Brexit, Europe and othering

Arno Van Der Zwet, Murray Stewart Leith, Duncan Sim & Elizabeth Boyle

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ABSTRACT
The UK has seen, within recent years, a noticeable increase in Euroscepticism, culminating in the vote to leave the European Union altogether. Although there were many reasons for the Brexit vote, the UK, in common with some other EU countries, had become increasingly concerned about rising levels of immigration, particularly from within the EU. This has led to an increase in a process of Othering those of a different background, nationality or religion, and ultimately the EU itself. This article seeks to explore aspects of Othering of the EU in the UK, partly in the light of the Brexit vote. It focuses on the role of the media and political elites in this process. The article draws from secondary sources and sets out a research agenda based on seeking to understand the Othering process of the EU, within the UK that requires further empirical research.

Introduction
The UK’s vote to leave the European Union was the culmination of decades of British Euroscepticism, at both the elite and citizen levels. Indeed, it stirred deep-seated and entrenched attitudes and emotions that underlie group identity with respect to the EU (Spiering, 2015). And yet, this was not always the case; the first European referendum in 1975 produced a 67% vote in favour of remaining a member of what was then the European Economic Community (EEC). The shift in public attitudes between 1975 and 2016 was, therefore, remarkable.

Rather than viewing Brexit as a mono-causal event, researchers have suggested that many variables including age, social class, postcode, educational level and political allegiance (partially) explain why UK voters voted for Brexit (Bailey & Budd, 2019). However, it is argued here that a crucial element within that explanation lies in the concept of Othering and the belief that ‘Europe’ – and European migrants to the UK in particular – represented an ‘other’ which was somehow alien to the UK, its history, culture and values. Othering refers to the process of labelling and defining those who we perceive to be in a different group as somehow ‘deviant’ (Tong & Zuo, 2018) and this process underlies many modern violent, but also non-violent, conflicts. The purpose of this article is to further understand how the concept of Othering relates to the 2016 Brexit result and how it might help to explain it.

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CONTACT
Arno Van Der Zwet arno.van-der-zwet@uws.ac.uk
The article identifies an opportunity to further pursue a research agenda based on the concept of othering, which would allow us to explore in more detail what has driven the othering processes of the EU, within the UK. We identify five key drivers of this process. The first is the historical baggage with which the UK is burdened. Many appear to resent their country’s shift from being an imperial power to a member state of the EU, ‘ruled’ by Brussels. Menon and Wager (2020) refer to this as ‘postcolonial melancholy’. Second, there are the socio-economic pressures being felt in certain parts of the UK. When unemployment levels are low, there is no real evidence that EU migrants are taking ‘British’ jobs. But in an environment where employment for many people is less secure than it once was and many are on ‘zero hours contracts’, for example, it is easy to blame immigrants for the situation. Third, there is the question of identity. Many Europeans hold to multi-layered identities, but for many UK citizens, it seems to have become increasingly difficult to combine a British identity with a European one, to an extent not seen elsewhere in Europe. Fourth, the rhetoric used by the political elite has been hugely significant, particularly from right-wing populist parties like UKIP, but also longer term scapegoating of the EU and its policies by mainstream parties has impacted on othering process. Crucially, the long-term impacts of othering processes have been felt differently across the UK. For example, in Scotland, a very different political rhetoric resulted in every single local authority area voting to remain in 2016. There seems little doubt that a Eurosceptic othering of the EU was significant in boosting the Leave vote. Finally, the influence of both social and print media has been important, with much of the tabloid press, for example, adopting an increasingly Eurosceptic stance over the years.

Our analysis explores the issue of othering through a structured use of secondary sources. We use the five drivers which we have identified above to focus our discussion.

**The UK’s historical baggage**

For the UK, the reasons for the emergence of Europe as its other are historically complicated, illustrated by the famous remark by American Secretary of State Dean Acheson in the 1950s, that Great Britain had lost an empire but not yet found a role. Indeed, until as late as the 1950s, Britain’s European and Empire identity could be united in its global superpower status and its commitments to free trade (Davies 1999 cited in Bailey & Budd, 2019, p. 158).

