British Politics (2021) 16:117–132
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00167-7

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Brexit and the Myth of British National Identity

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Accepted: 14 February 2021 / Published online: 20 March 2021

Abstract

In this paper we analyse Brexit in relation to changes in British national identity since World War II. We begin by analysing how the concept of "tradition" relates to "nation", and then examine current discourses surrounding Brexit and national identity. We trace the ways in which British national identity has been renegotiated since World War II through contests over nationality, citizenship, cultural diversity, and Europe. Finally, we ask why British political actors have struggled to negotiate the dilemmas of post-Imperial British identity, and what lessons can be learned. We look at changing coalitions within British political parties, which we connect to philosophical tensions in their underlying intellectual traditions, and to changes brought about by globalisation. We conclude that Brexit and the broader crisis of liberal democracy of which it is a part have deep historical and philosophical roots, and that attempts to unite our policy through a single national identity will be unsuccessful.

Keywords Brexit · Nationalism · Tradition · Decolonization · Multiculturalism · European Union · Populism · Globalisation

Introduction

In this paper we examine the connection between Brexit and British national identity. We start by analysing the relationship between nation, history, and tradition. We suggest that the idea of a single British identity or political tradition is a myth. British identity, like the British political tradition, is inherently fractured, contested, and unstable. We examine the connections between Brexit and national identity in

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current public discourse, before tracing the renegotiation of Britishness from World War II to Brexit. We argue that our narrative shows Brexit is the symptom of underlying tensions which cut across British national identity, our political parties, and the intellectual traditions they draw upon. We conclude that attempting to unite our society around a common national identity is futile, as a singular vision of Britain—no matter how putatively inclusive—cannot accommodate the plural identities, narratives, and traditions that constitute our contested polity.

National identities, histories, and traditions

Our main aim in this paper is to narrate the changing and competing traditions of "Britishness" that are found in Brexit. Before embarking on our narrative, however, we need to clarify why we think the idea of a single stable British identity or political tradition is a myth. In doing so, we clarify how we can simultaneously both use and critique concepts of "identity" and "tradition". On the one hand, political actors and everyday citizens definitely operate with ideas of Britishness that influence their behaviour. On the other hand, when these actors or scholars treat Britishness as stable and monolithic, they are inevitably perpetuating a myth. We have discussed the theoretical grounds for these views of tradition and identity at length elsewhere (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019a, c; Bevir 1999, 2007), so our account here will be brief.

The key point is that the concept of tradition enables human scientists to situate actors in the contexts relevant for explaining their actions. The grammar of our concepts presupposes that individuals are socialized into traditions which they use to make sense of the world, and to respond purposefully to the dilemmas they encounter when acting in it. Traditions help individuals to organize their beliefs (more or less) coherently, and therefore enable purposive action. By placing historical actors within particular traditions we are able to link their beliefs, desires, and actions in a way that explains their behaviour rather than simply describing it.

For traditions to clarify rather than obscure purposeful human action we must understand their nature as social, rather than natural, objects. We must not reify traditions, mistakenly treating them as things which have existence entirely separately from human beings (Marsh and Hall 2007, 2016; Hall 2011; Hall et al. 2018). In reifying traditions, we falsely prescribe to them causal powers that can operate independently of the way they are interpreted by particular individuals. Traditions are not brute causes of behaviour, but rather help us explain the particular choices actors freely make. Likewise, as traditions are social constructions not natural kinds, they cannot have necessary content or essential features. Traditions are constantly evolving along with the world which they help make sense of, and so must not be judged against idealized or "authentic" versions of themselves. As human scientists, we must be aware of the bewitching effects of language, which constantly tempt us into reifying or essentializing social objects.

Identifying traditions and situating individuals within them is necessary for making human behaviour intelligible. Traditions are passed down over time from person to person, and in the process they evolve, as individual actors change their beliefs in response to the dilemmas they face. The only way to describe and explain this

process as human scientists is through a narrative of our own. The tendency of modern social science to rely heavily on formal, quantitative methods to understand phenomena is therefore problematic. Narratives are also evidence, and cannot simply be trumped by data gathered by other putatively more "objective" approaches, such as surveys of public attitudes. Atomized pieces of information regarding people's beliefs and behaviours should not be used to dismiss narratives that are able to contextualize these attitudes within broader patterns of thought and behaviour.

