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Sèbe, Berny

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# Brexit and the ‘Imperial Factor’: A *longue durée* Approach to British Exceptionalism

Berny Sèbe

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

## ABSTRACT

To what extent can we detect echoes of the triumphant Britannia (Thomas Arne composed *Rule Britannia* in 1740) in contemporary Brexit debates? What were the subliminal refractions of the refrain ‘Britons never will be slaves’ in complaints about the frequently evoked ‘Brussels shackles’? Through a *longue durée* approach to two major elements of modern British history – Britannia and the celebration of colonial expansion as a ‘bringer of progress’, this article charts the persistence of political and cultural visions including the Empire simultaneously as an expression, a tool and a channel of British exceptionalism. Positing that the Empire was integral to the emergence of British identity and its consolidation, it also underlines, through references to John Robert Seeley’s highly influential work, the key role played by England in this process. Based upon the hypothesis that past reflections on Britain’s global role – including those championed by Cecil John Rhodes – have left an imprint on the Brexit conversation in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the vote, this article introduces the concept of ‘imperial factor’ as a way of taking into account the long-term impact that the development and possession of the world’s largest empire has left on British ways of seeing the world, and, crucially, of seeing Britain’s place in the world. Beyond the case-study of exceptionalism offered here, further research, especially of a quantitative nature, is suggested to refine our understanding of the precise extent to which the ‘imperial factor’ played a role in the Brexit vote of 2016. Conceived as an instrument to take into account the potential imperial dimension of a multi-faceted phenomenon such as Britain’s departure from the EU, the ‘imperial factor’ is, more broadly, a useful tool to gauge – in the UK but also among other formerly imperial nations – the potential and variable long-term influence that the possession of an empire left on national visions, psyche and practices.

## KEYWORDS

Brexit; Empire; exceptionalism; civilising mission; Cecil John Rhodes; John Robert Seeley; imperial factor; Britannia

**CONTACT** Berny Sèbe  [b.c.sebe@bham.ac.uk](mailto:b.c.sebe@bham.ac.uk)

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## Introduction: The Unbearable Lightness of Empire

When the race to replace a politically ailing Boris Johnson took place in the summer of 2022, very few commentators observed that the last two contenders, chosen from the ranks of the Conservative party, belonged to traditionally under-represented constituencies in British political life: one was a woman, and the other, a man of Indian origin. There had only been two female Prime Ministers in the whole of British history, and no individual of Indian descent ever reached that level of responsibility. Liz Truss went on to win the trust of Conservative party members (a group of about 172,000 people<sup>1</sup>), which allowed her to become the last Prime Minister anointed by Queen Elizabeth II, before the monarch passed away two days later. On many accounts, Liz Truss was the candidate with less gravitas and as outgoing Foreign Secretary, she seemed less robustly prepared than her competitor Rishi Sunak, the outgoing Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose financial reputation was impeccable and a strong guarantee in a world in economic turmoil. Yet, Truss won the vote among Conservative members with a comfortable margin (57% of the vote vs 43% for Sunak). One aspect which remained conspicuously absent from discussions of the result was the extent to which it might be explained by a visceral concern among grassroots Conservative membership, that a former 'subject' of the Empire might end up in Downing Street. It might have been a case of the traditional stiff upper lip – or political correctness. Yet, to many observers, especially from abroad, this amounted more to an 'elephant in the room', as if this element of the equation was better swept under the carpet. With Truss and her new Chancellor (of Ghanaian descent – another imperial connection), Kwasi Kwarteng, sending the British economy into a zone of high and dangerous turbulence as they sought to implement an ultra-liberal and misnamed 'mini-budget', the experience was short-lived. After an intense but momentary drama, Truss won an unenviable accolade as the shortest-serving British Prime Minister with just 49 days in office. A hastily-organised leadership contest finally returned Sunak unopposed as leader of the Conservative Party on 24 October 2022, allowing him to enter Downing Street as Prime Minister on Diwali 2022 – a highly symbolic date for the practising Hindu that he is.

For the first time in British history, a Prime Minister had clearly emerged out of the imperial connection, winding his way up to Whitehall – to lead the temple which no former colonised had ever attained: 10 Downing Street. With Sunak's father born in Kenya, his mother in Tanzania, grandparents from around the Indian subcontinent, and even the sonority of his name and surname, his trajectory out of the subaltern zone of the British Empire was clear.<sup>2</sup> Was it an unprecedented case of the 'empire striking back', in ways which had not been envisaged before?<sup>3</sup> For him, a cosmopolitan Brexiteer, the promise of a race-blind Britain seems to have delivered (at least on the second attempt). This also appeared to be the case for his Home Secretary

Suella Braverman, his Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, and his Minister for Women and Equalities Kemi Badenoch, all of whom have clear imperial connections in their genealogy. Yet, this does not prevent Sunak's government from being one of the most hardline on record when it comes to the (at least rhetorical) repression of illegal immigration – with the Home Secretary (whose parents, from Mauritius and Kenya, are also of Indian descent), claiming proudly to whoever will listen that it is her 'dream' and 'obsession' to see a flight departing asylum seekers to Rwanda.<sup>4</sup> This opening detour in contemporary British politics exemplifies the complexity of the relationship between Britain and its colonial past: both at the heart of many trajectories, and yet rarely acknowledged, or seen as simply peripheral or anecdotal. Could it be that this aspect of British identity and history remains in many ways hidden in plain sight?<sup>5</sup> Might it also reveal a pattern that is applicable to the connection between 'Brexit and Empire', a question that has remained at the heart of vigorous academic debate?

Ever since it gained common currency in British political life, Brexit has been marked by a remarkable level of plasticity which allowed it to aggregate various electoral constituencies, ranging from English ultra-nationalists to socially conservative second-generation migrants tempted to close the door to the 'Europeanisation' of British society, sometimes interpreted as a synonym for secularisation.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, there may have been some ulterior motives, such as to create opportunities for migration to Britain for overseas relatives, who had been consistently side-lined since 1973 for the benefit of European migrants who could enjoy free movement. Such ideological flexibility was clearly a source of strength for the 'Vote Leave' campaign at the time of the June 2016 referendum. It became a major weakness when, once the referendum was won by Brexit-supporting forces, finding out what it meant in practice became a necessary, rather than purely rhetorical, exercise. As part of the reflection upon 'Unmasking the Colonial Past' that is running through this special issue, the present article offers some elements of analysis about how scholars of British imperialism and colonial and postcolonial studies may seek to engage with a potential imperial facet of Brexit by considering its complex – and equivocal – relation with Britain's colonial fate, referred to here as 'the imperial factor'. Acknowledging how some ideas percolate into public consciousness over decades or even centuries, 'the imperial factor' problematises the long-term impact that the development and possession of the world's largest empire has left on British ways of seeing the world, and, crucially, of seeing Britain's place in the world. This concept will be illustrated here through a historicised approach to the notion of British exceptionalism, contextualising and enlightening its resurfacing in multiple, but often down-played, references to empire and Britain's role in the Commonwealth and in the world, within the framework of Brexit discussions.

