash over an unequal distribution of scarce resources, but this only happens when the subordinate group rejects its position and strives to change the status quo in order to establish its positive group identity.

National identity is a relevant social category that shapes collective identity (Beaumont, 2017). Indeed, in writing about David Cameron's juxtaposition of British and European identities in his 2013 Bloomberg Speech, Ruth Wodak (2018) seems to confirm this insight when she writes that

> "'Nation' as defined by many politicians, also from right-wing populist parties, is a limited and sovereign community that exists and persists through time and is tied to a specific territory (space), inherently and essentially constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition to its out-groups (Spiering 2015). Access to national identity/membership is defined via heritage and ancestry, also via "blood" (de Cleen 2012: 97)" (Wodak, 2018, pp. 38-39).

In the following pages, I will use the theory to explain how the British choice to leave the EU was motivated by a comparison between the British ingroup and the European outgroup which triggered the willingness to reject the status quo and enhance positive distinctiveness within the former. For this reasoning to hold, one must first of all understand why the comparison with the European outgroup resulted in the British perceiving themselves as the subordinate group. In the process of forming their social identity on their common national identity, a juxtaposition with the continental counterparts must have resulted in a sensation of inferiority, according to the SIT. Moreover, for the Brexit vote to be explained, Britons should negatively compare to Europeans in terms of sovereignty and control, which were presented as the main issues at stake, and thus the willingness to change the status quo in order to regain sovereignty and 'take back control' (Beaumont, 2017). With the information given thus far, it is unclear why such outcome would occur. The UK used to enjoy more opt-outs from European policies than any other European country. It was not part of the European Monetary Union, it was not a member of the Schengen area, and it opted out of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and the area of freedom, security, and justice. Arguably, the UK was the least integrated European country and

could thus claim more control and sovereignty over its own affairs than any other EU member State. This should have resulted in a positive comparison with the European outgroup, and thus the willingness to reject the status quo is not explained (Beaumont, 2017). Alone, the SIT does not hold as an explanatory framework for the Brexit vote.

To overcome this, a temporal element must be introduced. While the SIT does not imply the possibility that "social identity could be maintained by comparing the ingroup's position over time" (Brown and Zagefka, 2006, p. 652), another offshoot of the Social Comparison Theory, the Temporal Comparison Theory (TCT), first proposed by Stuart Albert in 1977, suggests that individuals not only perform intergroup comparisons, but also comparison with the self at a different point in time (be it in the past or prospectively into the future) (Brown and Zagefka, 2006). To Albert, the reasons for temporal comparison are to be found in the individual desire to outperform the former Self and to show self-improvement over time (Beaumont, 2017). The importance of temporal comparisons in intergroup settings is underlined by Rupert Brown and Hanna Zagefka (2006), and Mark Alicke and Ethan Zell (2008) stress that social and temporal comparisons are fundamental sources for the evaluation of the Self.

Combining the horizontal social dimension of the SIT and the vertical temporal one of the TCT, one can sketch the path that led to British rooted Euroscepticism. The continuous references to British great past, so permeated in British cultural imaginary (Stratton 2019; Daddow, 2006), enhanced a sense of low self-esteem according to the TCT. Consequently, the comparison with the European outgroup explained by SIT resulted in a negative self-perception with respect to the Other, almost as if the comparison was not between Britain and Europe, but between Europe and Britain's former Self. This in turn resulted in a perception of the European integration process as path towards subordination rather than cooperation (Beaumont, 2017). Wodak (2018) argues in accordance:

> "Spiering (2015: 17) mentions in much detail how essentialist ideas about British national identity go back several centuries, but most specifically to the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus, he maintains that "[a]t the root of British Euroscepticism lies a long-established tradition of contrasting the British Own with the European Other. British Euroscepticism is to a large extent defined and inspired by cultural exceptionalism" (2015: 18)" (Wodak, 2018, p. 39).

Consistently with demographic data of the Brexit vote, those who grew up with the Empire and experienced the aftermath of the Second World War were more likely to vote for leaving the EU. Furthermore, the top reasons voters gave for their support for the Leave alternative was that 'decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK', which sheds a light on the willingness to regain sovereignty. If, in line with the TCT, Britons tended to compare their role in the EU to their former position of rulers of the world, it goes straight that the result would be unsatisfactory. Moreover, one could even assume that in engaging in European integration, the UK has accepted to share sovereignty with those same powers it helped save (France) or defeated (Ger-

many) in the Second World War. The nostalgic vision of the past is thus explained, Euroscepticism being a corollary. Hence, the decision to leave.

The motives for leaving explained through the Temporal Comparison Theory were arguably stimulated during the referendum campaign. As we shall see below, historical references pervaded much of political narrative of both the Leave and the Remain camp (Maccaferri, 2019). Having illustrated above the theoretical framework guiding this article, below I will provide for concrete examples of how the awkward partnership between the EU and the UK evolved through historical developments. Keeping a focus on history-related elements, I will sketch Britain's slippery accession into the European project stressing the hypothesis that history played a major role in compromising the United Kingdom's relationship with the EU, in such a way that explains how history played a role in determining the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

A SLIPPERY ACCESSION

The conclusion we can draw from the previous section is that Britain's present is deeply entrenched in its past. This might seem obvious, but it is relevant to understand the flawed relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, which eventually led to Brexit. Traces of this can be identified through discourse analysis of some relevant speeches both during UK's permanence in the EU and in the years leading to the 2016 referendum. To further understand the assumption that the accession into the EEC was for the UK a source of humiliation rather than satisfaction (or subordination rather that cooperation), I shall briefly look at how 'Brentry' took place.

