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Economic nostalgia: the salience of economic identity for the Brexit campaign

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Abstract

The rise of ‘new populism’ is commonly explained by two opposing approaches known as cultural backlash and economic deprivation. Their antagonism perpetuates a dichotomous understanding of economy versus identity. This article contributes to scholarly attempts to overcome this dichotomy by introducing the concept of economic identity. It suggests to bring ‘the economic’ back into culturalist explanations as a discursive motif that can be charged with identity and tradition. I argue that shared assumptions about what economic practices, institutions and conventions appear appropriate for the nation can serve the purpose of national identification. A qualitative discourse analysis of almost 400 Brexit campaign documents shows that those in favour of withdrawal and often considered ‘populist’ did not neglect economic arguments. But instead of relying on brute economic calculus, they referred to Britain’s economic traditions and images of a glorious economic past. By linking economic critique of the EU to issues of British heritage, Leave made Brexit a question of national economic identity—a discursive strategy particularly resonating with those economically deprived.

Key words: identity, economic sociology, UK, discourse, politics

JEL classification: Z130 economic sociology, economic anthropology, language, social and economic stratification

1. Introduction

When the early morning of June 24 revealed the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the world was astonished. Many critical observers dismissed the decision as stubborn nationalism, an irrational neglect of economic globalization. They discarded it as an economic ‘shot in the foot’ (Jones, 2016) and blamed the vote in favour of Brexit on the campaign’s strategy to focus on topics of national identity and belonging—while omitting a substantial discussion of the economic costs and benefits of withdrawal. Ever since, movements from the

Polish PiS to Donald Trump's supporters to the French yellow vests have similarly been assessed as instances of 'identity trumps economics'. Such public critique builds on two major assumptions: (a) a focus on identity is seen as distinctive feature of new populist movements; and (b) identity is depicted as opposed to economic arguments.

In the academic debate on the global resurgence of populism, this perspective is echoed and substantiated by a strand known as 'cultural backlash'. Scholars like Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2019) argue that populist support is driven by actors who perceive changing cultural frames as a threat to their more traditional lifestyles. To this perspective, questions of national identity and cultural polarization are key for understanding the populist conjuncture. But what is more, cultural backlash explanations are often explicitly positioned in opposition to 'economic deprivation'¹ approaches. While the latter emphasizes the predominance of economic structure and understands populist support as a (more or less) rational response to economic grievance, proponents of cultural backlash maintain that resentment is *not* driven by economic interests but by a desire of 'belonging somewhere' (Goodhart, 2017) and demarcation from 'the others'. More often than not, their antagonism towards economic deprivation approaches induces culturalist perspectives to perpetuate a dichotomy of 'economy versus identity'—and to discard 'the economic' as a valid reference for explaining the recent populist crisis altogether.

While the economic sociology approach suggested in this article is closely attached to culturalist perspectives, I critically engage with the dichotomous understanding underlying many cultural backlash explanations. I argue that 'the economic' and 'the cultural' are not mutually exclusive spheres. In order to bring 'the economic' back into identity and discourse centred approaches, this article proposes the concept of national *economic identity*. It refers to a set of shared assumptions about what economic practices, institutions and conventions should characterize a nation's economic system and distinguish it from others. Drawing on a discourse analysis of almost 400 documents from the 2016 Brexit campaign, my empirical investigation shows that economic ideas can well serve as points of reference for collective, national identities and are therefore apt to be instrumentalized in political discourse. The ability of the proponents of withdrawal (Leave) to mobilize a very heterogeneous alliance was not based on the omission of economic arguments. Rather Leave alliances—irrespective of being left-wing or right-wing—charged economic arguments with identity, nostalgia and emotion. Unlike the advocates of sustained EU membership (Remain), Leave did not refer to a simplistic economic calculus, but instead legitimized their incoherent economic policy positions with promises of reviving economic traditions. Appeals to Britain's multifaceted and historically contingent economic identity presented Leave as compatible with different ideologies—and provided voters with frames to make sense of their 'perceived deprivation'.

