

Euroscepticism, Anti-Nostalgic Nostalgia and the Past Perfect Post-Brexit Future

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Abstract

While extant work on British Euroscepticism has highlighted vestiges of historical empire imaginaries in discourses opposing EU integration, the emotional dynamics of such frames remain curiously underexplored. The diluted quality of these Eurosceptic histories, with their distinctive interplay of past and future, has led some to reject their nostalgic emotional credentials altogether. This article challenges such assumptions of emotional absence through a qualitative discourse analysis of the 2016 EU referendum Vote Leave campaign's materials, and interviews with 13 former campaigners. By unpacking Vote Leave's preference for an *anti-nostalgic* form of empire nostalgia, central to its vision of a *past perfect post-Brexit future*, this analysis contributes primarily to literatures on British Euroscepticism and Brexit, revealing the counterintuitive nostalgic politics and persistent cultural appeal of ostensibly forward-looking discursive stances. The analysis also has broader relevance, particularly for advocates of an 'emotional turn' in EU Studies and scholars investigating escalating nationalisms beyond Britain.

Keywords: Euroscepticism; Brexit; EU contestation; Nostalgia; Nationalism

Introduction

In recent years European Union (EU) Studies scholars have become increasingly interested in political opposition towards EU integration, otherwise known as Euroscepticism. Contributions to date have provided a range of interpretations of Euroscepticism as a primarily strategic (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2000; Taggart, 1998), ideological (Marks et al., 2002), or historical phenomenon (Wellings, 2019; Wellings and Baxendale, 2015), or as a mixture of such variables (Bevir et al., 2015; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). Although strategic and ideological interpretations have made great strides in introducing the study of Euroscepticism to the discipline, however, they remain wedded to positivist and psephological methodologies that present EU opposition as a static or peripheral outcome of party competition or extant cognitive frameworks. By contrast, historical approaches have advanced our understanding of Euroscepticism's 'embedded persistence' in particular national contexts, often favouring post-positivist methods that examine the dynamic discursive 'creation and contestation of the idea of Europe' (Trenz and de Wilde, 2012, p. 537 cited in Wellings, 2019, p. 15). Many such contributions have focused on longstanding British objections to European integration, highlighting how deep-rooted ideas about national history, and related constructions of identity and culture, have been employed to capture the contemporary political mainstream (Daddow, 2015, 2019; Wellings, 2016, 2019; Wellings and Baxendale, 2015).

While such treatments have helpfully foregrounded the pre-eminence of peculiar historical imaginaries in British Eurosceptic discourse, however, the emotional dynamics

of historical framing remain curiously underexplored. This article contributes to addressing that paucity by arguing that nostalgia – an emotion intimately connected with images of the past – can help us to improve our understanding of the nature and persistence of historically-rooted Euroscepticism. Unlike in its conventional treatments, however, nostalgia is not only an emotion preoccupied with a backward-looking gaze but also one that bears on visions of the future (Boym, 2001). In Eurosceptic discourse, these complex temporalities appear notably in the subtle invocation of Britain's imperial and colonial history, often linked to the viability of cooperation with an alternative political collective known as the Anglosphere. For some scholars the diluted quality and forward-looking veneer of such imaginaries has been taken as evidence of empire nostalgia's absence (Saunders, 2020; Wellings, 2017). However, in this article I interrogate the emotional appeal of Eurosceptic Anglospherist discourses for their invocation of a past perfect future that remains implicitly rooted in imperial and colonial forms of nostalgia. Here, I show how British Eurosceptics exhibit a desire to reconnect with an increasingly futuristic and 'progressive' national path thought to have been prematurely disrupted by EU membership, using the imperial and colonial past as a vector of emotional comfort and revolutionary 'inspiration' (see Wellings and Baxendale, 2015; Wellings, 2017, p. 5). Importantly, this analysis also reveals the persistent meaning of nostalgia in Eurosceptic cultures that prize future-orientation, illuminating how nostalgia has come to be bound up in apparently 'anti-nostalgic' nationalist narratives (Kenny, 2017).

Although its primary contribution is to literatures on British Euroscepticism, however, the article also speaks to scholars working beyond these confines. First, it addresses those working in EU Studies more broadly, arguing for an 'emotional turn' in the discipline that has already animated other Politics and International Studies research. As such scholars frequently attest, without recourse to emotion we are left with a rather anodyne view of politics as 'cold, dry, uninspiring and unmoving' (Mercer, 2006, p. 298). Engaging political emotions can therefore help us to further understand the resonance and persistence of discourses of EU integration and its contestation, contributing towards a 'critical EU Studies' that departs from prevailing mainstream theoretical and methodological frameworks (Manners and Whitman, 2016; Rosamond, 2016) and reductive interest-based analyses (Manners, 2018). Second, the article also speaks to the various roles of nostalgia within different strains of nationalism that are escalating across Europe and beyond. While some discursive strands employ a conventionally nostalgic restorative lens, the article highlights how others prefer to apply an anti-nostalgic, revolutionary spin to the national past. These analytic foundations suggest much potential for further research to study intersections of nostalgia, anti-nostalgia and nationalism in different contexts and provide comparative insights into the interaction of these forces.