The limitations of modern social science techniques when applied to history should not, however, make us nostalgic for the essentializing national histories that they replaced. On the contrary, it is also important to guard against essentialism and reification when assessing traditions that clothe their abstracted and constructed nature in organic and naturalizing language, as has typically been the case with national history or national identity. Classic national histories took the form of "master narratives" that claimed to elucidate the character and traditions of particular nations in order to explain their development over time (Bevir 2007). A recurrent problem with these grand national histories, however, was that while they claimed to be describing a national identity, in fact they were part of the process of constructing it. As elements of elite-led projects of nation-building they treated the national "character" as a single tradition which possessed a stable core content. In the British context, these Whiggish narratives typically described British culture—and the institutions through which it was expressed—as uniquely tolerant, pragmatic, and stable. These grand national narratives thereby dismissed the contingent and contested features of "Britishness" in favour of a romanticized and essentialized view of the nation. Yet, while influential in public life, these accounts of the nation were ultimately rejected by modern historians as unreliable.

We must therefore be suspicious of sentimental paeans to forms of shared national identity that are themselves abstractions from the conflicting beliefs of individuals. Any account of national identity that foregrounds commonality over contestation risks lapsing back into the myth-making of the grand national histories of yesteryear. National identity is better construed as a broad tradition comprised of multiple and competing strands upon which political actors draw selectively to suit their particular purposes. As well as rejecting essentialist accounts of the nation as "primordial" or "organic", we must therefore also be suspicious of those who describe it as "imagined" or "mythical" but nevertheless see nations as constituted by shared history, institutions, values, or culture.[1] Any invocation of a singular "national identity" is better understood as normative claim about what national identity should be, than as an empirical claim about what it is. Our articulation of the nation as a form of tradition must have a critical edge that is absent from much of the related the public discourse.

We have argued that both social science and national history can rely on myths about a reified Britishness—an allegedly shared and dominant national identity or

[1] For example by Herder, Benedict Anderson, and David Miller. The phrase "national identity" in the singular is therefore problematic, as it functions as a broad generalization of the beliefs of a vast number of individuals and thus risks losing empirical traction (Ashcroft and Bevir 2018b).

tradition. Both are therefore inadequate if we are to narrate the complex relationships between national identities, British political traditions, and Brexit. Modern social science abrogates narrative as a mode of explanation, and thus cannot make sense of the role traditions play in politics without treating them as reified causes of behaviour. Whig history embraces narrative as a mode of explanation, but by describing national identity in essentialized terms loses empirical traction on the plural interpretations of the nation at play. We need a narrative of British national identity and political traditions that neither reifies or essentializes its objects of study. We require a narrative that is historicist in approach and critical in orientation.

Brexit, national identity, and decolonization

One of the defining characteristics of debates over Brexit is that the different actors seem unable to agree on what the central issues are, the likely consequences of the different scenarios, or even what the referendum was really about. We have argued elsewhere that the result was driven by the interaction of plural cross-cutting attitudes towards multiple issues, including national identity (Ashcroft and Bevir 2016). Framing the referendum question as a binary choice between staying and leaving the European Union was therefore a mistake, as it provided the illusion of a cohesive majority opinion in favour of leaving the EU. This allowed the referendum result to be shrouded in the rhetoric of popular sovereignty, lending respectability to darker populist urges amongst the public and the political class. The political paroxysms since the vote appear to have borne out these concerns, with the various factions within Parliament splitting and recombining in legion ways over time. Debates within Parliament, the Courts, and the public sphere have become increasingly hostile and intolerant, with each actor claiming democratic legitimacy over the others. It is therefore not surprising that, far from settling matters, the vote to leave the European Union continues to divide Britain in a multitude of ways.

Some of these cleavages map onto demographic differences, with younger, more educated, and minority voters on one side, and older, less educated, and majority-ethnic voters on the other (Ashcroft 2016; Clarke et al. 2017). Others fall on primarily geographical lines, with Scotland and Northern Ireland opposed to leaving and England and Wales in favour, and urban areas voting Remain and rural voting Leave. Another way of understanding attitudes to Brexit is to see the debate as one that is as much about subjective feelings—of economic insecurity, political disenfranchisement, or fear of immigration—as it is about underlying social realities. Yet none of these divisions map unproblematically onto the political parties which have dominated British life for over a century. The Labour and the Conservative Parties have been riven by internal disputes regarding the referendum result and the right response to it. The Liberal Democrats have maintained a greater degree of unity by remaining consistently anti-Brexit, but this clarity of purpose has failed to translate into electoral success, despite significant public support for their position. How then can we understand and respond to Brexit in a productive way, when it seems to be defined by cleavages that defy our traditional forms of political analysis and organization?

