

Political Psychology of European Integration: The (Re)production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate

Ian Manners

University of Copenhagen

This article uses political psychology to understand emotions such as anger, hate, and passion in the Brexit debate in order to demonstrate the wider value of the political psychology of European integration. It uses five strands of political psychology to understand European integration, drawing on evidence from the Brexit debate. These strands are individual cognitive psychology, social psychology, social construction, psychoanalysis, and critical political psychology. The article argues that the political psychology of European integration demands an understanding of the interwoven nature of feelings and illusions, the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes, and the multiplicity of strands of political psychology in the mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples. Only in this way is it possible to even begin to comprehend the many ways in which identity and difference are (re)produced by all partners in the Brexit debate and what these processes mean for the wider study of the political psychology of European integration.

KEY WORDS: Brexit, European Integration, European Union, political psychology, United Kingdom

The (Re)Production of Identity and Difference in the Brexit Debate on European Integration

In an era of European crises over political legitimacy, economic austerity, loss of confidence in the EU, and the rise of far-right populists, the topic of European integration has become a very emotional subject. The anger which protestors demonstrate against economic austerity, the hate which nationalist far-right parties express for the EU and fellow Europeans, and the passion with which supporters of the EU argue for greater integration and enlargement are today central to understanding European integration. This article uses political psychology to understand emotions such as anger, hate, fear, anxiety, and passion in the Brexit debate in order to demonstrate the wider value of the political psychology of European integration. What this article, and the special issue it is part of, shows is that psychology and politics are deeply implicated in understanding contemporary European integration.

The article uses five strands of political psychology to understand European integration, drawing on evidence from the Brexit debate.¹ These are individual cognitive psychology, social psychol-

¹In terms of method, the analysis began with a meeting with U.K. Minister for Europe, David Lidington in March 2013 and finished in September 2018, including the publication of the analytical framework (Manners, 2014), a working note (Manners, 2015), research report to the Danish Parliament (Manners, 2016), and data on objective knowledge of the EU (Manners, 2017). The method included microanalysis of qualitative discursive data, meso-analysis of quantitative survey data, and meta-analysis of secondary publications on the political psychology of Brexit.

ogy, social construction, psychoanalysis, and critical political psychology. These strands are not intended to be exclusionary and are clearly overlapping with, for example, overlaps between individual psychology and psychoanalysis and between critical political psychology and the four other strands. In this respect, the strands do not provide a comprehensive survey but focus on valuable approaches found in the emerging subfield of political psychology of European integration represented in this special issue. The article understands political psychology as the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes (Deutsch & Kinnvall, 2002, p. 17; Manners, 2014, p. 292). While European integration is understood as the economic, social, and political processes of mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples (Manners, 2013, 2014, p. 292).

The article's analyses are set out in the next five sections: (1) *Individual political psychology* suggests that individual cognitive psychological processes, such as "Euroscepticism" interact with very low levels of knowledge about the EU and sociolocal factors, as seen in consistently low levels of British support for EU membership found in certain regions; (2) *Social psychology* argues in a different direction, placing far greater emphasis on the effects of group psychology on the construction of identity, as seen in the creation of "Remainers" and "Brexiters" as sociopolitical groups since 2016; (3) From the perspective of *social construction*, European integration can be explained as social phenomena both in terms of identity and knowledge about one's self, for example, in the Brexit debates over whether the United Kingdom is more "ontologically secure" within or without the EU; (4) *Psychoanalysis* emphasizes the role of the unconscious in political processes such as European integration, for example, in the British desire for a "return" to the comforting familiarities of a post-World War II imperial "homeland"; (5) Finally, *critical political psychology* explains European integration by bringing the contextual and subjective components to social science by, for example, analyzing the feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation that minority, unemployed, undereducated, precarious, and disadvantaged groups in Britain feel towards the EU.

The article argues, first, that the era of simply arguing the *rational* or functional basis of support for the EU on grounds of objective self-interest is over. As the analyses will demonstrate, the Brexit debate has not only been framed in emotional and affective terms, it has clearly relied on reinvented memories of the past and contested imaginary futures that work to construct subjectivity, actions, and rationales. Second, the article argues that the analysis of European integration demands an understanding of the *bidirectional interaction* of political and psychological processes in the mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples. Only in this way is it possible to even begin to comprehend the many ways in which identity and difference are (re)produced by all partners in the Brexit debate. Third, the article argues that the contemporary passions over European integration can only be understood through the use of political psychological approaches in their *multiplicity*. As the analyses will demonstrate, there are at least five strands or ways of understanding the Brexit debate on European integration, and all five hold valuable insights. Thus, the article will conclude that the 50-year relationship between Britain and the EU must be viewed through the lens of political psychology in order to understand the many ways in which identity and difference are (re)produced by all partners in the Brexit debate on European integration.

The Individual Psychology of Attitudes, Class, and Scepticism

The skewing of white majority political action as the action of a more narrowly defined white working class served to legitimize analyses that might otherwise have been regarded as racist. In effect, I argue that a pervasive "methodological whiteness" has distorted social scientific accounts of both Brexit and Trump's election victory and that this needs to be taken account of in our discussion of both phenomena. (Bhambra, 2017a, p. 214)

Individual cognitive psychological approaches tend to read European integration from the perspective of individual determinants of political psychology. The term “individual” is used in three senses here: First, to reflect the presumed “individualism of American psychology” (Bar-On, 2001, p. 334; see also Nesbitt-Larking, 2003, p. 247; Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012); second, to reflect the “strong emphasis on psychological processes as determinants of political processes in American political psychology” (Deutsch & Kinnvall, 2002, p. 16); and third, to place emphasis on cognitive approaches rather than psychodynamic approaches covered below (Cash, 1989). Hence individual cognitive psychological approaches tend to read opinions and attitudes towards European integration as the result of a wide range of factors, including personal character and choice. Contributions to this special issue by Curtis and Nielsen (2018) and Capelos and Katsanidou (2018) demonstrate the importance of personality, opinions, and attitudes found in individual cognitive psychology to the study of European integration.

However, as Bhambra (2017a) has identified, social scientific accounts of Brexit have made assumptions about individual cognitive psychology which are problematic, including “methodological whiteness.” The question of how individual psychological processes (such as anxiety, fear, and hate) shape and are shaped by individual political processes (such as antiestablishment political views and support for xenophobic, far-right parties) are important for understanding the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes. The referendum campaign was popularly framed in terms of “Remain” reason versus “Leave” emotion. The Remain campaign was framed in terms of rationality and economic reasons for membership of the EU. The Leave campaign was framed in terms of emotion and affective feelings for leaving the EU. It is thus worth interrogating the individual psychology of how and why reason and affect shaped public opinions in terms of three factors: EU attitudes, white working class, and Euroscepticism.