The article proceeds in four sections. In the first section I situate British Euroscepticism in broader historiographical practices and conceptualize how the forward-looking character of such narratives disguises the operation of nostalgia. In the second section, I explore methodological issues involved in interpreting empire nostalgia in British Eurosceptic discourse, developing a granular definition that specifies how its discursive strands are calibrated to distinctive imaginaries of temporality and race. In the third section, I begin to interrogate the appearance of apparently anti-nostalgic forms of imperial and colonial nostalgia in the Vote Leave campaign – the 2016 EU referendum's official Brexit advocate. Concentrating on the ostensibly futuristic signifiers of

science and technology, I provide a qualitative discourse analysis of Vote Leave's outputs that draws on a documentary corpus constituted by all of the campaign's publicly available written, verbal and visual materials, produced during the referendum period: October 2015 to 23 June 2016. In the final section, I delve into the political thought of Vote Leave's central figure – Campaign Director and longstanding science enthusiast Dominic Cummings – drawing on additional discourse analysis of Cummings' early twenty-first-century outputs, and 13 semi-structured elite interviews conducted with former Vote Leave campaigners in 2018–19. This approach reveals how the anti-nostalgic nostalgic forms favoured by Vote Leave can be traced back through Cummings' political thought, unpacking underexplored connections with an Anglo-American iteration of Euro-sceptic Anglospherist discourse. It also highlights how Vote Leave Euro-sceptics preferred to present themselves as far-sighted, revolutionary figures, suggesting the campaign's internalization of a peculiar nostalgic culture embedded in broader practices of writing history.

I. Nationalist Narratives and Anti-Nostalgic Nostalgia

British Euro-sceptic discourse can be situated within a *Whiggish* historiographical tradition – dating to seventeenth-century accounts of England's Glorious Revolution – that cultivates a continuous and celebratory narrative of heroic national 'greatness' (Watson, 2020). Such a history is necessarily partial and often contradictory, speaking simultaneously to liberal and nationalist themes, both typically premised on Britain's successive victories against European 'tyranny', culminating in the Second World War (Spiering, 2015; Wellings, 2019). Potential contradictions in the content of Whig history are always marshalled into a coherent narrative via a common method, which prioritizes the continuity of national identity across time and replicates nostalgia's propensity to soothe disruption by making comforting connections between past and present (Davis, 1979). Despite such resonances with nostalgic practice, however, Whig history is not solely backward-looking in the manner attributed to conventional, *restorative* conceptualizations of nostalgia (Boym, 2001). While early Whigs narrated the removal of England's 'unsuitable' Catholic monarch as a simple restoration of past traditions, eighteenth-century Whig historians viewed their forebears as 'British patriots, forward-looking men not satisfied to simply conserve the old but also herald the new' (Zook, 2002, pp. 214–15). As we shall see, this strain of Whiggish thinking is particularly appealing to Euro-sceptics, enabling them to portray Britain's EU withdrawal as a *revolutionary* moment in which the nation might be 'placed back on its lineal progression' of escalating 'greatness' by enlightened heroes (Zook, 2002, p. 213).

Re-evaluating how nostalgia is conceptualized reveals how this revolutionary variant of Whig history is also essentially nostalgic. As Bonnett notes, nostalgia is not simply backward-looking but can also draw on a 'revolutionary imagination', characterized by 'paradoxical' discourses that prescribe 'a leap into the future that [is] also a step into the past' (Bonnett, 2010, p. 28). Indeed, Boym highlights nostalgia's potential relationship with an 'off-modern' temporality intent on exploring 'missed opportunities and roads not taken' (Boym, 2011). Here, the strict opposition of past and future is rejected in favour of a view of nostalgia that explores the 'sideways' evolutionary paths of the past's lost possibilities (Boym, 2007, p. 9; 2011). This type of nostalgia exceeds the admiration of 'modernization as it was' – although such a regard may still be part of the appeal – to focus on

realizing the lapsed potentials of the past's 'what if' moments (Boym, 2011). Nostalgia's key referent within a revolutionary, off-modern understanding of historical time is therefore 'the past the way it could have been. It is the *past perfect* that one strives to realize in the future' (Boym, 2001, p. 351, emphasis added). This nostalgic modality preoccupies many Eurosceptics with what Britain may have been, and might still become, by choosing an alternative path than European integration (see Browning, 2019, p. 234). Nevertheless, although such a revolutionary temporality corresponds with a Euroscepticism that draws on the narrative preferences of the later English Whigs, a similar interplay of past and future animates strains of nationalist discourse further afield, including in Hungary (Palonen, 2018), Ecuador (Radcliffe, 1996) and China (Benabdallah, 2021).

This suggests that a revolutionary nostalgia mode has both a general and context-specific emotional pull. In general terms, the off-modern combination of past and future intimates that nostalgia is emotionally valuable not only as a source of backward-looking comfort amid 'crisis' but also as a vector of 'forward-looking' inspiration. This framing marks a concerted departure from nostalgia's seventeenth-century diagnosis as a potentially fatal medical disease (Davis, 1979), whose pejorative connotations continue to colour dominant contemporary understandings of the emotion as synonymous with unfavourable traits of pessimism, weakness and backwardness (Kenny, 2017; Robinson, 2012). By contrast, a forward-looking orientation tends to be culturally prized as indicative of a more desirable positive and progressive outlook (Robinson, 2012). Yet as Kenny argues, the cultural value attributed to forward-looking stances does not erase nostalgia altogether but rather results in 'anti-nostalgic' nostalgic forms, which employ the affective resources of a nation's past even as they denigrate overt associations with *pastness* (Kenny, 2017). On this view, anti-nostalgic nostalgia enables its proponents to draw on the past's frustrated 'futurist speculations' (Hutton, 2016, p. 143) and provide an inspiring vision of a *past perfect future*, ostensibly distanced from 'offensive' backward-looking nostalgia (Kenny, 2017). Such anti-nostalgia is common in emotional cultures that reward future orientation, holding a specific appeal to certain British Eurosceptics who prefer to cast themselves and their Brexit project in the virtuous light of Whig history's forward-looking men.