We argue Brexit can be fruitfully understood through the lens of British national identity, which both frames public discourse and forms a central part of the substance of the debates. Whilst ours is not the only way of framing Brexit—as the other papers in this special edition demonstrate—we believe it is a vital one. Most obviously, there is a consistent discursive connection between Brexit and British national identity. The debates surrounding the referendum are often conducted through the language of the nation, frequently framing the conflict as one over the future of modern Britain, what it means to be British, and how Britishness might be secured or damaged by Brexit (Ashcroft and Bevir 2018a, 2019b). Actors articulate very different visions of "Britishness", however, that revolve around a variety of axes that can be more or less exclusionary, such as political values, cultural norms, or historical heritage. It is unclear whether the link between Brexit and Britishness is driven primarily by elite rhetoric or underlying public opinion. Yet whatever the ultimate cause and effect, the consistent association of Brexit and claims regarding "Britishness" is a fact of contemporary political discourse, and therefore the idiom of national identity provides us with a way to both narrate Brexit and critically engage it.

Beyond its prominence in current discourse, British national identity is also connected to Brexit both historically and philosophically. Brexit is the latest stage in a debate over national identity that has been ongoing since 1945, when decolonization led to a series of changes that radically altered Britain. The dilemma decolonization posed for Britain started a chain of events where each "solution" caused another set of dilemmas, which in turn required further controversial adjustments. These tensions were salved rather than solved by the series of compromises between—and within—Labour and the Conservatives after World War II. Brexit has thus highlighted the fact that the two major parties, Labour and the Conservatives, have been unable to negotiate different currents which pull them in different directions on nation, multiculturalism, and globalisation.

The transformation of Britain in the years following World War II altered both national identity and citizenship, each of which had internally and externally-facing elements. Prior to World War II, a prominent narrative portrayed Britain as a uniquely blessed nation. In drawing on the Whig interpretation of history this form of national identity gave a progressive account of British political institutions, valorising the "peaceful adaptation, timely accommodation, [and] responsive evolution" that characterized the unwritten constitution (Marquand 1995, p. 186). At the centre of this story was Parliament, and perched atop Parliament sat a constitutional monarchy, seen as evidence of the balanced, stable, and democratic nature of British political institutions. Yet this narrative was not a purely domestic one. Britain had created the largest empire the world had ever seen, and a central justification of Britain's "Empire of virtue" was that, unlike other European forms of colonialism, it would ultimately prepare its colonies to rule themselves (Morefield 2005).

This form of "British exceptionalism" facilitated the extension of the Whig narrative from domestic political institutions to British governance overseas.[2] Stretching the "golden circle of the Crown"[3] beyond the borders of the British Isles therefore connected British national identity directly to the Empire, casting it as inherently global and outward-looking.[4] In addition, the monarchy was not simply a part of the story of British political institutions, it was a symbol of the nation itself, shrouded in reverence, ritual, and patriotic fervour. National identity was thus articulated in terms of Britain's imperial mission to spread its political institutions, economic practices, and cultural values around the world.

The Whig Imperialist form of national identity formed something of a common currency in British national and political life, and was popular amongst elites in all the major political parties (Hansen 2000; Marquand 1995). Yet the remaking of the domestic and international order following World War II led to a diminution of Britain's status and power that undercut Whig Imperialism. The central dilemma faced by political elites in 1945 was how to adjust to the new global realities but also secure Britain's international position. To complicate matters further, the first majority Labour government fundamentally altered the domestic political landscape through the creation of the modern welfare state and the postwar "consensus" in its favour.[5] The new welfare state was about more than just constructing a robust social safety net. It was a transformation of British citizenship through adding economic and social rights to traditional political and civil ones, a project articulated most famously in T. H. Marshall's developmental history "Citizenship and Social Class" (1950). This postwar transformation of British citizenship was accompanied by sweeping reforms of nationality law through the British Nationality Act 1948 ("BNA 1948"). The BNA 1948 was not simply an attempt to codify the "Marshallian" citizenship by enshrining it in statute, as the relevant domestic economic and social rights were already granted through other legislation. Nor was it driven primarily by the desire to modernize the feudal concept of subjecthood, which still lay at the heart of the new regime (Hansen 2000).[6] Rather, the BNA 1948 was a central part of a broader strategy pursued by political elites in both major parties aimed at securing British power on the global stage, and preserving its Whig Imperialist identity.