While it is popular to frame the Brexit debate in terms of reason versus emotion, these categories collapse in the light of evidence of wide-spread ignorance of the EU and the low level of enfranchisement and participation in the referendum debates. First, the overwhelming majority of U.K. citizens lack sufficient objective knowledge of the EU to be able to form a reasoned opinion on the referendum (Manners, 2017). Eurobarometer data demonstrates that among older, larger member states, U.K. citizens surveyed over the past 13 years are the least knowledgeable, most incorrect, and most unable to answer simple questions on the EU (Manners, 2017). Approximately 76–87% of U.K. citizens lack the knowledge to answer even basic questions on the EU, placing reasoned knowledge far behind emotional appeal in the Brexit debates. Second, an important number of adult U.K. residents did not participate in the referendum, either because they abstained (13 million people or 20% of the U.K. population) or because they were not allowed to vote (5 million people or 8% of the U.K. population) (Manners, 2016, p. 2). Thus the individual psychology of attitudes towards the EU must be understood in terms of factors other than knowledge, as postreferendum analyses attempt to do so.

A large number of publications analyze individual determinants of EU attitudes such as education, age, income, and race/ethnicity (Arnorsson & Zoega, 2016; Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2016; Goodwin & Heath, 2016). What these analyses argue is that all the factors played a role in shaping voting patterns, in order of importance: Lower educated, higher age, lower income, and racial majority individuals were more likely to vote “Leave.” Political pundits, followed by political scientists, were quick to identify the Leave vote with white working-class voters in Northern England, popularly termed the “left behind” by globalization. There are two significant problems with this explanation: First as Dorling (2016) has made clear through the use of exit polls, it was the white middle-class voters of southern England who determined the outcome. Second as Bhambra (2017a) demonstrated, not only has race and racism been broadly overlooked in the study of EU attitudes, but the fact that Black and ethnic minority voters were 18% more likely to support Remain raises the question of the extent to which dislike of the EU corresponded with dislike of minority races and foreigners (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). What these studies demonstrate is that the most important factor

was not education, age, race, or class; it was location. In other words, voters tended to vote according to social locality. This social locality factor is illustrated through the tendency of eastern England to vote Leave, while south-central England voted Remain. Similarly, while seven of Britain's largest cities (with over 200,000 population)—London, Leeds, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Bristol, Manchester, and Liverpool—voted Remain, three of England's largest cities—Birmingham, Sheffield, and Bradford—voted Leave.

The final factor is found in the conventional way of framing the public debate over the EU in terms of “Eurosceptics” against “Europhiles” (Holmes, 2001; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Price, 2009). Framing the debate this way has two serious problems. First, in the academic and popular imaginary, it is possible to present supporters of European integration as romantic lovers, while opponents are presented as clinical sceptics. Second, it is clearly inaccurate to present political parties, groups, and activists as “skeptical” of European integration. The right-wing of the English Conservative party has been anti-EU since the late 1970s Thatcherite reaction within the party. Furthermore, the growth of far-right groups which coalesced into UKIP were not only anti-EU, but clearly antiforeigner (Wodak, 2015). Thus, using the notion of “Eurosceptic” to explain individual psychology is clearly misleading—the combination of less education, older age, white ethnicity, and middle-class background may lead to dislike of minorities and foreigners—but “Euroscepticism” is a result of these social conditions, not a psychological explanation for EU attitudes.

In summary, individual cognitive psychological approaches tend to read character traits, opinions, and attitudes such as “Euroscepticism” as determinants of political choice and voting preferences found in the Brexit debate. The strengths of these approaches include the ability to generate and analyze personal data, such as education, age, income, or party identification, but their weaknesses include the ease with which dynamics such as ignorance, race, racism, class, social locality, or xenophobia can be overlooked as explanatory factors. While this discussion of survey research reveals the strengths and weakness of such analyses, it still remains for such deeper individual cognitive political-psychological research on Brexit to be conducted, as the contributions to this special issue address. In order to widen the analyses away from individual cognitive psychology, it is necessary to turn to how social psychology can be used to understand the Brexit debate.

The Social Psychology of Remainers Versus Brexiters

Two correlational studies examined the previously unexplored question of whether the Brexit vote and support for the outcome of the EU referendum were linked to individual predictors of prejudice toward foreigners: British collective narcissism (a belief in national greatness), right wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation.... These variables explained the variance in the perceived threat of immigrants and support for the Brexit vote over and above other previously examined predictors such as age, education, or ethnicity, as well as, national identification and national attachment. (Golec de Zavala, Guerra, & Simão, 2017, p. 1)

In contrast to the work of individual psychology, social-psychological approaches to the study of European integration are more common. Social psychology has historically been stronger in Europe, reflecting the “effect of the collective on the construction of identity” (Bar-On, 2001, p. 335), and in particular the influence of the social identity theory of Henri Tajfel (Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012, p. 52). Similarly, European political psychology has been “less one-sided” in “the study of the influence of political processes on psychological processes” (Deutsch & Kinnvall, 2001, p. 16). Contributions to this special issue by Cram, Moore, Olivieri, and Suessenbach, (2018), Androuli and

Nicholson (2018), Mahendran (2018), and Portice and Reicher (2018) demonstrate the value of social psychology for the study of European integration.

As Golec de Zavala et al. (2017) have concluded, social-psychological concepts such as collective narcissism, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation can be used to understand identity in the Brexit debate. In general, research within this approach places emphasis on the effects of collective psychology on the construction of identity, as seen in the emergence of *Remainers* as a distinct social group juxtaposed against *Leavers* or *Brexiteers* as a competing social group. In the aftermath of the campaign, when the extent of systematic lying linked with the illegal use of data harvesting and foreign influence became clearer, right-wing news outlets became even more dominant in the (re)production of the right-wing government's political coup (Wren-Lewis, 2016), the gap between the social-identity groups of "Remainers" and "Brexiteers" increased. The Google Trends comparison illustrates this continued use of social labels throughout the June 2016–September 2018 period (see Figure 1).

The Google Trends comparison shows that not only are Remainers and Brexiteers self-identifying social groups, they are also highly active in group psychological practices in news and social media. The trend also suggests that these social group distinctions are becoming more prominent with time, particularly with the politico-legal debates in the U.K. Parliament and government resignations two years after the referendum. This production of identity and difference between the two groups is interesting because prior to 2016 the question of "Europe"—the United Kingdom's membership of the EU—was long considered a "second-order" (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) issue of no real political interest to voters and politicians alike. The divisive campaign, referendum, and resulting political chaos have thus created a new, first-order social group dynamic at the heart of British society and politics.

Four headlines from the hard-right-wing *Mail* (July 14, 2017) and *Express* (October 15, 2017), compared with the centrist *Independent* (July 19, 2017) and center-left-wing *Guardian* (October 15, 2017) illustrate how the social-identity groups of Remainers and Brexiteers describe each other as "Remoaners" and "Brexitemists" (Grice, 2017; Littlejohn, 2017; Rawnsley, 2017; Tominey & Devlin, 2017).

These four headlines illustrate how the two social groups constitute each other through social psychological concepts. Brexiteers demonstrate collective narcissism when they label Remainers "Remoaners" who question Britain's national uniqueness. In contrast, Remainers undermine claims of national uniqueness when they label Brexiteers "Brexitemists" who exhibit dangerous right-wing authoritarian traits.