Specific engagements with anti-nostalgia are nevertheless relatively scant in Brexit commentary, despite broader nostalgia analysis gaining ground beyond EU Studies. Following Kenny's (2017) coinage of the term, anti-nostalgia was suggestively attributed to the Remain campaign, with the Leave side primarily consigned to the vice of traditional nostalgia (Campanella and Dassù, 2019, pp. 42–3). This is a common feature of Brexit scholarship, which frequently dismisses its own underlying politics of nostalgia (Saunders, 2020) – a theme I return to below. With anti-nostalgia still a marginal consideration for the majority of analysts, much work has concentrated on identifying the often-competing strands of conventional nostalgia at stake in pro-Brexit ideology. These include a left-leaning longing for a 'lost politics of solidarity', tied to the affective appeal of the National Health Service (NHS) (Coman, 2020), and a desire to return to a racially homogeneous society, characteristic of longstanding anti-immigration discourse rooted in the right-wing nationalist invective of former MP Enoch Powell (El-Enany, 2020). Indeed, Powellite language has been credited with securing Leave's referendum victory, its restorative hallmarks also echoing in comparable ethno-nationalisms that are escalating across Europe (Brubaker, 2017) and beyond (Bhambra, 2017). It has also sparked

much debate about the emotional resonance of Britain's former empire. While some define empire nostalgia as a desire to reclaim a 'buccaneering' heyday, distinct from Powell's criticism of Britain's imperial 'folly' and account of England's longer exceptional history (see Kenny and Pearce, 2018), others view contemporary Powellite discourse on immigration and race as inevitably linked with Britain's imperial exploits (El-Enany, 2020). Still others remain sceptical of the 'myth' of empire nostalgia (Saunders, 2020).

As I explore below, there is a notable but often overlooked overlap between anti-nostalgia, empire nostalgia and race in British Euro-sceptic discourse, as expressed in the 2016 Brexit referendum Vote Leave campaign. Anti-nostalgia's revolutionary temporality frequently imbued campaign messages that countered nostalgia's typical melancholy tropes by providing an ostensibly positive, optimistic and forward-looking case for Brexit that nonetheless drew subtly on the affective resources of British history. For all that Vote Leave spokesperson Michael Gove MP concluded that 'our best days lie ahead', for example, his ensuing assertion that an independent Britain would be 'capable [...] *once more* of setting an inspirational example to the world' provided a brief but suggestive indicator of its nostalgic undercurrents (Gove, 2016b, emphasis added). Gove's phrasing echoed a common Euro-sceptic tendency of viewing EU membership as 'a mere interregnum in [Britain's] global trajectory' (Wellings, 2016, p. 369), recalling the Whiggish identification of a national rupture and accompanying desire to place Britain back on an increasingly 'great' path. As I discuss below, although this nostalgic thinking extends beyond the referent of British empire, it does imply specific imperial and colonial themes, connected to the advocacy of a 'modern' Global Britain and the renewed civilizational potential of the Euro-sceptic Anglosphere. Explanations of empire nostalgia have, however, proved controversial in Brexit analyses. Some have pointed to the interaction of the imperial and colonial past and post-Brexit future in Leave discourse to reject interpretations of 'simple nostalgia' (Wellings, 2017, p. 5). Others have argued that existing conceptualizations of empire nostalgia are suspiciously wide-ranging and 'polemical' (Saunders, 2020, p. 2). Taking these criticisms seriously helps us to build a more nuanced picture of empire nostalgia that recognizes the different forms it takes in British Euro-scepticism.

II. Interpreting Empire Nostalgias in British Euro-sceptic Discourse

Doubt about the explanatory power of empire nostalgia is a feature of some interrogations of Euro-scepticism's relationship with the Anglosphere – a loose post-imperial collective whose constitutive nations frequently appear as viable alternative international partners for a post-Brexit Britain. Scepticism about the presence or role of empire nostalgia typically rests on one of the following claims: first, that the hybrid temporality of Anglospherist discourse, which combines remnants of both past and future, does not sit well with nostalgia's classic backward-looking gaze (Wellings, 2017); and second, that the Anglosphere represents such a watering-down of imperial and colonial ideas that to characterize it as an embodiment of empire nostalgia is misleading. Here, the contemporary Anglosphere that many Euro-sceptics favour is a reconditioned, neoliberal free-trading network that has actively sought to depart from the contentious 'era and ethos of empire', with its exclusive and violent connotations (Kenny and Pearce, 2018, p. 131).

Similar thinking characterizes one particularly stringent criticism of empire nostalgia's analytic value, which raises serious concerns about the term's liberal application and insufficient evidence-base in Brexit commentary (Saunders, 2020). Further complaints argue that dominant framings of empire nostalgia conveniently overlook its role in pro-European discourse and marginalize the nostalgic power of broader imaginaries of 'greatness', which are allegedly unmoored from imperial connotation and premised on Britain's longstanding status as 'a small island that had always punched above its weight' (Saunders, 2020, p. 5).