[2] For an account of "British exceptionalism" and its relationship to "Whig imperialism" see Ashcroft and Bevir (2019b).

[3] Churchill in the House of Commons after World War II (House of Commons 1945), as quoted in Marquand (1995).

[4] While historians still debate the precise impact of imperialism on British domestic culture, we believe it is clear that the Empire was a fundamental part of British national identity from at least the mid-Victorian period up until the mid-twentieth century. As well as Colley (1992) see MacKenzie (1999) and Catherine Hall (2001, pp. 27–39).

[5] The blueprint for the welfare state drew state on interwar developments in both liberalism and socialism (Backhouse et al 2017; Peden 2017) but it become a central part of the postwar "consensus" that included conservatives (Kavanagh 1992).

[6] The roots of postwar citizenship lay in the feudal concept of subjecthood, whereby individuals owed direct allegiance to the sovereign. Calvin's Case (1608) established the principle of jus soli in the common law, meaning that those born with the dominion of the Crown naturally possessed all the rights and duties of subjecthood. The gradual expansion of individual rights over time meant, however, that while British law was still structured around subjecthood, it was common to refer to "British citizenship".

As noted above, Britain had always clothed its imperialism in paternalist liberalism, claiming that unlike other European powers, it would grant independence to its colonies once they were ready to rule themselves, and pointing to the Dominions as evidence of this. This form of "British exceptionalism" provided a way of narrating decolonization as an expression—rather than abnegation—of the Whig Imperialist form of national identity, thus rendering the loss of empire less traumatic. It also provided an opportunity to preserve international influence by positioning Britain at the head of a geopolitically significant Commonwealth of Nations that could operate independently of both the United States and Europe.[7] A successful turn towards the Commonwealth would thus have allowed key aspects of both British identity and influence to survive. This strategy required, however, a reassertion of Whig Imperialism whilst transforming that form of national identity to fit a postcolonial world.

It was this paradox that the BNA 1948 tried to solve by re-establishing the common legal status of individual subjecthood held across the Empire in the interwar years, but simultaneously transforming it into an inclusive citizenship that stretched far beyond the shores of the United Kingdom. Common subjecthood was granted automatically to everyone born within the British Empire and Commonwealth, yet previously had subsisted primarily through a direct common law relationship between Crown and individual.[8] In contrast, the BNA 1948 made all grants of British subjecthood dependent on some form of citizenship, whether that of an independent country such as Canada or India, or through being "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies", a category which did not distinguish between those individuals born within the UK and those born in the current colonies. The overall effect of the BNA 1948 was that almost everyone in the Commonwealth or Empire had a statutory right to migrate to the UK irrespective of place of birth, race, religion, or class. The postwar nationality reforms thus reaffirmed Britain's putative commitment to the freedom and equality of those within the multi-racial Commonwealth it hoped to lead, and in so doing both presupposed and articulated an inclusive and evolving form of British national identity to match.

The delusion that Britain's "benevolent" imperialism would secure her place at the head of a Commonwealth sphere of influence was swiftly corrected, however, as former colonies such as India made clear their desire for a clean break with their imperial past, and the Suez Crisis brought home Britain's impotency as an independent international actor. Political elites therefore abandoned the Commonwealth dream in favour of a European one.[9] Yet, while the attempt to find international influence in the post-imperial era through Europe was arguably successful in political terms, it did not settle the question of British national identity after Empire. This was in part because the problem of post-imperial British national identity was not solely a question of adjusting the idea of Britain to match her reduced international

[7] The Commonwealth vision was shared by both Attlee and Churchill, and its centrality is a commonplace. See Hansen (2000), Marquand (1995), Hampshire (2005), Spencer (1997), Ward (2001a, b, c), and Karatani (2003).