The suggested concept of economic identity resonates well with current critiques that consider the opposition between culturalist and economic explanations as problematic for a comprehensive understanding of populism (Noury and Roland, 2020, p. 435). Indeed, scholars have started to explore the interaction of economic and cultural factors, mostly tying cultural resentment and identarian anxieties back to economic contexts and material grievance. This article contributes to this growing integrative strand of literature. However, inspired by new economic sociology, it offers a complementary perspective that considers

1 For an excellent overview of this literature, see Noury and Roland (2020, p. 429ff).

‘the economy’ not primarily as material context, but as a discursive motif that can itself become a question of identity and tradition.

The next two sections depict economic identity as an analytic concept that brings ‘the economic’ back into culturalist explanations for the recent rise of populism. The concept is then fleshed out by an empirical study of the 2016 Brexit campaign. Based on the results of a qualitative discourse analysis, I first explore the role of economic arguments and nostalgia in both camps. I then depict the versatile economic traditions Leave employed to strengthen their argument. The conclusion shows how economic identity provides new perspectives on the controversy surrounding the research on ‘new populism’ and facilitates a rapprochement of both cultural backlash and economic deprivation explanations.

2. Economy versus identity: two alternative explanations for the rise of ‘new populism’

The precise definition of what ‘populism’ refers to, whether the term appropriately or at least usefully describes the current ruptures, remains contested (e.g. [Molyneux and Osborne, 2017](#)). Although aware of the shortcomings of this notion, I adopt it as a proxy for recent political developments. As a working definition and following what [Cas Mudde and Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser \(2018\)](#) have described as ideational approach, we can consider populism as political action that reclaims unfettered majority rule and depicts the ‘real’ people as opposed to the degenerate elites which wrongfully govern them.

Indeed, despising elites and the claim to speak for ‘the people’ is far from being new. In most countries, including Britain ([Sandbrook, 2018](#)), this well-established narrative reappears in historically contingent forms ([Rooduijn, 2014](#); [Piwoni, 2015](#)). Yet, as [Rogers Brubaker \(2017\)](#) emphasizes, we are witnessing a particular ‘populist moment’ that becomes apparent as a series of unexpected political outcomes, of political crises, of victories and almost-victories by movements remorselessly challenging established institutions. The increased populist supply and demand ([Norris, 2005](#)), i.e. the emergence and distinctiveness of populist movements on the one side and the willingness of voters to support them on the other side, appear remarkable. A wide, interdisciplinary community has therefore set out to explain what is often referred to as ‘new populism’² ([Revelli, 2019](#)).

Much of the respective research explicitly focuses on explaining right-wing, far right or radical right populism ([Ford and Goodwin, 2014b](#); [Wodak, 2015](#); [Ausserladscheider, 2019](#)); others distinguish between mobilization of right- and left-wing populisms ([Burgoon et al., 2019](#); [Manow, 2018](#)). However, this binary scheme barely applies to the *movimento 5 stelle*, the French *gilets jaunes* or the Brexit movement, on which this article focuses. The field of scholarship dealing with ‘new populism’ is therefore less differentiated along categories of right and left, but rather along two basic explanatory models: economic deprivation and cultural backlash (cf. [Noury and Roland, 2020](#)). While both approaches relate the populist renaissance to an increasing division of society, both emphasize alternative ‘fault lines’

2 While I do not assume that ‘new populism’ fundamentally differs from older versions of populism, I adopt this term to indicate that the literature I engage with is concerned with the recent populist conjuncture many Western societies have been experiencing for approximately the last two decades.