In line with the objectives and practices of this special issue, our approach seeks to move beyond reductive binaries (the one immediately springing to

mind is, naturally, that between Leavers and Remainers). Instead, it proposes to adopt a *longue durée* approach in an attempt to illuminate the extent to which past reflections on Britain's role have left an imprint on the Brexit conversation in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the vote. This analysis revolves around the notion that empire was a potent expression of a form of 'British exceptionalism' that people in the UK could legitimately feel proud of, and which was – implicitly or explicitly – at risk as a result of 'ever closer' European integration.<sup>7</sup> Considering British exceptionalism as a contributing element to the debate around Brexit does not preclude, in any way, the validity of other factors, such as economic concerns, the long-running dissatisfaction with the political elite, the supposed red-tape associated with EU membership, persistent defiance towards decisions taken 'over there' in Brussels – as opposed to 'over here' in London, or the feeling among some quarters – especially working-class ones – that a broken system needed a radical change. Yet, it also acknowledges a *Weltanschauung* that matured over several centuries, and a framing of the discussion, which made the prospect of seeing British identity diluted gradually into a European project distinctly unpalatable, posing a clear threat to what had made Britain 'great' in past centuries, which was intrinsically associated with the imperial experience, assimilated as both a tangible proof and an undisputable consequence of this greatness. Evidence laid out in the following pages suggests that knowledge of and, more often than not, pride in, Britain's imperial destiny have been both a contributing factor, and an element of reassurance, in the protracted process that led to Brexit.

An ever-growing historiography has appeared on the subject, echoing in several ways some of the controversies that marked the emergence of the concept of 'popular imperialism' to understand how an 'imperial mindset' had come to characterise British popular culture, and its relationship with overseas expansion, from the nineteenth century onwards. Having identified how 'New Imperialism' coincided with the emergence of the mass-media, John MacKenzie first demonstrated the links between 'propaganda and empire',<sup>8</sup> a view that would be systematically challenged by Bernard Porter a few years later<sup>9</sup> until, in the end, the MacKenzie-ite vision clearly prevailed, if we judge by the vast academic output it has generated over the years.<sup>10</sup> Some aspects of the scholarly discussion around Brexit have echoed the travails of the MacKenzie-Porter debate, not least around the real or supposed significance of a form of imperial after-image which may have influenced some of the discussions, and subsequent political choices, around the prospect of leaving the European Union. To the 'maximalist' school led by the likes of Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch, or Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson,<sup>11</sup> one could oppose the 'minimalist' interpretation, championed by Robert Saunders, for whom 'imperial nostalgia' was only a convenient but unconvincing myth to understand the 2016 vote. In Saunders' nuanced and carefully documented view, imperial memory penetrated both the Leavers' and Remainers' imaginary, contrary to the latter's dominant narrative which sought to underline colonial

longings primarily among Brexiteers, as hasty proof of their opponents' supposedly unpalatable preferences.<sup>12</sup>

The 'imperial factor' which is referred to here has nothing to do with nostalgia, or longing for a bygone colonial age. Instead, it refers to the development over several centuries and regular re-investment through socio-cultural percolation, of a frame of mind that cannot be separated from twenty-first-century discussions about Britain's core values and vision for the future. In other words, to what extent can we detect echoes of the triumphant Britannia (Thomas Arne composed *Rule Britannia* in 1740) in contemporary Brexit debates? What were the subliminal refractions of the refrain 'Britons never will be slaves' in discussions about the frequently evoked 'Brussels shackles'?<sup>13</sup> Whilst the concept of Empire 2.0 has often been used by a variety of (mostly critical) commentators to engage with the range of strategies suggested or implemented by Brexiteers to compensate for the reduction in neighbourly trade with European countries by boosting commercial links inherited from a past that was not always celebrated among ex-colonies (at least those beyond the former white dominions),<sup>14</sup> the long-term ramifications of the acquired reflexes and feelings of pride towards a time when, as the word goes, the 'sun never set on the British Empire,' should not be under-estimated. Our hypothesis posits that acknowledgement and awareness of the Empire have been consistently present (although at varying degrees and serving a range of political purposes) at least since the eighteenth century, and that they found a new lease of life when conversations around Brexit triggered a nationwide discussion, with existential undertones, about the essence of Britishness and where the country should be heading in the next generation. This has led some politicians or commentators to celebrate, often implicitly, but also explicitly, the strength and example of the imperial trajectory as a suitable and preferable alternative to the EU project, giving vital historically-fuelled momentum to the idea of leaving the EU to release once again British genius, attested, in such a narrative, by an imperial experience stretching all the way from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II. Spanning three centuries of British cultural history, this article explores an aspect of 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 very ideals it had actively promoted – for instance, as a founding member of the Council of Europe. Such a radical U-turn ought to have deeper roots than a referendum result influenced by the apparent simplicity of the leave/remain alternative offered in 2016, or a parliamentary representation skewed by the first-past-the-post system explaining partly the crushing victory of the Leave side of the Conservatives led by Boris Johnson in 2019. In our search for possible roots to these dynamics, we will be exploring two key themes which, taken together, draw a picture of 'British exceptionalism', the contemporary echoes of which will be analysed in the final section of this article.



First, under the heading of ‘Britannia’, we will consider the ways in which the very idea of 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. Occasionally, this has involved gluing, sometimes with a bit of pressure that was not always welcome in some parts of 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 we argue strengthened arguments in favour of Brexit by offering implicitly an alternative, deemed as glorious, to EU membership. We will conclude by analysing instances when the rise of Brexit ideals can be associated with what is called here the triumph of the ‘Absent-Minded “Civiliser”’ in the postcolonial era. This concept also explains some of the blatant inconsistencies in governmental narratives surrounding the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth, with on the one hand the Foreign Office extolling the special links embodied by the Commonwealth, and, on the other, the Home Office refusing to accept the migratory consequences of such political and economic proximity. The tensions resulting from these diverging aspirations are particularly apparent in post-Brexit bilateral discussions between Britain and India, where closer economic partnership is sought by the British side, which extols the benefits of past association between the two countries, but at the same time cannot accept the migratory demands resulting from this proximity.<sup>15</sup> Drawing upon our observations about the imperial trajectory of ‘Britannia’, and the ideology of progress that accompanied its growth, this third and final section explores how the genealogy of some aspects underlying the various projects put forward by Brexiteers, especially around the relevance of the concept of a ‘Global Britain’ fully independent from the EU in the twenty-first century, can be traced back to beliefs in the exceptionality of Britain’s fate, fuelled by the example of imperial expansion over several centuries. This section ambitions to ‘unmask’ some imperial connections of Brexit through a set of three discourses that have come to play a discreet but significant role in bolstering confidence in a hypothetical, and then real-life, British position in a post-Brexit world: the rise of an interpretation of Empire as a benevolent force promoting progressive values, such as justice or the rule of law; the triumph of the English language as the world’s *lingua franca*; the role, relevance and resilience of the ‘Anglosphere’ extending beyond its purely linguistic aspects.

