

Why Brexit Britain is a Threat to the EU From the Left, not the Right

[Angelos Chrysogelos](#)

Brexit is still viewed in Europe as part of the populist revolt that swept much of the world in the last decade; a decade symbolised most clearly by Donald Trump's victory in the US, months after the EU referendum in the UK. But while Trump's (preliminary) defeat and the relatively orderly departure of the UK have allayed fears that English-speaking democracies could become hotbeds of right-populist destabilisation of the European project, a new crop of leftist identity politics in Britain poses a more insidious danger for the legitimacy and standing of the EU.

Left is the new right

To understand this challenge, we must return to the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum. Most international observers were fixated on its right-wing faces, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. If there was an appreciation that Brexit was also supported on the left, this was seen as a remnant of old-school radical socialism of the 1980s. Once considered marginal, this strand of British politics was resurrected after Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader in 2015, his subsequent lacklustre support for Remain seen by many as a crucial factor in Leave's victory.

But the referendum helped crystallise also a different, novel form of leftist Euroscepticism in Britain, combining social-democratic economics with nativist politics. This was more attuned with the sovereignist *zeitgeist* that culminated in the Leave victory. [Prominent voices of this strand](#) adopted the populist critique of the EU as an undemocratic, unaccounta-

ble structure, while framing Brexit as an opportunity to reorient the British economy away from Thatcherite neoliberalism.

This left-wing advocacy for Brexit made its mark with a vehement opposition to EU freedom of movement, seen as the main source of British people's [lost sense of 'community'](#) - also because 'uncontrolled immigration' was responsible for the dislocation of the old industrial working class. In this vision of Brexit, [economic and cultural sovereignty](#) went hand in hand with each other, the state 'taking back control of its borders' seen not only as guarantee of cultural coherence but also as precondition for an egalitarian progressive economic agenda.

This peculiar left-nativist statism, inspired partly by the reforms and construction of the welfare state by Labour governments after World War II, was originally without a political home. The dominant iteration of Brexit coming from the right of the Conservative party was of course focused on immigration, but was also libertarian, pro-market and anti-statist. On the left, Corbyn was personally unenthusiastic about the EU, but the vast majority of his young supporters were pro-European, if not out of love for the EU's free market economics then for its liberal supranational character.

And yet, this left-nativist strand of Brexit ended up influencing the post-referendum agenda more than originally expected. Under Theresa May and Boris Johnson, the Conservatives repudiated their neoliberal image and embraced state activism, higher

taxes and [‘levelling up’](#) post-industrial Northern England, along with a militantly anti-immigration posture. The management of the pandemic, necessitating the government to subsidise locked down businesses and engage in de facto industrial policy for vaccine development and procurement, accentuated this trend.

Although many see this as yet another example of the Conservatives’ historical pragmatism, the success of these left-wing Brexiteers demonstrated how opposition to the EU can be more attractive if economic and cultural nationalism is re-articulated, or felt to be re-articulated in progressive and inclusive terms demanding economic justice and social cohesion.

Post-Brexit race, identity and post-colonialism

While consensus in the UK has moved leftwards in economic policy after the referendum, since 2020 the main inflection point in British politics has focused on issues of race, identity and multiculturalism. Edged on by developments in the US, questions of representation, diversity and identity of Britain’s non-white communities are intensely discussed in media and academic circles. Many of these actors are calling for a long-overdue reckoning with Britain’s colonial legacy.

This prominence of race, identity and post-colonialism provides a new opportunity for left-wing ideologues of Brexit and British sovereignty. The irony here is that the vast majority of social justice and anti-racism activists opposed Brexit in the years of the drawn-out withdrawal from the EU (2016-20). Instead, it is the old freedom of movement sceptics who use anti-racism as opportunity to articulate Euroscepticism, this time in progressive and emancipatory terms.

A recent such example is [an essay](#) in the centre-left *New Statesman*, where the EU is presented as a post-imperialist project defined by its ‘whiteness’. The focus on EU migration policies, castigating migrants ‘drowning in the Mediterranean’ while the UK is comfortably sheltered from massive flows by continental Europe, is also a common trope among adherents of left-nativist Brexit. It helps them stay true to their anti-EU sovereigntism while latching onto fashionable and energetic new demands in

public debates.

But can this ideological niche become politically consequential for UK–EU relations in the future? Given that many of those purveyors have already infused left-nativist economic statism into the Conservative platform after 2016, we must not exclude the possibility that they can do it a second time. This new brand of Euroscepticism will influence a future progressive government. While the Conservatives appear today dominant on the basis of a winning coalition of their affluent traditional voters and their new working-class supporters, we may already witness the beginnings of an opposite realignment.