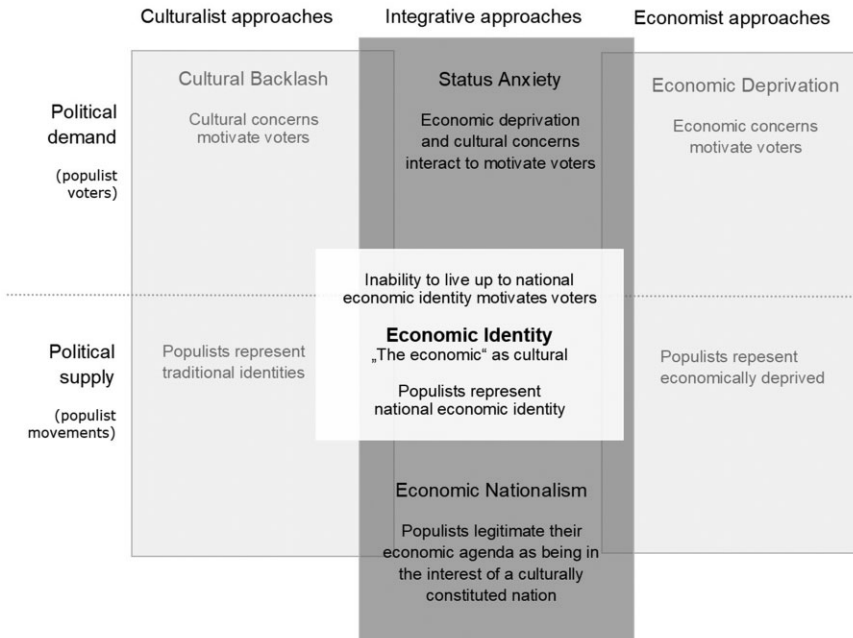


Figure 1. Explaining new populism: explanatory focus of important approaches and how they relate the ‘the economic’ to ‘the cultural’.

(O’Reilly, 2016), namely ‘the economic’ and ‘the cultural’. Figure 1 summarizes how important demand and supply-side explanations to populism differ according to these fault lines.

The concept of *economic deprivation* (Figure 1, upper right) draws on basic Marxist reasoning as well as previously established theories of populism (e.g. Bell, 1964). Often rooted in political economy, it explains populist support as an (at least subjectively) rational response to rising economic inequality and experiences of economic decline. The recent rise of populist movements is then traced back to ongoing economic transitions like globalization (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Manow, 2018; Rodrik, 2018), (neo)liberalization (Pettifor, 2017; Hopkin, 2020), changing growth regimes (Tooze, 2018; Hopkin and Blyth, 2019) and particularly the austerity measures following the 2008 economic crisis (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018; Margalit, 2019). Economic deprivation explanations typically argue that the often more protectionist and non-liberal policies of populists appear in the economic interest of those ‘left behind’. This argument is then supported by empirical research that can relate populist support back to socio-economic characteristics. For the case of Brexit, studies both on the level of individuals (e.g. Hobolt, 2016; Alabrese *et al.*, 2019) and agglomerates (e.g. Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Clarke *et al.*, 2017, pp. 146), have shown that lower income and education levels, a background in the working class, precarious jobs (Froud *et al.*, 2016; Warhurst, 2016), as well as experiences of austerity (Fetzer, 2019), regional economic decline (Adler and Ansell, 2020) or rapid rise of migrant workers (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2018) have bolstered the propensity to vote Leave. While this research has also found that—irrespective of one’s economic situation—age,

self-association as middle class (Antonucci *et al.*, 2017) and lack of migration background seem to favour Leave support, most studies confirm that Brexit has particularly resonated with those economically deprived.

While much of economic deprivation literature focuses on the political demand-side and the socio-economic circumstances of voters, it is complemented by a supply-side perspective that studies changes within the political landscape (cf. Figure 1, lower right). The political mainstream and particularly social democracy, it is argued, have ceased to promote policies in favour of those economically deprived (Elsässer *et al.*, 2018; Berman and Snegovaya, 2019; Hopkin and Blyth, 2019). The increasingly market-friendly, neoliberal orientation of parties formerly representing working class interests has left a substantial 'representational vacuum' (Voss, 2018) that populist movements are eager to fill. For Britain, the neoliberal shift in British politics is seen as major resource for the rise of far-right Ukip even in former Labour strongholds (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Cutts *et al.*, 2020)—a development that prepared the grounds for the subsequent outcome of the Brexit vote.