Quoting Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, Kevin O'Rourke (2018) recalls that, consistently with what I illustrated thus far, "many British political leaders in 1945 thought of their country as being both European and imperial" (p. 37). Sharing the same imperial history, European states had common roots that might have served as a basis for a common future, and perhaps the United Kingdom could be their leader. Indeed, it was Winston Churchill among the first to call for a 'United States of Europe', of which Great Britain and the British Commonwealth of Nations, among others, would be 'friends and sponsors'.[14] [15] According to Stuart Croft (1988), the two years that followed saw the British government taking a leading role in creating a union of West-

14. September 19, 1946. University of Zurich. Full speech available at https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/united-states-of-europe/ [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
15. Churchill's favourable position on Europe must be used with caution. As a matter of fact, some say that his fervent support for the European integration project became more ambiguous in 1951 (Young, 1985) and debates over Churchill's Europhilia still flame British scholars and politicians (Wilks-Heeg, 2015). Perhaps, Churchill was in favour of European integration as far as the United Kingdom's place in the project would be that of 'friend and sponsor' – or as Thompson says quoting Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, "Though Churchill spoke grandly of a United States of Europe, he 'showed little inclination to involve Britain in this process'" (2019, p. 174).

ern European states, aiming at setting up a system of intergovernmental cooperation. In 1947, for example, the Treaty of Dunkirk was signed between France and the United Kingdom to establish an alliance of mutual assistance and confirm 'cordial friendship and close association of interests'.[16] The following year, in order to provide a framework for military, economic and social cooperation, the Treaty of Brussels was signed by the United Kingdom, France and the Benelux countries.[17]

Despite Britain looking initially in favour of a European-wide project, when the governments of the Continent started talking about institutionalizing further unity that would go beyond the intergovernmental scope, the United Kingdom responded with fierce opposition. As Croft (1988) puts it, Britain hoped to lead the union of European states in order to i) secure economic recovery, and ii) prevent the extension of Soviet influence, both aims to be achieved with the resources provided by the United States. Yet, when the project of a *union* turned into dreams of a *unity* which "sought to go beyond the intergovernmental level towards West European federation" (Croft, 1988, p.617), the British Labour government (in office between 1945 and 1951) was rather reluctant to support such a plan. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Labour politicians were committed to establishing a wide welfare state, the birth of the National Health Service being Labour's greatest monument (Brown, 2001b). They wanted to protect the extended powers of government, an aim which clashed with the idea of ceding sovereignty to a European supranational authority (Croft, 1988). Also, in a post-war Europe where socialist parties were not successfully reaching government positions, the British Labour Party was opposed to taking powers away from London.

The alternative to which Labourers were looking at was the Commonwealth (O'Rourke, 2018; Croft, 1988). When discussions begun within the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), born in 1948 as a strictly intergovernmental institution with Britain occupying a leading position, about creating a European customs union, the United Kingdom was fiercely against it. The reason was that entering a customs union would mean committing to a common external tariff policy, which was incompatible with the generous tariffs on goods arriving from the territories of the Commonwealth. Yet, remaining outside of it would mean economic damages for the English market. Here we encounter a first concrete example of what has been previously described as the United Kingdom post-war vacillation between its imperial past and a European-wide future.

The United Kingdom's view of an intergovernmental arrangement for the new European order was objected by those from across both the Atlantic Ocean and the

16. Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and France (Dunkirk, 4 March 1947). Full text available at https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/026961fe-0d57-4314-a40a-a4ac066a1801/5d5a64ab-9c7c-4e19-b528-9e53f9ce937b/Resources#1fb9f4b5-64e2-4337-bc78-db7e1978de09_en&overlay [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
17. Full text available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17072.htm [last accessed on 24 May 2021].

English Channel. The government of the United States was in favour of European economic unity and was pressing for it to happen in order to guarantee the success of their European Recovery Program; on the other hand, European states with France at the head were pursuing a federalist view of European institutions. In May 1950, the French foreign minister Robert Schuman proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) which implied the establishment of a supranational authority in charge of administering the pooled resources. Proponents of a European federation at the time were still hoping that the United Kingdom and France would lead the union, but they were faced with disappointment when the 1950 general elections in the United Kingdom focused on British themes linked to the future of the Empire, rather than on the European integration project (O'Rourke, 2018). Once again, while history was going on in the Continent, the UK was looking at its past.

In the meantime, Paris started looking at Germany rather than Britain for a leading companion of the West European union (Croft, 1988). This became mostly evident in the creation of the ECSC, which the British were invited to join – and thus accept its supranational dimension – without being able to enter the preliminary negotiations. Joining the Community was not acceptable to the UK. Key industries were increasingly being incorporated within the public sector and subjected to economic planning, including the nationalization of coalmines and the creation of the Nation Coal Board in 1947. Furthermore, again, the Community would impose the establishment of common tariffs, which were incompatible with Britain's willingness to pursue its own independent external policies with the countries of the Commonwealth. In the end, the United Kingdom remained excluded from the project.

The year 1950 can be seen as the watershed which turned Britain from the potential leader of a new Europe to one of the last wheels of the wagon – a metaphor that fits since even that last wheel, eventually, arrives where the wagon is supposed to be. Indeed, Britain did not retreat from the European project altogether, rather it remained at the borders of it. In the meantime, the British prominence in European affairs was starting to fade. As a matter of fact, eventually the European Economic Community (EEC) was established with the signature of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which implied the creation not only of a customs union, but also of a common market. In Rome, France, Italy, West Germany, and the Benelux countries ('the Six') agreed on 'establishing a common market and progressively approximating the economic policies of Member States', by creating a system whereby States would eliminate customs duties and restrictions among each other, create a common commercial policy and customs tariffs towards thirds countries, and abolish between them obstacles to freedom of movement for persons, services and capital.[18] In response to the EEC, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, and Portugal (the 'Outer Seven' or the 'Other Six' plus Portugal) agreed on the establishment of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1960, which had a purely intergovernmental fashion.