### **Britannia: Where It All Started?**

Whilst it might have become less fashionable to celebrate imperial greatness openly, 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, in most cases, it was nowhere to be found in the post-colonial period, it still remained almost everywhere in an unspoken, subterranean fashion.<sup>16</sup> When considering what it takes to be British, or even more generally what makes a British person, it is difficult for the Empire to be *too* far. At times, it could even be literally at the heart of people's homes, especially when their own lives had included significant spells under imperial skies.<sup>17</sup> 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 crystallised the 'British state and Empire', which he has identified as being primarily the Union flag (often featured on overseas flags, until the present day, with four Commonwealth countries, and thirteen provinces in Canada, Australia and the United States still displaying it as of 2023), 'God Save the King' and 'Rule, Britannia' – 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.<sup>18</sup> Although the exact nature of the relationship between British greatness and Empire remains open to debate, with the latter variously interpreted as a cause or a consequence of the former, the place of the Empire as tangibly associated with the national narrative, appears to be beyond doubt – even if it is in a non-exclusive manner. One might add that many key identity-related elements, some of which formed part and parcel of everyday life, made direct reference to the concept of Empire, creating a cognitive environment where 'imperial' had positive connotations, including as a unifying drive. One such example is the 'imperial system' of measurements, which came into being under this designation as a result of the Weights and Measures Act of 1824, and another, the use of 'imperial' as a synonym for 'grand' when applied to commercial products, or buildings – as in 'imperial hotel'.<sup>19</sup> Even if the true extent to which such use reveals any conscious imperial mindset remains a point of contention, the semiotic associations at work in such cases cannot be entirely discarded.

More broadly, the way in which the Empire was celebrated in the past, through a wide variety of means ranging from cartographic representations to emblematic imperial heroes, has not been without impact on current reflections on the subject.<sup>20</sup> In that context, reading 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 of the UK.<sup>21</sup> Seeley began his first lecture on *The Expansion of England* arguing that the exceptionalism of English history in the past meant that, at the time of writing (1883), it could not be put on equal footing with what he saw as lesser European countries:

It is a favourite maxim of mine that history, while it should be scientific in its method, should pursue a practical object. That is, it should not merely gratify the reader's curiosity about the past but modify his view of the present and his forecast of the future.

Now if this maxim be sound, the history of England ought to end with something that might be called a moral. Some large conclusions ought to arise out of it; it ought to exhibit the general tendency of English affairs in such a way as to set us thinking about the future and divining the destiny which is reserved for us. The more so because the part played by our country in the world certainly does not grow less prominent as history advances. Some countries, such as Holland or Sweden, might pardonably regard their history as in a manner wound up. They were once great, but the conditions of their greatness passed away, and they now hold a secondary place. Their interest in their own past is therefore either sentimental or purely scientific; the only practical lesson of their history is a lesson of resignation. But England has grown steadily greater and greater, absolutely at least if not always relatively. It is far greater now than it was in the eighteenth century; it was far greater in the eighteenth century than in the seventeenth; far greater in the seventeenth than in the sixteenth. The prodigious greatness to which it has attained makes the question of its future infinitely important and at the same time most anxious, because it is evident that the great colonial extension of our state exposes it to new dangers, from which in its ancient insular insignificance it was free.<sup>22</sup>

Seeley's series of lectures was influential, in terms of both print run and longevity. An estimated 80,000 copies were sold in the first two years following its launch in 1883, and the title still sold as many as 11,000 copies in 1919, twenty-five years after its author's death. Whilst the annual figure dropped to 3,000 in 1931, it still remained in print until the Suez crisis, and underwent a new edition in 1971.<sup>23</sup> The commercial success of *The Expansion of England*, as well as Seeley's role in the founding of British imperial history, indicate that his ideas percolated effectively into national self-representation, and influenced several generations of British people when it came to reflecting on the uniqueness of their country's trajectory.<sup>24</sup>

As demonstrated in Seeley's above-mentioned opening quote, evidence suggests that the development of the feeling of belonging to the British nation – what Benedict Anderson famously called an 'imagined community'<sup>25</sup> – was deeply influenced by a belief in national superiority, relying essentially on its clout as a maritime superpower at the time. British historians such as Linda Colley and David Cannadine have given the Empire a central role in their narratives exploring how Britain was forged as a nation, or how 'Ornamentalism', namely how the British saw themselves and their Empire, trickled down also at home.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

For his part, drawing on the school of thought pioneered by MacKenzie's *Propaganda and Empire* (first published in 1984), Andrew Thompson has demonstrated how public support for 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, Thompson

argues, was mostly felt amongst the working classes.<sup>28</sup> More abstract political or economic concepts may have remained more exclusive, but they still serve as 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’.<sup>29</sup> Whilst Thompson’s research focused essentially on the ‘New Imperialism’ of the nineteenth century, Kathleen Wilson has demonstrated 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’.<sup>30</sup>

What John MacKenzie has termed an ‘imperial mindset’<sup>31</sup> penetrated into the interstices of the British psyche, associating closely Britannia and the Empire. This was perfectly encapsulated in the famous 1886 world map of the ‘imperial federation’ by Walter Crane which, in spite of some hidden second meanings with French-inspired Republican undertones, conveys a general celebration of the Empire as a key constitutive element of what Britannia stood for.<sup>32</sup> Through a variety of connections, ranging from the press to the economic sphere and politically-motivated arguments, the Empire appeared as Britannia’s intrinsic *raison d’être*, encapsulating its greatness as an expression of national genius at the same time as it was a consequence of it. This association could crystallise around specific reputations attached to colonial figures presented as exemplary and widely celebrated as ‘standard-bearers’ of national greatness.<sup>33</sup> Politicians, especially Conservative ones, rarely missed an opportunity to underline the close link between Empire and national greatness: one famous example being Sir Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, who argued passionately in favour of the Empire, not only in Parliament but also in his successive constituencies of Suffolk and Sheffield and also spoke vociferously about British imperial responsibilities in the press.<sup>34</sup> Time and again, the Empire would become an essential element of Westminster’s political rhetoric. It is revealing that, upon delivering his famous speech known as ‘the Finest Hour’ on 18 June 1940, Winston Churchill made a vibrant call to the British Empire in its concluding lines:

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour’.<sup>35</sup>

A considerable body of evidence suggests that the symbolic construct of Britannia emerged as a figure closely connected with imperialism, an association that would have far-reaching consequences up to the present-day. From that perspective, John MacKenzie has summarised the centrality of the imperial experience to British culture and thinking:

Popular imperialism was not a brief, jingoistic and aberrant phenomenon. It was a continuing factor in British society and politics from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. If it had seemed invisible or non-functioning to many

historians, it is simply because it was always there, a continuing tradition which inevitably underwent changes over time, but which contained more continuities of expression than have been recognized.<sup>36</sup>

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. This claim of exceptionalism continues to resonate today as part of what is called here the ‘imperial factor’, contributing to relativising the potential consequences of a breakaway from the world’s largest single market.

### **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 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, and which made it distinct from any other power – let alone, nation – in the world.<sup>37</sup> 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’.<sup>38</sup> When he expressed regret at the fact that the United States (‘the finest [country] in the world’) had chosen to demand independence from Britain, he hastened to add that ‘even from an American’s point of view just picture what they have lost, look at their government, are not the frauds that yearly come before the public view a disgrace to any country and especially their’s [*sic*]’.<sup>39</sup> He subsequently asked rhetorically:

Would they have occurred had they remained under English rule great as they have become how infinitely greater they would have been with the softening and elevating influences of English rule, think of those countless 000’s of Englishmen that during the last 100 years would have crossed the Atlantic and settled and populated the United States.<sup>40</sup>

On the one hand, Rhodes regretted the fact that the United States had decided, ‘owing to two or three ignorant pig-headed statesmen of the last century’, as he put it, to go their own way and therefore deprive the US of the benefit of British paramountcy, but also to write off a possible destination for British settlers, because the 1776 declaration of independence, and its outcome with the 1883 Treaty of Paris, brought the US off-limits for British projects in his view:

Does an English father when his sons wish to emigrate ever think of suggesting emigration to a country under another flag, never—it would seem a disgrace to suggest such a thing I think that we all think that poverty is better under our own flag than wealth under a foreign one.<sup>41</sup>

On the other, Rhodes used his extreme nationalist perspective to advocate British expansion elsewhere, and not surprisingly given his professional and personal interests, particularly on the African continent. He used this moment, in his apparently unstoppable train of thought, to deliver a direct strike at Britain's long-standing rival, France:

Put your mind into another train of thought. Fancy Australia discovered and colonised under the French flag, what would it mean merely several millions of English unborn that at present exist we learn from the past and to form our future. We learn from having lost to cling to what we possess. We know the size of the world we know the total extent. Africa is still lying ready for us it is our duty to take it. It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race more of the best the most human, most honourable race the world possesses.<sup>42</sup>

This line of thinking would be echoed in countless interventions over several decades, notably by politicians belonging to the Tory party, owing to the close association that they traditionally defended between imperialism and national pride, but also, crucially, beyond. Joseph Chamberlain, known for his philanthropic efforts at home, with a view to enhancing 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.'<sup>43</sup> 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'.<sup>44</sup> 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 emphasising that it opened 'new vistas of culture and advancement, that it seeks to win them to itself'.<sup>45</sup> 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. Milner's most recent biographer has asserted that he was 'a man moving against the

current of history',<sup>46</sup> which might have an element of truth by today's standards, but is less clear in the *longue durée*, when considering that even a Liberal politician like Rosebery felt comfortable defending the principle of a 'sane imperialism', which in his view was simply akin to 'a larger patriotism'.<sup>47</sup> Among the Liberal family, he had been preceded as early as 1869 (so even before Rhodes's *Confession of Faith*) by Charles Dilke's enthusiastic praise of the 'grandeur of our race' which he sought to demonstrate through his globe-trotting account around the English-speaking world, revealingly entitled *Greater Britain*.<sup>48</sup> Even William Gladstone, who as a Liberal and partisan of the Irish Home Rule, was so often decried by his opponents as harbouring anti-imperialistic views, was reportedly described by one of his colleagues as 'an imperialist' who would 'fight for the Empire', this view having been introduced by the more general observation: 'give him a cause he thinks just, and he will fight harder and longer than any of them'.<sup>49</sup>

Such views, amply reported through a wide variety of cultural productions ranging from films to books and newspaper articles, contained all the ingredients necessary to generate and sustain a powerful and durable superiority complex revolving around claims of exceptionalism and supremacy.<sup>50</sup> 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 that had been exemplified and energised by the imperial experience. This is what I call the triumph of the 'absent-minded "civiliser"', which emerged in the context of Brexit discussions.

### **The Triumph of the Absent-minded 'Civiliser' in Brexit Discussions?**

John Robert Seeley, whom we met earlier in this article, once wrote that 'we seem to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind'.<sup>51</sup> His view was given a new lease of life – at least in academic circles – when Bernard Porter chose this remark as the title for his book challenging (especially for the period running up to the 1880s) MacKenzie's theories.<sup>52</sup> Arguably, the second decade of the twenty-first century has given us a good reason to recycle the concept of absent-mindedness: this was a time when discussions around Britain and its world role, closely associated with Brexit, included elements evocative of the 'absent-minded civiliser', as a late but not insignificant sequel of nineteenth-century 'popular imperialism'.

