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**BREXIT AND EMPIRE:
THE ROLE OF COLONIAL NOSTALGIA
IN THE ARGUMENT FOR “GLOBAL BRITAIN”**

To what extent has the argument for ‘Global Britain’ benefited from elements of colonial nostalgia that may have permeated British collective memory until the present day? In other words, can a genealogy be established between Britannia (Thomas Arne composed Rule Britannia in 1740) and Brexit? Whilst the concept of Empire 2.0 has often been used to engage with the range of reasons put forward by Brexiteers to support the principle of a breakaway from the EU, commentators have often neglected the long-term ramifications of the feelings that may have played a role in the choice of 52% of the British population in the summer of 2016.

Yet, a *longue durée* approach reveals compelling continuities over several centuries. Historiographical developments since the 1980s have pointed towards the persisting influence of the imperial experience on the DNA of British culture and politics. This was reflected in a range of cultural manifestations reaching large constituencies of the population of the British Isles – what John MacKenzie has termed ‘Popular Imperialism’. This paper explores the hypothesis that this deeply rooted attachment to the Empire has been running consistently (although at varying degrees) at least since the eighteenth century, and has found a new lease of life among supporters of the Brexit process, who have celebrated often implicitly the strength of the imperial legacy as a suitable alternative to the EU project.

Key words: ‘Global Britain’, colonial nostalgia, Brexit, European Union.

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**Брексит және Империя: «Жаһандық Британия» жолындағы
колониалдық ностальгияның рөлі**

Бүгінгі күнге дейін британдық ұжымдық санаға сіңіп кеткен колониалдық британдық империяны аңсау элементтері «Жаһандық Ұлыбритания» ұғымының жетістігіне қаншалықты себептеседі?

Басқаша айтқанда, Британия (1740 жылы Томас Арн шығарған Rule Britannia (Басқар, Британия) патриоттық әні бойынша) және Брексит арасында генеологиялық байланыс орнатуға бола ма?

Империя 2.0 тұжырымдамасы елдің Еуропалық Одақтан шығу принциптерін қолдайтын Брексит жақтастарының бірқатар себептерді негіздеу үшін жиі қолданылғанымен комментаторлар Британия халқының осы мәселе төңірегіндегі бұрынғы сезімдерін елеусіз қалдырғаны белгілі рөл атқарды және Ұлыбритания халқының 52% 2016 жылдың жазында Еуроодақтан шығуды қолдады. Сондықтан, әлі күнге дейін ұзақ мерзім тәсілі – (*longue durée*) бірнеше ғасырлар бойғы тұрақты сабақтастықты көрсетеді. 1980 жылдардан кейінгі тарихи оқиғалар британ мәдениеті мен саясатының ДНҚ-сына империялық тәжірибе ықпалының тұрақты сақталғандығын көрсетеді. Бұл Британдық аралдардың бүкіл тұрғындарын қамтыған және Джон Макензи «халықтық империализм» деп атаған бірқатар мәдени шараларда байқалды.

Бұл мақалада, кем дегенде он сегізінші ғасырдан бері терең бойлап кеткен империяға тәуелділік құбылысы (әр түрлі дәрежеде болса да) сақталып, империялық мұраның күшін ЕО жобасына қолайлы балама ретінде көбіне жасырын атап өткен Brexit жақтастары арасында жаңа өмір тапты деген гипотеза зерттелген.

Түйін сөздер: «Жаһандық Ұлыбритания», британдық империяны аңсау, Брексит, Еуроодақ.

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Брексит и империя: роль колониальной ностальгии в аргументах за «Глобальной Британией»

В какой степени доводы в пользу «Глобальной» Британии выиграли от основ колониальной ностальгии, которые, возможно, пронизывают британскую коллективную память до сегодняшнего дня? Другими словами, можно ли установить генеалогическую связь между Британией и Brexit (Томас Арн написал «Правь, Британия» в 1740 году)? В то время как концепция Империя 2.0 часто использовалась для обоснования целого ряда причин, выдвинутых сторонниками Brexit, поддерживающими принцип выхода страны из Европейского Союза, комментаторы пренебрегли давними чувствами Британского населения относительно данного вопроса, что сыграло определённую роль и 52% населения поддержали выход из Евросоюза летом 2016 г.