Of these criticisms, the recognition of empire nostalgia's role in left-wing pro-European advocacy makes a particularly important contribution, highlighting the imperial and colonial resonances of decades-long 'Remainer' arguments about Britain's natural place leading Europe and representing the Commonwealth in EU institutions (Saunders, 2020). This insight also illuminates the peculiar nostalgic meta-politics of Brexit scholarship, underscoring how pro-Remain authors frequently dismiss the nostalgic proclivities of positions that correspond to their personal politics, while tarnishing pro-Brexit rivals with nostalgia's unsavoury undertones (Saunders, 2020). Although such discrediting tactics are a common feature of broader political discourse (Kenny, 2017), as my analysis below attests, binaries of nostalgic 'backward-looking conservatism', associated with the Eurosceptic Right, and anti-nostalgic 'forward-looking progressivism', attributed to the pro-European Left, are flawed (Robinson, 2012, p. 19). While mindful of the multifaceted politics of nostalgia analysis, however, I do seek to question the remaining criticisms of its empire variant. Such assessments are, I argue, founded on misapprehensions about how empire nostalgia can be interpreted in Eurosceptic discourse, reflecting a problematic detachment of much EU Studies and Brexit scholarship from critical analytical frameworks. Indeed, many contributions that endorse empire nostalgia's pertinence to Euroscepticism and Brexit exhibit similar deficiencies such that the term is also underspecified in these literatures. As such, some work cites nostalgia only as a fleeting descriptor of imperially-inflected discursive tone or content (Daddow, 2015, pp. 78–9; Murray-Evans, 2018, pp. 199, 204), while other interventions note only the general affective (Siles-Brügge, 2019) or nostalgic appeal (Adler-Nissen *et al.*, 2017, p. 13) of Anglospherist political economic visions.

Criticisms and endorsements of empire nostalgia analyses therefore share a methodological need to reconsider the emotion's discursive forms and functions – a task that can be assisted by adopting insights from broader political emotions and postcolonial research. As Hutchison has argued, while emotions are often complex and thus have the potential to be 'indeterminately' expressed, 'all discourses possess emotional underpinnings and effects, even if they do so implicitly or in unobvious ways' (Hutchison, 2016, pp. 106, 149). Indeed, the representation of emotions in discourse – even when tacit – is the Social Science researcher's primary avenue for accessing them (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, pp. 505–6). Such epistemological and methodological positions should cause us to question assumptions of empire nostalgia's absence in Eurosceptic discourses whose content and temporality have been ostensibly distanced from the imperial and colonial past. Indeed, while some critics have argued that pointing to Leave campaigners' invocations of the post-Brexit possibilities of a 'Global Britain' provide insufficient evidence of empire nostalgia (Saunders, 2020), contemporary British discourse tends only ever to refer to empire in such fragmentary and 'euphemistic' terms that offer an

opportunity to view its legacy as beneficial rather than violent (El-Enany, 2020:177). Such practices suggest nostalgia's sanitizing capacity to generate rose-tinted and diluted narratives of empire (Rosaldo, 1989). Rejecting these propositions tends dangerously close to much early Brexit scholarship, which obscured the legacies of empire and race entirely (Bhambra, 2017). As I explore further below therefore, attempts to detach ostensibly 'post'-imperial proposals for a Euro-sceptic Anglosphere from their racialised roots in empire are spurious (Bell and Vucetic, 2019, p. 12). Indeed, Britain's 'island story' of 'greatness' against the odds, while premised in part on imaginaries of England's longer political traditions, are also indelibly intertwined with the nation's imperial heritage (Wellings, 2016).

Nevertheless, achieving more nuance in interpreting empire nostalgia is both possible and necessary. As such, I depart from uniform uses of the term to describe *any* reference to Britain's empire history and specify its distinctive discursive strands. While I agree that Powellite discourse is rooted in imperial race thinking (El-Enany, 2020), it operates via a conventionally nostalgic *restorative* desire to reinstate Britain's domestic racial integrity. Its embodiment in Vote Leave's calls to 'take back control' amid immigration 'crisis' therefore tells us little about the forward-looking revolutionary temporality of anti-nostalgic nostalgia, which remains underexplored in Brexit literatures. As suggested above, empire nostalgia does not require the explicit assertion of a desire to go 'back' to the 'good' old days. Instead, it frequently operates in subtler imperial and colonial modes (see Lorcin, 2013). Here, imperial nostalgia refers precisely to a longing to reclaim the trappings of Britain's former hegemonic status, rather than a desire to reinstate empire per se (see Lorcin, 2013, pp. 103–4). Colonial nostalgia, though notably racialised like Powellite discourse, expresses a distinct yearning for the 'homely' comforts of white settler colonialism – a 'global' racial imaginary that draws on 'the occluded memory of the exactions inflicted on the colonized people, the belief in benevolent modernity, and the relative bonhomie of the colonial lifestyle' (see Lorcin, 2013, p. 104). As such, while the 'Powellite' nostalgia that characterizes many strands of European ethno-nationalism employs a civilizational lens to construct the Otherness of (Muslim) immigrants as threatening to an insular 'homeland' (Brubaker, 2017), colonial nostalgia employs a civilizational lens to amiably 'look outwards' and reunite racially coherent peoples across time and space. Utilizing these granular definitions of empire nostalgia therefore helps us to articulate how Euro-sceptic discourse remains patterned with implicit but emotionally resonant remnants of the imperial and colonial past, valued for their potential to be articulated in ostensibly forward-looking and anti-nostalgic terms. As I explore below, such nostalgias were an often-inconspicuous but important feature of Vote Leave's futuristic invocation of science and technology, which connected the campaign to broader Anglospherist imaginaries.