The outcome of the EU referendum in June 2016 seemingly led to the resurfacing of old tropes that had lost currency with the emergence of a narrative around post-colonial Britain seeking to foster multi-culturalism at home through a 'de-prioritisation' of Empire which swept under the carpet many potentially uncomfortable conversations about the country's colonial past.<sup>53</sup> 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. This episode led local British ambassador Andrew Patrick to suggest to Britain's top diplomat at the time that it was 'probably not a good idea' to recite these verses in this context – a claim that he reiterated seconds later, uttering 'not appropriate'.<sup>54</sup> Yet the very fact that the situation happened in the first place, and that the ambassador's mission in Burma ended a few months later, with Patrick subsequently becoming an advisor working remotely from Bangkok for the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, was a tell-tale sign of changing attitudes towards Britain's imperial past. 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 woo them to sign free trade deals with the ex-metropolis. Speaking at the Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington to extol the benefits of a post-Brexit UK-US free trade agreement, Fox was eager to celebrate the 'golden economic opportunities of the future' presented by 'the rise of the collective wealth of developing countries', which referred to Asia-Pacific and Africa, where most of the former members of the British Empire are located.<sup>55</sup>

The long shadow of the Empire – the 'imperial factor' – seems to have gained a renewed influence on the world-view of many British politicians in the twenty-first century. Even a mundane issue such as the question of visas and migratory opportunities could give rise to a bout of imperial nostalgia (combined with patriotic elan) in the eloquence of then London mayor and yet-to-become leading Brexit supporter, Boris Johnson:

In 2013 I visited Australia and was reminded of the myriad enduring bonds between 'the English-speaking peoples', to use Churchill's phrase. I was also struck by the strength of the Australian economy. A year previously I had been in India, marvelling at its economic growth and yet wondering why Britain's share of Indian trade remains so relatively small. Recent data from Africa shows an economic renaissance across that continent. It seems that almost all parts of the Commonwealth are brimming with a new energy and optimism, at precisely the time that the European Union is struggling. As we reconsider Britain's place in the world, I want us to reconsider how we engage with Commonwealth peoples. I have proposed a bilateral migration agreement between Australia and the UK, which if successful could be extended to other Commonwealth countries too, and I am pleased that Commonwealth Exchange has started to examine this idea. The UK has bonds of history, language, law, family and customs across the world and we would be foolish not to make more of these at this time of profound global economic revival.<sup>56</sup>

The rhetoric developed here resurfaced on many occasions in the lead-up to, and after, the Brexit vote: 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; 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. This world 'brimming with a new energy and optimism' was usually contrasted with a 'struggling' EU, as Johnson did it in the above-mentioned text. As the author of the booklet which Johnson introduced stated in his concluding remarks:

[I]t would be shameful and a deep error to disregard the shared language, similar legal system, and customs that the Commonwealth family provides. UK soft power will be significantly weakened if we ignore the Commonwealth and its potential.<sup>57</sup>

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, Norman Lamont and the aforementioned Liam Fox. During his own trip to Australia in 2013, to which he referred in the above quotation, Boris Johnson argued that 'when we joined the Common Market, we in effect betrayed our relationships with Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand'.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst the Empire has featured repeatedly among the Tories or the far right in the discussions leading up to, and following, the Brexit referendum, Labour has not been immune to such inclinations either, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, which are reflective of what Saunders has called 'the broader trajectory of Euroscepticism from Left to Right'.<sup>59</sup> 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, before advocating that:

We have a different history. We have ties and links which run across the whole world, and for me at least the Commonwealth, the modern Commonwealth, which owes its creation fundamentally to those vital historic decisions of the Labour Government, is something I want to cherish. [...]

I am the last person in the world to belittle what we might call the old Commonwealth. When people say, 'What did we get out of New Zealand; what did we get out of Australia; what did we get out of Canada?', I remember that they came to our aid at once in two World Wars. We, at least, do not intend to forget Vimy Ridge and Gallipoli; we, at least, do not intend to forget the help they gave us after this last war. Harold Wilson will remember the loans from Canada, the willingness of New Zealand and Australia to accept very low food prices to help us out year by year.

Then we have the new Commonwealth. Why, what a comment it is that some people should be ready, no sooner is it created to cast it aside! It means something to us and to the world. Where would our influence be in the world without the Commonwealth? It would be very much less. And I believe with all my heart that the existence of this remarkable multi-racial association, of independent nations, stretching across five continents, covering every race, is something that is potentially of immense value to the world. It does matter that we have these special relations with India and with Pakistan, with the African states as well as with Canada, Australia and New Zealand; for together we can, I believe, make a great contribution to the ending of the cold war.<sup>60</sup>

One should remember in the first place how 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.'<sup>61</sup> Yet, and above all, underlying Gaitskell's argument against Britain joining the European Community is a feeling of exceptionality, disguised in a humble but 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 summarised here as being that of the 'absent-minded civiliser', which bestows the benefits of its superior civilisation 'in a fit of absence of mind'. The Iraq War of 2003, which led to the emergence of a clear rift at the heart of the EU between France and Germany on the one hand, and the UK and Spain (associated with the US) on the other, around the question of the pertinence of Western military intervention to topple Saddam Hussein, crystallised the resurgence of echoes of the 'civilising mission', especially in the Bush-Blair 'Battle for Global Values' which motivated both leaders to remove the dictator through the use of force.<sup>62</sup> Arguably, Blair found in Britain's imperial past a potent source of justification (he famously boasted that he was 'proud of the Empire'), one that cast the country as endowed with a special mission to energise and implement the US neo-Conservative agenda in the Middle East, which sought to impose democracy by force if necessary.<sup>63</sup>

This 'different history', referred to humbly in 1962 by the Labour politician Gaitskell, and much more forcefully by his flamboyant successor Blair in 2003, has been ploughed in recent years 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. Such exceptionalism is often – but not always – associated with the belief that the UK, through its Empire, has given to mankind the rule of law, free trade and the absolute *lingua franca* of the modern world, the English language. Such a distinguished track record sets it aside, at least implicitly, from the rest of the pack – and especially from the rest of the EU. The 2000s have been in some ways 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*. Whilst Kwarteng delivered a critique of British imperial rule which put him at odds with the unreserved enthusiasm of some of his Tory colleagues, both made a case for the exceptionality of the British Empire. Ferguson's argument was grounded in the notion that 'it sought to globalize not just an economic but a legal and ultimately a political system too,'<sup>64</sup> whereas according to Kwarteng:

The British Empire, in its scale and ethos, was completely unlike any system of government that the world has known. It is highly unlikely that such an enterprise will be undertaken by any nation, no matter how powerful, ever again. The phenomenon of British imperial rule must be understood in its own terms.<sup>65</sup>

Even if the future Chancellor of the Exchequer (under Liz Truss's short-lived government in the autumn of 2022) recognised, rather unflatteringly, that 'much of the instability in the world is a product of [the British Empire's] legacy of individualism and haphazard policy-making', he remained confident that 'the British Empire did bring justice and order to often anarchic parts of the world'.<sup>66</sup>

Such volumes and their wide-audience-facing initiatives (*Empire* was released concomitantly with a highly successful six-hour Channel 4 documentary series presented by Ferguson<sup>67</sup>), were only the tip of a growing historiographical iceberg. Whereas the study of the British Empire had fallen so much out of fashion in the late twentieth-century that imperial history had become a 'dying sub-discipline' represented only by 'a fugitive band, chased by the heavily armed columns of "area studies"', it has attracted by contrast, in the last twenty years, renewed interest in the historical profession and more generally among the British general public.<sup>68</sup> Although imperial topics might not have reached the levels of popularity of Great War and Second World War history books, they have provided a copious list of best-sellers in recent years, and have fuelled a constantly growing historiography.<sup>69</sup> Among the many discussions that have taken place around the question of colonialism and imperialisms past and present, three have directly impacted discussions on Brexit in the UK.