The UK did not immediately join the newly established European Economic Community (EEC) and its attitudes were summed up by Churchill in 1953. While supporting post-war European integration, he did not necessarily see Britain as being part of it, declaring:

> Where do we stand? We are not members of the European Defence Community, nor do we intend to be merged in a Federal European system. We feel we have a special relationship to both. This can be expressed by prepositions, by the preposition ‘with’ but not ‘of’ – we are with them, but not of them. We have our own Commonwealth and Empire. (quoted in Risse, 2003, p. 500)

Maccaferri (2017) argues that the UK’s delayed membership of the European project together with the difficulties of joining was a missed opportunity which led to some bitterness within government circles, as the EEC was seen to be a more successful political
and economic venture than the Commonwealth. In addition, there was perhaps a feeling that, in joining the EEC, the UK was giving up a global role and also ‘giving up on a separation that has, to some extent, spared Britain some of the instability experienced elsewhere in Europe’ (Oliver, 2015, p. 413).

For Hirsch (2018, p. 270), there are other historical and geographical reasons for British ambivalence:

> There is the geography of being an island. There is the peculiarity of a royal family that is European but has rebranded itself as British since time immemorial, and whose legitimacy has long derived from its own Church, severed from the Catholic Church in Rome. There is the suspicion that the EU is really about the Germans and the French.

Hirsch goes on to quote Dixon’s (2016) observation that, in 1940, the UK still ruled over 25% of the world’s land area from London. It was difficult, therefore, for the country to accept being ‘ruled’ from Brussels. Other European nations gave up their empires without obviously maintaining such an imperial mindset but, in the UK, the process appears to have been difficult. Following the Brexit result, government policy appeared to favour some kind of ‘global Britain’, in which the UK would forge a new relationship with the Commonwealth as a kind of ‘Empire 2.0’, suggesting that the imperial mindset was still very much alive (Turner, 2019).

**Immigration and jobs**

Researchers seeking to explain the 2016 EU referendum result generally agree that, for Leavers, ‘sovereignty and autonomy emerged as the single most important consideration, permitting immigration to be controlled. Few saw economic advantage in leaving’ (Coleman, 2016, p. 686; see also Menon & Wager, 2020). Thus, perceived high levels of immigration appear to be a key factor in explaining the vote and migrants to the UK have emerged as a significant other in political debate (Bailey & Budd, 2019). The othering of European migrants is demonstrated by the fact that according to around three-fifths of British people, EU migrants should be treated no differently from prospective migrants from other parts of the world when it comes to immigration rules (BSA, 2019). In short, European migrants are, for many, as much ‘others’ as those from other parts of the world.

During most of the post-war period, a great deal of this othering was directed at migrants from Commonwealth countries in South Asia and the Caribbean ‘Windrush generation’ (Phillips & Phillips, 1998). The Britain in which they arrived was frequently hostile to black migrants and there are accounts of racist incidents concerning these ‘dark strangers’ (Patterson, 1963), leading eventually to Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968. But by the late twentieth century, these groups had become settled in the UK and othering was increasingly directed instead at refugees and asylum seekers (Lynn & Lea, 2003). As many of these had come to the UK from Muslim countries, this gave rise to substantial Islamophobia and, as some had travelled from non-Commonwealth countries, they were thought to have little connection to the UK or to British life and culture.

At the same time, the European Single Market introduced freedom of movement for workers across the EU and there was a growing othering of EU migrants within the UK, often encouraged by stories that stigmatised them (sometimes concocted) in the right-wing media (Legrain, 2006). The roots of the UK’s raised levels of immigration actually
lie in the decision taken by the Blair government in 2004 to allow workers from the east European accession countries unrestricted entry to work in the UK; only Ireland and Sweden similarly allowed unrestricted access. By 2013, 1.24 million people born in Eastern Europe lived in the UK, compared to 170,000 in 2004 (Coleman, 2016). Although the figure may appear high, net migration to the UK was actually much lower than in Germany, Spain and France, because the UK had a fairly high emigration rate to other EU countries (Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2017). But what appears to have sparked electoral concerns about immigration was the rate of change, rather than the absolute numbers and the UK can now be considered one of the most divided countries when it comes to the issue of economic immigration (BSA, 2016). Many migrants took jobs in agriculture and food processing in rural areas with little previous experience of immigration. Support for leaving the EU was stronger in those areas, ‘underscoring how relatively sudden demographic shifts can trigger significant political reaction among voters’ (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). However, the MP David Lammy spent part of his childhood in Peterborough and suggests:

It’s not all about migration, religion, the internet or cultural changes. Rather it’s the quantity of factors happening simultaneously, and the speed at which people are expected to adjust. Diversity, immigration and technological progress can be hugely positive, but … people get defensive and threatened. (Lammy, 2020, p. 58)

This is clearly an area where further social science research is needed, to explore the interaction between immigration and other factors.

During the referendum campaign, there were some complaints about EU migrant workers taking ‘British’ jobs. In March 2020, prior to the Covid-19 lockdown, the UK unemployment rate of 3.9% was the lowest since the 1970s and so the argument that British workers have been prevented by migrants from gaining access to employment is not a convincing one. Indeed, there is a broad consensus within the literature that the presence of immigrants in the labour force has had a marginal effect on indigenous wages and employment (Arnorsson & Zoega, 2016) and they have had a positive effect on the economy (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014). That said, employment for many in the UK has been more precarious since the financial crisis of 2008 with a number of individuals on zero hours contracts and this has led to them being described as the ‘left behind’ (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). It is important, however, not to overstate the numbers involved and Dorling (2016) points out that only 24% of Leave voters came from the D and E class as defined by the Office of National Statistics. Nevertheless, the fact that most of the migrants entering the UK during this period were from the EU served to confirm ‘Europe’ as the UK’s other.

In fact, the UK has been somewhat polarised in its attitude to migrants. Although the movement of migrants into the country has created a very multi-cultural society, not everyone appears comfortable with this. Hence:

One view accuses migrants in general – and EU migrants in particular – of being free-riders and taking job opportunities and social benefits away from locals. The other view, which is pragmatic and instrumental, sees them bringing economic benefits and helping to relieve social burdens caused by the aging population in Britain. (Tong & Zuo, 2018, p. 4)

It is also important to reiterate the very significant differences of opinion across the UK. We have already noted that Scotland voted overwhelmingly, by 63–37%, to remain in
the EU and, while there were some public concerns about immigration as in the rest of the UK, it did not emerge as a major political issue. The rhetoric across all political parties in Scotland has been to recognise that, with a relatively slow-growing and ageing population, the country has benefited from immigrants of working age to boost the economy. The Scottish government has therefore argued strongly that responsibility for migration should be devolved from Westminster rather than the UK government adopting a ‘one size fits all’ policy for the whole of the UK (Griffith & Morris, 2017).

Arguably, the hostility towards migrants from the EU was seen throughout the referendum campaign. There was a clear denial of their voice or scope for active citizenship through voting rights (Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly, & McMellon, 2018), while the nadir of the whole campaign came with the unveiling by UKIP leader Nigel Farage of a poster entitled ‘Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all’. The poster depicted a line of non-white (mostly Syrian) refugees crossing the border between Croatia and Slovenia but was used as part of an ongoing campaign against migration from existing EU countries. It was a clear exploitation of a refugee crisis in a dishonest way and was reported to the police for inciting racial hatred, but once disseminated, it remained a powerful image (Looney, 2017). Moreover, after the vote itself, there was evidence of growing racism which extended beyond that of the most vulnerable communities: ‘Now white Europeans realised they were “immigrants” too – French bankers, Italian architects and Portuguese beauticians suddenly felt vulnerable’ (Hirsch, 2018, p. 275).

The Brexit campaign used the word ‘Europe’ to mean many things – the EU itself and its regulatory framework, migration from EU countries, the role of the European Court of Justice and so on. But the implication was clear – Europe was the UK’s (and particularly England’s) other and the country would be better off outside it.