The creation of social-identity groups goes beyond the use of ingroup terms, such as Remainer and Brexiteer and their associated terminology of outgroup derision, Remoaner and Brexitemist, to the use of emotional language including "hero," "coward," "patriot," or "treason" to describe social

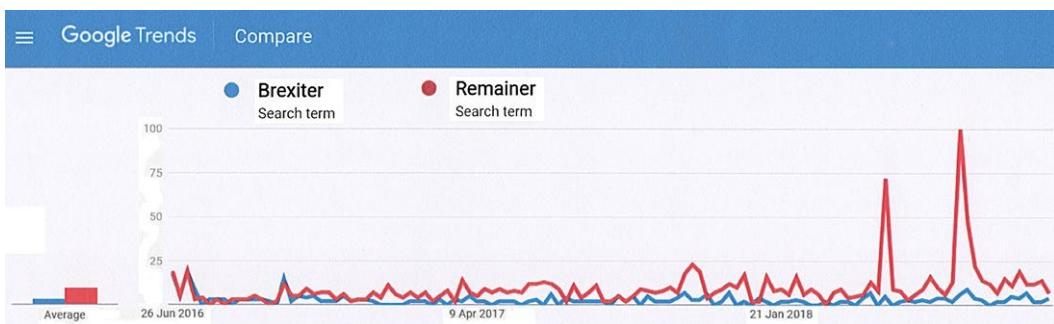


Figure 1. Google trends comparing Remainer with Brexiter. Searches on terms since the referendum expressed as a proportion of the peak search week in July 2018.

group icons like Nigel Farage or Gina Miller (Contributor, 2016; Shrimpsley, 2017; Theodoracopolus, 2017; Wilkinson, 2016). The hard-right-wing *Mail* regularly uses headlines, for example, “enemies of the people” or “crush the saboteurs,” in support of the Brexit cause. The use of the language of antidemocratic authoritarianism by its editor Paul Dacre and journalist James Slack in pursuit of Brexit is seen as ironic for the hard-right-wing paper, particularly as Slack was subsequently appointed as Prime Minister Theresa May’s official spokesperson (Martinson, 2017; Slack, 2016)

The use of emotional language in the four headlines show how Brexiters, in particular, use the language of heroism, treason, traitor, patriots, enemies, and saboteurs to shape the collective narcissism of national uniqueness through the discourse of right-wing authoritarianism.

Beyond the Remain/Brexit social-group language, co-opted by newspapers and politicians alike, there has emerged activist groups engaging in local and national demonstrations as well as social media campaigns. As Appendix S1 demonstrates, there are large and active groups who organized active demonstrations and petitions and share information on social media.

The October 2017 Ipsos MORI longitudinal online panel data suggests there are seven “clusters” of Remainers and Leavers, broken down by Labour and Liberals, younger and more educated Remain supporters, against UKIP and Conservative, older and less-educated Leave supporters (Ipsos MORI, 2017) (see Figure 2). This identification of seven “clusters” or “nuances” makes clear that the emergence of just two diametrically-opposed Remainder and Brexiter groups is best understood through sociopsychological political processes that cut across party lines and class lines.

These insights regarding the production of Remainder and Brexiter social-identity groups, and the increasingly differentiated politics, activist groups, and language of these groups suggest that social psychology is important in understanding the way in which the referendum and subsequent politics have created a “new, first-order rupture at the heart of British society and politics” (Manners, 2016, p. 1). While there are clearly multiple group identifications at play within this struggle, such as between national identities, between races, and between the “people” versus the “elite,” the social psychological dynamics of ingroup and outgroup identification between Remainers and Brexiters are revealing in understanding the (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate.

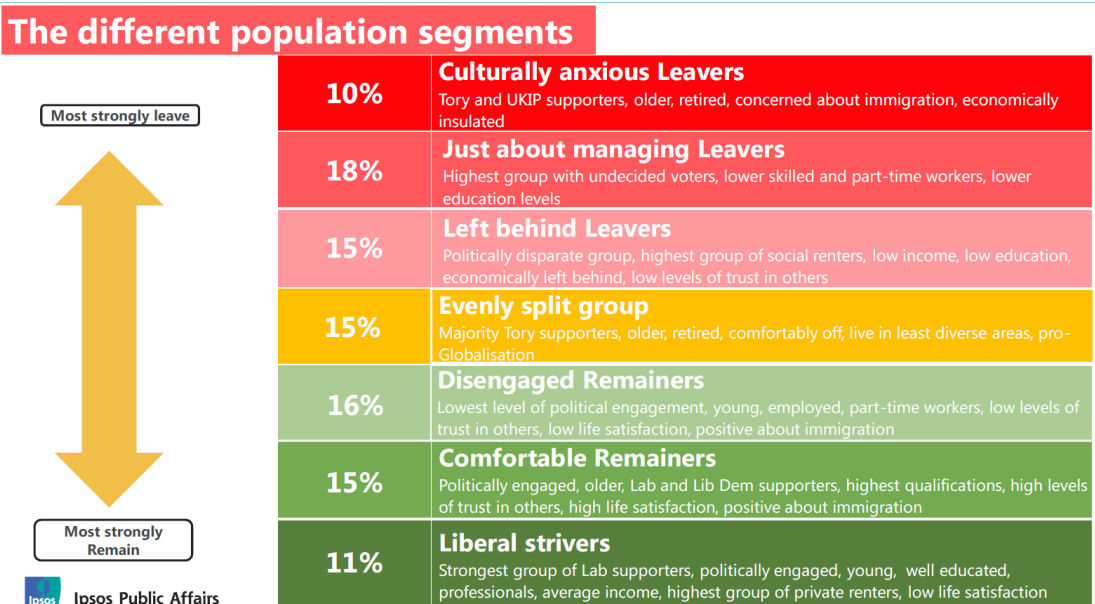


Figure 2. Ipsos Brexit populations segments.

The emergent social-psychology literature on Brexit confirms these findings by testing the relationships between long-term ingroup disadvantage, collective narcissism, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and support for Brexit. Marchlewska, Cichočka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, and Batayneh (2017; also Oliver, 2017) found that “perceived long-term ingroup disadvantage led to greater support for Brexit and this relationship was accounted for by national collective narcissism” (p. 1). As discussed, the studies by Golec de Zavala et al. (2017; also Gabbatiss, 2017) found “that at least three categories of concerns that go beyond cost-benefit and risk calculations are relevant to the Brexit process: undermined national uniqueness (concern associated with collective narcissism), the threatened traditional status quo (concern associated with right wing authoritarianism), and threatened international status (concern associated with social dominance orientation)” (p. 12). Similar to individual cognitive psychological approaches, these surveys use individual-level data, but they interrogate ingroup and outgroup identification in their research. In order to interrogate further the anxieties and fears which drive the ingroup/outgroup conflict of Remainers and Brexiters, the use of social construction of ontological security is needed to understand the Brexit debate. Following this, the understanding of national uniqueness (collective narcissism), traditional status quo (right-wing authoritarianism), and international status (social dominance orientation) will be examined through psychoanalytical approaches to postcolonial melancholia and the pathology of greatness.

