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Constructions of Europe in the run-up to the EU referendum in the UK

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Abstract

The paper reports on a focus group study on representations of Europe, conducted in England in the run-up to the UK EU referendum. Four themes were identified in the analysis: ‘cultured Europe’; ‘little Europe/global Britain’; ‘Europe as a cultural threat’; and ‘Eastern vs. Western Europe’. Analysis of these themes showed that Europe was an ambivalent identity category that could encapsulate contrary ideas such as cosmopolitanism/isolationism and cultural enrichment/undermining. Europe’s relation to Britain was also ambivalent in the data. Britain could be positioned as superior to Europe, sometimes being seen as closer to the ‘European essence’ in the context of the EU’s eastward expansion, which was seen as diluting European culture. But, Britain could also be seen as backward compared to the idea of cosmopolitan continental Europe. These different lines of argument and their ideological underpinnings are explored in the discussion of the findings.

Keywords

Brexit; European identities; EU referendum; ideological dilemmas; social representations

Euroscepticism in the UK

In the UK, the European Union is an ambivalent category. On the one hand, the UK is an EU member and has taken part in the European Union integration project. However, the

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UK has historically been an unenthusiastic member of the Union. Successive UK governments have been reluctant to engage in deeper European integration, for instance, by opting out of the single currency and the Schengen treaty. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), whose *raison d'être* has been to take the UK out of the EU, saw its popularity increase in recent years – it was the first party in the European elections of 2015 and the third party in vote share in the 2015 general election. In the same year, David Cameron, then Prime Minister, announced that his government would hold an EU ‘in/out’ referendum, confident that an ‘in’ vote would silence the Conservative Party’s Eurosceptic wing and halt UKIP’s momentum. Cameron’s plan backfired with Leave gaining 52% of the vote in the 2016 referendum over Remain’s 48%.

As this result indicates, Euroscepticism is not just a matter of party politics but also of public attitudes. Public Euroscepticism in the UK appears much more entrenched than in the rest of Europe (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015). For instance, British participants, to a very large extent, do not report that they feel European in the British Social Attitudes survey (Curtice 2016). Also, the UK population as a whole report feeling less attached to the EU compared to the EU average (European Commission 2016).

Nevertheless, Euroscepticism is not the norm across all sections of the British public. For example, younger people are substantially more pro-EU compared to older people (Bruter and Harrison 2012; Curtice 2017). Analyses of the 2016 EU referendum have also shown that the UK population is divided on the question of Europe on the basis of education, social class, and age, among other factors (Swales 2016). National identification also plays a decisive role. While strong identification with one’s nation, as measured in survey scales, is generally related with Euroscepticism, that association becomes even stronger when it comes to English national identification, as analyses of the Brexit vote have shown (Carl 2017; Henderson, Jeffery, Wincott, and Wyn Jones 2017).

Euroscepticism is rooted in Britain's imperial history. Britishness, commonly conflated with the dominant Englishness, has historically been an imperial identity (McCrone 1997). In the context of Britain's imperial decline in the second half of the twentieth century, Europe has served as the 'other' against which (Anglo-)Britishness could be re-imagined and British exceptionalism could be maintained (Gifford 2006, 2015). Euroscepticism is tied up with particular visions of Britishness that have been mobilised to re-construct the British political subject in the post-colonial era.

While Euroscepticism is part of mainstream of British politics in both the left and the right (Daddow 2013), more recently, it has been linked to a specific strand of right-wing populism, namely UKIP (Ford and Goodwin 2014). This trend towards Euroscepticism is reflected across the continent and it is particularly appealing to those voters who have been severely affected by the financial crisis (Hobolt and de Vries 2016).

A key element of this Eurosceptic discourse is intra-European immigration, particularly immigration from Eastern Europe following the 2004 and 2007 accessions. This was an important issue around which support for Brexit was mobilised (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Meleady, Seger, and Vermue 2017). Views against Eastern European migration can be said to draw on a deeply entrenched Orientalist schema (Said 1995) which positions Western Europe as the European core against the 'semi-European' and 'semi-civilised' status of Eastern Europe (Wolff 1996). In the debates around European integration and membership of the EU in the UK, this Orientalist frame has been a key ideological anchor.

Views towards Europe are therefore more complicated than the label 'Euroscepticism' might at first suggest. It is such nuances and their ideological underpinnings that this paper explores, considering in particular how European identities are constructed and related to Britishness in focus group discussions in the run-up to the EU referendum. The paper

discusses four salient themes identified in the analysis: ‘cultured Europe’; ‘little Europe/global Britain’; ‘Europe as a threat’; and ‘Eastern vs. Western Europe’. Before presenting these findings, the paper’s theoretical approach on identity and the study’s methodology are outlined.