The question of identity

It is generally accepted that our sense of identity, or of belonging, is inextricably linked with the places where we were born or where we live, and these are usually our neighbourhood, our town, our region or our nation (Carey, 2002). Most analyses of national identity acknowledge the work of Anderson (1983) in seeking to pin down what we mean by the nation and how, for most of us, it is an ‘imagined community’, because no member of that nation will ever know most of his or her fellow members. Taking this further, De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) suggest that our understanding of national identity rests on certain assumptions. First, as Anderson notes, they are imagined political communities. Second, the notion of identity is produced and reproduced through discourse, by language and other semiotic systems. Third, and drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (Lizardo, 2004), that identity is a complex of common ideas, concepts or perceptions; these perceptions are formed in large part through schools and education systems. Fourth, they argue that the construction of national identities goes hand in hand with the construction of difference – from others who do not belong. And fifth, that there may not exist a single national identity and, therefore, they will change and vary over time.

The construction of difference referred to above means that there are those who do not belong and who may be seen as ‘them’ – or perhaps as an ‘out-group’, as opposed to ‘us’ who are the ‘in-group’ (Mamadouh & Bialasiewicz, 2016). National identity,
therefore, involves a distinction between “us, the nation”, having a unique, common historical destiny, and “them, the foreigners”, from which we identify ourselves as different (Simonsen, 2004, p. 357). These foreigners become our ‘Significant Others’ that have historically influenced the construction of our own national identity, perhaps through their threatening presence or because of cultural differences.

Within the field of social anthropology, there has long been interest in the ways in which boundaries between groups are expressed, the classic work being that of Barth (1969). Groups ascribe different identities to members of their own and other groups, and members of those other groups may be viewed as ‘strangers’. Such boundaries may lead to ethnic-based nationalisms and antagonisms. McCrone (1998, p. 184) has noted that ‘nationalism grows best in a medium in which there is an Other – an enemy or rival against which we can measure and develop our identity’.

Of course, others may exist within as well as outside a nation and there is considerable evidence of the ways in which internal minorities have been othered. Some groups of people may be seen as a threat to societal values and interests and a ‘moral panic’ emerges – an act of othering through a process of labelling and defining the others as deviant (Tong & Zuo, 2018). Minorities who have been othered in this way may include foreign nationals, religious or ethnic minorities, refugees or homosexuals. Others do not necessarily have to be either inimical or external; the key is difference rather than enmity (Wintle, 2016).

We also acknowledge that individuals may hold to more than one identity. We have already referred to the ways in which our sense of belonging may refer to our neighbourhood, our region or our nation and Bruter (2005) sees these ‘layers’ of identity as a series of concentric rings, moving out from the individual at the centre, through locality, region and country to Europe and beyond. The ‘width’ of these rings and hence the strength of the associated identity will vary. This notion of concentric circles is often referred to as nested identities, so that every member of the smaller group also feels attached to the larger one. But another important way of describing multiple identities is that of the marble cake, where the various components of an individual’s identity cannot easily be separated; rather they influence each other, mesh and blend (Risse & Grabowsky, 2008).

When we begin to explore national identity in relation to the UK, we are confronted with the fact that Britishness is a contested identity because, as Bhambra (2017) points out, it was only with the British Nationality Act of 1981 that the term ‘British’ came to mean the UK alone, rather than the wider Empire or Commonwealth. The UK itself of course is a multinational state and Britishness may be contested between its constituent parts. Individuals may feel English or Scottish in addition to – or instead of – feeling British. If we look specifically at the Brexit referendum results as indicating attitudes towards Europe, then it is clear that there were significant differences across the UK, with most of England and Wales voting to Leave and Scotland and Northern Ireland (as well as London) to Remain. Analysis of the results has shown that these voting patterns were, to some extent, rooted in varying national identities. Thus, among those who described themselves as ‘British’, only 45% voted to leave the EU. In contrast, among those who included ‘English’ among their selection of identities, 54% voted to leave. This is not simply a reflection of the fact that a majority of voters in England voted to leave, whereas in Scotland, the opposite was the case.
Those who said their sense of being English was more important than their sense of being British were more likely to vote to leave than were those whose British identity was the more important. Indeed, among those who said they were English and denied that they were British, nearly three-quarters (74%) voted to leave, whereas fewer than two in five (38%) of those who rejected feeling English did so. This should not come as a surprise. Within England at least, Britishness rather than Englishness has long been promoted as a ‘multi-cultural’ identity, and there has also long been a link between feeling British and holding a more liberal attitude towards migrant minorities (Curtice, 2017).