18. This translation of the 1957 Treaty of Rome refers to the one available at https://ec.europa.eu/romania/sites/default/files/tratatul_de_la_roma.pdf [last accessed on 24 May 2021].

The aim was to bridge the EEC and eventually enlarge the free trade area to the other European states (O'Rourke, 2018), but the project was soon severed by the United Kingdom itself. In 1961 the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan asked for the country's accession into the EEC. Reasons for this were both economic and political. From an economic standpoint, Macmillan thought that involvement in the continental market would prove beneficial to British economy (Bogdanor, 2019). He had acknowledged the 'winds of change' that were blowing on the UK and Europe. First of all, as far as trade was concerned, the market of the EEC was more relevant to the UK than that of the EFTA. Secondly, trade with the Commonwealth was being reformed since colonies were gaining more and more independence. Macmillan himself, in a speech delivered in 1960 and later renamed the 'winds of change' speech, changed once and for all British policy in regards of African colonies: "Macmillan's speech of February 1960 […] abolished Britain's century-old support for white domination and resolved all doubt about Britain's future commitment to democracy in Africa. The speech is thus the center piece of the final chapter in the history of the British Empire." (Myers, 2000, p. 556)

Politically, Harold Macmillan was especially concerned with rebuilding the special relationship with the United States. After the Anglo-American clash over the Suez crisis in 1956, the American opposition to the EFTA and the preference for the EEC instead, and other detrimental geopolitical episodes (Ashton, 2005), Macmillan worked to rebuild the closeness between Washington and London. Nevertheless, Britain's first request to join the EEC was vetoed by Charles De Gaulle's France, and so was the second in 1967.

> "'England in effect is insular, she is maritime, she is linked through her exchanges, her markets, her supply lines to the most diverse and often the most distant countries; she pursues essentially industrial and commercial activities, and only slight agricultural ones. She has in all her doings very marked and very original habits and traditions. In short, the nature, the structure, the very situation that are England's differ profoundly from those of the continentals'". [19]

Negotiations only started again three years later with the Europhile Conservative Prime Minister Ted Heath. The British society was still split on the issue, and so was Parliament. Indeed, in 1971, 244 Members of Parliament, among whom the majority of the Labour Party and one fifth of Conservative MPs, opposed to EEC membership. Pushed by economic necessities and eager to get out of its economic stagnation, fascinated and embarrassed by the early economic success given by European coordination, Britain eventually yielded and accessed the EC in 1973.

19. Charles de Gaulle, 1963, explaining his veto on British membership. Quoted by Carl et al., 2019, p. 283.

FROM BRENTRY TO BREXIT – AN IDEOLOGICAL REWORKING

As Pieter Lagrou (2009) puts it,

> "since the nineteenth century the UK had projected itself onto the Commonwealth for its economic development, military security and the survival of the cultural values of a long imperial tradition, but ended up in 1973 relying on the Common Market to a far greater extent. More importantly still, what occurred in the course of the 1950s and 1960s, was a genuine transfer from empire to Europe" (Lagrou, 2009, p. 320).

One of the reasons which convinced the UK to join the EEC was the poor economic British performance vis-à-vis the 'Golden Age' of the Continent, the latter boosted by American investments for post-war reconstruction and technological spill overs. The United Kingdom joined hoping to take advantage of the economic growth which marked the first decades of European integration. Yet, some months after British entry into the EEC the Golden Age came to an end and a period of slow economic growth and stagflation begun, with British inflation and unemployment rates being higher than in other developed countries, and its growth rate performing more poorly than in the Continent. The crisis was so severe that in 1976 the British government had to ask for an emergency loan to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was conditional to rigid spending cuts.

The crisis of the 1970s marked the end of the Keynesian macroeconomic model as the standard paradigm to understand and manage economic policies. This in turn led to the affirmation of the so-called neo-liberal model of development in the 1980s and 1990s, which entailed notions such as the creation of global markets, the liberalization of markets for goods and capital, privatization waves, and the erosion of the welfare dimension of the state. According to Fazi and Mitchell (2018), this design found its maximum institutionalisation in the forms of European integration. If the rise of Keynesian economics is owed to the English economist John Maynard Keynes, it was another Englishman who certified its end. The Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan (in office from 1976 to 1979), in his speech to the Labour Party conference in 1976, said that Keynesian policies were no longer a viable alternative to bring the country out of recession (Fazi and Mitchell, 2018; Skidelsky, 1997).

The change in the way to look at the macroeconomic scenario was also reflected in British politics. In those years James Callaghan was leading the right-wing faction of the Labour Party, which advocated cuts of public spending, while the left wing of the party under Tony Benn proposed the so-called Alternative Economic Strategy, which implied the enlargement of the government competencies and most of all the withdrawal from the European Economic Community (Fazi and Mitchell, 2018). After the results of the 1975 EU referendum and the depreciation of the sterling, Tony Benn's ideas were marginalized within the party and Callaghan's line prevailed, and the country resorted to the IMF loan. This internal choice paved the way

for the election of Margaret Thatcher, committed to neoliberal prescriptions of privatization and deregulation (Fazi and Mitchell, 2018; Mudge, 2018; O'Rourke, 2018).