European identities and the EU referendum

Following the Brexit vote, much has been written about the economic and political implications of Brexit (e.g., UK in a Changing Europe 2017). Comparatively little emphasis has been placed on the cultural dimensions of Brexit. Nevertheless, the EU referendum has symbolic significance that goes beyond its specific economic ramifications. The EU is not just a set of seemingly faceless institutions, but also a complex network of ideas and images which may take different forms, in different contexts and for different social and political actors (Jenkins 2008). It is suggested here that the EU referendum debates have also been debates about the meanings of Britishness, Europeanness and their relationship.

Identities have been conceptualised in multiple and often conflicting ways in the social sciences (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In this paper, identities are conceptualised through a social representations approach (Andreouli and Chrysoschoou 2015). Social representations are socially elaborated systems of lay knowledge that constitute social reality; they are ‘ways of world making’ (Moscovici 1988). They can be described as lay theories which enable people to make sense of their social world, act upon it and communicate with others. We agree with Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher (2011, 735) that “a critical aspect of social representations concerns the way we divide people into categories in the social world”, because identities can be understood as organising principles in processes of representation. That is, ‘who *we* are’ and ‘who *they* are’ are key dimensions in constructing lay knowledge about social and political issues, such as the European Union.

Identities are intertwined with social relations. Identities enable people to position and navigate themselves within a social field by addressing the questions ‘who are we?’, ‘who are they?’ and ‘what is our relationship?’ (Chrysochoou 2003). Identities do not simply describe an existing system of social categorisation. They are action-oriented symbolic resources which determine not only how people understand the groups they belong to, but also how they are mobilised to act in relation to group and intergroup dynamics. In that sense, identities can be described as political projects; they represent (versions of) the present visions of the future (Reicher 2004), shaping and being shaped by everyday ideologies (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, and Radley 1988).

In the case of UK/EU relations, the ideology of nationalism is particularly relevant. Following Billig (1995), nationalism can be understood as an everyday ideology that naturalises the nation as the ultimate form of community and the nation-state as the ultimate form of political organisation. Nationalism is reproduced in ‘banal’ and unnoticed ways, such as the waving of national flags in public buildings and the indexicalization of national categories in talk, such as ‘we’ and ‘they’, which assume a national ‘we’ against national ‘others’. Thus, nationalism goes hand in hand with an international perspective. Banal nationalism not only naturalises ‘our’ nation, but it also assumes an international system of nation-states within which ‘our’ nation is positioned.

Bozatzis (2014) has further proposed that nation talk may not only reproduce and naturalise the idea of nationhood, but also a polarised and hierarchical distinction between the West and the Rest. The world of nations, which is taken as a given in everyday talk, is structured around specific power relations which marginalise the Rest against the hegemony of the West. Banal nationalism may thus be entangled with banal Occidentalism (Andreouli, Figgou, Kadianaki, Sapountzis and Xenitidou 2017).

Taking this discussion to the context of the present study, it is suggested here that supporting Leave or Remain in the UK EU referendum was not just a choice between remaining or leaving the European Union in a ‘pragmatic’ sense. It also represented people’s views about Europe as an identity category and their visions for Britain in relation to it. These views are embedded in the current socio-political context and also draw on long-standing ideological and cultural themes.

Method

Nine focus groups with thirty-eight participants were conducted in June 2016 prior to the referendum. The focus groups were conducted across England with participants who intended to vote Remain, Leave and some undecided. Participants came from a variety of socio-economic and political backgrounds (see Table 1).

(INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

The focus group topic guide was semi-structured touching upon the meanings of Europe and the UK’s relation to it and participants’ views of the upcoming referendum. All focus groups started with a word association task with the word ‘European’, which served as stimulus for the discussion.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001). Three main themes through which Europe was constructed in the context of the referendum were identified: a politics theme (touching on issues such as sovereignty), an economy theme (touching on issues around the financial costs and benefits of the EU), and a cultural identity theme (touching more directly on cultural constructions of Europeanness and Britishness). The first two themes have been discussed elsewhere (Andreouli and Nicholson under review). This paper focuses on the theme of identity.