For Hirsch (2018), this suggests that English identity is less secure than, say, a Scottish or Irish identity. She notes that Scots have the ‘advantage’ of being able to view England as their other, which is a unifying factor across divides. And for the English themselves, there is a history of anti-Scottish and anti-Irish rhetoric (Hickman, Morgan, Walter, & Bradley, 2005; Ichijo, 2004). That said, there appears to have been a strengthening of English identity, following the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and Prime Minister David Cameron’s pursuit of ‘English Votes for English Laws. Kenny (2015) refers to this as ‘the rise of a political Englishness’ with English national identity becoming a serious political force. O’Toole (2020) believes that Brexit itself is an English nationalist movement, although he distinguishes between London (which voted strongly to Remain) and the rest of the country, which he states is a new polity called ‘England-without-London’ and where a clear majority of almost 11% voted Leave.

For many within the UK – and particularly in ‘England-without-London’ – there appears to be a belief that an identity which embraces ‘being European’ is at odds with a British national identity (Ormston, 2015). But, as Risse (2014) points out, elsewhere even a rather low degree of identification with the idea of Europe nevertheless correlates with strong support for membership of the EU itself. For Marks and Hooghe (2003), the key lies in the notion of exclusive national identity. There are large variations across the EU as regards a sense of European identity, but most people hold multiple identities. Eurobarometer surveys carried out by the EU, however, reveal that there are those who hold to their national identity to the exclusion of a European one. In other words, they think of themselves as only British or French or whatever. In 2000, the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2000) showed that in the UK, a massive 67% of people held to their national identity to the exclusion of a European one, the highest figure in the EU. In 2010, admittedly in an enlarged EU, the survey asked the extent to which respondents felt European (European Commission, 2010). The EU average was 74% but in the UK, it was 48%, the lowest figure in the EU. Finally, in 2018, people were asked about their attachment to the EU (European Commission, 2018); again the UK figure was amongst the lowest at 44%. In the UK, in particular therefore, European identity is seen as being in conflict with British (especially English) identity rather than being complementary (Ormston, 2015).

This analysis confirms a number of other studies which have demonstrated the lukewarm attitude of many UK citizens towards the EU. A study by Cinnirella (1997), for example, of British and Italian respondents showed that, ‘whereas the British respondents often perceived a need to choose between a British and European identity, the Italians felt that both identities could be cultivated with few problems’ (Cinnirella, 1997, p. 28). Risse (2001) believes that, in fact, the British (or more precisely the English) national identity has
been constructed as something quite distinct from ‘Europe’ and that this has been the case since the 1950s.

The prevailing English nation-state identity still perceives Europe as the (friendly) ‘other’. The distinctive nationalist English identity is incompatible with federalist or supranationalist visions of European political order. It explains why British governments, whether Conservative or Labour, have consistently been reluctant to support a deepening of European integration. (Risse, 2001, p. 199)

**Political rhetoric**

Elites play an important role in defining the nation in terms of who belongs and who does not. There is an extensive literature that analyses the instrumental role that elites play in defining the nation (for example, Brass, 1991; Leith & Soule, 2012). For the purpose of this article, we can, therefore, say that othering processes are instigated or reinforced by political rhetoric used by elites.

It is important to recognise that British elite attitudes to Europe were not always so sceptical. The UK applied to join the EU in 1963 and 1967 but was rebuffed by President de Gaulle of France, before Prime Minister Edward Heath succeeded in negotiating British entry in 1973. The decision was ratified in a UK-wide referendum in 1975, in which a resounding 67% voted to remain in what was then the European Economic Community (EEC). Of course, the question in 1975 was different from 2016, as was the electorate, but nevertheless, the result was clear. In party political terms, it was the Labour Party rather than the Conservatives which had the greater divisions over European membership (Swales, 2016). To some extent then, the European issue appeared settled and for many years, ‘the EU was “the dog that didn’t bark” in British electoral politics’ (Evans & Mellon, 2019).