[8] See Karatani (2003, 40ff, pp. 76–90), and Hansen (2000, Chap. 2) for a fuller discussion.

[9] See Ward (2001a, b, c, 2007a, b) for series of detailed discussions.

status—whether that was within the context of the Commonwealth or Europe—but also of responding to her domestic transformation, which gave rise to new forms of national identity.

The postwar reforms of both nationality and citizenship law eased the way for mass non-white migration from the colonies. In turn, this provoked a nativist public and political backlash, highlighting the shallowness of the "inclusive" form of Britishness formed during Empire. As we have detailed elsewhere, these mono-cultural and mono-ethnic forms of Britishness came into conflict with more colour-blind and pluralist conceptions of the nation, resulting in the emergence of a distinctive form of "British multiculturalism" over the 1960s and 1970s (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019b). This "Janus-faced" approach to managing cultural diversity was comprised of tough external immigration controls, which were married to a generous internal regime of race-relations, broad citizenship rights, and accommodations for minorities. Whilst it has been broadly stable as a matter of policy and law from the 1960s to the present day, multiculturalism has always been a source of controversy, in part because it embodies an uneasy mix of exclusionary and inclusive attitudes to difference.[10]

These conflicts between multi- and monocultural forms of British national identity have been compounded by the UK's membership of the European Union. This is in part because the free movement of workers by-passes the tough immigration controls that form the outward-facing aspect of the multicultural regime. The result has been the muddling together of arguments regarding EU membership with unrelated debates over immigrants and refugees entering from outside of Europe, as evidenced by UKIP's disgraceful "Breaking Point" campaign poster. In addition, it was always going to be difficult to reinvent British identity within the European project, given that British identity was forged, as Linda Colley (1992) has shown, substantially through anti-European conflict. In effect, joining the European community attempted to replace a Whig imperialist national identity with the very thing it was forged in contrast to, continental Europe. It is therefore unsurprising that pro-Brexit campaigns and subsequent Conservative governments have frequently articulated leaving the confines of Europe as an opportunity to rekindle Britain's globe-straddling past, and in so doing have frequently invoked the imagery and language of Empire (Finn 2016; Mathew 2016).[11] Even "liberal" forms of British nationalism which emphasize anti-racism and cultural diversity often articulate the nation in terms of "unique" British values and practices, harking back to postwar British exceptionalism.[12] Current debates over Brexit are therefore marked by reassertions

[10] In particular, the "traditional" policy framework has been subject to widespread criticism that it has damaged social cohesion following race riots in Northern England and the fallout out from the "war on terror" in the early 2000s. While it is debatable whether British multiculturalism is currently undergoing a "retreat" or a "rebalancing" (Meer and Modood 2019), it is clearly currently subject to pressure from more homogenizing forms of liberal nationalism, "muscular liberalism," and overt nativism. See Ashcroft and Bevir (2018a, 2019b), BBC News (2011, 2017), Croucher (2016), Mason (2016), Matthew (2016), and Rudd (2016) for illustrations of this point.

[11] See also Farage (2016), Mason (2016), Gove (2009a, b, 2010), Whale (2016) and May (2017).

[12] See Ashcroft and Bevir (2018a, 2019b), Goodhart (2006, 2014), May (2017), and Pitcher (2009) for examples.

of the form of national identity that led to the failed attempt to secure Britain's place at the head of a Commonwealth bloc.

Brexit is rooted in the dilemmas posed by decolonization. The imminent loss of Empire destabilized a form of national identity rooted in Britain's imperial mission, but the subsequent reforms of nationality and citizenship aimed at shoring up Whig Imperialism started a chain of events that have led us here. Britain's international prestige plummeted as the turn towards the Commonwealth failed, and mass immigration forced political elites to develop a form of "British multiculturalism" comprised of a precarious balance of external exclusion and internal inclusion of immigrants. The tensions between multicultural, monocultural and monoethnic versions of national identity were exacerbated by the turn towards a continental Europe that Imperial Britain had defined itself against, ultimately leading to another set of debates over "Britishness" as part of Brexit.