In a more detailed analysis of this theme four sub-themes were identified: ‘cultured Europe’; ‘little Europe/global Britain’; ‘Europe as a threat’; and ‘Eastern vs. Western Europe’. In addition to the analysis of thematic content, drawing on ideas from the ideological dilemmas tradition in social psychology (Billig et al. 1988) as well as from political psychology approaches on social representations (Elcheroth, Doise, and Reicher 2011), the analysis considered the ways in which wider cultural and ideological resources were mobilised in participants’ accounts. A micro approach (examining specific themes and argumentative threads in the focus groups) was thus combined with a more macro approach (examining the ideological resources which anchor talk about European identities in this context).

Analysis

Cultured Europe

Travelling and holidays were mentioned frequently in the focus groups particularly in relation to the initial word association task. Participants discussed European holiday destinations, the pleasant Southern European weather and the ease of travel that comes with carrying a European Union passport. In addition to these lifestyle-oriented discussions, participants referred to the rich cultural heritage of Europe, its cultural diversity and its position as the world’s intellectual centre. While these discussions were common, they tended to be brief and superficial. Participants focused instead on the political and economic dimensions of the referendum vote.

The exception to this general trend were the two London-based, young and left-leaning focus groups (FG2 and FG7 in Table 1), whose participants all intended to vote Remain. In these focus groups, European identity was constructed in terms of cultural sophistication, as the extract below illustrates.

Extract 1

Amanda: I almost feel like European is an adjective in itself, like, rather than actually, I don't know, finding other adjectives to describe it. European for me is quite - I should be writing this out - it does feel quite cultural and sophisticated in some ways, even though I know that it's obviously very diverse and multicultural and there's a lot of groundedness and kind of... it's not all sophisticated, it's rural kind of groundedness in Europe as well.

Interviewer: Yes, it's interesting, that sort of cultural-

Jenny: I put cosmopolitan, kind of arts, history, gourmet food, culture of food and fine food, and... Obviously, that's all the kind of high stuff, but it's what springs to mind initially. (FG2)

In this extract, taken from the beginning of the focus group when participants discussed the word association task, European identity is predominantly seen in terms of 'high culture'. In addition to their young age and geographical location (London), which are both associated with the Remain vote (Swales 2016), the middle-class background of these participants is important for understanding their accounts. The use of the words "sophisticated", "cosmopolitan", "arts" and "gourmet" point to a conception of a rather 'high-brow' European cultural identity, one that is more associated with the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes (Savage 2015). As has been noted by scholars of cosmopolitanism, this appears to be an 'elitist' conception of cosmopolitanism which is more relevant to the material resources and lifestyles of transnational elites (Calhoun 2002). Although 'groundedness' is also part of this representation of Europe described by Amanda above, this point remains unelaborated whilst ideas around cosmopolitanism and high culture take centre stage. In this account of Europeanness, Britishness is presented as not sufficiently cultured to be European, as the following extract from the same focus group shows:

Extract 2

Amanda: To me there is an impression of cool Europe, cool continental Europe, and British to me can sometimes equate to like, I think, maybe back a generation or two, how we might have to sit at a table with proper crockery and proper cutlery and make sure we use our proper things, and elocution lessons, and I don't know, that kind of - that, to me, is quite British, and the kind of multiculturalism that Connor was talking about, to me, in my mind, that's the experience of somebody who has come as a young person to live in London, which is a very multicultural environment and is very open-minded, but it's not the really rural British experience. The rural British experience is something that I think is much more straight and regimented - I don't know, it's got much more, it's less flexible.

(FG2)

The quote above is extracted from a wider discussion about the cultural similarities between Britain and Europe. European identity is constructed here as embracing diversity, being open-minded and flexible. This is contrasted with Britishness, which is seen as the opposite: rural, traditional and backward. Britain is presented as following the rules of civilised conduct (e.g. “proper crockery”, “proper cutlery”, “elocution lessons”), but this focus on traditional norms makes it outdated and ‘uncool’. It could be argued that Amanda’s emphasis on respectability and age-old traditions echoes a rather aristocratic understanding of Britishness. But while this could perhaps be seen by others as a source of national pride, in Amanda’s account it is presented as being at odds with contemporary norms of cultural sophistication. These norms are encapsulated in “cool continental Europe”, and Britain, particularly its rural parts, is positioned outside Europe’s cultural core.

Parallels can be drawn between this ‘modern Europe/traditional Britain’ schema and an Orientalist representation of Europe that differentiates between a developed European core and an inferior periphery (see also fourth theme below). Within this Orientalist framework, the European core is epitomised in Western Europe and it is juxtaposed to Eastern Europe

and other ‘peripheral’ European countries (Andreouli et al. 2017; Andreouli and Howarth 2018). In the extract above, Britain is not Orientalised, as it is still presented as civilised and ‘proper’. But Amanda’s account presents a reconfiguration of the European cultural core/periphery schema. This schema is cast here not in terms of an Orientalist West/East distinction but in terms of a metropolitan/rural distinction. London is associated with youth, multiculturalism, open-mindedness and Europeanness. On the other hand, (rural) Britain is seen as traditional and outdated, being at odds with European values of openness.