The fact that Brentry was immediately coupled with stagflation and economic difficulties was certainly not a good starter for the relationship between the Continent and the archipelago, and Margaret Thatcher's rise to power shortly after did not help the Anglo-European partnership. Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, after having substituted the pro-European Ted Heath at the head of the Conservative Party in 1975. In the meantime, the Tories continued to be a largely pro-European party, while in 1980 the official policy of the Labour Party under Michael Foot became that of seeking British withdrawal, which pushed several Labour politicians to secede and form the Social Democratic Party in 1981. Soon after, a merger between the newly formed Social Democratic Party and the Liberals gave birth to the Liberal Democrats, the most pro-European British party today together with the Scottish National Party.

The Thatcher years were extremely relevant in the journey towards Brexit. First, Thatcher was openly against the European project, and this triggered the first moves of prominent Eurosceptic movements in the Country; secondly, the Conservative Party entered the Thatcher years as a pro-European party, but it will get over them in its way to becoming the 'party of Brexit' (Daddow et al., 2019). And yet, the Thatcher years were also fundamental for the creation of the European Union and the Single Market, a process which was very much favoured by the Conservative Party and by Thatcher herself. To understand how these two assumptions go together we must go back to where we left, i.e., the years of economic stagflation and crisis. As it often happens, national responses to the crisis implied protectionist measures to shelter national industries. Strongly in favour of free market, Margaret Thatcher was actively involved in the negotiations to get rid of protectionist devices across the EEC. As a matter of fact, the European Commissioner for the Internal Market Arthur Cockfield, nominated by Thatcher, led the work for the writing of a White Paper published in 1985 which listed 297 economic barriers among Member States that had to be eliminated by 1992. Thatcher's free-trade vision for Europe took shape with the signature of the Single European Act (SEA) in 1986, with which European governments committed to the establishment of a single market by 1992, following the prescriptions of Cockfield's White Paper. And yet, the achievement they supported would become the main driver for Brexit appeals – and Thatcher herself will soon repent for the mechanism she helped create. Indeed, one of the major changes brought by the SEA was that decisions concerning the Single Market had to be made by qualified majority, thus removing individual veto power to Member States (which at the time were twelve, Portugal and Spain having joined in 1986 and Greece in 1981). Decisions on taxation and free movement of people still required unanimity. The step represented a momentous turn to a more supranational governance since Member States at that point would have to implement decisions with which they might disagree. Nevertheless, the British government still applauded the move that helped create a freer European-wide market.

The 1980s was a turning decade, from which the English political landscape on Europe came out more confused than ever. For the Labour Party, things changed after the 1983 general elections. While the Conservatives led by Margaret Thatcher won by a landslide majority, for the Labour Party the elections were disastrous. From fiercely opposing the European Communities, which were seen as a capitalist club, the Labour Party had to reconsider its official position and soften its attitudes towards the Continent. Key in this transformation was the 1988 Jacques Delors' speech at the British Trades Union Congress (O'Rourke, 2018), where he put forward a different view of the European Single Market.[20] Two themes of the speech were, in my view, key in changing the minds of the Labourers. First, by the end of his address Delors promised that "You, dear friends, will remain British. […] We will maintain our individual ways of life, and our valued traditions. […] We will succeed in preserving our identity and our culture".[21] This in some way might have mitigated the fear of the Left that a European authority might excessively intervene in national affairs and that the Labour Party would remain able to pursue its social policy objectives. Secondly, he suggested that the SEA gave the European project a social dimension. In Delors' presentation the European dimension was depicted as a framework for social progress. The then President of the Commission guaranteed that the following principles would guide the definition and implementation of European rules:

> "First, measures adopted to complete a large market should not diminish the level of social protection already achieved in the Member States. Second, the internal market should be designed to benefit each and every citizen of the community. It is therefore necessary to improve workers' living and working conditions, and to provide better protection for their health and safety at work. Third, the measures to be taken will concern the area of collective bargaining and legislation".[22]

By the 1990s, the Labour Party was largely a pro-European party, except for some hard-core leftists.

The story of how the two main British parties swapped their positions on Europe is a story of two speeches. Let us imagine British politics as a Cartesian plane, with time on the x axis. On the positive side of the y axis, pro-European attitudes are measured, while going down vertically Euroscepticism increases. We can depict the Labour Party's attitude on Europe as an upward sloping line which starts from a given point along the Eurosceptic negative y axis and crosses the x axis in the point corresponding to September 1988, when Delors delivered his speech. On the other hand, the Conservative Euroscepticism-measuring line follows the exact opposite path. From be-

20. "1992: the social dimension", address by President Delors at the Trades Union Congress - Bournemouth, 8 September 1988. Accessible at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/speech_88_66/SPEECH_88_66_EN.pdf [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
21. *Ibid*.
22. *Ibid*.

ing a pro-European party in the beginning of the European integration process, and initially survived to the paradox of having a Eurosceptic leader in the person of Margaret Thatcher who still made a pivotal contribution to the construction of a supranational Europe, the party ultimately crossed the x axis exactly in September 1988. The two major parties in British politics literally swapped on their attitude towards Europe, convincing some but leaving many others behind, hence creating a legacy for the politics to come that would resemble more to a scatter plot than to a coherent cross. This confusion, as already mentioned, will inform the political landscape around Brexit almost forty years later.

It only remains to understand what happened in September 1988 that became a watershed in Conservative policy on Europe. On September 20th, 1988, Margaret Thatcher delivered a speech about the future of European integration at the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, which became known as the Bruges speech.[23] The occasion was seized to fiercely oppose Delors' view of European integration and to present a framing of British and European history in such a way as to propose an alternative view to manage the European question in British politics – 'history with a purpose' (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 15) or ideological reworking. In the end, Daddow and colleagues (2019) calculated that one third of the Bruges speech was devoted to promoting such an alternative view. Themes that have been already mentioned, such as Britain's imperial past and its role in the Second World War, were presented in 'an Anglicized reading of British and European history' (Daddow et al., 2019, p.15). Eventually, the Bruges speech laid the fundamental arguments that would be further developed in the following decades by Eurosceptic actors. But it was also the foundation of the clashes over Europe within the Conservative Party:

> "The fundamental schisms that were to engulf the Conservative Party from Maastricht onwards emerged in nascent form in the tensions between the FCO[24] and Downing Street in drafting the Bruges speech. They demonstrate how a contemporary right-wing Euroscepticism began in the high politics of UK government leading to a breakdown of the governing consensus on Europe, before subsuming the Conservative Party and eventually, with Brexit, the wider political and public arenas" (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 9).