III. Science, Technology and Empire Nostalgias in the Vote Leave Campaign

Political discourse typically invokes the futuristic markers of science and technology through a techno-nationalist or techno-globalist lens (Edgerton, 2007). While the former current focuses on 'national inventiveness', particularly on certain innovative individuals, as evidence of a country's exceptional status, the latter narrative appeals to technology's ability to dissolve geographic distance and generate an interconnected 'global village'

(Edgerton, 2007). As I explore below, both strands characterized Vote Leave's Brexit advocacy and connected it implicitly to Britain's empire heritage. This is unsurprising since although a (techno-)nationalist outlook exceeds empire, both nationalist and globalist frames characterize imperially and colonially rooted British Eurosceptic discourse (Wellings, 2019). On this view, while techno-globalism's alleged weakening of the nation state is eschewed (Edgerton, 2007), its preference for international connection marries with English nationalism's increasingly expansive ambit, reimagined in the contemporary Anglosphere (Wellings, 2019). Such themes were suggested in Vote Leave's statements that 'Science is global' and that a new funding system was required for Britain to engage in research 'all over the world' (Vote Leave, 2016a). This tied into further messaging which argued that a post-Brexit Britain would be primed to engage with technological developments, including 'the mobile internet, "the internet of things", genetic engineering and robotics' (Gove, 2016b; Vote Leave, 2016a, 2016g). A similar lens coloured the remaining pillars of the Anglospherist Global Britain discourse (Daddow, 2019), which promoted technological solutions for facilitating sweeping free-trade (Siles-Brügge, 2019) and cultivating a domestic economy driven by ambitious and talented migrants from around the world (for example, Gove, 2016b). As such, although the precise term 'Global Britain' has been criticized by Vote Leavers – including Dominic Cummings – for being vacuous and failing to resonate with voters (Anonymous, 6, 11, 12, 2018; Cummings, 2018a), its themes were implicit in their campaign's messages.

A combination of techno-nationalist and techno-globalist frames allowed Vote Leave to claim Britain's temporal superiority over a 'backward' and failing EU (see Campanella and Dassù 2019, p. 53). Whereas 'science research' would join the NHS and education within a trio of proposed post-referendum 'national priorities' (for example Vote Leave, 2015a, 2016b), the EU was irredeemably 'anti-science', had unjustly fired its Chief Scientific Adviser, and was draining funds from its research programmes to finance Eurozone bailouts (Vote Leave, 2016a, 2016g, p. 12). Indeed, one digital pamphlet interspersed futuristic visuals of Britain's post-Brexit technological possibilities – including a launching rocket, a nuclear reactor, digital currency, and network connectivity – with images of EU decline, such as anti-austerity protests held before Greece's ancient, crumbling monuments (Vote Leave, 2016g). Vote Leave's primary political representatives also referred disparagingly to the EU's mid-century origins (Johnson, 2016a), dubbing it 'an analogue union in a digital age' (Gove, 2016a). Despite making such a categorical distinction, however, Vote Leave's vision for the nation was not purely futuristic. Instead, it cultivated an image of a *past perfect future* that betrayed subtle and seemingly anti-nostalgic nostalgias for an innovative British history that could only be reinvigorated by EU withdrawal.

Outputs such as Vote Leave's *Heroes* video were indicative of how the campaign drew on a nostalgic Whiggish continuity of national inventiveness that emphasized England's longstanding exceptional character. Here, Brexit presented an opportunity to place Britain back onto a trajectory of escalating greatness, distinguished by the heroic accomplishments of the nation's maverick scientists. As such, the *Heroes* video advanced ostensibly techno-nationalist claims about the historic innovative capacities of important British scientists, such as Newton and Turing (Vote Leave, 2015b). Its revolutionary temporal hybrid of past and future was conveyed aesthetically through a fusion of flickering sepia graphics – the classic monochrome markers of nostalgic historicity and 'pastness' (see

Grainge, 2002) – and images of British history’s famous scientists alongside their remarkable discoveries and forward-looking inventions. A similar approach was evident in further campaign videos, which narrated the founding of the NHS in the embers of the Second World War by wartime leader Winston Churchill and Labour politicians Clement Attlee and Aneurin Bevan (for example Vote Leave, 2016d). Positioning such figures as the kinds of forward-looking radicals whose visionary leadership had been stymied by Britain’s EU membership, these videos also interspersed nostalgic vintage photographs of the early NHS and its founders with frequent invocations of the futuristic post-Brexit promise of medical science. This hybrid nostalgic modality marked a departure from the health service’s typical discussion through traditional nostalgia’s restorative lens and recruited left-wing and progressive themes to a campaign dominated by right-wing, conservative figures. As such, the campaign narrated an illustrious history of national endeavour that could only be reactivated by Brexit, employing anti-nostalgia’s narrative devices to conjure a past perfect post-Brexit future with broad appeal.

While such nostalgia exceeded the referent of the British empire, however, certain aspects of its content exhibited distinctive imperial and colonial inflections and connected it to a complementary techno-globalist outlook. Although the NHS videos disguised the institution’s origins in empire’s extractive and racial logics, the *Heroes* video made clearer nostalgic links between empire and scientific advancement. Imperial nostalgia’s longing for Britain’s lost global status was implied, for example, in the illustration of ‘British heroes [that] changed Britain and the world for the better’ (Vote Leave, 2015b). This statement echoed a common Victorian imperial imperative of bringing ‘light to the dark corners of the earth’, a ‘civilising mission’ that was further implied in the equivalence that the video drew between visionary scientists and traditional imperial heroes, such as Churchill, Nelson and Wellington (Bell, 2007, p. 12). Nostalgic imperial inflections also infused campaign statements that characterized post-Brexit Britain as a ‘world leader’ in ‘crucial fields’ (Vote Leave, 2016a), including biosciences and ‘technology of all kinds’ (Johnson, 2016b). As Campaign Director Dominic Cummings declared, a vote for Brexit presented an opportunity to address the infamous mid-Century diagnosis of Britain’s post-imperial decline and redefine the country’s ‘influence’ through scientific innovation that would ‘change the world’ (The Economist, 2016). Although such statements professed to be *post-imperial*, they were persistently framed in the language of world leadership and influence that suggested the nostalgic pull of empire’s former ‘hegemonic advantages’.