The idea that Britain is not sufficiently cultured compared to Europe relates to the notion of ‘little England’, which was often used by participants intending to vote Remain to delegitimise support for Brexit (Andreouli and Nicholson under review). The extract below illustrates the stark contrast, constructed by participants of another left-leaning, Remain and London-based focus group, between the image of cultured Europe against the narrowness of Brexit:

Extract 3

Interviewer: And how about you, Mel? Would it [Brexit] affect you personally?

Mel: It’s so hard to tell, isn’t it, on a day to day basis? It’s like you get a new government in power, it doesn’t really feel like it affects you. But yeah, I think the same thing. I think, you know, we go to Europe at least once a year every year. I think it would be sad. I think it would be sad to feel that we weren’t part of something bigger. And, you know, like [the interviewer] was saying with the collaborations. We, not that I ever go to the theatre and cinema any more, but I will do at some point. We really love watching foreign films and seeing foreign plays, and I don’t, yeah, I wonder if it’ll be harder to do all that.

Jean: I feel a bit embarrassed as well, like from a world point of view. I think I feel a bit like, great, we’ve said to the world we just want to shut ourselves off and be a little island. (FG7)

Here, Mel is discussing the impact of a potential Brexit vote for her everyday life. While she does not feel affected by domestic politics, being part of the European Union appears to be more personally relevant and affectively charged (“I think it would be sad”). Being part of the EU resonates with Mel’s cosmopolitan vision for Britain, which she describes as “being part of something bigger”. Similarly, Jean argues that she would feel embarrassed if Britain voted for Brexit, because this would say “to the world we just want to shut ourselves off and be a little island”. Brexit, in other words, would leave Britain without cosmopolitan identity credentials. As in the previous two extracts, the version of European cosmopolitanism constructed in this account is intimately connected with particular forms of cultural consumption. Being part of the EU stands for collaboration and engagement with cultural diversity, particularly in the arts, which speaks more to the cultural tastes and lifestyles of higher social classes.

The theme of cultured Europe presented in this section resonates with other Brexit analyses which have suggested that Remain is associated with a more cosmopolitan and liberal outlook whereas Leave is associated with a more communitarian outlook (e.g. Ford and Goodwin 2017), which also maps on to a distinction between globalisation ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (Hobolt 2016). This cosmopolitan/communitarian scheme can explain to an extent the changing political cleavages of the Brexit landscape, but it does not fully capture the complexity of the meanings attached to these concepts. As the next section shows, the meanings of the categories ‘local’ and ‘global’ cannot be taken as given because they are actively constructed and negotiated in debates around Britain and the EU.

Little Europe/Global Britain

Contrary to the previous theme, an image of ‘Little Europe’ emerged in some discussions among participants intending to vote Leave. Responding to popular arguments at

the time that exiting the EU would leave the UK vulnerable within the global economy, participants argued that Britain can ‘go it alone’. This view was particularly salient in two Leave-supporting focus groups conducted in Hertfordshire (FG5 and FG6). This perspective transpired a sense of faith in Britain as a world leading economy and seemed to echo a rather imperial view of British greatness, which, as argued in the introduction, has served as an ideological anchor for contemporary manifestations of Euroscepticism in Britain, England in particular (Gifford 2006, 2015). The quote below comes from a focus group with UKIP supporters where the participants, all intending to vote Leave, argue that Britain would remain one of the main financial markets. outside the EU

Extract 4

Interviewer: So, you think we should come out, all of you. So, what are the main reasons?

Josh: Economically I think we’re going to be better off.

Tim: We’re not going to be giving. That money we’re giving to the EU, we’d still be £160 million a week better off. And we can still pay all the subsidies that they currently pay to us, and we still wouldn’t be paying all the rest of-

Dan: Every country will want to negotiate with [the UK]. Brazil haven’t got a trade agreement with us, and while they’re struggling with the Olympics, they’re still an up-and-coming country.

Interviewer: Do you think we could be swallowed up by America, then?

Tim: No.

Dan: No.

Josh: Not in a million years.

Tim: No, we’ve got our own. As much as what they say about the financial markets, we’ve got the main one.

[...]