Through subtle references and conveyed images, the Bruges speech was a critique to the European project and a representation of an Anglicized narrative of British history (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 4). Despite being in favour of a European-wide free market, Margaret Thatcher had a traditional conception of national sovereignty according to which the UK should be free to pursue its ambitions in an Anglo-Ameri-

23. Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech"), 1988, 20 September. Available at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332 [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
24. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

can realm rather than in the European contexts ("To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardise the objectives we seek to achieve").[25] In detail, the most famous lines of the speech are the following:

> "But working more closely together does not require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy. […] *We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels*. Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country; for these have been the source of Europe's vitality through the centuries".[26]

Curiously, these lines resemble what the opposition MP Harold Macmillan (Prime Minister since 1957) said in 1950 to oppose to British membership of the European Coal and Steel Community: "We have not thrown the divine right of kings in order to fall down before the divine right of experts" (quoted in Bogdanor, 2019, p. 27). Eventually, Harold Macmillan will first ask British accession to the EEC, and Margaret Thatcher will promote the decisive step towards the supranational fashion of European governance which the British have always loathed.

The Bruges speech was permeated with historical references grouped in three main themes: British exceptionalism; Britain's martial past; and the "normative desirability of empire(s) and free trade" (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 15). As for the first, Daddow and colleagues (2019) detected in the speech constant appeal to the alleged incompatibility between Britain and Europe, due to the fact that Britain could claim more ancient traditions of representative democracy. In doing so, Margaret Thatcher focused rather on the centrality of England rather than Britain, conveying an historical framing that was the English view of history (Daddow et al., 2019). Once again, in line with what has already been reported in these pages, Thatcher's framing anticipated "the strength of Eurosceptic sentiment amongst English-identifiers, as opposed to those who saw themselves as 'British'" (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 16).

Then, references to the role of the British in the Second World War were aimed at stressing the special contribution of the Country in the outcome of the war ("It was British support to resistance movements throughout the last War that helped to keep alive the flame of liberty in so many countries until the day of liberation. […] And it was from our island fortress that the liberation of Europe itself was mounted".)[27] This line of reasoning was designed to present the alternative view according to which after WWII peace was maintained in Europe not because of European

25. Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech"), 1988, 20 September. Available at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332 [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
26. *Ibid*. Emphasis added.
27. *Ibid.*

integration, but because of NATO. Finally, as for the framing of free trade and imperial arrangements, the Bruges speech was filled with generic allusions to British imperial past which, without ever mentioning it directly, conveyed once again the idea that British exceptionalism was "rooted in an Anglo-American rather than Europeanist tradition" (Daddow et al., 2019, p. 18). Despite referring to the 'common experience' of Europe and Britain ("For instance, the story of how Europeans explored and colonised —and yes, without apology — civilised much of the world is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage")[28] she quickly passed to underling the 'very special way' in which the British contributed to Europe: "Over the centuries we have fought to prevent Europe from falling under the dominance of a single power. We have fought and we have died for her freedom. […] Had it not been for that willingness to fight and to die, Europe would have been united long before now — but not in liberty, not in justice".[29]

The Bruges speech lit the Eurosceptic enthusiasm in Britain. It was the speech that encouraged the foundation of the Anti-Federalist League, the forerunner of the United Kingdom Independence Party, in 1991. It was the speech that triggered the idea behind the Referendum Party in 1994 (Daddow et al., 2019). But most of all, the first effect of the Bruges speech was the creation in 1989 of the first major Eurosceptic organization, the Bruges Group, which by 1991 counted 132 Tories backbenchers and Thatcher's supporters that challenged the idea of European federalism and centralization (Daddow et al., 2019).

After that, things went downhill. The battles over Europe within the Conservative Party in government harshly emerged over the question of whether the UK should join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), the first of a three-stage process leading eventually to a full European Monetary Union (EMU). Despite Thatcher's opposition, her ministers won the battle, and the British joined the ERM in October 1990. By the end of November, Thatcher was gone.

From 1990 to 1997 Conservative John Major led Downing Street. In these years, he signed the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which was a definitive step in favour of European integration: it established the European Union, paved the way for EMU, and introduced the concept of European citizenship. The Treaty was initially welcomed as success in Britain (Todd, 2015), at least by some such as Boris Johnson (O'Rourke, 2018; Shipman, 2017). Major managed to guarantee the UK the opt-out from the EMU and from the social chapter. But the Maastricht Treaty in fact represented a deep split within the Conservative Party, which has been divided over Europe ever since. The galaxy of Eurosceptic parties and organizations became progressively more influent since then. Amongst the doubts over the value of the contents of the Treaty, something else occurred in 1992 that strongly diminished pro-European credibility: the sterling was forced out of the ERM in September, hurting one of the main battles of Europhile Conservatives in the previous years.

28. *Ibid*
29. *Ibid*.