The video’s preference for a particular kind of hero was also suggestive of colonial nostalgia and how it whitewashes empire’s racial violence. In addition to their specific links with the British empire’s commission, the ‘heroes’ the campaign foregrounded were predominantly male and exclusively white. The choice of such figures reflected a broader tendency of using men in nationalist narratives to represent the ‘progressive, forward-looking project of nationhood’ (McClintock, 1993, p. 66). It also echoed a British culture that routinely elevates racially homogeneous, imperial figures in exclusive ‘national’ histories (Watson, 2020). The video’s portrayal of ‘benevolent modernity’ therefore spoke to colonial nostalgia’s longing for a convivial but fictional past, excised of any memory of imperial and colonial brutality. Similar inclinations permeated Vote Leave’s plans for a ‘scientific’ points-based immigration system (Vote Leave, 2016f). The proposal initially appeared post-racial, founded on a techno-globalist vision for a

contemporary Anglosphere that relies on technology's ability to 'abolish distance' and enable Britain's former colonies to harmoniously reconnect across time and space (Deudney, 2001). Indeed, the system appealed to Commonwealth citizens and high-flying international professionals – particularly doctors and scientists – to participate in the project of a post-Brexit Global Britain. By scoring migrants according to their education and language ability (for example Vote Leave, 2016c), however, the scheme implied a colonial nostalgia rooted in the racial science (Saini, 2019) and civilizational hierarchies that structured the British empire and continue to imbue the Anglosphere (Davis, 2019).

Victorian imperialists often juxtaposed the 'primitive, childlike, savage, irrational and sometimes effeminate [colonized] against British civilization and modernity' (Webster, 2005, p. 4) in a discourse of 'civilizational infantilism' (Mehta, 1990; Watson, 2020). Similar hierarchies persist in contemporary visions of the Anglosphere, suggesting that attempts to distance its various iterations from their imperial 'baggage' are a 'red herring' (Bell and Vucetic, 2019, p. 12). The Anglo-American view of the Anglosphere famously touted by American entrepreneur J. C. Bennett is, for example, organized around a core of Britain and the US, surrounded by Britain's remaining white settler colonies and other Anglophone nations, and further circles of less linguistically 'sophisticated' countries (Browning and Tonra, 2010, p. 169). Indeed, Bennett specifically understands his Anglosphere as a 'Network Civilisation' of nations unified by their 'advanced' institutions (Browning and Tonra, 2010, p. 169). Viewed through this lens, Vote Leave's points-based immigration system subtly reproduced the hierarchical logic of Bennett's Anglo-American Anglosphere, promising to reunite Britain with the most 'advanced' subjects of its former colonies in an effort to reinvigorate its former global status. In the next section, I further explore these imperial and colonial nostalgias by tracing their evolution in the political thought of Vote Leave's central figure – Campaign Director Dominic Cummings.

IV. Dominic Cummings, Nostalgic Science and Anglo-America

Vote Leave's campaigning drew heavily on the political thought of its Director, Dominic Cummings. Cummings belongs to a broader extra-parliamentary faction of the British Eurosceptic movement with ties to the Conservative party, embodied in campaigns that preceded Vote Leave, including No Euro and Business for Britain. Cummings merits specific attention, however, due his status as Vote Leave's key architect (Anonymous, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 2018; Anonymous, 13, 2019) and his longstanding advocacy of the post-Brexit promise of science and technology, which colours his wide-ranging critique of the structure and operations of the contemporary British state. Prior to Vote Leave, Cummings advocated for a national reorientation towards science and innovation, including in the public sector, which he argued should embrace scientific practices and forms of evidence (Cummings, 2013). Here, he called for reforms to the education system that would prioritize science as a national imperative (Cummings, 2013), and favoured the transplantation of scientific epistemologies into institutions such as the civil service (Cummings, 2014a). These stances are broadly 'retro-futurist' in that they prescribe a techno-nationalist return to 'Britain's innovative genius [as] a source of national strength', much like in the *Heroes* video described above (Edgerton, 2020). As above, Cummings' desire to reconnect with a scientifically-driven past perfect future also carries

techno-globalist connotations, intersecting with a specific Anglo-American worldview with persistent inflections of empire nostalgia. Indeed, such themes have long characterized Cummings' political thought, evidenced by the campaigning of the New Frontiers Foundation (NFF) – a think tank he co-founded in 2004 to develop an 'alternative national strategy' (New Frontiers Foundation, 2005a).