Tim: But we'll never not be one of the main financial markets. We've got the pound and the dollar are the two main trading things. We've got one of the oldest trading- and the thing is, they went on about all of the banking stuff, and then they said "well we'll fine them and take away their bonuses". And they all said, "Oh yeah, we'll all move to Switzerland or Hong Kong". None of them have gone. They're all still here. All still carrying on, same as they always were. I don't think they'll ever change because they've got the best people, and they've got the best way of doing it. (FG5)

In this extract, participants stress the economic benefits of Brexit and present Britain as a world leading economy, on a par with the USA. Participants appear confident that Britain's position as a financial centre cannot be jeopardised by Brexit because of its significance for global economy. This argument is made emphatically through the use of strong wording (e.g. "best people", "best way of doing it") and extreme case formulations ("not in a million years"). In this account, contrary to the previous theme, Brexit Britain is presented as a 'global player' that can be independent and able to collaborate on its own terms with non-European countries, such as Brazil.

One could assume that this idea of a global and potent Britain might be a minority view being associated only, or predominantly, with right-wing political orientations. Indeed, analyses of the Brexit vote suggest that Leave voters tend to be more right-wing and authoritarian than libertarian (Raines, Goodwin, and Cutts 2017; Swales 2016). However, in these data, this view was also found among left-leaning participants, who are traditionally considered more libertarian in their politics, suggesting that either/or ideological dichotomies fail to account for the complexity of everyday political reasoning. The extract below comes from a Labour-supporting focus group whose participants intended to vote Leave. This focus group can be said to represent to some extent a 'Lexit' (i.e. left exit from the EU) perspective, which was relatively underreported in the run-up to the referendum. This is a particularly

interesting perspective as it unsettles the ‘easy’ distinction between a left-wing Remain camp and a right-wing Leave camp. The extract comes from the beginning of the focus group when participants discuss the association task with the word ‘European’.

Extract 5

Jim: You know, trading between the Americans, Europe, you know, all over the world. I don't see it being an issue, it opens UK up to other countries what we can trade to instead of being stuck in Europe.

Interviewer: So, you think being in the EU we're being stuck with-

Jim: Yeah, I think we're being held back, you know, because of Brussels we have to have permission to do- to be told what to do.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

Jim: You know but you can trade with other people. (FG6)

Here, the EU is not only seen as a barrier to the economic success of the UK because it is financially costly, but also because it keeps the UK confined within the European Union and prevents it from engaging with the broader world (“being stuck in Europe”). Britain is portrayed as bigger than Europe, and “Brussels”, objectifying here the EU institutional structure and bureaucracy, is seen as holding Britain back by telling it what to do. As was noted in the introduction, this perspective towards the EU can be said to rest on a broader vision of post-imperial Britishness whose key element is British exceptionalism defined through opposition to Europe and the EU. Another point to note is that this finding challenges a clean-cut dichotomy between nationalism and internationalism (see Billig 1995). In the extract above, a seemingly nation-centred argument (leaving the EU and enhancing national sovereignty) is meshed together with a more internationalist framework of being open to the world outside Europe.

Europe as a cultural threat

The theme Europe as a cultural threat was more salient among Leave-supporting participants. In contrast to the first theme of ‘cultured Europe’, in this theme, the relationship between Britain and Europe was constructed as antagonistic and the two identities as incommensurable. The extract below comes from a mixed focus group in the context of a discussion about the economic risks of Brexit. Gina, who intended to vote Remain, recounts a story which illustrates her dilemma about staying in (as the sensible decision) or leaving the EU (as the emotional decision).

Extract 6

Gina: For me, if the pound decreases against the Euro, that’ll have a massive effect on us because of having a mortgage in Spain as well. Like I said to you before, my heart says get out. But up here [pointing to her head] is saying vote to stay in [...] And this is what made me think about getting out. There’s a little old, well, I say a little old lady, she’s probably about seventy-five. And my hairdresser had been talking to me about it and she turns, this lady who’s sat next to me, and I said, “Mrs whatever-your-name-is, what do you think?” And she went, “I sent my vote off weeks ago”. So, the hairdresser went, “are you going to tell us what then, what did you vote?”. She went, “120 per cent out”.

Scott: Well of course she would.

Gina: And what she said [was] “my father and my grandfather didn’t fight in two world worlds” [...] And she said that they didn’t fight for this country to now, to be get told by bloody Germany, she went “to be told by bloody Germany what we should and what we shouldn’t do”. And she said, “I’m British, proud of it and I do not want to be a bloody European”. And I just- It was when she said about her dad, and I just thought, do you know what, I think she’s right.

Interviewer: It touched your heart?