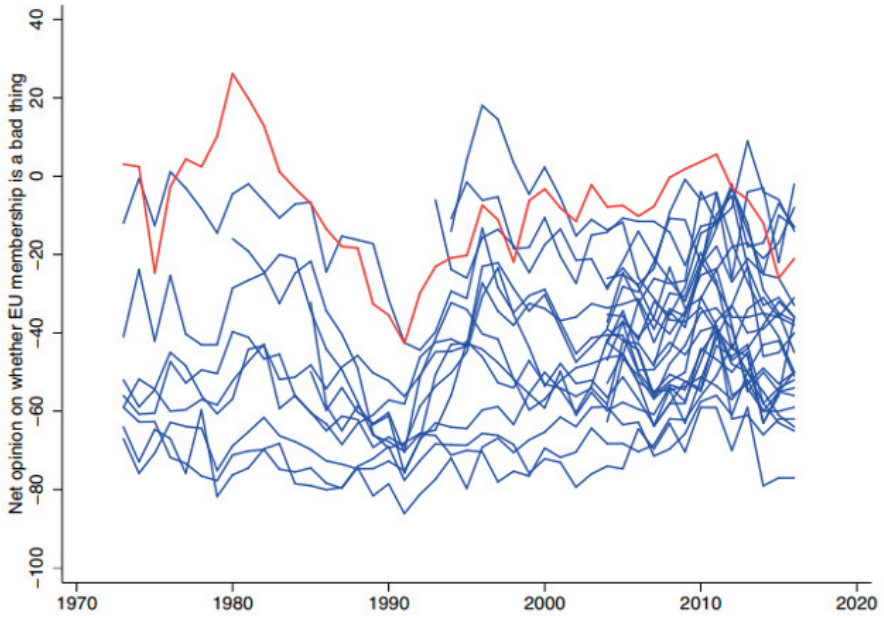

Figure 3 – Net opinion on whether EU membership is perceived as a 'bad thing' 1973-2016. The line for the UK is lighter. Data from Eurobarometer. Source: Carl et al., 2019, p. 287.

According to Carl and his colleagues (2019) the ERM crisis, together with the signature of the Maastricht Treaty, and later the Eurozone crisis and migration influxes, were the four main developments that contributed to the rise of Eurosceptic feelings in Britain. Indeed, even if the United Kingdom has always been one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the European environment, the rate of distrust towards Europe have not been steady throughout the years. According to the elaboration of data by Carl et al. (2019), over the last 40 years the British society has shown stronger Eurosceptic attitudes than any other European country. After reaching a peak in the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, Euroscepticism kept decreasing until the early 1990s, when rates started again to grow (Figure 3). The same idea is conveyed perhaps more straightforwardly by Paul Beaumont's representation of the data (Figure 4).

In 1997, the pro-European 'New Labour' Party took office with the Prime Minister Tony Blair. Despite the decision not to bring the UK into the EMU, still Blair proved his Europhilia by opting into the European social chapter. By that time, the transformation of the Labour Party into a neoliberalist force was complete. Mudge (2018) quotes Colin Crouch to say that "Blair's New Labour government was the culmination of neoliberalism's 'new hegemony'". (p. xiii), and Anne Applebaum (1997) reports that "Blair declared that he admires Margaret Thatcher for her reinvention of the right nearly 15 years ago, an unthinkable sentiment for any previous Labour leader" (p. 46).

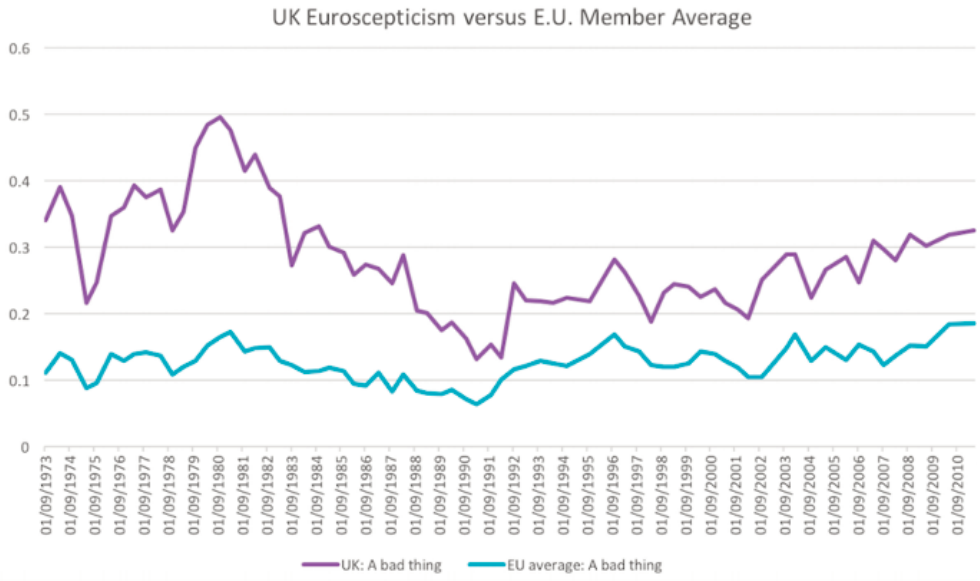

Figure 4 – UK data v. EU average on perception of the EU as a 'bad thing'. Data from Eurobarometer. Source: Beaumont, 2017, p. 4.

Eventually, the Iraq War which started in 2003 was a major blow to Blair's credibility (as Oliver Daddow recalls quoting Ian Kershaw, "'For Anthony Eden it was 'Suez'. For Blair, it will be 'Iraq'"),[30] and the 2008 financial crisis that begun only one year after Blair had resigned ensured Labour's failure at the following general election – "in 2010 Labour's share of vote declined to a level not seen since the early Thatcher's era" (Mudge, 2018, p. 308). In 2010 Conservative David Cameron came to power, and the history from there is well-known.