The Social Construction of Ontological Security

[W]e have witnessed two major crises, one “economic” and one “migratory,” together with two consecutive [votes], the U.K. referendum on Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, all of which have been interpreted along the lines of major political turmoil... These risks are not predominantly physical on the sense of being threats to territories or to human lives—although the shadow of possible terrorist attacks can be perceived as such—rather they are alleged existential and ontological threats, creating a sense of angst and ontological insecurity among their inhabitants. (Kinnvall, 2017, p. 1)

While social psychology has its roots in the work on ingroup and outgroup dynamics, social construction has broader origins in hermeneutics, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and poststructuralism. Although Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) marks the meeting of phenomenology and social construction, it was Giddens’ *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979) and *The Constitution of Society* (1984) that did most to popularize notions of structuration and social construction. For Giddens (1979), “[t]he concept of structuration involves that of the duality of structure which relates to the fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency” (p. 69). Drawing on the fields of psychoanalytic theory, sociology, and political psychology, the study of ontological security in International Relations (IR) has increased dramatically over the past two decades (Kinnvall, 2006; Rumelili, 2016; Steele, 2014). Contributions to this special issue by Mitzen (2018) and Alkopher (2018) demonstrate the importance of social construction and ontological (in)security to the study of European integration (see also Browning, 2018; Kinnvall, Manners, & Mitzen, 2018).

From the perspective of social construction, European integration can be explained as social phenomena both in terms of identity and knowledge about one’s self, for example, in the Brexit debates over whether the United Kingdom is more “ontologically secure” within or without the EU. As Kinnvall makes clear, European crises of the past decade, in particular economic and migratory crises, but also the fear of terrorist attack, have created a sense of angst and ontological insecurity which fed the (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate. To illustrate how social

such feelings of ontological security are, the Eurobarometer surveys from spring 2016 (EB 85) and spring 2018 (EB 89) illustrate two very different sets of responses to the question of the most important issues facing respondents at the personal, country, and EU levels. The Eurobarometer surveys do not ask how secure or insecure respondents feel, but it is possible to take responses to questions on “most important issues” as indicative of concerns that undermine security, feeling of home, and disruptions to the routines of everyday life from changes in costs of living, health and social security, unemployment, immigration, and terrorism.

According to the surveys, when asked about the two most important issues they are *personally* facing, in spring 2018 respondents are primarily concerned (QA4a) about rising prices/inflation/costs of living, health and social security, pensions, household financial situation, taxation, unemployment, and the education system. In other words, the primary *personal* concerns and fears felt personally across the EU are socioeconomic insecurity in the context of globalization, economic crisis, austerity, and vulnerability (see Figure 3 and Appendix S2). In the spring of 2016 (EB 85), the list of six *personal* concerns was the same, but the figures were generally lower with U.K. figures being similar to EU averages. In the intervening two years, key U.K. figures have leapt by a fifth or more because U.K. respondents are registering feelings of rapidly increasing *personal* concern with rising prices/inflation/costs of living, health and social security, and household financial situation since spring 2016. On the basis of this opinion-poll data, U.K. citizens felt as personally ontologically insecure on socioeconomic fears as the rest of the EU prior to the referendum. Since the referendum, U.K. personal fears have increased through feelings of concern with rising prices caused by the declining value of the pound, as well as increasing problems with U.K. health and social security, financial situation, and crime.

In comparison, in spring 2018 respondents’ main concerns for issues faced by their “*country*” (QA3a) were unemployment, health and social security, immigration, rising prices/inflation/costs of living, and economic situation. The noticeable difference here is that EU respondents are significantly more concerned about unemployment, immigration, economic situation, and terrorism, at the *country* level compared to their *personal* concerns. In contrast, respondents are more *personally* concerned about rising prices/inflation/costs of living and household finance compared to the *country* level (see Figure 4 and Appendix S3).

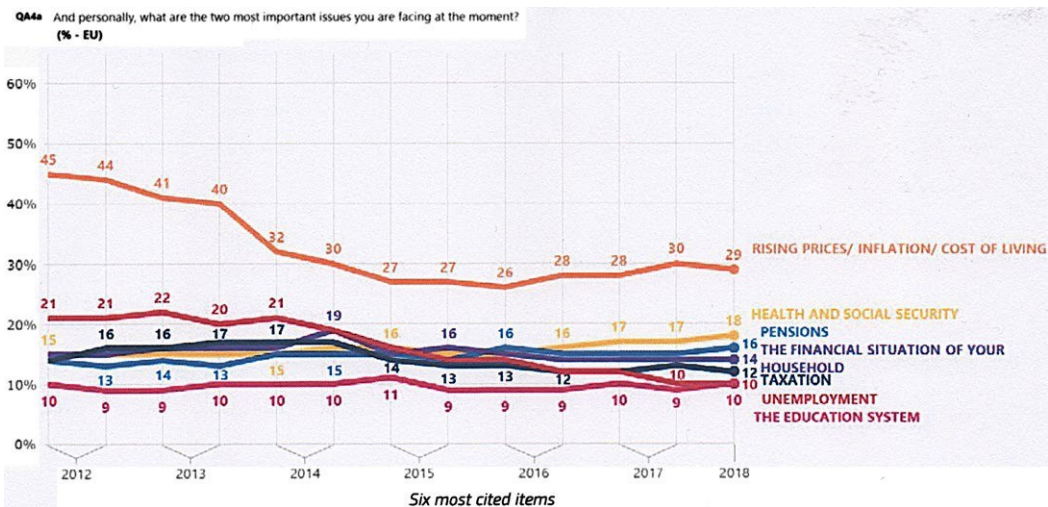


Figure 3. Eurobarometer—most important “personal” issues (Eurobarometer EB 89, Spring 2018, p. 12, QA4a).

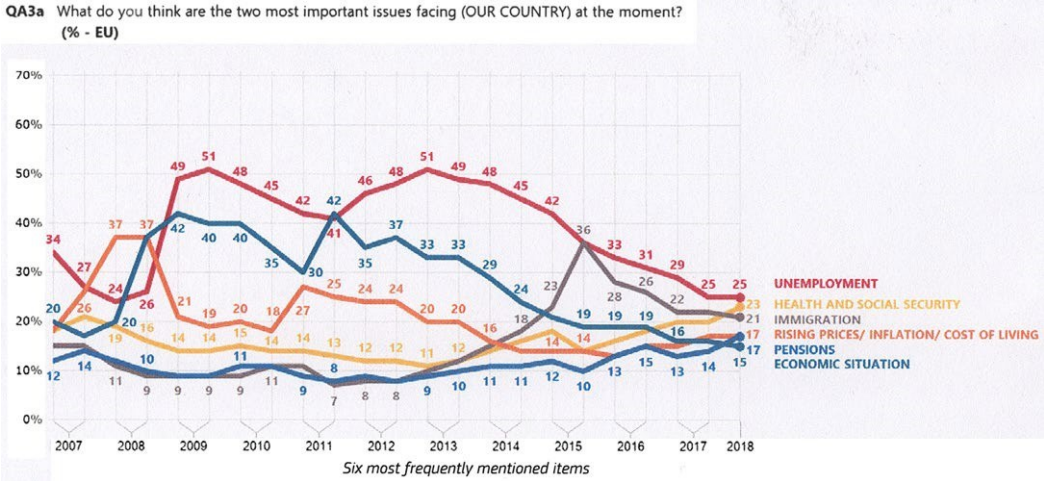


Figure 4. Eurobarometer—most important “country” issues (Eurobarometer EB 89, spring 2018, p. 20, QA3a).