Political parties, intellectual traditions, and the crisis of liberal democracy

The basic arc of our historical narrative is clear enough, but in itself does not tell us how to address the current situation. In this section we try and understand why British political actors have struggled to provide a clear and coherent response to Brexit. We argue that the current confusion over how to react to Brexit reflects the inability of British political parties to solve the underlying issue of post-Imperial national identity, as evidenced by their longer-standing divisions over Europe and multiculturalism. We suggest these internal tensions have been exacerbated by the changing nature of their coalitions over time, by broader structural changes in the postwar period, and by philosophical tensions in their underlying intellectual traditions.

While the Liberal Democrats have been consistently pro-EU, a relative lack of electoral success has meant that their stance has had little effect on government policy.[13] In contrast, the dominant Labour and Conservatives parties contain a plethora of pro- and anti- European factions motivated by different political goals and understandings (Beech 2019; Hickson 2019). The influence of these different factions on party policy has shifted over time, and as a result both parties have been officially pro- and anti- EU at different points over the postwar period. The clearest change has been within Labour MPs who have moved from predominantly anti- to pro-EU, albeit that a suspicion of the EU from the hard left has always remained. In contrast, the Conservatives were nominally pro-EU from the 1960s to the 1980s, but since the end of the Thatcher era the Eurosceptic wing has become increasingly vocal and powerful, leading to deep divisions in the Parliamentary party. This fluidity in the two major parties on the issue of Europe meant that Britain's commitment to the European project was half-hearted and never completely beyond question.

[13] Save, perhaps, in that the collapse of their vote in favour of the Conservatives in 2015 meant that Cameron did not require them as partners in government, and therefore was not able to use them to block the referendum he had promised to his backbenchers from actually occurring.

Although all mainstream parties nominally support the goal of an inclusive-yet-culturally-diverse Britain, there have been clearer divisions between the parties on multiculturalism than on Europe. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have taken more consistently pro-diversity positions than the Conservatives over the postwar period, although the locus and focus of some of their policies has shifted over time (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019b). Labour in particular were the driver behind generous internal aspects of the British multiculturalism as it developed over the 1960s, including the shift from cultural assimilation towards the more difference-friendly goal of integration. In contrast, it was the Conservatives who started the process of restricting immigration in 1962, and who pushed through almost all subsequent immigration legislation aimed at reducing the flow of immigrants, often through explicitly or implicitly racialized criteria. Nevertheless, there have been countervailing strands within both Labour and the Conservatives on multiculturalism which complicate the picture. For example, despite Thatcherite control of central government in the 1980s and 1990s, the multicultural regime was broadly maintained in policy terms, albeit that there was some tightening of immigration restrictions and weakening of welfare state provision (Karatani 2003, pp. 182–185, Hansen 2000, pp. 220–221). And whilst New Labour initially reinforced the pluralist elements of the multicultural regime, after 2001 they emphasised the need for minority communities to assimilate "British" values and culture. (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019b). Prior to Brexit, the leadership of both parties had been drifting towards more assimilative forms of liberal nationalism even as they maintained a commitment to a culturally diverse Britain (Meer and Modood 2019). Post-Brexit there is arguably a slight widening of the gap between Labour and the Conservatives on this issue, as some in the broader Conservative coalition have appeared more comfortable expressing nativist tropes (Cockburn 2016; Croucher 2016). This has pushed many in Labour to express their support for cultural diversity more loudly even as the leadership prevaricated on the issue of Brexit (Hall 2015), which itself partly turns on attitudes to multiculturalism and immigration (Ashcroft and Bevir 2016).

The most salient reason for the shifts in Labour and the Conservatives on Europe and multiculturalism are changes in their electoral coalitions. There has been an increase in younger, educated, middle class, and urban support for Labour since the 1990s, and all of these demographics are generally both pro-European and committed to multiculturalism (Furlong 2019). Labour's traditional working-class base is less enthusiastic about the EU and the effects of immigration, however, making both Brexit and multiculturalism tricky issues for the party. In contrast, the current Conservative party relies heavily on older, white, English voters who feel more anti-European and are more concerned with the effects of multiculturalism on social cohesion (Ashcroft 2016; McDonnell and Curtis 2019). Conservative leadership, which has been broadly pro-European since Major, has therefore had to worry about defections to UKIP from both the Eurosceptic wing of the Parliamentary party and its core voters.