Поэтому, так называемый подход *longue durée* отражает убедительную преемственность на протяжении нескольких столетий. Историографические события с 1980-х годов указывают на сохраняющееся влияние имперского опыта на ДНК Британской культуры и политики. Это было отражено в ряде культурных мероприятий, достигших широких кругов населения Британских Островов – то, что Джон Маккензи назвал «народным империализмом».

В этой статье рассматривается гипотеза о том, что это глубоко укоренившаяся привязанность к Империи существует постоянно (хотя в разной степени), по крайней мере, с VIII века, и приобрела новую жизнь среди сторонников процесса Brexit, которые часто восхваляли, без колебаний силу имперского наследия как самую подходящую альтернативу Европейскому Союзу.

Ключевые слова: «Глобальная Британия», колониальная ностальгия, колониальная ностальгия, Евросоюз.

Introduction

The result of the referendum that took place in Britain on 23 June 2016, which asked the question “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” sent shockwaves through the world as it provided the relatively unexpected result that 51.89% of voters, or just above 17.4 m voters, chose to leave the EU, as opposed to 16.1 m, or 48.11 %, opting to remain. Thus a small majority of the British public decided that Britain’s future was better outside of the EU, than as part of the largest free-trade area of the world. This seemed to be an unexpected course, to say the least, for a country that had so often been the champion of free-trade, very frequently to the despair of its Continental rivals. This choice was confirmed on the occasion of the early general election of December 2019, which returned a majority of eighty MPs in favour of Boris Johnson’s Conservatives. Whilst the first-past-the-post electoral system decidedly skewed the result, with only 48 % of the vote going to openly pro-Brexit parties (therefore excluding Labour which, with the rest of the opposition, has gathered around 52 % of the votes), the path to ‘Get Brexit done’, as the Conservative electoral slogan put it, lay wide open and it had proved to be a decisive winning argument in the electoral battle.

Therefore, it is fair to say that Britain is a country which has not voted to leave the EU in a ‘fit of absence of mind’ (to paraphrase John Robert Seeley, of whom we will hear more below). To a small majority of the British population, Brexit appears as a project, the same way as, in John Darwin’s words echoing those of Adam Smith, the British Empire was ‘the project of an empire’. Could it be that Brexit was in the end the twenty-first century equivalent to Henry VIII’s decision to secede from Rome? Beyond blaming Britain’s current electoral system which has provided perhaps a skewed representation of the ‘people’s will’, as it is so widely referred to these days, there are some legitimate reasons grounds to look for reasons explaining the persistence of the British public’s aloofness, or even open hostility, towards the European project. Was the past, especially in its colonial form, sending palatable echoes to a significant fringe of British voters, who were lured into the prospect of an ‘Empire 2.0’? Could it be that the British bulldog was biting back, perhaps for the wrong reasons, but answering nonetheless an atavistic call?

As a historian of the British empire who, from a historiographical perspective, belongs decidedly to the camp of the MacKenzie-ites, perhaps of the sub-type of the MacKenzie-ites sans frontières (Sèbe 2019), and therefore believes in the pervasive

influence of the colonial experience on British culture, beliefs and values – what MacKenzie has termed the ‘imperial mindset’, one question becomes inescapable: could it be that all these sediments accumulated over centuries of overseas ventures, these echoes of ‘Britannia rules the waves’, played a role in shaping the 21st-century British worldview, singularly vis-à-vis the major political project of the post-war period, the EU? Could it be that not-too-distant memories of empire, and nostalgia towards it, have made it easier for the overwhelming majority of UK newspapers to develop a fiercely anti-European, jingoistic tone to the delight of their readers?

More broadly, can a genealogy be established between Britannia (Thomas Arne composed *Rule Britannia* in 1740) and Brexit? Whilst the concept of Empire 2.0 has often been used to engage with the range of reasons put forward by Brexiters to support the principle of a breakaway from the EU, commentators have often neglected the long-term ramifications of the feelings of pride and nostalgia towards a time when, as the word goes, the ‘sun never set on the British empire’. Yet, such feelings may have played a role in the choice of 52% of the British population in the summer of 2016.