In the spring of 2016 (EB 85), the list of six *country* concerns was similar with immigration, economic situation, and terrorism more important than rising prices/inflation/cost of living and health and social security. In contrast, in the spring of 2016, U.K. respondents felt far more concerned at the *country* level with immigration, health and social security, terrorism, and housing compared with the EU average. In the intervening two years, the U.K. figures have shifted significantly away from feelings of concern at the *country* level for immigration and terrorism and towards rapidly increasing concerns for health and social security, rising prices/inflation/costs of living, and economic situation. According to this data, prior to the referendum, U.K. citizens appeared to be far more ontologically insecure about Britain compared to the rest of the EU because of fears about immigration and terrorism. Since the referendum, U.K. feelings of ontological insecurity about Britain appear to have shifted drastically from immigration and terrorism to socioeconomic fears and concerns for the United Kingdom’s contracting health and social security services.

The final comparison is respondents’ main concerns for *EU* issues (QA5) where immigration, terrorism, economic situation, public finances, unemployment, climate change, and the EU’s influence in the world are the main issues. In comparison with *country* and *personal* concerns, respondents are significantly more worried about immigration and terrorism, and to a lesser extent, climate change and the EU’s global influence at the *EU* level. In contrast, respondents are far less concerned about pensions, taxation, and rising prices/inflation/costs of living at the *EU* level (see Appendix S4).

In general, the Eurobarometer survey data shows that over the past decade respondents have primarily had a *personal* concern for rising prices/inflation/costs of living (peaking in 2012), unemployment (peaking in 2013), and the financial/economic situation (peaking in 2014). In noticeable contrast, respondents state the most important issues facing the *EU* over the same period have shifted from the economic situation (peaking in 2011) and unemployment (peaking in 2013), to immigration (peaking in 2015) and terrorism (peaking in 2017) (see Figure 5).

In the spring of 2016 (EB 85), the list of six *EU* concerns was similar, with crime more important than climate change and the EU’s global influence, but the figures were generally comparable with similar U.K. figures. However, in the spring of 2016, U.K. respondents felt slightly more concerned at the *EU* level with immigration, economic situation, and public finances compared with the EU average. In the intervening two years, the U.K. figures have seen significant drops in feelings

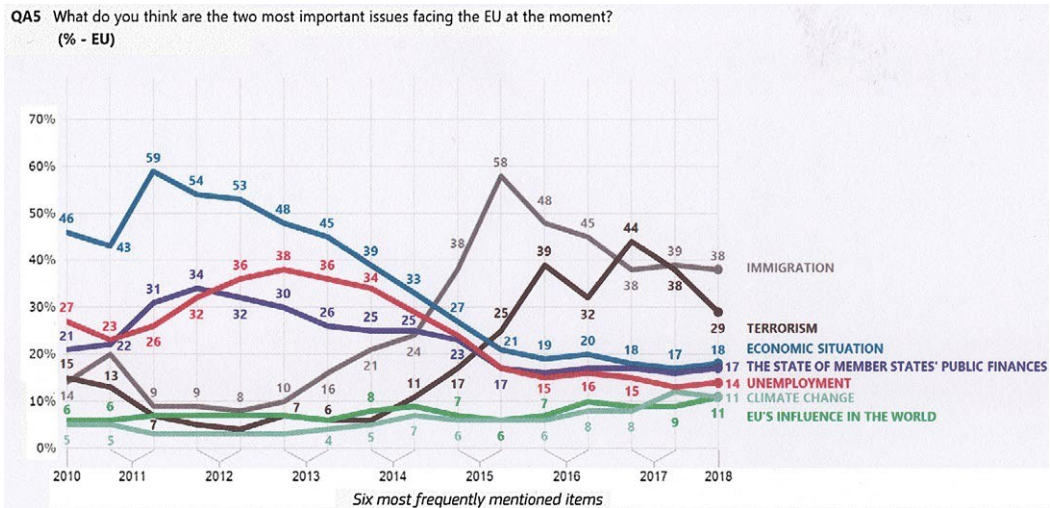


Figure 5. Eurobarometer—most important EU issues (Eurobarometer EB 89, spring 2018, p. 27, QA5).

of concern at the *EU* level for immigration and terrorism. According to this data, prior to the referendum U.K. citizens appeared more ontologically insecure about fears of immigration at the *EU* level compared to two years after the referendum when such fears about *EU*-level immigration and terrorism have diminished.

What this comparison of three “levels” of survey data suggests is that EU citizens have considerable concerns regarding issues that provoke anxiety and fear—primarily socioeconomic in the mid-2010s, but increasingly regarding immigration and terrorism over the past three years. It is this sense of ontological insecurity that has driven support for hard-right-wing groups and parties in government in Hungary, Poland, United Kingdom, and Italy (with France and Germany not so far behind). It is also clear that there were high levels of ontological insecurity regarding immigration and terrorism in the United Kingdom and EU during the spring 2016 referendum period and have subsequently been replaced by much more diffuse *personal* ontological insecurity fears for rising prices, inflation, costs of living, and the increasingly difficult U.K. health and social security, housing, education, and pensions sectors.

In summary, the study of the social construction of ontological insecurity brings a psychosocial approach to the study of the political psychology of European integration. Scholars of the (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate interpret social data psychoanalytically to understand what is driving angst, fear, and thus hatred among U.K. respondents. As Kinnvall, Manners, Mitzen, Browning, and Alkopher argue, the driving fears of socioeconomic anxiety, racism, and the role of imaginary others is a crucial part of ontological insecurity in explaining Brexit. In order to more fully understand why the United Kingdom has proved particularly vulnerable to angst and ontological insecurity, and the simplistic solutions offered by far-right politicians, it is necessary to turn to the psychoanalysis of Britain’s postcolonial melancholia.