Europe and a new British political alignment

Recent by-election and local election results indicate that many Conservative voters are growing concerned with the party’s turn to statism. Demographic changes also dilute the political makeup of Conservative constituencies. Like in the US, affluent suburbs grow increasingly liberal as people move there from large metropolitan areas. As a result, in a mirror image of the ‘red’ post-industrial North turning ‘blue’, parts of the Conservative heartlands in southern England are projected in some years to be closely contested by parties of the centre-left: Labour, the Liberal Democrats and even the Greens. In other words, this may be the first steps of an emergent centre-left majority.

To most Europeans, this is a dream scenario that would signal a new era of close relations with the UK. All centre-left parties opposed Brexit. But one should not expect ‘Europe’ to remain a core marker of progressivism in British politics when, and if, this realignment materialises. Rather, the displacement of Europe by race and colonialism as battlegrounds of the new culture wars means that any centre-left alternative to the Conservatives will be as uncomfortable with Europe as the Conservatives are today, albeit for different reasons.

Why football matters

One episode that demonstrates the changing priorities of UK progressives was the Euro 2020 football championship in Wembley. For years captive to a racist fan culture, the England football team has become today a darling of the liberal British intelli-

gentsia thanks to its diverse composition and the way some of its members have defended causes of equality and inclusion. With the team reaching the final and playing at home, many progressive commentators spoke of the rehabilitation of patriotism as a new multicultural and diverse value in Britain.

What is interesting of course is that this debate took place exclusively within the confines of British nationality. Even for liberal pro-Europeans in the UK, the existence of England's opponent in the final, Italy, was erased from the conversation. And despite the fact that there are more than two hundred thousand Italians living in the UK, forming an important part of economic and social life.

As a result, for all the heated debate over racism in British society, racist incidents against Italian and other European fans during the Euros went largely unmentioned amidst the euphoria of the England team advancing to the final. For many Europeans in the UK, this episode was a reminder that the direction of the cultural debate in British society, largely viewed through the lens of Britain's imperialist past, leaves them squeezed between a Europhobic government and an anti-discrimination agenda that is largely blind to the needs and concerns of non-British white people.

Although still playing out in newspaper pages and social media, this debate should be a warning that any post-Conservative constellation will not rush to reinstate Europhilia as the guiding principle of British policy towards the EU. Any such government will be forced by its activist base to evaluate the EU on the basis of a new set of criteria: not the familiar tenets of political and economic liberalism that for long formed the backbone of pro-EU sentiments in the UK, but new ideas of racial justice and the legacies of colonialism.

Under this new set of criteria, core features of the EU like its role as custodian of European diversity or its commitment to border security will become sources of ideological friction with progressive Britain as much as the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice or fisheries are with conservative Britain today.

It would be the ultimate irony if Brexit, once hatched as a right-wing libertarian and anti-immigration pro-

ject, ended up a thorn on the EU's left wing. Yet this is a distinct possibility. Already, the first right-wing pillar of the original Brexit – the 'liberation' of Britain from EU regulations and the 'unleashing' of its free-market potential – has been turned on its head with its re-articulation of economic statism. It is not inconceivable that the second right-wing pillar of Brexit, its Europhobic identity politics, suffers the same fate. The intellectual activism of the few but influential exponents of left-sovereigntist Brexit already points to this direction.

Conclusion

This ideological transformation of the content of Brexit does not necessarily foreshadow the choices and decisions of future centre-left British governments that, in practical terms, may well be more amenable to compromise with the EU than the Conservatives.

The EU needs to debate diversity, representation and reckoning with its colonial past. But this should not be conducted in a framework dictated by the British (or US) experience, as these questions intersect in complex and important ways with the EU's core mission of fostering diversity among European nations. Indeed, many EU member states were never colonial powers in their own right, rather *themselves* victims of colonialism or imperial intervention.

But the disproportionate influence of English-speaking media in European debates provides a permanent sounding board to this new approach of the British left. Even after Brexit, the interests of left-wing anti-Europeans occupied with this new form of identity politics is a danger to the EU, specifically its international standing as a model of regional cooperation. The EU's fragile internal unity can barely afford another source of friction in the form of a culture war – a danger which will be magnified if influenced by extra-EU actors clearly hostile and prejudiced against the EU.

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