Conservative elites’ attitudes to Europe began to shift during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher after 1979. Indeed, Thatcher is often viewed as being extremely Eurosceptic, partly as a result of her tough negotiations with the EU over a British financial rebate and partly as a result of a speech she made in Bruges in 1988 (Daddow, 2013). Yet Thatcher did not advocate leaving the EU and, in 1986, signed the Single European Act, an integrationist treaty which created the single European market. For many within the government at the time, there was a belief that pragmatically crafted European institutions could be effective technical instruments for British interests, most obviously in spreading liberalisation (Fontana & Parsons, 2015).

It is true, nevertheless, that the seeds of Euroscepticism were sown during Thatcher’s period in office. Browne (2017) highlights the de-industrialisation and high unemployment of the early 1980s for rising discontent and growing divisions between the North and South of the UK. When allied to Thatcher’s rhetoric on British nationalism, this led inexorably to a view that someone ‘other’ was to blame and the blame could be laid at the door of ‘Europe’. By the time John Major signed the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, there was a stable but significant core of Euroscepticism within UK politics (Swales, 2016).

Although Blair and Brown’s governments were essentially pro-European, and their governments initially attempted to normalise UK–EU relations, as Baker (2005) argues their strategy moved from constructive engagement to defensive engagement, favouring Atlanticism. During this period, British public opinion remained Eurosceptic. As we note
above, Eurobarometer data showed that there was little change in UK attitudes towards the EU, although most people were in favour of remaining in it. Nevertheless, British support for the EU was little more than half the EU average and openly critical attitudes were over twice as high in the UK as in the EU as a whole (Daddow, 2013).

While the public within the UK may have been Eurosceptic, many of the political elites were not. And political elites can play a significant, if not decisive, role in shaping public opinion and identification with the EU (Marks & Hooghe, 2003) through the adoption of pro- or anti-European messages and platforms (Mendez & Bachtler, 2016). The position began to shift following the electoral successes of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which tapped into the public’s Euroscepticism. Formed in 1993, the party operated on the political fringes until 2014, when it achieved success in that year’s European elections, closely followed by gaining two MPs as a result of defections from the Conservative Party. Fearful of the threat posed by UKIP to the Conservative vote, Prime Minister David Cameron, although not himself a Eurosceptic, conditionally promised a referendum on European membership, which was held in 2016 (Tournier-Sol, 2015). The referendum campaign provided an opportunity for many Conservatives to acknowledge openly their hostility to the EU and, in contrast to many other European nations, where anti-EU views have tended to be the preserve of more marginal populist parties, elements of the Conservative Party took a Eurosceptic message not only into the political mainstream but into the heart of Government (Hobolt, 2016).

The political situation in Scotland (and in Northern Ireland) has, however, been markedly different. The Scottish National Party has become the dominant political party in Scotland and has long pursued a policy of ‘Independence in Europe’ (Hepburn 2009). As Arnorsson and Zoega (2016) point out, small countries tend to do well within the EU in that they can benefit from access to a large market while becoming (or remaining) politically independent. In 2016, the referendum on EU membership produced radically different results in Scotland and England, which may well be due to the different messages coming from the different political elites (Van der Zwet, Bucken-Knapp, & Cox, 2015).

The influence of the media

In a similar way to political elites, the mass media have also played a crucial role in influencing perceptions of Europe. Research by Bruter (2003) showed very clearly that exposure to good and bad news on European matters affects individual perceptions of the EU and European identity. Thus:

persistent good news on Europe – its achievements and its successes – modifies citizens’ perceptions of the unification process and, in turn, clearly influences their likelihood of identifying with Europe. Conversely, being systematically exposed to bad news on European integration – its failures and its threats – damages citizens’ perception of Europe’s record and, in turn, also makes them less likely to feel part of Europe. (Bruter, 2003, pp. 1164–1165)

Bruter (2004) went on to use focus groups to explore the impact of good and bad news on European attitudes and perceptions. He found that, in general, participants judged news on Europe to be roughly neutral in the Netherlands, neutral to fairly negative in France and very negative in the UK. The research showed that citizens were often aware of the failings of the media to present an objective picture but nevertheless the
long-term impact of media negativity was to increase Euroscepticism. In the UK, in particular, British citizens knew that their mass media were Eurosceptic, but this did not prevent the said media from making British citizens feel significantly less European than others (Bruter, 2009).