The case for such a perspective is compelling. A *longue durée* approach reveals robust continuities over several centuries. Historiographical developments since the 1980s, in the wake of MacKenzie’s *Propaganda and Empire*, have pointed towards the persisting influence of the imperial experience on the DNA of British culture and politics. It is now beyond doubt that a broad range of cultural manifestations reaching large constituencies of the population of the British Isles contributed to the creation of an intellectual and political climate congenial to the blossoming of feelings of exceptionality about Britain’s destiny.

In other words, did Britannia lead in some way, perhaps via a couple of detours, to Brexit, as some scholars have started to argue recently? (Ward and Rasch; Dorling and Tomlinson) More broadly, can historians contribute in meaningful ways to the soul-searching exercise that events in the last three years have inevitably led liberal thinkers to undertake? This was the case both in the wake of the June 2016 referendum and its sequel, the 2019 general election that gave Boris Johnson an unprecedented level of control over the legislative and executive future of the country, with a clear mandate to implement Brexit, ending the parliamentary limbo brought about by the deep divisions running through the Houses of Parliament about that matter throughout the summer of 2019.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that this deeply rooted attachment to the Empire has been running consistently (although at varying degrees) at least since the eighteenth century, and has found a new lease of life among supporters of the Brexit process, who have celebrated often implicitly, but also explicitly, the strength of the imperial legacy as a suitable and preferable alternative to the EU project, therefore giving vital historically-fuelled momentum to their movement. Spanning three centuries of British cultural history, this paper offers a reflection about the long-term dynamics that have made the unthinkable possible: that one of the leading proponents of post-war European cooperation and free trade, would decide one day to turn its back to the ideals it had actively promoted – for instance, as a founding member of the Council of Europe. Such a radical U-turn is bound to have deeper roots than a skewed parliamentary representation or an unexpected referendum result, and we will be exploring three key themes in the following pages.

First, under the heading of Britannia, we will consider the ways in which Britishness has taken shape hand in hand with imperial expansion, and how, conversely, the empire has been a major conduit for the emergence of this composite identity, gluing, sometimes with a bit of pressure that was not always welcome at the receiving end, the four constitutive nations of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, under the concept of ‘Bringers of Progress’, we will examine how imperial thinking fuelled a deep belief in the exceptionalism of British imperialism – a claim that would lay the ground for the third and last stage of our journey, which is Brexit. We will see how the rise of Brexit ideals was fuelled by what I call here the triumph of the ‘Absent-Minded “Civilizer”’ in the postcolonial era.

Finally, as a concluding coda, we will ask whether Brexit Britain could be seen as a new Brutus, condemned as it is to reinvigorate memories of past imperial grandeur, and the subjugation of others that came with it, to justify its claim for its own national independence, in a blatant example of historical collision that does not fall short of irony.

Britannia: Where it all started?

Whilst it might have become less fashionable to celebrate it ever since British policy-makers calculated that an orderly retreat from Empire was preferable to a string of costly wars against independence fighters around the world, the notion of Empire has been historically very closely associated with the concept of Britishness. Even if

it was nowhere to be found in the open in the post-colonial period, it still remained almost everywhere. When considering what it takes to be British, or even more generally what makes a British person, the Empire could never be too far. At times, it could even be at the heart of people's homes, especially when their own lives had included significant spells under imperial skies (Longair and Jeppesen). Ever since the Act of Union of 1707, the Empire offered an outlet to glue the four nations of the United Kingdom, alleviating the tensions between England and its other three junior partners, who resented the former's leading role, often to their detriment. Among the four nations, the Scots played a significant role in the administration of the empire, as recent scholarship has highlighted, bridging a historiographical oversight that is revealing in itself, as far as the Anglocentrism of Britain is concerned (MacKenzie and Devine). We also know that the Irish contributed to the population of both settler colonies and the 'Anglo-world' in general (Kenny; Belich). David Armitage has underlined the close relationship between empire, nationalism, patriotism and national identity, especially revolving around the Anglo-Scottish union of 1707, and the associated hallmarks of national identity that crystallized the 'British state and empire', which he has identified as being primarily the Union flag (often featured on overseas flags, until the present day), 'God Save the King' and 'Rule, Britannia' (Armitage 170) – the imperial echoes of which resurfaced on the occasion of the controversy around the inclusion of the piece in the BBC's Night of the Proms in the summer of 2020. One might add to the list the very fact that many key identity-related elements, some of which formed part and parcel of everyday life, sometimes made direct reference to the Empire: one of the most blatant examples being the 'imperial system' of measurements.