The Psychoanalysis of Postcolonial Melancholia

[T]o listen to several leading members of the British government and to the fantasies of Britain’s great importance conjured up during the Brexit campaign, a second version of the

empire is exactly what a lot of people want.... Paul Gilroy points out that Freud associates guilt with melancholia, which the psychoanalyst described as a shameless condition, one that relates to the passing of something that cannot be fully understood and thus does not lead to positive change. Melancholia is related to mourning—the loss of empire is painful but it cannot be processed because, as Gilroy says, “Britain might learn too many uncomfortable truths about its history if it was known and considered.” (Rickett, 2017)

The origins of political psychology as a discipline are to be found in the psychoanalytical work of Freud and Lasswell who, together with Klein, Lacan, and Kristeva, provide the grounds for bringing individual psychoanalytical theory, understood as the role of the unconscious, to the societal and political levels. For Nesbitt-Larking and Kinnvall (2012), “Freud’s political psychology is about the struggle between desire and order and the challenges of balance” (pp. 49–50). Important here is Lacan’s linguistic reading of Freud in which “to be positioned as an outsider, as marginal, as eccentric, engenders a space from which to question the encrusted and obdurate character of the established order” (quoted in Nesbitt-Larking, 2003, p. 248). The contribution to this special issue by Kølvrå (2018) demonstrates the importance of psychoanalysis and making the unconscious conscious to the study of European integration (see also Cash, 2017).

Psychoanalysis emphasizes the role of the unconscious in political processes such as European integration, for example, in the British desire for a “return” to the comforting familiarities of a post-World War II imperial “homeland.” As Gilroy points out in the article (above), psychoanalytical approaches can be used to understand Britain’s postcolonial melancholia at the loss of empire and how this translates into support for Brexit. Gilroy (2004), drawing on the psychoanalytical work of Fanon, argues that “[Fanon] recognizes that dominance can carry its own wounds, even if they are veiled in colonial privilege and postcolonial melancholia.... [A] culture of melancholia and a pathology of greatness” (pp. 57, 97). Postcolonial melancholia has become a major approach to understanding the (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate since 2016, with Andrews (2016) arguing that “colonial nostalgia is not just confined to Brexiteers” and Akala (2017) asking “how can Britain move beyond its postcolonial melancholia, selective memory, and national forgetting... to understand the roots of Brexit?”

The language of postcolonial melancholia came to the forefront prior to the June 2016 consultative referendum with leading anti-EU campaigners claiming that “The United Kingdom, is one of the few countries in the European Union that does not need to bury its 20th century history” (Liam Fox, 2016) and that “we used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen, and with a much smaller domestic population and a relatively tiny Civil Service” (Boris Johnson, 2016). Activist groups within the Leave campaign, such as “Global Britain,” worked with right-wing neo-colonialists in the Conservative party to promote the idea of joining the “anglosphere” of former colonies, which Colley (2016) identified as “nostalgics in search of a lost empire” while President Barack Obama warned against leaving the EU to join an Anglosphere with the United States (Rachman, 2016).

The pathology of greatness was at work prior to the campaign and after, with attempts by the conservative government to promote GREAT Britishness launched during 2012, including the “GREAT Britain” cultural campaign of the British Council, the “James Bond is GREAT” Skyfall campaign, the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elisabeth II, the London 2012 Summer Olympics, and the commercialization and popularization of the lost 1939 government propaganda poster, “Keep Calm and Carry On” (Calhoun, 2017, p. 61). The polarizing effects for this pathology were immediate, particularly when combined with governmental and far-right press campaigns of stigmatizing foreigners. Theresa May’s 2013 London anti-immigrant “Go Home” poster van campaign contributed to this polarization prior to the referendum. It is within this context of race, gender, citizenship, and empire that Brexit must be located (Bhambra, 2017a, p. 216, 2017b; Guerrina & Murphy, 2016).

Public attempts by the Conservative government and the Leave campaign to selectively invoke national glories are not isolated acts. A short list of the British film industry's 2015–18 popular TV and film releases illustrates a wider phenomenon with *Home Fires* (de Beauvoir, Quinn, & Goodinson, 2015–16), *Dad's Army* (Jones & Parker, 2016), *Their Finest* (Scherfig, Dwyer, & Karlsen, 2016), *Dunkirk* (Nolan & Thompson, 2017), *Churchill* (Teplitzky, 2017), and *Darkest Hour* (Bevan & Wright, 2018) said to “peddle fantasies of national greatness” by “fuelling Brexit fantasies,” but do “little to solve the country's contemporary problems” (Brendon, 2017; Jack, 2018; Wintour, 2018). Explicit in most of this nostalgia are the gendered representations of men fighting while women keep the home fires burning, leaving no doubt about the unconscious desires of post-Brexit Britons (Barber, 2018; Bennett, 2018; Newbiggin, 2017).

This culture of melancholia and pathology of greatness around which much of the Brexit discussions revolve have not gone unnoticed outside of Europe, with commenters from former colonies being particularly attune to the psychosis of empire. For example, from Al Jazeera “Brexit is the United Kingdom's rage against dying of colonial light” (Geohegan, 2016), from the UAE “an inability to process the loss of empire, or to come to acknowledge its brutality... [is] in part because of the distraction of the relentless melodrama engulfing” Britain (Hancox, 2016). Similarly, from India “the entire Brexit referendum strategy for European disengagement had been to shock and awe simple natives with the hubris of an exclusivity based on an assumed cultural superiority” (Majumdar, 2017), and from Ireland “a timely response to empire nostalgia... is imperative given the impact and legacy of imperialism,... not to mention downright ignorance” (Ferriter, 2017).

One of the most challenging aspects of a psychoanalytic approach to studying British postcolonial melancholia in the context of Brexit is the presence of multiple “national” identities within the United Kingdom. While the recent political and cultural attempts to return to the comforting familiarities of GREAT Britain have traded on amnesia and nostalgia in equal parts, a closer analysis of referendum voting reveals far greater complexity. As the two charts from Uberoi (2016) illustrate below, English local authorities identifying more “British only” in the 2011 England and Wales Census were more likely to vote Remain, while English local authorities identifying more “English only” were more likely to vote Leave (see Figure 6).

This picture is complicated by the presence of not just five national identities (English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Northern Irish), but many other national, ethnic, and mixed identities as demonstrated in the Census (other self-identifying groups include Kernowyon/Cornish). These observations are interesting because the number of U.K. citizens identifying as “British only” or British (in combination) is decreasing. Census and survey data from the four “home countries” suggest that only 19%

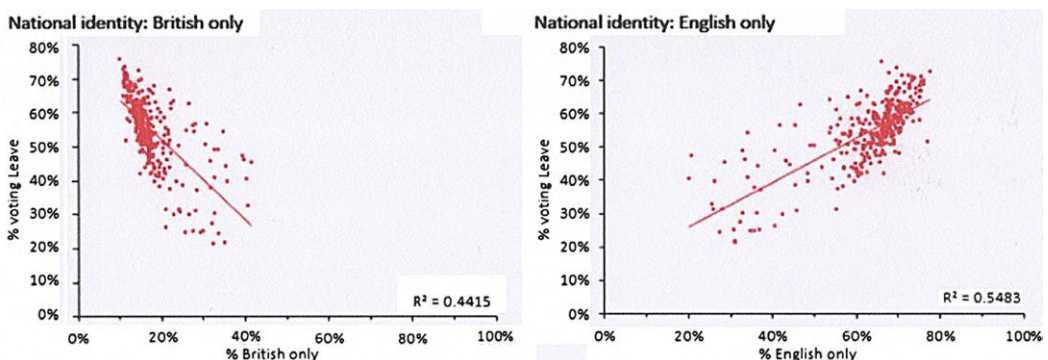


Figure 6. National identities and voting Leave (Uberoi, 2016, “Local authorities: national identities and Leave votes”).

of Scottish residents identify as “British first,” with the figure for Wales being 30% (Carrell, 2011). While the Census suggests that in England, 60% identified as English only and 19% as British only in 2011 (Uberoi, 2016).