Gina: Yeah, it did. And I don't want to be a European. We're British and I think we're a great country, I think it could be better. But I do think we are- I would never want to live anywhere else in the world. (FG3)

Gina and Scott both stated that they intended to vote Remain. However, support for Remain in Gina's account appears half-hearted. In her talk and non-verbal signs (i.e. pointing to her head), Gina makes a distinction between emotion ('the heart') and reason ('the head'). For Gina, it is rational to stay in the EU, as this would protect her financial interests in Spain, but, emotionally, she would rather leave the EU. This becomes evident in Gina's recounting of her encounter with an older woman who is presented as an ardent supporter of Leave ("120 per cent out"), because this would release Britain from Germany's hegemonic influence. This woman is presented as resenting German hegemony in Europe ("to be told by bloody Germany what we should and what we shouldn't do"), and Gina appears to have respect for and agree with this view ("I just thought, do you know what, I think she's right"). Here, voting Leave is presented as a patriotic duty that stems out of national pride for Britain's role in the two world wars as well as out of respect for those who fought in the wars against Germany. As in the previous theme, in this extract too, a sense of nostalgia towards past greatness is evident. The European Union symbolises German domination and the fading of Britain's global power.

The extract below from a focus group with Leave supporters continues on this theme of European threat, but this time the threat is more explicitly related to Britain's cultural heritage.

Extract 7

Tim: I dislike all their little laws on this and how their court is the ultimate thing, where I think that our High Court should be

Interviewer: Like the Court of Human Rights?

Tim: Yeah. And you know, you get the odd-

Josh: And straight banana and straight cucumbers and silly things like this.

Tim: Yeah. We've got to have this like that. Everything's got to be measured in kilos now down in the butchers. And yet we all go, if we all said to each other, "what do you weigh?", and we went, "such-and-such kilos" they'd go, "what's that in English?". And if I went, "twelve stone," they'd go, "right, yeah, lovely, I know exactly what you mean".

Interviewer: It's funny, I can't do it in kilos either, I haven't got a clue.

Tim: It's like if you put everything in kilometres, you're kind of like, "what are you talking about? How many miles is it?" You know, because you've got an idea of distance.

Dan: That's more like decimalisation.

Tim: But then they had the thing where we had to fight tooth and nail two years ago to keep our pint in the pub.

Interviewer: Oh really, was that a challenge? Did you really do that?

Tim: Yeah, there was a challenge for that.

Josh: They were trying to push it to be this-

Tim: And I don't like that because these are the traditional things of England or Great Britain, you know, they're just gradually eroding it away. (FG5)

The extract starts with Tim and Josh arguing against the power of EU legislation and the European Court of Justice (mistakenly referred to as the European Court of Human Rights, which is not an EU court). Britain is not seen here as part of the EU; rather the EU is seen as an 'other' (for example, the ECJ is referred to as "their court"). European authority is not only challenged because it limits Britain's political and legislative sovereignty. What appears more important are the symbolic implications of this. The participants express contempt for the EU for creating "silly laws" for "straight banana" and "straight cucumbers". This constructs an image of the EU as a non-serious institution, which nevertheless expects Britain to abide by its regulations. For these participants, the influence of European

regulations, for example being forced to adopt the European metric system, has a detrimental effect on British cultural tradition. The absurdity of the EU and the level of the cultural damage it inflicts on Britain (equated with England here) are further highlighted through reference to the pint, an ‘imperial’ unit of volume originating, in line with an imperial view of Britishness as in the previous theme. Symbolising the supposedly quintessential British habit of going to the pub, the pint is presented as having been under threat by the EU. With an extreme case formulation (“we had to fight tooth and nail”), Tim both stresses the severity of this European cultural threat and highlights British resilience against it.

Eastern vs. Western Europe

Concerns over European freedom of movement were more pronounced among Leave-supporting participants in the data, in accordance with survey research showing links between anti-immigration views and support for Brexit (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Meleady, Seger, and Vermue 2017). However, a broader scepticism towards immigration was commonplace across the data, and, in such discussions, participants, intending to vote both Leave and Remain, often drew a distinction between Eastern and Western Europe. In an interesting reversal of the first theme of ‘cultured Europe’, in this theme of ‘Eastern vs. Western Europe’ Britain is positioned securely within the cultural ‘core’ of Europe. Echoing Orientalist discourses, this theme constructs a two-tiered Europe of a more developed West and a more backward East.

A line of argument in this theme was that the UK contributes more than it receives from the EU, compared to the less economically powerful countries of the South and the East. A complementary argument was that EU development efforts in these countries often go to waste because they are disorganised, mismanaged and corrupt. This point is made in the extract below from a Remain focus group.