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The turn of the 21st century did not prevent the British political debate from being permeated with history and references to British exceptionalism. Indeed, ideological reworking during the referendum campaign took the form of a 'discursive recontextualization' of traditional historical narratives (Maccaferri, 2019). Building on Discourse-Historical Analysis/Approach (DHA), Maccaferri (2019) concludes that the main narrative informing British Euroscepticism – but also the Remain arguments – is constructed around the idea of 'British exceptionalism' with has roots in British traditions. Indeed, history pervades the political narrative of both Eurosceptic and Europhile discourse, in an intertwining of 'competing conceptions of history'. According to Maccaferri (2019), the European question in the British debate has been framed

30. Daddow, 2009, p. 547

along an 'historical construction', which determined that "the Brexit discourse was actually an ongoing 'recontextualization' of traditional historical narratives. This re-narration reproduced historical arguments as well as reinterpreted dated clichés to finally create a new hierarchal discursive order" (p. 2). For pro-Brexit arguments, this translated into a focus on material borders to stress the contrasting British and European environments and the need to 'take back control'; on the other hand, the Remain camp employed British exceptionalism in the fashion of historical borders in order to support the idea that democracy had to be reinvented within the EU, and thus Britain had to stay.

One relevant example of how history informed the Brexit debate, especially from the Leave camp, is the attitude shown by Brexiteers towards the imperial past of the country, especially in the form of praising a return to a Commonwealth-oriented trade policy. Stephen Ashe (2016) writes of a tendency by UKIP and Conservative Eurosceptics to re-imagine Britain's colonial past to make proposals for the future (such as, leaving the EU and set up trade with Commonwealth countries, instead). The origins of this rationale can be traced back to 1961, when Harold Macmillan's application to join the EEC pushed some Conservatives to form the Anti-Common Market league to gain support of politicians and activists (Lloyd, 2016). Paul Gilroy has referred to this as a 'postcolonial melancholia', "characterised by a mixture of guilt and pride which prevents Britain from being able to mourn its imperial history without facing up to the barbarity that this entailed. To compensate, the nation clings desperately to the memory of its 'finest hour' – victory in World War Two" (Ashe, 2016).

The concept is further explored by Neil Roberts (2008), who explains how Gilroy's assumption comes from the psychoanalytical theory by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich ('The inability to mourn'), which is expanded to explain Britain's inability to mourn the loss of its Empire. A consequence of this is that this postcolonial melancholia continues to influence British polity and politics. Indeed, many Brexiters advocate for the creation of CANZUK, a union of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK (Bell and Vucetic, 2019), but proposals to create an incorporation or a federation of the British Empire are present from the late nineteenth century in the UK (Blick, 2019). The rationale behind the proposal is the same I already discussed in the previous paragraphs – namely, that these countries are bound by common traditions and organizational structures. It is in light of this insight, hence, that one must understand Farage's claim that he would prefer migrants from India and Australia, rather than from eastern Europe, since the former are more likely to speak English, understand the common law system and 'have a connection with country' (Mason, 2015). Or Boris Johnson's lamentation that joining the EEC 'we betrayed our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand' (Johnson, 2013, quoted in Bell and Vucetic, 2019). As a matter of fact, Boris Johnson has been labelled 'the quintessential nostalgic leader' (Campanella, 2019).

Reviewing Michael Kenny's and Nick Pearce's *Shadows of Empire: The Anglosphere in British Politics*, Thompson (2019) explains that the authors "illuminate how generations of English Conservatives promoted an alternative vision of Britain's role in global politics – one centred on the wider English-speaking world, or 'Anglosphere'"

(p. 174). Central to the Anglosphere's appeal in Eurosceptic argument is its ambiguity; there is no clear definition of what the Anglosphere is. It is assumed to be a group of English-speaking nations that share language, culture, and judiciary tradition (such as former dominions like Canada, Australia, and the United States), but it might also go so far as to include India, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Thompson, 2019). With roots dating back to the post-1870 period, the Anglosphere has proved its potential during the Second World War, and the strategic rationale for British development only changed in the second half of the twentieth century when, as already outlined, "'Europe was, often grudgingly, seen as a necessary choice'" (Thompson, 2019, p. 174). Most importantly, Kenny and Pearce stress in their book that by the beginning of the 21st century a conservative "Eurosceptic Anglosphere" had developed, which draw inspiration from Margaret Thatcher's attitude and finally consolidated its position in 2010, when the Conservative David Cameron took office in Downing Street.

Finally, allusions about the Anglosphere came extremely useful in the toolbox of Eurosceptic figures of speech during the Brexit referendum campaign. The presumption that the historical reworking was a prerogative of the Eurosceptics is confirmed by Eoin Drea (2019), who speaks of a misinterpretation of British imperial history, designed with the purpose of promoting the primacy of the nation state over European pooling of sovereignty; indeed, he briefly describes a "certain Eurosceptic Tory interpretation of British and imperial history" (p. 118). And yet, it is not only the Eurosceptics who used 'history with a purpose', but also those actors in the Remain camp (Maccaferri, 2019).