The first of these conversations broached ethical and philosophical considerations about the acceptability of imperialism. In stark contrast with the opinion that has prevailed overwhelmingly since the 1960s, from the 2010s onwards, some voices have emerged calling for 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 ploughing a field similar to Ferguson and Kwarteng, are Bruce Gilley and Nigel Biggar. Whereas the former has sought to put into question, through a highly controversial article entitled 'The Case for Colonialism', the 'orthodoxy' which 'for the last 100 years' had given 'western colonialism [...] a bad name',<sup>70</sup> the latter asked

readers of the *Times* not to ‘feel guilty about our colonial history’,<sup>71</sup> on the basis of arguments and findings resulting from an ‘ethics and empire’ research project that he was leading, with financial support from a US-based religiously-oriented foundation.<sup>72</sup> Further inspired by Gilley’s aforementioned article, Biggar’s latest attempt to defend the legacy of British imperialism has taken a book-length form. Whilst acknowledging some of the injustices and spoliations associated with imperial rule, Biggar defends the ‘credit column in the British imperial ledger’, as part of what he describes as a wider case of ‘discriminate identification with liberal, humanitarian principles and endeavours of the colonial past that deserve to be admired, owned and carried into the future’.<sup>73</sup> Whilst such positions have traditionally represented a minority view in academia since decolonisation, they appear to have been on the rise, at least in terms of the number of articles, books and discussions that they generate in public debate, contributing in the process to firming up an interpretation of the British Empire which posits it as the source of a liberal global trajectory that was generously and benevolently bestowed upon the rest of the world.

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 victory of the West, particularly in its English-speaking version.<sup>74</sup> As English has clearly triumphed as the world’s *lingua franca*, the origin of this global success has attracted renewed interest. Through his account of how the Anglophone ‘settler revolution’ had ‘replenished the world’, James Belich has offered a powerful narrative about the ‘rise of the Anglo-World’ since American independence.<sup>75</sup> Whilst they are rigorously conducted, historically accurate and not overtly designed to play a political role, books of this nature have the potential to nurture renewed feelings of pride in Britain’s imperial past, with the resurgence of a thinly disguised belief in the ‘civilising mission’ of earlier centuries. This sentiment can be compounded by the place of explicit or implicit memories of Empire in the everyday life of many British people, referring to the exceptionality of the British imperial trajectory. This was exemplified by adverts on CrossCountry train services in 2018–20 celebrating Britain as the ‘original’ template of modernity (including as the origin of the world’s only hypercentral language<sup>76</sup>), sporting slogans such as ‘You can’t beat the original. There are 52 other Plymouths worldwide, but nothing compares to this one [a picture of Plymouth in the UK]’. Such a statement was complemented by other posters reminding the public that ‘Plymouth, Devon came first. Other places with the same name later popped up in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and the West Indies’.<sup>77</sup> Combined with the relatively slow start of the process of critical engagement with the UK’s imperial past, and an often-whitewashed vision of its ‘end of Empire’, the conditions were ripe to generate the third discussion which interests us here.<sup>78</sup>

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 increasingly appealing alternative. As the 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).<sup>79</sup> 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 and UK historian Andrew Roberts.<sup>80</sup> Whilst the racial undertones of the concept might have slowed its spread in earlier decades, right-wing parties in English-speaking countries, particularly 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.<sup>81</sup> 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 CANZUK project.<sup>82</sup> The first stage of this Empire-centric diplomatic ambition was triumphantly implemented with the AUKUS treaty, breaking existing Franco-Australian cooperation on submarine procurement for the Australian Navy, and replacing it instead with tripartite arrangements between Australia, the UK and the USA, ostensibly remaining within the Anglophone sphere. Johnson observed that Australia was 'one of our oldest friends, a kindred nation', a view echoed by the Australian Premier who argued that 'We have always seen the world through a similar lens' and that the UK, Australia and the US have been 'Always together. Never alone'. As far as he was concerned, US President Biden argued that, through this agreement, 'our nations will update and enhance [their] shared ability to take on the threats of the twenty-first century just as [they] did in the twentieth century: together'. Whilst the imperial past was not mentioned explicitly, its unmissable shadow could be felt as a foundational event when Johnson referred to the 'enduring strength of our shared values'.<sup>83</sup>

Although the three developments which we have just examined sometimes exposed what has often been described as the yet-unresolved 'fundamental contradiction of Brexit – a reassertion of imperial self-confidence and an anti-colonial insurgency all at once' (in the words of Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole), such discussions appear broadly in line with the general direction of travel of British public opinion. A series of YouGov polls spread across several years (2014–2019) have demonstrated consistently that, among Europeans, the British (alongside the Dutch) have remained the most enthusiastic supporters of their imperial past, with more than a quarter of respondents in 2019 wishing that their country still had an Empire, confirming a general mood

that had been attested five years earlier, when 59% of British respondents felt that the British Empire was something to be proud of.<sup>84</sup> In *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’.<sup>85</sup> The last British Governor in Hong Kong, and Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Lord Patten of Barnes, illustrated this 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’.<sup>86</sup>

### **Conclusion: Brexit, the ‘Imperial Factor’ and British Exceptionalism**

Unravelling the endless web of causes that led to the outcome of the Brexit referendum is as complicated as disentangling the complex consequences of this choice. It does not seem likely that we will ever be in a position to ascribe a single root cause to this decision, since too many competing factors have coalesced at this particular juncture in the summer of 2016, some of which appeared internal to the UK, whilst others were clearly external. As can be expected, intense and diverse discussions seeking to explain this outcome have taken place, and we can anticipate that no definitive answer will appear any time soon. As part of the reflection taking place in this special issue of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* driven by the objective to ‘unmask the Colonial Past’, the present article has sought to contribute a historical dimension illuminating how the contrast between the perceived and often-praised exceptionalism embodied by the British Empire, having been running over several centuries in national debates, is likely to have played a role, consciously or unconsciously, in diminishing the appeal of remaining in a supra-national entity like the EU. In this context, European integration could appear all the more as an existential threat to British values and genius, as the UK could not claim the status of a founding member of this Union: it was simply mission impossible to turn the 1957 Treaty of Rome into a foundational moment echoing in some ways the Act of Union of 1707 on a larger scale.