The NFF immediately possessed a notable orientation towards the US, inspired by the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute (New Frontiers Foundation, 2005a), US think tanks that have themselves been characterized as advocates of a neoliberal Anglosphere (Kenny and Pearce, 2018, pp. 147–8). The NFF's name also recalled the reheated frontier masculinities of imperial expansion that commonly imbue 'modern' technocratic discourse (Hooper, 2001). Similar imperially-rooted themes permeated the NFF's critique of contemporary Britain and its EU membership. While the EU's integration trajectory was a 'step backwards' that doomed the organization to 'failure', 'impotence', 'decline' and 'crisis', America appeared as Britain's ultimate ally and exemplar – a country deemed more advanced than Europe on 'economic, demographic, technological and cultural' measures and thus primed to tackle '21st Century challenges' (New Frontiers Foundation, 2005b). Britain, however, had 'lost its way' in keeping pace with scientific developments spearheaded by the US, its EU membership foreclosing the possibility of 'an independent global role based on technological exploration' (Cummings, 2005, p. 1). The recommended corrective was the renewed pursuit of 'relentlessly future-oriented' projects premised on 'a new Elizabethan age' (Cummings, 2005, p. 1) of technological progress in which Britain would once again find itself at the centre of the world. Indeed, Cummings lamented the "once global but now-parochial Britain" and asserted his desire to 'mak[e] Britain *again* a global leader articulating a sense of the nations future [sic]' through 'a national *rediscovery* of future orientation' (Cummings, 2005, pp. 1–2, emphases added).

Such reflections were not, however, 'relentlessly' forward-looking but suggested a *revolutionary* nostalgic temporality in which conventional nostalgic pastness was superficially tempered by future promise, while the ability to achieve such a future remained subtly underwritten by selective memories of Britain's former imperial accomplishments. This imperial nostalgia suggested tensions in its content, as the NFF's US orientation appeared at odds with the anti-American leanings of New Elizabethanism's major proponent – the mid-century British military inventor and Commonwealth enthusiast, Barnes Wallis, whom Cummings cited directly (Cummings, 2005, p. 1; Zaidi, 2008, p. 64). For Wallis, as for some contemporary Anglospherists (Bell and Vucetic, 2019), the rise of America threatened to consign Britain to a mere 'satellite' and hamper the renewal of its pivotal global status (Zaidi, 2008, p. 71). Despite such contradictions, New Elizabethan and Anglo-American ideas continued to fuse together and combine with Cummings' broader techno-nationalist political thought, coalescing in the Brexit referendum where he returned to his dual criticism of the EU and contemporary British state. Deeming both incapable of the 'rapid experimentation and adaptation' (Vote Leave, 2016e) that disruptive 'technological and economic forces' demanded (Vote Leave, 2016a, 2016g), Cummings argued that contemporary governance structures lacked the capacity for 'error correction' (Cummings, 2017a, 2018b; Treasury Committee, 2016, p. 22–3). By being 'extremely centralised and hierarchical' (Cummings, 2017a), such institutions were thus ill-equipped to process information, solve problems (Cummings, 2017a) and 'learn from

things fast' (Treasury Committee, 2016, p. 22). For Cummings and Vote Leave this partly explained why the EU was 'broken', 'slow' and in 'crisis', and why Britain was struggling to keep pace with technological advances (Vote Leave, 2016a, 2016e).

Despite the veneer of modernity and objectivity that these appeals to science afforded, however, such claims remained subtly underwritten by nostalgias for an Anglo-American iteration of Britain's imperial and colonial past. Cummings unwittingly expanded on these undertones on his personal website and in evidence before the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee, where he spoke of the intrinsic superiority of the 'evolved institutions' (Cummings, 2017a) of the 'Anglo-American political system and its common law' (Cummings, 2017b; also Treasury Committee, 2016, p. 22–3). Common law occupies a special position within Whiggish narratives of British history as an emblem of national qualities of reason and 'common sense flexibility' (Spiering, 2015, p. 55–9). Cummings exhibited a similar perspective when, quoting the physicist David Deutsch, he argued that unlike the EU, and despite contemporary British institutional failings, a capacity for evidence-based flexibility and 'error correction' was inherent to Britain's 'more advanced political culture' (Cummings, 2017a). Indeed, while the ability to adapt to new evidence had been 'one of the greatest strengths of the Anglo-American system over 200 years' (Treasury Committee, 2016, pp. 22–3), EU institutions were wilfully opposed to such a principle (Cummings, 2017a). In summary, whereas historic institutions such as the English common law constantly updated like a strong immune system or market prices, more recent structures like those of the EU allowed 'more and more resources [to be] devoted to reinforcing failure' (Cummings, 2014a, 2017a). By leaving the EU and reforming Whitehall according to historically rooted 'scientific' principles, Britain would therefore be able to 'do what we used to do which is be a model of good governance for countries around the world' (The Economist, 2016).

By Cummings' own admission such specific points played little role in the referendum debate (Cummings, 2017a). They warrant attention, however, because they provide further evidence of how deep-rooted empire nostalgias subtly underpinned Cummings', and hence Vote Leave's, 'forward-looking' perspective. Cummings' longstanding desire to reimagine Britain's world role, as expressed in his work at the NFF, in Vote Leave's *Heroes* video and in the other campaign outputs discussed above, reflected the persistence of an imperial nostalgia concerned, however implicitly, with recapturing and extending the hegemonic trappings once associated with empire. His wistfulness for the shared institutions of Anglo-America and Britain's civilizing mission of spreading prudent governance around the world, meanwhile, pointed to a colonial nostalgia characterized by flattering narratives of institutional and racial harmony. Indeed, while Cummings distanced himself from the 'romantic pursuit of "the special relationship"' between Britain and the US (Cummings, 2014b), his fondness for Anglo-America nevertheless implied colonial nostalgia's sanitization of the countries' historic ties. As such, Cummings' desire to place post-Brexit Britain back at the heart of a global network of science and technology, his civilizational belief in Britain as an exemplar of good governance, and his faith in the inherent scientism of the English common law all resonate with Bennett's nostalgic Anglo-American Anglosphere.