The way in which the empire was represented to the British public in the past might explain why its long shadow has influenced current reflections on the subject, sometimes reverberating until the present day. In that context, historian John Robert Seeley might offer a key to understanding the reason why Brexit has enjoyed higher levels of support in England than in any of the other constitutive nations. He began his first lecture on *The Expansion of England* developing as his main argument the exceptionalism of English history, which could not be put on equal footing with other European nations such as, he argued, Sweden or Holland. The long-lasting commercial success of *The Expansion of England*, as well as Seeley's role in the founding

of British imperial history, indicate that Seeley's ideas percolated into national self-representation, and influenced several generations of British people when it came to reflecting about the uniqueness of their country's trajectory (Burroughs).

Evidence suggests that the development of the feeling of belonging to the British nation – what Benedict Anderson has famously called an 'imagined community' (Anderson) – was deeply influenced by the belief in national superiority, relying essentially on its clout as a maritime superpower at the time. Historians of British nationalism such as Linda Colley and David Cannadine have given the empire a central role in their narratives about how Britain was forged as a nation, or how 'Ornamentalism', namely how the British saw themselves and their empire, trickled down also at home (Colley; Cannadine). As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have argued, the British monarchy played a leading role in the 'invention of tradition' throughout the nineteenth century, and within it, the empire played a central part (Hobsbawm and Ranger).

For his part, drawing on the school of thought pioneered by MacKenzie's *Propaganda and Empire* (first published in 1984), Andrew Thompson has shown how support towards the empire included 'various strands of discourse' and levels of interaction, citing in particular 'transnational family ties', 'international labour solidarity' and 'the adventure, excitement and spectacle of faraway and exotic places', the appeal of which was mostly felt amongst the working classes (Thompson, 240). More abstract political or economic concepts might have remained more exclusive but remained powerful markers of an imperial identity. Overall, Thompson has demonstrated conclusively how the British people 'developed a remarkably rich relationship with their empire that markedly extended the boundaries of their domestic society', rejecting in the process the idea that Britain was an 'empire-free zone' (Thompson, 239). Whilst Thompson's research focused essentially on the 'New Imperialism' of the nineteenth century, Kathleen Wilson has demonstrated in *The Sense of the People* that empire was also an element of British popular culture in the eighteenth century, a point which was central to the theories of the 'new imperial history' (Wilson).

What John MacKenzie has termed an 'imperial mindset' (MacKenzie 2009) penetrated into the interstices of the British psyche, associating closely Britannia and the empire, as was perfectly encapsulated in the famous 1886 world map of the 'imperial federation' by Walter Crane which, in spite

of some hidden second meanings, conveys a general celebration of the empire as a key constitutive element of what Britannia stood for (Biltcliffe). Through a variety of connections, ranging from the press to the economic sphere and politically-motivated arguments, the empire appeared as Britannia’s intrinsic ally. This association could crystallize around specific reputations attached to exemplary figures, such as imperial heroes widely celebrated as ‘standard-bearers’ of national greatness (Sèbe 2013). Thus in a movement similar to that of the ‘manifest destiny’ in the US, British imperial thinking developed the assumption that British imperialism, as a bringer of progress, was endowed with specific virtues that made it an exceptional political, military and economic achievement – a claim for exceptionalism that resonates until today.