This negativity appears to be related to the particular nature of the British print media (Grant, 2008). Firstly, national titles have much wider circulation in Britain compared with many other countries in Europe. Secondly, ownership is concentrated in a very few individuals, who tend to be Eurosceptic. Thirdly, few newspapers appear to spend much time undertaking research into European issues, with the result that news reports are often factually inaccurate or misleading. Grant (2008) stated that only three national daily newspapers – the Guardian, Times and Financial Times – had staff correspondents in Brussels. Thus, the British print media has played a significant role in the othering of Europe, either by playing on traditional ill-feeling, being deliberately offensive, or by focusing on the more obscure (and sometimes odd) ramifications of EU legislation (Cinnirella, 1996, 1997).

Bureaucrats within the EU are aware of the negative images associated with it and, in a November 2017 paper, the European Commission (2017) argued for the strengthening of European identity, partly through the use of the MEDIA programme which produces European educational films and audio-visual products. While upholding the principles of media freedom and media pluralism, the European Commission nevertheless believed it was important to address the growing challenges to qualitative journalism and objective reporting of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’. However, in the case of the UK and Brexit, it was already too late.

Social media too have been extremely significant in the European debate. Ofcom has suggested that 43% of those who get news online receive it through social media and this rises to 61% among 16–24 year olds (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017). They point out how users create a network of followers and so Eurosceptics would receive messages from those of a like mind. Their analysis of Twitter users shows that Eurosceptics were more active than Remainers and so the Eurosceptic message was more easily spread. Some political parties became extremely adept in their use of social media, with the Brexit Party (set up to fight the 2019 European elections) dominant during the campaign (Ramley, Rossiter, & Harris, 2019).

The discussion above provides a conceptual framework of the othering concept in the Brexit context. The five drivers that have been identified all raise important empirical questions. First, when we place othering in a historical perspective, it raises questions in terms of historic identities relating to empire and religion but also the presence of an Island identity. Second, immigration is clearly a key driver for othering but is dependent on the extent to which it is seen as a threat to indigenous employment opportunities and public service delivery as well as the extent to which immigrant cultural identities are considered a threat. Third, and related to the last point, the nature of indigenous identity plays a key role in understanding othering process. It raises questions in terms of the extent to which national identities are ‘secure’ and whether it is considered inclusive or exclusive. Fourth, political narratives and elite rhetoric play an important role when it comes to defining the nation according to the points above. In this context, the role of fringe parties that can influence mainstream narrative requires due consideration. Fifth, the role of the media which includes the nature and the quality of reporting on European
issues as well as their reach needs to be taken into account when understanding othering. Taken together, these drivers of othering process clearly point towards a multi-disciplinary field of scholarship that covers the breadth of social sciences.

Conclusion

Since the 2016 referendum, there have been several attempts to try to explain why the UK voted as it did. There appears to be a general agreement that, for Leave voters, issues of sovereignty and autonomy were important. Furthermore, voting patterns suggested that Leave votes were high in particular parts of the country which were suffering economic disadvantage – the ‘Left Behind’ groups (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Menon & Wager, 2020).

If we take a more historical perspective, then what is striking is the way in which attitudes towards Europe have shifted. In 1975, over two-thirds of voters supported staying in the EEC, yet 40 years later, Remainers were in a minority. We would argue that this shift is due in part to the persistent ‘othering’ of Europe and the EU, such that Europe somehow became a different place, one where the UK did not belong. Indeed, speeches by politicians often refer to ‘Britain and Europe’ as if they were opposing concepts and that, somehow, the UK was not a European country. The discourse is frequently one of distinction and, as Spiering (2015, p. 24) points out, ‘Britain is not so much partaking in European integration, but integrating (or attempting to integrate) with an outside entity called “Europe”’.