Psychoanalytical approaches to the political psychology of European integration analyze the role of the unconscious in political processes including guilt, shame, denial, melancholia, mourning, and bereavement (Brändle, Galpin, & Trenz, 2018). What the analysis of the Brexit debate suggests here is that attempts to deny and repress both Britain’s colonial history and the presence of a multi-national and multiethnic self are not just significant for the (re)production of identity and difference, but leave the United Kingdom a confused and most unwell political body. Furthermore, this body is gendered by “toxic masculinity” as it becomes increasingly clear that the nostalgic desire in post-Brexit Britain is one in which women “have the most to lose” as they lose equality-rights gains of the past half century and are forced to become carers again (Bennett, 2018; Berger, 2018; Glosswitch, 2018; Whithers, 2018).

The Critical Political Psychology of Neo-Liberal Alienation

Leave voters have no common project—they want to leave the EU but they have no destination. They are not a grassroots group but what the philosopher Hannah Arendt termed a “mass”.... According to Arendt, if the structures that hold people together in society collapse, the inhabitants are turned into a mass of isolated individuals.... To fix Brexit, to fix the UK’s potential vulnerability to other extreme ideologies, we need to fix British fractured society. This is the only long-term fix. (De Cruz, 2017, p. 1)

Critical political psychology has its origins in the critical theory of Gramsci as advocated by Weltman and Billig (2001) as distancing itself from “the claims being made within the ideological common sense” (p. 381). Critical political psychology places an emphasis on “cross-cultural political psychology and the possibilities of political psychology beyond the framework of possessive individualism” (Nesbitt-Larking, 2003, p. 239). It is here that the most interesting, challenging, and yet insightful critical social science is to be found—a crucial arena for trying to understand the dissatisfaction and alienation that many Europeans feel towards politics, politicians, government, and the EU in the twenty-first century (Manners, 2013). Although there is no contribution to this special issue specifically within the strand of critical political psychology, recent contributions by Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking (2011), Tileaga (2013), and Pace and Bilgic (2018) demonstrate the importance of critical political psychology to the study of European politics and integration.

Critical political psychology explains European integration by bringing the contextual and subjective components to social science, for example, by analyzing the feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation that minorities, unemployed, undereducated, and disadvantaged groups in Britain feel towards the EU. Drawing on the work of Arendt, De Cruz (2017) argues that “masses are moved by superficial and empty rhetoric, they are not truly mobilised, as genuine grassroots movements are. Instead they are being played.” She suggests that ‘isolated, apathetic individuals become loyal to the “will of the people” (Brexit) regardless of what it brings or doesn’t bring, regardless of what it looks like [because] isolated, atomized individuals get a “sense of having a place in the world.” Brexit gives a false, short-lived sense of identity.’

Neo-liberal alienation within the United Kingdom has arisen from the long-term effects of four decades of “Thatcherism”; that is the privatization of public life, including the deregulation and privatization of nationalized industries, financial services, welfare state, and government. From 1960 to 1984, the United Kingdom was one of the more equal societies in Europe, with Gini inequality indices in the range 0.23 to 0.27 (compared with USA 0.38 to 0.34). With the election of the Conservative

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979, inequality in the United Kingdom climbed rapidly to U.S. levels, with Gini inequality indices in the range 0.28 to 0.35 (compared with the United States: 0.34 to 0.38) in the period 1985 to 2016 (UNU-WIID, 2018). As OECD Gini income inequality data for the EU (2004–15) demonstrates, the United Kingdom consistently has one of the highest income inequalities in the EU. The ideology of austerity in Britain enforced by the Conservatives from 2010 to date has accelerated this neo-liberal severity with disastrous socioeconomic consequences. The Resolution Foundation (2017) concluded after the U.K. government's November 2017 budget statement that average income had undergone the longest contraction in real terms since 1812 and was predicted to remain below 2007 levels until 2025.

The long-term effects of inequality, austerity, and neo-liberal alienation on U.K. citizens became far clearer by 2016, most critically through their effects on adult and child food insecurity, poverty, and mortality. By May 2016, it was clear that one-in-10 U.K. adults (8.4 million people) suffered from moderate levels of food insecurity, with 4.7 million U.K. adults thought to be regularly going a day without eating (Taylor & Loopstra, 2016). In June 2017, a UNICEF report set out how one-in-five U.K. children under the age of 15 suffers from relative income poverty and food insecurity with levels of child hunger and deprivation in the United Kingdom among the highest of rich nations (UNICEF, 2017). According to the report, one-in-three U.K. children live in “multidimensional poverty” with a shortage of access to housing, clothing, nutrition, and to social and leisure activities. By March 2018, these longer-term effects were beginning to affect child mortality rates with a rising infant mortality rate caused by obesity, poverty, smoking, and a shortage of midwives found in England and Wales (Cheung, 2018).

It was within this context that in June 2016, after six years of austerity, many U.K. voters felt isolated and alienated, impoverished and vulnerable to the appeal of extreme claims of simple solutions such as “taking back control” and making Britain Great again, let alone removing foreigners from Britain and Britain from the EU. The ideological common sense of this new era was that established politicians and parties, working with the EU, were responsible for the United Kingdom's poor economic situation and that none of the established political institutions were to be trusted.

The Eurobarometer public opinion surveys over the past 14 years illustrate the way in which public trust in national and EU political institutions has collapsed with the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis during 2011–14 and the refugee crisis during 2015–16. As Figure 7 (QA8a) shows, relative public trust in the EU over 40% during 2004–2009 had fallen below 40% during 2011–16. Similarly, average public trust in national governments over 30% during 2004–2009 had fallen below 30% during 2011–16. The almost complete absence of public trust in political institutions in the United Kingdom is even more pronounced, both in terms of trust of the national government and the EU. The highest level of trust in the U.K. government in spring 2007 and autumn 2017 was only 34%, while the lowest level of trust was 24% in autumn 2013. Similarly, the highest U.K. level of trust in the EU in spring 2007 was 36%, while the lowest level of trust was 19% in autumn 2013. The most recent U.K. level of trust in the EU is 30% in spring 2018.