Bringers of progress: Imperial thinking and British exceptionalism

As the ‘empire project’ took shape and gained more currency, giving rise to the largest and one of the most enduring colonial systems of modern times, another associated belief, which has been underlying a lot of the Brexiters’ arguments recently, started to gain real traction among the wider British public: the idea that Britain had a unique legacy to give to the world, through its successes based upon the practice of imperialism. British exceptionalism could appear sometimes in rather crude forms, as when Cecil Rhodes defended the concept of a specific place in the world for the Anglo-Saxon race. In his so-called ‘Confession of Faith’ of 1877, the Oxford-educated diamond magnate, who gave his surname to two British colonies in Africa, formulated the ‘dream’ to create a ‘secret society with but one object: the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole uncivilised world under British rule’ (Rhodes). Rhodes adopted an extreme nationalist perspective to advocate British expansion elsewhere, and not surprisingly given his professional and personal interests, on the African continent where he proved to be among the major British empire builders in history.

Such a line of thinking would be echoed in countless interventions, especially by Tory politicians, over several decades. Thus, Joseph Chamberlain, known for his philanthropic efforts at home, with a view to improve the sanitation of the city of Birmingham, and as the founder of the University of Birmingham, claimed in March 1897 that ‘I maintain that our rule does, and has, brought

security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew these blessings before.’ (Chamberlain). German-born and German-educated politician, colonial administrator and pro-colonial publicist Alfred Milner became a champion of British leadership in the era of ‘New Imperialism’. The man who was granted peerage in 1901 as Baron Milner of St James’s and Cape Town, in an association that reflected the central place of the empire in his trajectory, chose as his motto *Communis Patria*, or ‘patriotism for our common country’ (Lee Thompson, 1). This choice was directly in keeping with his self-depiction as a patriot for the Anglo-Saxon Race. Milner celebrated in the British Empire ‘the power of incorporating alien races without trying to disintegrate them, or rob them of their individuality ... characteristic of the British imperial system’, insisting that it ensures its success not by ‘what it takes away, but what it gives’ and emphasizing that it opened ‘new vistas of culture and advancement, that it seeks to win them to itself’ (Milner, xxxviii). A keen promoter of the empire, Milner could draw on his exchanges with his long-time friend W. T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, not only about his creed around government by journalism, but also his support for the empire, demonstrated repeatedly throughout his career.

Such pro-imperial views prevailed even among Liberal politicians. Rosebery felt comfortable defending the principle of a ‘sane imperialism’, which in his view was akin to ‘a larger patriotism’ (Jacobson, 86). Before him (and even before Cecil Rhodes himself), Charles Dilke had praised enthusiastically the ‘grandeur of our race’ which he sought to demonstrate through his globe-trotting account around the English-speaking world, revealingly entitled *Greater Britain* (Dilke Preface).

Such views, amply reported through a wide range of cultural productions ranging from films to books and newspaper articles, contained all the ingredients necessary to create a powerful superiority complex revolving around claims of exceptionalism and supremacy (Thomas and Tøye). Fast forward a hundred years, once the dust of decolonisation has settled, and the revival of this rhetoric, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, tended to imply by contrast that EU membership would lead mechanically to a dilution of the unique genius of British values and practices. This is what I call the unexpected triumph of the ‘absent-minded “civilizer” in the postcolonial era’

Brexit: The Triumph of the Absent-Minded ‘Civilizer’ in the Postcolonial Era?

John Robert Seeley, whom we met earlier, once wrote that ‘we [the British] seem to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind’ (Seeley, 8). His view was given a new lease of life when Bernard Porter chose it as the title for his book challenging (at least for the period running up to the 1880s) John MacKenzie’s theories about the extent and depth of ‘popular imperialism’ (Porter). Perhaps the second decade of the twenty-first century has given us a good reason to recycle the concept of absent-mindedness, and to examine whether Britain has experienced on this occasion a bout of imperial nostalgia and self-delusion that might have amounted to the triumph of the ‘absent-minded civiliser’, as a new embodiment of the ‘absent-minded imperialists’ of the late nineteenth-century.

The outcome of the EU referendum of June 2016 has seemingly led to the resurfacing of old tropes that had somewhat disappeared under the veneer of a post-colonial, Liberal Britain specifically embodied by the Blair and Brown years (with the notable exception of the Iraq war of 2003). Emblematic of this resurgence is the episode when then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was heard in September 2017 reciting the first lines of Kipling’s arch-imperial poem *Road to Mandalay* whilst on a state visit to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar, where colonial memories remain raw and politically sensitive. As the British government, backed by an ever-evolving political landscape, opted gradually for a more clear-cut divorce from the EU, secretary of state for International trade (2016-2019) Liam Fox returned to old friends in the Commonwealth and in the Anglosphere to woe them to sign free trade deals with the ex-metropolis (Fox).