The evaporation of the positive attitude towards the EU demonstrated in the 1975 referendum has been accompanied by an ignorance about Europe. Startin (2016) refers to Eurobarometer surveys which show the UK as having the highest ‘knowledge deficit’ about the EU across the continent, and this has perhaps allowed voters in ‘left behind’ and non-metropolitan areas, as well as some politicians, to ‘blame’ Europe for various ills, safe in the knowledge that they were unlikely to be challenged.

At the elite level, there has perhaps been disappointment and disillusionment with the direction of the European project. When the UK joined in 1973, it was expected that it could be a leader in Europe and shape European integration to resemble the model of the Commonwealth. The moves towards increasing political integration were not in line with the vision for Europe many had in 1973 (Bailey & Budd, 2019). Particularly within the Conservative Party, this led to a gradual erosion of the pro-European narrative and the negative othering of the European project.

It has been argued that the 2016 Brexit vote represents what Calhoun (2017) calls a ‘mutiny against the cosmopolitan elite’ – an elite which may have accepted the European project but which failed to convince ‘ordinary’ people in the UK to do the same. At the same time, it may have been the victory of a non-European, firmly British elite, who convinced ‘ordinary’ people in other ways. It is, of course, easy to criticise the bureaucracy and cumbersome nature of the EU, as well as some of its more questionable regulations, but it has been at the forefront of defending human rights and addressing environmental issues including climate change. But within the UK, since the referendum, we have seen the development of what Foster (2019) has called ‘the poisonous political atmosphere of Brexit Britain’.

Much of the Brexit debate has been viewed through the prism of immigration and we have shown how attitudes have shifted from othering black and minority ethnic migrants
during the earlier post-war period, to othering EU migrants today, a process aided and abetted by hostile British media, both traditional and social. Brexit may, in any case, do little to reduce immigration. Figures released by the Office of National Statistics (2020) show that in 2019, an estimated 270,000 more people moved to the UK to stay than left, with net migration from non-EU countries at its highest level since records began in 1975. Theresa May, as Home Secretary from 2010 to 2016, and then as Prime Minister, vowed to reduce immigration significantly but conspicuously failed to do so. It remains to be seen if Brexit will make a difference.

Othering is perhaps a fact of life and is frequently used in relation to migrants and minorities. It may be seen as something positive if our awareness of difference leads us to reach out towards other groups (Powell, 2017). But in the somewhat febrile socio-political atmosphere of today, othering appears to be deeply negative and problematic and a continuing challenge to the EU’s ideal of a European identity as being ‘unity in diversity’. Ironically, Brexit may remove one greatest sources of othering in the EU but does not stop the process in the UK itself. Hence, a research agenda that further examines the phenomenon in the context of Brexit but also the future relationship with the EU as well as the rest of the world is highly significant. It provides a comprehensive framework that include push (i.e. events and trends that drive people to othering such as demographic trends, public service pressures, limited economic opportunities) and pull factors (i.e. proactive strategies that elites adopt) for the othering process that are examined from a cross-disciplinary perspective, involving political scientists, sociologists, historians, economists, psychologists among others.

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Notes on contributors

Arno van der Zwet is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and Public Policy at the University of the West of Scotland and a senior research associate at the European Policies Research Centre at the University of Strathclyde. His research interests are territorial politics, regional policy, territorial co-operation and identity studies, including the relation between national identity and attitudes towards European integration and immigration.
Murray Stewart Leith is the Professor of Politics at the University of the West of Scotland. He has written extensively on aspects of politics, devolution and identity and his recent research includes investigations on Scottish national identity; diaspora policy; returning members of the diaspora; and studies of the Scottish diaspora in England and in northern Europe.

Duncan Sim is Honorary Senior Research Fellow (and formerly Reader in Sociology) at the University of the West of Scotland. His research interests lie in issues of ethnicity and identity and particularly in relation to migrants and diasporas. He has undertaken research on BME groups, refugees and migrant workers, within the UK, North America and Europe.

Elizabeth Boyle is a Reader in Psychology at the University of the West of Scotland. Recently, her main research interests have been in psychological aspects of e-learning, digital games and social media. She was project coordinator of the EU-funded CHERMUG project, which developed games for research methods and statistics, and the Erasmus+ YOUTHYES project which developed an online game to support young people in career planning.

ORCID

Arno Van Der Zwet http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0107-3290

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