A pivotal example of how history was used to promote a Remain stance is represented by the famous 2013 Cameron's Bloomberg speech. Delivered on January 23rd, 2013, the speech can be considered as the 'starting point' for the EU 2016 referendum, for many arguments used by both camps during the referendum campaign can already be detected in Cameron's Bloomberg Speech (Todd, 2015). The assumption that arguments supporting opposite camps can come from the same speech appears counterintuitive. And yet, this ambivalence stresses once again Cameron's ambiguity about the desirability of European integration. Indeed, despite Cameron stating that "I never want us to pull up the drawbridge and retreat from the world. I am not a British isolationist", that he has "a positive vision for the future of the European Union. A future in which Britain wants, and should want, to play a committed and active part", and that he does not want the British people to drift towards exit, Oliver Daddow (2015) maintains that the press coverage of the speech built a narrative whereby the EU was presented as the Other, which limits British sovereignty and freedoms. Through DHA Ruth Wodak (2018) shows how the Bloomberg speech stressed the contrast between national and European identity perceived by the British, with the aim of convincing auditors that the country should stay in the EU. Cameron did so by framing his conception of 'in- and out-groups' – the UK v. the EU, by defending the prominence of the need for strengthening economic ties rather than social and legal integration, and yet without ever mentioning the potential negative consequences of Brexit (Wodak, 2018). Consistently with Maccaferri's analysis (2019)

concluding that British exceptionalism is employed by remainers to support a transformation of the EU from within, Wodak (2018) claims that David Cameron in the Bloomberg speech juxtaposes the British and European identities to suggest proposals for transformation of the EU to accommodate British needs. An example is:

> "I know that the United Kingdom is sometimes seen as an argumentative and rather strong-minded member of the family of European nations. And it's true that our geography has shaped our psychology. We have the character of an island nation — independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel. And because of this sensibility, we come to the European Union with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional. For us, the European Union is a means to an end — prosperity, stability, the anchor of freedom and democracy both within Europe and beyond her shores — not an end in itself".[31]

Furthermore, Wodak (2018) underlines how in the Bloomberg Speech there's frequent employ of the "'topos of history' which draws from Britain's salient role in WWII and during the cold war inasmuch as it always supported Europe during times of huge dangers. The process of transferring given elements to new contexts is labelled *recontextualization*." (p. 33). In doing so, Cameron is also performing a "discursive construction of a hegemonic British national identity" (ibid. p.45) by cultivating "a sense of belonging to a superior British nation, in the tradition of the British empire" (ibid. p. 46). An example is:

> "From Caesar's legions to the Napoleonic Wars. From the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution to the defeat of Nazism. We have helped to write European history, and Europe has helped write ours. Over the years, Britain has made her own, unique contribution to Europe. We have provided a haven to those fleeing tyranny and persecution. And in Europe's darkest hour, we helped keep the flame of liberty alight. Across the continent, in silent cemeteries, lie the hundreds of thousands of British servicemen who gave their lives for Europe's freedom".[32]

CONCLUSIONS

The elements analysed in the previous pages tell us that British history does play an important role in shaping how the British people perceive their country, and in turn how this perception inform the understanding of the relationship with Europe. The first element to start with is the largely evidenced Euroscepticism which is observed in the United Kingdom more than in any other European country. I argue that the

31. David Cameron's EU speech at Bloomberg, 23 January 2013. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg [last accessed on 24 May 2021].
32. *Ibid*.

reasons for such widespread distrust towards the European dimension lie in the unique historical traits that make the European Union a constant term of comparison for the people of the UK. Bound by a collective identity which is deeply rooted in Britain's former *grandeur*, the British people perceive the relationship with Europe as one of subordination rather than cooperation (Beaumont, 2017). This is because, according to a reasoning built on the assumptions of the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Temporal Comparison Theory (TCT), in the process of individual and social identity building, Britons tend to compare Britain's former self with its position within the EU. Observing *how* history played a role in determining the outcome of the Brexit referendum is not enough, for one should also be able to say *why* it was so. The conflict that arises from the outcome of such comparison, which inevitably results in the UK being worse off now vis-à-vis the times of imperial greatness, has fuelled the distrust towards the European project. This also explains why many authors quoted in this thesis write of an "imperial nostalgia" (Lagrou, 2009), of a "postcolonial melancholia" (Ashe, 2016), and of a struggle for 'taking back control' (Beaumont, 2017).

If the imperial past is still engraved in the collective unconscious of the British people, this is even more true for the Second World War. The UK emerged from the ruins of the war as the saviour of Europe, the 'island nation' that not only defeated Hitler and Nazism, but was arguably the only country which suffered neither dictatorship nor foreign invasion. On the one hand, this boosted British nationalism even more. On the other, the 'cultural trauma' determined by the fear of invasion has survived the decades until now, which partly explains the effectiveness of anti-immigration arguments so largely deployed in the Brexit referendum campaign. Speaking of the past surviving in the present, the imperial nostalgia, too, found its expression in contemporary terms. The allegations that the Commonwealth, the former territories of the empire, or even a new CANZUK (the union of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK) would be a better alternative to the European partnership is largely present in the debate around Europe and Brexit. One of the most prominent figures of the Brexit campaign, the leader of UKIP Nigel Farage, openly advocated for such a shift of alliances.

In the article I also address the question of how such historical references remained vivid in the minds of the British people throughout the centuries. Here, the press and the public debate play a pivotal role. Indeed, many scholars detect a tendency towards a "misinterpretation of British imperial history" (Drea, 2019) and the use of "history with a purpose" (Daddow et al., 2019). The images of former greatness have stood the test of time because they became an integral part of the common cultural imaginary. And they did so in a way which emphasised the martial glory of the British people, especially during WWII, which inevitably bore the consequences of stressing the differences – if not the superiority – vis-à-vis the other European states which were now at an equal footing in the context of the European Union. The imperial past is vivid in the cultural imaginary of the British through national liturgies which keep reminding the population about the lost *grandeur*, such as the Commonwealth Day which is the natural evolution of the former Empire Day. Overall, taking inspiration

from the Discourse-Historical Analyses by Daddow (2015), Wodak (2018), and Maccaferri (2019), we can conclude that the main narrative informing British Euroscepticism is constructed around the idea of 'British exceptionalism' which has roots in the unique history of the United Kingdom.

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