Many leading Conservative figures have adopted a similar stance over the years, among them former party leaders William Hague and Michael Howard, as well as former ministers David Willetts, John Redwood and Norman Lamont. A new rhetoric has emerged, extolling the close cultural and linguistic connection with the kith and kin of the ex-White dominions, the soft power over ‘third-world’ countries which were formerly part of the British empire, the rule of law as a specifically British legacy, or the representation of the Anglosphere as a family that longs to be reunited after Britain’s perceived betrayal when it joined the EU in 1973.

Whilst imperial nostalgia associated with Brexit longings has been mostly the preserve of the Tories

or the far right in recent years, Labour has not been immune to it either. If Jeremy Corbyn’s half-hidden Brexit sympathies may have been influenced by his scepticism towards Brussels’s perceived liberalism, some of his predecessors openly used the imperial card to justify their hostility to closer partnership with Europe. The Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell argued at the 1962 Labour party conference that joining the then European Community meant both ‘the end of independence’ for Britain and no less than the ‘end of the Commonwealth’. Britain would become a mere ‘province’ in a federal Europe, bringing to an end ‘a thousand years of history’, Gaitskell argued (Gaitskell). Recourse to the Commonwealth was ‘a means of disguising from international observers, from the electorate at home, and even from the policy-makers themselves the full long-term implications of the transfers of power’ (Darwin 1986). Yet and above all, underlying Gaitskell’s argument against Britain joining the EC is a feeling of exceptionality, disguised in a humble but yet distinctive claim which hardly succeeds in hiding a deeply-rooted superiority complex: ‘We have a different history’ – in other words, having ‘civilised’ the non-European world gives Britain a special place as a ‘chosen nation’, a view I summarise here as being that of the ‘absent-minded civilizer’.

This ‘different history’, referred to almost humbly in 1962 by a Labour politician, has been ploughed in recent years, and with much less humility, by a new generation of historians, both popular and academic, who have extolled Britain’s exceptional legacy and, in the background, its claim to a unique role on Earth, based on the claim that it has bestowed the rule of law, free trade and the English language to mankind, setting it aside from the rest of the pack – and especially from the rest of the EU. The 2000s have been somewhat of a watershed in that regard, starting with Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World* published in 2003, followed eight years later by Kwasi Kwarteng’s *Ghosts of Empire: Britain’s Legacies in the Modern World*. Both made a case for the exceptionality of the British Empire, the former on the basis that ‘it sought to globalize not just an economic but a legal and ultimately a political system too’ (Ferguson 362). Among the many discussions that have taken place around the question of colonialism and imperialisms past and present, three have direct ramifications for our understanding of present forms of ‘popular imperialism’, and its impact on Brexit thinking in the UK.

The first of these discussions broached ethical and philosophical considerations about the accept-

ability of imperialism. In stark contrast with the opinion that has prevailed overwhelmingly in academia since the 1960s, some controversial voices have argued in favour of a revision of the standards by which this fact of world history is appraised in the global human trajectory. Particularly vocal in this school of thinking, and drawing upon the likes of Ferguson and Kwarteng, are Bruce Gilley and Nigel Biggar. Secondly, the development, fate and meaning of English-speaking countries worldwide have attracted renewed interest in the last two decades. The ‘end of history’ as it had been identified by Francis Fukuyama meant an almost absolute triumph of the West, in particular in its English-speaking version. With the triumph of English as the world’s *lingua franca*, the origin of this global success attracted renewed interest from a generation of new imperial historians such as James Belich and his study of the ‘rise of the Anglo-World’ since American independence.