Extract 8

Rob: In places in the former Soviet Union that have joined the European Community and further East, you know, there were none of those regulations, and Europe has brought those in place and accelerated their move towards better stewardship of the planet, people's rights, and everything else.

Leslie: The only faint snag I see sometimes: once countries get EU funding, they suddenly build motorways through environmentally sensitive areas, and things like that, which –

Nick: Yeah, they try and get the infrastructure, you know, so much money goes in to improve-

Linda: At the cost of other things.

Leslie: At the cost of the environment, you know. Ploughing up fantastic old forests –

Linda: Yeah, yeah.

Rob: I think Ireland's a good example.

Nick: The Greeks have done a lot of that, I think.

Leslie: Yeah, we've seen lots of projects in Greece, haven't we? If it helps, sometimes you just wonder. (FG1)

In the extract above, an image of European periphery is constructed, made up of Eastern European countries of the former Soviet Union, but also other European countries, such as Ireland and Greece. These different countries are grouped together into a single category, despite being geographically dispersed and having different historical and cultural backgrounds. What unites them in this account is that they are countries of the European periphery, in terms of their economic and political power, compared to a supposed European core which is not mentioned but alluded to in this extract. This 'other' Europe is seen as less developed and in need of being brought up to speed in terms of environmental issues and

people's rights. Participants also argue that development efforts led by the EU are often misused at the expense of the environment, suggesting that these countries are somewhat immature and unable to see beyond short term development goals. Ultimately, the value of these development projects is questionable ("If it helps, sometimes you just wonder").

In the extract below, from a mixed focus group, Bulgaria, an Eastern European country that joined the EU in 2007, is discussed:

Extract 9

Interviewer: And what sort of countries do you go to?

Scott: France and Spain mainly.

Gina: Italy.

Nick: Italy, yeah.

Scott: I think that you'd feel completely comfortable to go to almost any of the European countries, maybe not the Eastern ones necessarily, but without even a second thought of your safety [...]

Nicole: I don't know, I don't even want to go to, like, Bulgaria or anywhere like that.

Scott: Neither do I, but I'm not scared of it.

Nicole: Well, yeah, I know, but I don't know.

Sam: I wouldn't want to go to Tunisia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Egypt. I wouldn't go to any of them.

Nicole: Turkey, Serbia, and all them countries that are coming in, I would not- I don't think they're the same as us.

Julie: Well, Turkey's not that (overspeaking)

Nick: But the thing is, actually, what happened on the beach, was that Tunisia?

Gina: Yeah, Tunisia.

Nick: Actually, that odd thing now is the safest place to go for me.

Gina: Egypt again, as well.

Nick: I think Europe used to be a lot safer, I think it's a bit more high-alert now.

Nicole: I think Europe's expanded past what is anywhere near like the morals of England. I think that's what it is. Like there's areas where your morals, it may come down to religion, but people don't really need religion for morals. But there's a certain standard of appreciation for life, because we're educated, but I think that Europe has now gone past that to areas that are so, maybe poor, you know, that they actually aren't so educated. And I think that makes it a bit scary. Those sorts of places, they don't think like us. (FG3)

In this extract, participants discuss European holidays. France, Italy and Spain are initially mentioned as holiday destinations and Scott argues that he would be comfortable to travel to almost any European country, with the possible exception of Eastern countries. Nicole picks up this point and mentions Bulgaria. Contrary to Italy, Spain and France, Bulgaria is not seen here as an attractive holiday destination. The mention of Bulgaria changes the tone of the conversation: from a light-hearted discussion about travel, the conversation turns to security issues. Bulgaria is lumped together by Sam and Nicole with Tunisia, Turkey, Egypt and Serbia as countries that have come dangerously close to Europe (echoing one of the Leave campaign's arguments that Turkey might soon join the EU) and that are culturally different and unsafe ("I don't think they're the same as us"). Although Scott ("but I'm not scared of it") and Julie ("Turkey's not that") raise objections, the rest of the group, particularly Sam, Nicole and Nick, appear to agree that there are security threats coming from these countries. In the end of the extract, presumably referring to the most recent Eastern European accessions, Nicole suggests that the expansion of the EU has made Europe inferior to English morals and levels of education ("I think Europe's expanded past what is anywhere near like the morals of England"). This suggests that while England and Europe may have been similar in the past, European enlargement has corrupted the moral and cultural essence of Europe, thus magnifying the cleavage between England and Europe.