The *revolutionary* nostalgic temporality embodied in Cummings' longstanding political thought is also suggestive of the origins of Vote Leave's broader preference for anti-nostalgic nostalgia. As noted above, the campaign evinced a peculiar variant of Whig

history that favours the heroic achievements of the nation's forward-looking men. A similar veneration of forward-looking heroism pervaded the interview responses of 13 of Vote Leave's former personnel, who largely rejected interpretations of simple nostalgia in their campaigning, instead praising its scientific aspirations (Anonymous, 1, 6, 2018). An alleged reformist rather than simply restorative spirit was also offered in support of Vote Leave's anti-nostalgic credentials (Anonymous, 6, 2018). Further interviewees acknowledged the importance of emotion in the referendum but downplayed the role of nostalgia specifically (Anonymous, 9, 2019), or located its presence within certain factions of the voting public or broader Euro-sceptic movement, rather than within the Vote Leave campaign itself (Anonymous, 3, 9, 2018). Another argued robustly that interpretations of nostalgia were 'complete nonsense' and suggested instead that Brexiters were 'not nostalgic' but advanced a 'broad based serious argument about having a civilised, democratic country in the future' (Anonymous, 10, 2018). A few interviewees were a little more inclined to entertain the role of nostalgia but immediately tempered its backward-looking connotations with caveats that elevated the importance of the future (Anonymous, 3, 2018) or the present (Anonymous, 8, 12, 2018). As one interviewee argued, Vote Leave's calls for 'refreshing' Britain's historic international relations operated alongside a desire to create something 'new', 'modern' and 'forward-looking' (Anonymous, 1, 2018). On this view, whilst attempts to return Britain to a 'global context' were 'nostalgic by necessity' in that they required a return to a pre-EU Britain, Vote Leave also advocated applying a 'modern aspect to that', particularly in the form of scientific and technological advancement (Anonymous, 1, 2018).

As in Cummings' political thought and Vote Leave's broader campaigning, however, such responses remained underwritten by a past perfect view of the post-Brexit future that positioned Britain's EU membership as an inconvenient interruption to an increasingly progressive, Whiggish trajectory spearheaded by enlightened heroes. As such, a successful vote for Brexit would not only reconnect the nation with this prematurely disrupted history but revitalize its innovative and global potential through renewed interest in science and technology. Coupled with the empirical materials reviewed throughout this article, the testimony of Vote Leave interviewees implies that the campaign's emotional culture valued anti-nostalgic nostalgia, expressed through an apparently forward-looking yet historically-rooted gaze. This is an important insight as it speaks to underexplored dimensions of both elite British Euro-scepticism and of nostalgia itself. Euro-scepticism must be understood as the product of peculiar emotional and cultural formations, opening new pathways for challenging its often monolithic treatment. Likewise, nostalgia should not be viewed in uniform terms that privilege its relationship with pastness and lead to mistaken claims about its absence in ostensibly diluted, future-oriented political discourse. Nostalgia should instead be embraced as an emotion capable of cultivating complex temporal visions that underpin the manifold historiographical practices and nationalist narratives employed in British Euro-scepticism and beyond.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored Vote Leave's cultivation of a past perfect post-Brexit future underscored by persistent nostalgic views about the British empire that remain

embodied in contemporary imaginaries of the Eurosceptic Anglosphere and the futuristic promise of science and technology. In doing so, I have suggested how the cultural value attributed to representations of the past and future in such nationalist narratives draws on the longstanding pejorative connotations of nostalgia's origins as a medical disease, configuring apparently 'anti-nostalgic' expressions of nostalgia. This insight undermines assertions of nostalgia's absence in seemingly diluted and forward-looking yet historically-rooted nationalist narratives and contributes primarily to our understanding of the emotional resonance, and consequent persistence, of a 'futuristic' Eurosceptic repackaging of Britain's imperial and colonial past.

Importantly, the analysis also suggests applications that stretch beyond the study of British Euroscepticism alone. By demonstrating how nostalgia analysis helps us to account for the cultural and emotional resonance of political discourse, it also speaks to advocates of an 'emotional turn' in EU studies more broadly. On this view, the time is ripe for the discipline to concertedly depart from reductive interest-based or anodyne identity-based interpretations of EU integration and its contestation, and embrace emotions as important sites through which such discourses are configured. In this sense, the article complements an as yet slim body of EU Studies work that has begun to engage political emotions in empirical areas including trade (Siles-Brügge, 2019), the EU's external image (Chaban and Kelly, 2017), and its founding myths (Kølvraa, 2016).

Finally, the article also speaks to scholars concerned with escalating nationalisms beyond Britain. As noted above, while there are peculiar features to the nostalgias of elite British Euroscepticism, resting on the specifics of national history, the restorative gaze of conventional nostalgia and revolutionary lens of anti-nostalgia also animate distinctive strains of nationalist politics further afield. This article provides strong analytic foundations for further exploring the intersection of these forces in different contexts. While anti-nostalgia may not always draw on an empire history, for example, the article suggests that it will exhibit a similar temporal relationship between past and future, underpinned by a desire to gain distance from the pejorative implications of traditional backward-looking nostalgia. This analysis opens new pathways for future research to build on, enhancing extant work that has identified anti-nostalgia's revolutionary nationalist modality in Hungary, Ecuador and China, and suggesting the need for comparative insights into the relationship between nostalgia, anti-nostalgia and nationalism across Europe and beyond.

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