Theresa May’s Lancaster House speech in January 2017 was enlightening in that regard: sharpening her credentials as a former Remainer who was now in charge of implementing Brexit, she argued that post-Brexit Britain would be a ‘country free to leave the European Union and embrace the world’ – in other words, answering this call, felt ‘instinctive’ in her view, to ‘get out into the world and rediscover its role as a great, global, trading nation’.<sup>87</sup> Such statements point towards a longing for the global role that found one of its most potent expressions in the growth of the British Empire, and the resulting feeling of exceptionalism associated with the notion of ‘imperial destiny’. They also hint at the fear that the long-held British sentiment of being ‘the chosen ones’ (or the ‘chosen race’ in the terminology of some nineteenth-

century commentators that we discussed earlier) was at risk of being lost in the transnational and possibly supra-national EU aggregate. Generations of patient and passionate work by the likes of Seeley and Rhodes, proudly celebrating British imperial achievements, might have resulted from a perceived lack of appetite for imperial expansion among metropolitan audiences at the time, but their echoes in twenty-first century discussions indicate that they ultimately left a deep imprint on 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 proposed in this article the notion of 'imperial factor' to encapsulate the process through which a global vision influenced by the experience of running the world's largest empire percolated through public consciousness and political debates until the present day. Part of it remains unspoken or unnoticed (as the opening example sought to demonstrate), rendering any effort to measure it with some degree of precision difficult – but not impossible. Close analysis of referendum results combined with tailor-made opinion polls on awareness of, and engagement with, the imperial past and its associated values and ideas, broken down according to UK constitutive nation, region, age group, education and political leanings, would be needed to give more granularity to the relative potency of the 'imperial factor'. This would allow us to fine-tune its significance in the twenty-first century, and illuminate why the Scots, who played a significant role in the administration of the Empire, as recent scholarship has highlighted somewhat belatedly, voted solidly in favour of Remain<sup>88</sup> – the case of the Northern Irish, who also voted to remain in the EU, being different as they clearly anticipated all the complications that would emerge, as planned, during the EU-UK negotiations leading up to Brexit.<sup>89</sup> As Victor Bulmer-Thomas has recently sought to demonstrate, it might well be that imperial expansion was primarily an English drive,<sup>90</sup> first to the detriment of its immediate neighbours, before spreading to the rest of the world, with corresponding consequences on the strength and longevity of the 'imperial factor' in England.

The ambition of the 'imperial factor' – unlike for instance the aforementioned concept of 'Empire 2.0' – is not to establish a direct and systematic causality between Brexit and Empire, but rather to acknowledge the subtle ways in which, through centuries of debates and discussions that have sedimented into public consciousness, Britain's imperial trajectory has influenced the national soul-searching exercise that Brexit both initiated and reflected. In that regard, it is applicable to a wider range of situations where the imperial experience appears to have exerted an influence, but no direct or quantitative causality could be readily demonstrated. It would also be desirable to apply it to other European nations with an imperial past: it might not be a coincidence if, for a long time, France, having run the second largest empire in the world, faced among its population the ever-growing appeal of the so-called 'Frexit' (a movement that seems to have been thwarted by the actual implementation of Brexit itself,



even if demand for a referendum appears to remain high).<sup>91</sup> The notion of ‘imperial factor’ allows us to take into account the imperial dimension(s) of some of the major phenomena of our world, to conceptualise the myriad ways in which the past continues to shape the present, and to offer a first step towards assessing it.

## Notes

1. Burton and Tunnicliffe, *Membership of Political Parties in Great Britain*.
2. Ashcroft, *Going for Broke*, 9–10.
3. On the concept of the Empire ‘Striking Back’, see Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?* and more recently Sanghera, *Empireland*.
4. Dearden, “Suella Braverman says it is her ‘Dream’ and ‘Obsession’ to see a Flight take Asylum Seekers to Rwanda”.
5. On the ‘forgetting’ of the colonial past in Britain, see Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France*.
6. On the higher-than-expected support to Brexit among ethnic minorities, see Martin and Sobolewska, “The End of the Ethnic Bloc Vote?”
7. The objective of an ‘ever closer union’ was included in official texts from as early as the Treaty of Rome. See Miller, “‘Ever Closer Union’ in the EU Treaties and Court of Justice Case Law”.
8. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*.
9. Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists*.
10. Porter discussed his position in “Further thoughts on imperial absent-mindedness”, as did MacKenzie in “‘Comfort’ and Conviction” and “The British Empire: Ramshackle or Rampaging?”. See also Thompson, *Writing Imperial Histories*, and Barczewski and Farr, *The MacKenzie Moment*.
11. Ward and Rash, *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain*, and Dorling and Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia*.
12. Saunders, “Brexit and Empire”.
13. The concept of ‘Brussels shackles’ has been frequently used to refer to alignment with EU rules. See for instance, Maddox, “Britain’s universities will thrive once we are free of Brussels shackles”.
14. See for instance Olusoga, “Empire 2.0 is Dangerous Nostalgia”. Saunders rightly observes that this term was primarily seized upon by Brexit critics: Saunders, “Brexit and Empire,” 1143.
15. Wilkinson, “Boris Johnson Wants a Trade Deal with India. But Will the UK Accept Looser Immigration Rules?”
16. Regarding the ‘forgetting’ of colonialism in post-colonial British society, see Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France*.
17. Longair and Jeppesen, “Domestic Museums of Colonisation?”.
18. Armitage, *Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 170. On the Night of the Proms discussion in the summer of 2020, see for instance Sillito, “BBC Proms: *Rule, Britannia!* and *Land Of Hope and Glory* will Feature on Last Night”.
19. I am grateful to John Darwin for reminding me of the second use of ‘imperial’, applied to hotels – even if he personally believes that its significance is very limited.
20. On the connection between mapping and imperialism, see for instance Edelson, *The New Map of Empire*. Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa*, examines the impact of colonial heroes on British popular culture.