With Britain still soul-searching in an ever-changing world (one has in mind Dean Acheson’s famous word in 1962: ‘Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role’), recourse to the Anglosphere, as opposed to ‘ever closer union’ with its continental neighbours, seemed to become an alternative, and increasingly promoted, proposition. As a new millennium started, historian Robert Conquest delivered a stringent critique of the world order in the West, including the EU, and offered as a potential solution closer unity between the Anglosphere nations (whilst advocating Britain’s withdrawal from the EU). This proved not to be an isolated case. The Anglosphere has been equally presented as a way of coping with the challenges of the twenty-first century by both US businessman James C. Bennett (*The Anglosphere Challenge: Why the English-speaking Nations Will Lead the Way in the Twenty-first Century*) and UK historian Andrew Roberts (*A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*). Whilst the racial undertones of the concept might have slowed its spread in earlier decades, right-wing parties in English-speaking countries, and especially in the UK, seized the opportunity to give a new lease of life to a concept that had existed for a long time, but had become dormant as the sun of post-colonialism rose (Kenny and Pearce; Vucetic). Even the revival of the heavily racialized alliance with the ‘white dominions’ of Canada, Australia and New Zealand became a prospect often used to justify Brexit or as a means of reassurance in the transition period, through the project of CANZUK (Geoghegan).

Whilst such positions were oblivious of the ‘fun-

damental contradiction of Brexit – a reassertion of imperial self-confidence and an anti-colonial insurgency all at once’ (in the words of Fintan O’Tool), they exerted considerable traction among the public. In his recent *Empires of the Mind*, Robert Gildea has argued that ‘ambitions and fantasies about empire in the global and metropolitan spheres had an important impact on a third sphere too: Europe’ (5). Indeed, the result of the referendum of 23 June 2016 was a potent sign of the close links between narratives of empire and the Brexit project. The last British Governor in Hong Kong, and chancellor of the University of Oxford, Lord Patten of Barnes, said nothing else when he accused Boris Johnson and his negotiating tactics in the divorce discussions with the EU, to be on a ‘runaway train of English exceptionalism’ (Patten).

Conclusion

Is Britain betraying some of its fundamental values by turning its back to the EU project, which owes so much to its ideas and to its practices – often marked by clear and resolute opposition to the views of its Continental partners, which it was able to enrich and to nuance at times? Or is it reconnecting with its imperial past by turning its back to Europe and instead claiming to seek to deal directly with the rest of the world because, in the words of Boris Johnson, ‘We used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen’, and therefore ‘Are we really unable to do trade deals?’ (Johnson 2016).

In this context where ‘Global Britain’ is actively championed by its governmental backers, can we argue that being ‘imperialily literate’, or, in Andrew Thompson’s word, not ‘imperialily illiterate’, played a role in diminishing the appeal of being a member of the largest economic ensemble in the world, which sits just across the Channel? The concept of ‘popular imperialism’, and above all its legacy today, provides a powerful explanation as to why the 22 miles that separate Dover from Calais might seem to some British voters wider than the 3,800 miles between Cornwall and New York.

Theresa May’s Lancaster House speech in January 2017 was enlightening in that regard: post-Brexit Britain would be a ‘country free to leave the European Union and embrace the world’ – in other words, answering this call, felt ‘instinctively’ in her view, to ‘get out into the world and rediscover its role as a great, global, trading nation’ (May). This is what Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch have described as akin to ‘embarking on a voyage of *rediscovery*’ (2). Whilst the Brexit vote has seemingly resulted

from the coalescence of a variety of factors, ranging from fears of being socially downgraded, expressed by sizeable sections of the white working class, to immigration fears and sheer xenophobia, it seems beyond doubt that the long-standing influence of the imperial experience on various constitutive layers of the British public has played a key role in the ultimate success of the Brexiteers's narrative. A potent drive towards Brexit may have been the sadness at the idea that the British feeling of being 'the chosen ones' (or the 'chosen race' in the terminology of some nineteenth-century commentators) was being lost in the transnational and possibly supra-national aggregate that the EU is seeking to emulate. Generations of patient and passionate work proudly 'showcasing empire' have left a deep imprint in the country's imaginary, demonstrating once again the intricate relationship between culture and politics and how they can coalesce powerfully at times of national soul-searching. We have every reason to believe that the British Empire, and its image in

popular culture, has been, and is bound to remain, a powerful and meaningful key to unlock many aspects of British collective consciousness, past and present.

NOTE

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