It is widely accepted that these shifts in the base of the two parties are related to the outcome of the referendum, but what is less clear is precisely how. Part of the problem is that when surveyed, voters provide very different reasons for their positions on Brexit, making it very hard to identify a single factor that lies behind either

the Leave or Remain vote in general, or even to explain trends within particular demographics (Ashcroft 2016; Clarke et al 2017). This has resulted in a multitude of theories regarding the "real" reason for Brexit, precisely why it has destabilized Labour and the Conservatives, and how the parties should respond. No doubt ink will continue to be spilt on this question for years to come in both academic and popular presses, and it is impossible for us to settle matters definitively here. We suggest, however, that it is helpful to situate these coalitional shifts in the context of broader domestic and international changes over the postwar period.

The most obvious changes within the UK that have influenced Brexit are related to the economy, but on closer inspection these appear also to have political and cultural components. For example, a key part of the Leave vote seems to have been driven by a sense of economic vulnerability, especially those subject to competition from highly mobile labour from within the EU (Ashcroft 2016, Davies 2019, and Clarke et al. 2017). The sense of having been "left behind" may have its roots in the shift from an industrial to service economy, but it seems likely that economic anxiety has been heightened by recent political choices, in particular controversial austerity policies. Also, different migration and socialization patterns between urban and rural areas within the UK driven partly by changes in the economy seem to have contributed to the emergence of a form of cultural conservatism that cuts across traditional left/right political distinctions (Wren-Lewis 2019, Weale 2018). Another key part of the Leave "coalition" seems to turn, however, on a (likely misplaced) sense of economic security rather than vulnerability, but again this can be connected to cultural issues. For example, some argue that older, predominantly white, voters who see themselves as economically secure because they own their homes were able to foreground cultural issues rather than the economic consequences of Brexit in making their decision (Davies 2019).[14]

These changes in the UK can be placed in the context of a broader international pattern. Since the mid 1980′s, the "Washington Consensus" has ensured that the free movement of capital and labour central to the European project has dominated international economic governance. This has contributed to the leadership of major European political parties coalescing on the position that "there is no [viable] alternative" to the EU in economic terms, which has fed into a fundamental political realignment of left and right across the entire continent (Mudde 2016a, b). This realignment has opened the door to populism, allowing savvy nativists to exploit the situation by blaming "remote" and "out of touch" elites at both the national and European level (Mudde 2016a, b; Weale 2018; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). The "permissive consensus" that had facilitated a steady expansion of the European community for most of the postwar period added legitimacy to these accusations, even if they were exaggerated.[15] The current confusion within British political parties over

[14] Many of whom benefited from Thatcher's sale of former council properties in the 1980′s, another part of the key economic changes in the UK over the postwar period.

[15] See Costa and Brack (2019), Chapters 1 and 2, Checkel and Katzenstein (2009), Holmes (2009), Moravcsik (2002), Scharpf (2011), Schimmelfennig (2001), Hix and Bjorn (2013) for a series of useful discussions of European integration, the permissive consensus, and democratic legitimacy in the EU.

the issue of Brexit is not, therefore, simply a result of competition between different factions within them, or even changes to their underlying electoral coalitions. It is also part of a wider pattern of domestic and international developments related to globalisation which have contributed to the rise of economic and cultural divides that cut across political traditions.

The overall effect of these changes has been that immigrants, multiculturalism, and the EU can be blamed for deeper-rooted problems, ignoring the political decisions that have contributed to current economic woes. We suggest this allows actors in debates over Brexit to hide their true motivation—perhaps even from themselves—by unhelpfully conflating political, economic, and cultural issues. The *lingua franca* of national identity through which much of this is debated exacerbates the failure to separate the different aspects of Brexit. The abstract and contested nature of "the nation" allows it to become a vessel into which people can pour a range of political, economic, and cultural anxieties. And because it is national *identity* that is being contested, individuals feel like part of their own identity is at stake, potentially turning policy issues into existential threats (Triadafilopoulos 2011). Clothing everything in the idiom of national identity simultaneously obscures the actual issues underlying Brexit and heightens the emotional tenor of the debate, thereby encouraging—and arguably legitimating—exclusionary forms of nationalism, nativism, and populism. Social cleavages have been exacerbated by the fact that Europe has been an elite-led project for most of the postwar period, and those who most strongly identify as European are the educated and wealthier voters who have benefited the most from it (Fligstein 2009; Favell 2009).[16] All of these factors feed into critiques of the EU from across the political spectrum. Critics accuse the EU of being "undemocratic" in whichever way suits their purposes, typically by alleging it represents the nefarious forces of "globalisation" that haunt both left and right populism (Holmes 2009).