Discussion

Seeking to explore the complexity of views towards the EU in the specific context of the in/out referendum of June 2016, this paper reported on focus groups with participants from a range of socio-political backgrounds in the few weeks prior to the referendum. Using a social representations approach which sees identities as symbolic resources through which people co-construct and navigate their social world, it examined constructions of Europeanness as a cultural identity and its relation to Britishness. Taken as a whole, the findings illustrate the semantic complexity of values of national pride and cosmopolitan openness and their complex intermingling with other ideological themes such as imperialism and Orientalism in constructions of Europeanness and Britishness.

More specifically, the analysis indicated four main themes in how Europeanness is represented in this specific context. A theme of ‘cultured Europe’ was prominent in the Remain, younger and metropolitan focus groups. This reflected to an extent these participants’ middle class positions which are associated with more ‘cosmopolitan’ cultural tastes. In this theme, and very much in contrast with the commonplace idea of British exceptionalism against Europe, Europe was represented as culturally superior to Britain. Britain’s conservatism and traditionalism were juxtaposed to the cosmopolitanism and openness of continental Europe. On the contrary, a theme of ‘little Europe/global Britain’ was present in the accounts of some participants intending to vote Leave. In this case, Europe was seen as restricting Britain’s relations with the rest of the world, and Brexit was seen as a way of engaging with the world rather than a sign of nationalism. This is an interesting finding given how strongly Brexit has been associated with nationalism and xenophobia (e.g. Khalili 2017). It highlights the ideological complexity of everyday political thinking and the inability of either/or dichotomies (e.g. left/right; nationalism/cosmopolitanism) to account for this complexity.

Moreover, the meanings of cosmopolitanism and nationalism were not fixed in the focus groups. On the one hand, cosmopolitanism could be associated with a non-British ‘cultured’ Europe, positioning Britain in the margins of the European cultural core. On the other hand, in other Leave-supporting accounts that were nostalgic of Britain’s imperial past, Europe could be constructed as restricting Britain’s global aspirations. Similarly, in the theme of Europe as ‘cultural threat’, more prominent among Leave voters but not exclusively, Europe was represented as threatening Britain’s national cultural heritage and its place as a global power. As shown in the introduction, these accounts can be understood as resting on a vision of post-imperial Britishness whose key element is British exceptionalism against the EU as Britain’s ‘other’.

In the fourth theme of the ‘Eastern vs. Western Europe’, found in both Leave and Remain supporting accounts, Europe was represented through Orientalist lenses as a hierarchical entity. Within it, the West of Europe, including the UK, was placed at the core, while countries in the East and the South were positioned at the margins of European culture. This can be understood as an instance of ‘banal Occidentalism’ (Bozatzis 2014), which reifies and justifies power differentials between a ‘European West’ and a ‘European Rest’. However, as noted above, this Oriental/Occidental distinction was not always relevant, particularly among the more pro-European and metropolitan focus group participants. In these focus groups, Britain’s cosmopolitan and European identity credentials were seen as being contingent on maintaining its links with the EU. Severing these links in a Brexit scenario would (dis)place Britain in the margins of Europe. Contrary to the pride and nostalgia towards Britain’s past and its history as an imperial power, found in more Eurosceptic accounts as in the themes of ‘little Europe/Global Britain’ and ‘Europe as cultural threat’, Britain in this scenario could become the source of shame.

Overall, these findings illustrate the multiple and complex meanings that European identities take in the context of debates around EU membership and their complex relationship with Britishness. In the politically turbulent era of Brexit, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of people's visions about what Britain and Europe stand for. The ways that these identity projects may form, clash and develop will be consequential in shaping future British and European politics.

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Table 1. Participants' table

Focus group	No of participants	Gender	Socio-Economic Status	Age	Location	Political party support	Voting intention
1	4	2F; 2M	B	50-60	Cumbria	Liberal Democrat	Remain
2	4	2F; 2M	A/B	30-40	London	Green; Labour	Remain
3	6	3F; 3M	B/C	30-45	Kent	Conservative	3 Remain; 2 Leave; 1 Undecided
4	2	2F	A	40-60	London	Conservative	Remain
5	4	3M	C/ D	40-50	Hertfords hire	UKIP	Leave
6	3	2F; 1M	C/D	30-40	Hertfords hire	Labour	Leave
7	3	3F	B	30-40	London	Labour	Remain
8	6	6M	C/D	30-55	London	Conservative ; Labour	2 Remain; 2 Leave; 2 Undecided
9	6	4F; 2M	B/C	40-70	Hampshire	Conservative	3 Remain; 2 Leave; 1 Undecided