21. Electoral commission, “Results and turnout at the EU referendum” <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/results-and-turnout-eu-referendum>. Accessed 24 December 2022.
22. Seeley, *Expansion of England*, lecture 1.
23. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies*, 51; Gross in Seeley [1971 ed.], xii.
24. Burroughs, “John Robert Seeley and British Imperial History”.
25. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
26. Colley, *Britons*; Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*.
27. Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.
28. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?*, 240.
29. *Ibid.*, 239.
30. Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.
31. MacKenzie, *European Empires and the People*.
32. Biltcliffe, “Walter Crane and the Imperial Federation Map Showing the Extent of the British Empire (1886)”.
33. Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa*.
34. Whilst there is at present no study relating to Sir Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett (1849–1902) and empire, his papers reveal his long-standing defence of the imperial idea. See <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/bb142965-3d72-3131-b9cb-1a2f46b222ae>
35. Churchill, “War Situation”.
36. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 82.
37. I borrow the concept of the ‘empire project’ to Darwin, *The Empire Project*, who was himself inspired by Adam Smith and his statement that the British Empire ‘has hitherto been not an empire, but the project of an empire’: Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book V, chapter III.
38. Rhodes, “Confession of Faith”.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.* All spelling and grammar idiosyncrasies or errors were in the original text.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. Chamberlain, *Foreign and Colonial Speeches*, 244.
44. Thompson, *A Wider Patriotism*, 1.
45. Milner, *Nation and the Empire*, xxxviii.
46. Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 9.
47. Jacobson, “Rosebery and Liberal Imperialism,” 86.
48. Dilke, *Greater Britain*, preface.
49. Smalley, “Mr Gladstone,” 798, quoted in Peterson, “Gladstone, Religion, Politics,” 258. For a relatively old, but still pertinent, reflection on Gladstone’s views about imperialism, see Macdonald, “Gladstone and Imperialism”.
50. See for instance Thomas and Toyé, *Arguing about Empire*.
51. Seeley, *Expansion of England*, 8.
52. Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists*.
53. Lotem, *Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France*, 191–227. See also El-Enany, *Bordering Britain*.
54. Worley, “‘Stunning’ Gaffe”.
55. Fox, “Case for Free Trade”.
56. Johnson, “Foreword – Commonwealth contribution to London”.
57. Hewish, *How to Solve a Problem like a Visa*.
58. Cited in Parker, “Theresa May to offer Commonwealth post-Brexit Bonus”.

59. Saunders, “Brexit and Empire,” 1149.
60. Gaitskell, Speech at the Annual Labour Conference, 3 October 1962.
61. Darwin, “The Fear of Falling”.
62. Blair, “A Battle for Global Values”.
63. Parmar, “‘I’m Proud of the British Empire’: Why Tony Blair Backs George W. Bush”.
64. Ferguson, *Empire*, 362.
65. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, 397.
66. Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, 8 and 393.
67. The documentary series was released on Channel 4 in six one-hour episodes between January and mid-February 2003: Porter, review of *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. Although he supported Remain during the Brexit campaign, Ferguson argued, after the vote, that he had been ‘wrong’: <https://twitter.com/nfergus/status/806463421705318400?lang=en>
68. Darwin, “Afterword,” 407.
69. As of 31 August 2023, the website of the Oxford bookshop Blackwell’s lists no fewer than 480 history books under the label ‘Colonialism and Imperialism’, which of course lists only titles that are currently available new. See <https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/category/NHTQ?offset=480>
70. Gilley, “The Case for Colonialism”. The article gave rise to intense debate surrounding freedom of speech and historical accuracy, especially following its retraction by the journal that had published it. See for instance the collective statements “Our colonial history and guilt over empire” in *The Times*, 2 December 2017; “Scholars and the debate about colonial rule” in *The Times*, 8 December 2017; “Ethics and empire: an open letter from Oxford scholars” in *The Conversation*, 19 December 2017. The article also attracted a special issue in October 2017 from the Cato Institute’s online journal, entitled ‘Perspectives on Colonialism’, with essays by Sahar Khan, “Libertarians Shouldn’t Accept the Case for Colonialism,” James Stacey Taylor, “Foreign Rule and Colonial Fictions” and Berny Sèbe, “The Case Against Historical Anachronism”.
71. Biggar, “Don’t Feel Guilty about our Colonial History”.
72. The ‘Ethics and Empire’ project (<https://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/ethics-and-empire>) forms part of the activities of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics & Public Life at the University of Oxford (<https://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/>), which is supported financially by the McDonald Agape foundation ([www.mcdonaldagape.org](http://www.mcdonaldagape.org)).
73. Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, 284 & 297. For an example of reactions to Biggar’s ideas, see Lester, “The British Empire in the Culture War,” and Biggar’s own response to it, Biggar, “On Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning: A Reply to Alan Lester”.
74. Fukuyama, *End of History*.
75. Belish, *Replenishing the Earth*.
76. De Swaan, *Words of the World*.
77. These adverts, which featured a large-format picture of Plymouth (UK), were displayed in the toilets of CrossCountry train services on the Bournemouth to Manchester Piccadilly line in 2018–2020.
78. Jeanblanc, “Immigration impériale racisée postcoloniale”; Lotem, *The Memory of Colonialism in Britain and France*.
79. Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*.
80. Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge*; Roberts, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*.

81. Kenny and Pearce, “Rise of the Anglosphere”; Vucetic, *The Anglosphere*.
82. Geoghegan, “Adventures in ‘Canzuk’”.
83. Johnson, “PM Statement on AUKUS Partnership: 15 September 2021”; White House, “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS”.
84. On the results of a 2014 opinion poll about the memory of the British Empire in Britain, see Dahlgreen, “The British Empire is ‘Something to be Proud Of’”; raw opinion poll results can be found here: [http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus\\_uploads/document/6quatmbimd/Internal\\_Results\\_140725\\_Commonwealth\\_Empire-W.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/6quatmbimd/Internal_Results_140725_Commonwealth_Empire-W.pdf)  
For a general discussion of the results of a series of opinion polls about European attitudes towards their colonial past in 2019, see Smith, “How unique are British attitudes to empire?”. For the raw results of a Europe-wide poll on imperial attitudes in 2019, see <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/g9th5mtevv/YouGov%20-%20Empires%20attitudes.pdf>
85. Gildea, *Empires of the Mind*, 5.
86. Patten, *Today* Programme Interview, BBC Radio 4, 12 December 2020.
87. May, “The Government’s Negotiating Objectives for Exiting the EU: PM Speech”.
88. MacKenzie and Devine, *Scotland and the British Empire*. The very fact that the Scottish contribution to Empire has remained under-studied for so long is in itself edifying, and could explain why the ‘imperial factor’ was less powerful North of the border.
89. On the Irish contribution to the British Empire, see for instance Kenny and Pearce, “Rise of the Anglosphere”; Belich, *Replenishing the World*.
90. Bulmer-Thomas, *Internal Empire*.
91. See in particular the result of an opinion poll conducted by TNS-SOFRES for *Le Figaro*, RTL and LCI in June 2016: <https://www.youscribe.com/BookReader/Index/2742119/?documentId=2925449>. According to an IFOP poll of February 2022, 63% of respondents would be in favour of a referendum on EU membership: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-et-lorganisation-dun-referendum-sur-le-frexit/>

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## ORCID

Berny Sèbe <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7608-7793>

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