We suggest situating Brexit within these broader global trends highlights underlying conflicts within the intellectual traditions which inform the two major parties in the UK, social democracy and conservatism.[17] As we have seen, despite their other differences, the leadership of both Labour and the Conservatives in the immediate postwar years shared the traditional "Whig Imperialist" vision of British national identity (Hansen 2000). This shared understanding of British national identity aligned with prominent strands of conservative and social-democratic thinking to ensure cross-party support for both the initial turn to the Commonwealth and the subsequent regime of multiculturalism. The overall result was the distinctive form British multiculturalism comprised of restrictive immigration controls, coupled with a strong internal race relations regime and the preservation of cultural differences

[16] The primary mechanisms for postwar European integration have been economic, with political and bureaucratic actors largely relying on spill-over effects to drive the process rather than democratic decision-making or shared cultural norms (Costa and Brack 2019; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009).

[17] Elements of universalism, internationalism, and cosmopolitanism can be found in each of conservatism, liberalism and socialism, yet all three contain countervailing strands of thought that emphasize ethical pluralism, national interests and obligations, and more local forms of culture and social organization (Bevir 2012).

within a framework of broad citizenship rights (Joppke 1999, 2010). This regime represented a compromise between the two main parties, and between elements of universalism and pluralism present in each party and in their underlying intellectual traditions (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019b). Yet, as our narrative has shown, this compromise has proved unstable over time, leading us steadily from the postwar reforms of British nationality to Brexit. British social democracy and conservatism are an uneasy mix of difference-blind principles and practices that valorise particular differences, containing inward- and outward-facing aspects that simultaneously pull up towards the global and push downward towards the local. Competing strands of universalism and particularism are thus part of the reason British political parties have not responded effectively in the aftermath of the referendum. These philosophical tensions have made it much harder for British political parties to negotiate the conflicts within a British national identity destabilized by decolonization, multiculturalism, and Europe.

Britain's decision to leave the EU therefore cannot be understood fully without tracing its philosophical and historical connections to pre- and postwar globalisation. Brexit is the local manifestation of a broader crisis of liberal democracy across the world, as contemporary polities struggle to manage both increasing globalisation and deepening cultural diversity, and the threat of both to traditional forms of national identity and long standing political traditions. Brexit and this crisis of liberal democracy have deep and shared roots in the unresolved tensions at the heart of the Enlightenment project between universal and particular, and global and local.

Conclusion: Decentering the Nation(s)

Brexit can be fruitfully understood as the most recent part of an ongoing debate over post-imperial national identity. Yet there is little acknowledgement that the Empire played some role in holding together the different nations that comprise the British "nation", and thus that its loss necessarily called into question the future of the Union. Whilst the process was not inevitable, the chain of events started by the postwar reforms led us slowly and surely to the current national crisis. Brexit is therefore partly the result of an inherent pluralism within British national identity which has been exacerbated by modern globalisation. Our contemporary political parties are ill-suited to address this pluralism, as they draw on competing intellectual currents of universalism and particularism. Leaving the European Union will not solve these tensions, nor will attempts to settle the question of British nationality, as contemporary versions of the British nation are necessarily both partial and incomplete. Partial in that the competing versions of Britain—which are articulated, and perhaps even created, by political elites—ignore the views of substantial segments of the population, who thus inevitably feel alienated by them. Incomplete in that each version fails to resolve the tensions between the competing strands of nationalism and internationalism, universalism and pluralism, and cosmopolitanism and localism which they draw upon.

As the other papers in this special edition show, moving past our current disputes will require reimagining British political traditions in fundamental ways. In

this paper, we have suggested that whatever other dilemmas Brexit is taken to pose, trying to unite our polity through a myth of a shared British national identity cannot be the answer, and is likely to further destabilize our political parties, traditions, and institutions. If we are to prevent the permanent fracturing of the polity itself, we must decentre the imagined national community that lies at the heart of the Brexit debate into the plethora of communities and identities that comprise it.

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