The overall picture of feelings about political institutions in Europe is that support and trust for both national and EU institutions has declined from the peaks of EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007 to the lows of Eurozone and refugee crises in 2013 and 2015. But in the United Kingdom, like Greece, very low levels of trust in the national government are also seen in similarly low levels of trust in the EU. In contrast, even lower (15%–33%) levels of trust in national governments across the Eurozone and Eastern Europe are not accompanied by low levels of trust in the EU where trust is, on average, double (34%–64%) that of trust in national government. Within the context of critical political psychology, there is something very particular about the United Kingdom—an almost complete absence of trust in both national and EU political institutions caused by the accelerating neo-liberal alienation of Thatcherism and ideological austerity.

QA8a I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.
 (% - EU - TEND TO TRUST)

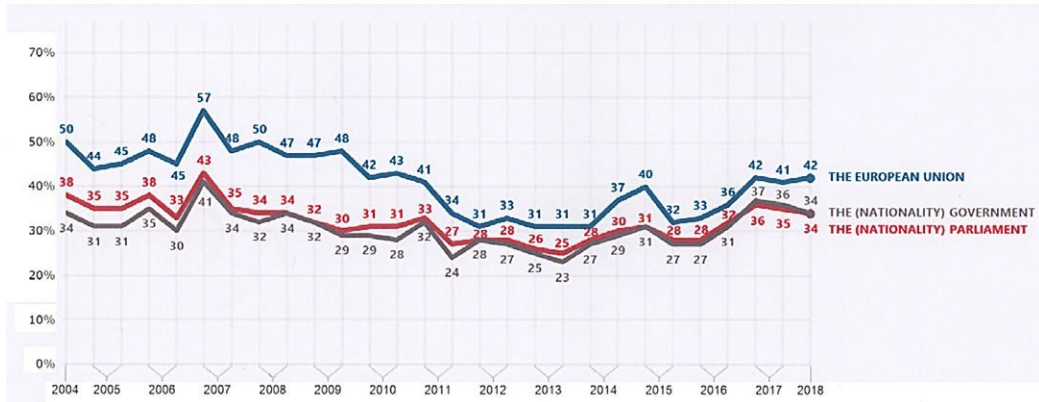


Figure 7. Eurobarometer—trust in national and EU political institutions (Eurobarometer EB 89, Spring 2018, p. 41 QA8a).

Critical political psychology approaches to European integration allow the analysis of contextual and subjective factors such as the long-term privatization of public life and the feelings of neo-liberal alienation and insecurity that accompany such processes. The political consequences of such factors and feelings clearly drive different parties, governments, and political systems in different directions. But in the case of the United Kingdom and Brexit, it is very clear that underemployed and undereducated “masses,” as well as wealthy neo-liberal ruling classes, were motivated by superficial and empty rhetoric. The role of well-funded and manipulative agents of propaganda both before and well after the referendum raises considerable concern regarding the (re)production of identity and difference by the hard-right English media, U.S. social media manufacturers, and wealthy neo-liberal ruling class in the Brexit debate (Cadwalladr, 2017).

Conclusion: Political Psychology of European Integration and Brexit

[T]he Leave campaigners’ principal claim ... and the campaign was based, not on fact, but on what it “felt like”—on illusion, therefore, and emotion. Why did it “feel like that”? Where did the illusions of Leave voters come from? The question Brexit really raises is one not of economics or politics, but of national psychology. And it is not “British” psychology that is at issue, but English ... On June 23rd, 2016, the English ... opted to continue living the fiction of splendid isolation that sustained the United Kingdom and the British Empire before it... Any recovery from this collective mental breakdown will involve treating it in the light of its deep historical causes. Not until there is a separate English parliament, giving England at last the distinctive political identity it has shunned for 300 years, will the delusions that led the country to Brexit finally be dissipated by contact with reality. Perhaps then, with their psychosis healed, the English will apply to rejoin the EU. (Boyle, 2018)

Boyle (2018) captures many of the analytical factors of the political psychology of European integration in his reflections on Brexit as a “collective English mental breakdown.” Boyle emphasizes the importance of understanding emotions and illusions of what it “felt like,” rather than rational economic calculation. He argues that English national psychology is key to understanding the illusions

of Leave voters, demanding analysis of the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes. Boyle sets out why Brexit must be treated within the context of deep historical causes for the many ways in which the (re)production of identity and difference are important. Finally, Boyle demands a reading of the political psychology of European integration as understanding the processes of mutual accommodation and inclusion which provoke ongoing crises for English political identity in coming to terms with the psychosis of empire and recognizing the equality of EU membership.

The first conclusion found in the analysis of the Brexit debate is that it is not accurate or even possible to juxtapose rationality and economic reason against emotion and affective feelings in simple terms. The simple logics of elites versus working class, Remain versus Leave, insecure versus secure, liberal cosmopolitan versus global greatness, and nation versus alienation do not easily differentiate along the lines of reason versus affect. For the political psychology of European integration, this first conclusion emphasizes the importance of analyzing and understanding the political and psychological processes of attitude formation, group identity, (in)security, the unconscious, and ideological common sense.

The second conclusion from the Brexit debate is that the conjunction of political and psychological processes are crucial for understanding the (re)production of identity and difference. As the five previous sections have demonstrated, social-local psychology affects political attitudes; social-group psychology creates first-order political rupture; psychosocial ontological insecurity affects political support for far-right groups and parties; pathologies of greatness traumatize English national politics; and the psychology of neo-liberal alienation collapses trust in national and EU institutions. But the opposite is equally true as Eurosceptic politics validates racist and xenophobic psychology; Remain versus Leave politics shapes ingroup versus outgroup social psychology; far-right groups and parties (such as UKIP) drive a politics of fear which undermine ontological security; conservative politics of national greatness repress unconscious trauma and postcolonial melancholia; and populist, antiestablishment politics feed a psychological willingness to embrace the emotional appeal of returning to the romanticised past in order to “take back control.” Thus only the bidirectional interaction of political and psychological processes can be used to understand the political psychology of European integration.

As demonstrated here, the third conclusion from the Brexit debate is that there are many, at least five, ways of analyzing the (re)production of identity and difference. While not trying to present a comprehensive survey of the subfield, all five strands of political psychology help provide a more complete picture for understanding European integration and Brexit. Individual cognitive psychology provides a view on questions of attitudes, locality, whiteness, and “Euroscepticism.” Social psychology shifts the focus to group behavior found in Remainer versus Leaver/Brexit group formation, activism, and identification shaped by collective narcissism. Social construction moves to a psychosocial perspective on feelings of angst and fear found in ontological insecurity. Psychoanalytical approaches view English national psychology as an expression of unconscious postcolonial melancholia and pathology of greatness. Critical political psychology takes a step back from the ideological common sense in order to bring a contextual and subjective understanding of the role neo-liberal alienation in Britain and Europe. Any one of these approaches could usefully have been applied on its own, as the contributions to this special issue attest, but the combination of the five illustrates both the singular perspectives and multiplicity of strands in understanding the political psychology of European integration.

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Supporting Information

Appendix S1. Remain and Brexit Groups on Facebook

Appendix S2. Eurobarometer --Most Important “*Personal*” Issues

Appendix S3. Eurobarometer --Most Important “*Country*” Issues

Appendix S4. Eurobarometer --Most Important “*EU*” Issues