Though economic deprivation approaches contribute to a plausible interpretation of the rise of new populism, their underlying rationale is challenged from several directions. A first strand of critique argues that populist support is not in the objective interests of those already economically deprived. Vulnerable groups are seen to particularly suffer from the economic policy mixture of outside protectionism and internal deregulation advocated by new populism. In Britain, many economic analysts have predicted the damaging economic effects of Brexit, a message that was frenetically reiterated by the Remain campaign. Moreover, it seems that the loss of EU funds and additional trade barriers particularly affect those who voted Leave in the first place (Los *et al.*, 2017; Taylor-Gooby, 2017; Fetzer and Wang, 2020). Against these findings, the preferences of Leave supporters appear almost irrational, a 'vote against their pocketbook' (Gartzou-Katsouyanni *et al.*, 2022). While the economic consequences of Brexit and their social distribution will remain contested for some time—and their scholarly assessment clearly exceeds the scope of this article—it is worth recognizing that such evidence at least complicates the argument of populist support being a purely 'rational'—or at least intentionally rational—response to economic deprivation.

A second strand of critique emanates from a more value-centred perspective promoted, e.g. by Cultural Political Economy (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008; Best and Paterson, 2010) and emphasizes that actors need to first make sense of their deprivation and their interests if they are to become performative. Making sense is, however, a social and often discursive endeavour. As Mark Blyth has argued, what appears in individuals' economic interest is not self-evident but 'must be seen as intrinsically bound up with ideas' (2002, p. 270). In this vein, *perceptions* of economic deprivation, of receiving less than one deserves, can only be experienced relative to what Bob Jessop (2013) has described as 'economic imaginaries', i.e. normative ideas of how the economy is supposed to operate.³ While such critique does not deny the overall importance of economic deprivation for the rise of new populism, it points to the importance of interpretation and doubts that populist support can simply be derived as a rational response to socio-economic circumstances. For the case of Brexit, Bronk and Jacoby (2020) have for example emphasized the role of narratives for political interest

3 A related strand of research argues that deprivation can only be experienced *relative* to an imagined group of peers (Walker and Smith, 2002; Burgoon *et al.*, 2019; Kurer, 2020).

formation. The conclusion of this article will come back to this important perspective and relate it to my broader argument on economic identity.

For *cultural backlash* approaches (Figure 1, upper left) these challenges to economic deprivation models serve as vantage point to offer an alternative and often antagonistic explanation to the rise of new populism. Here, the critical societal division is not an economic but first and foremost a cultural divide.⁴ They emphasize the devaluation of national identities in favour of globally oriented lifestyles and observe an increasing polarization between the dominant cosmopolitans, who consider themselves as ‘progressive’, and those who feel vilified as ‘backwardly’ nationalists (Goodhart, 2017; Hochschild, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Reckwitz, 2020). It is argued that the pace of changing cultural norms and values, e.g. concerning race, gender, environment, religion, migration or food, has overwhelmed parts of the population and offended their more traditional identities. The loss of hegemonic cultural status is assumed to provoke an angry backlash (Mckenzie, 2017) against ‘progressive’ cultures and their most vulnerable representatives. While cultural backlash models address the general rise of new populism, they have particularly been adopted to explain the white working and middle class support for Brexit (e.g. Gest, 2016; Grey, 2016; Green and Shorrocks, 2021).

Similar to economic deprivation explanations, much of cultural backlash literature focuses on the political demand-side and addresses voters’ cultural values and anxieties. However, a complementary supply-side perspective (Figure 1, lower left) criticizes established political parties for merely strengthening individual rights, choices and identities, while failing to provide more integrative narratives. An excessive focus on economic reasoning, it is argued, has led political actors to ignore the most human need of belonging. Political decisions have excessively been legitimized by an individualistic economic calculus, while collective frames, like liberal or constitutional patriotism, promoted in the 1990s (Habermas, 1992; Gustavsson, 2019) have taken a back seat. Populism is considered to have benefited from this omission: Especially right-wing populism was able to instil nativist and often racist conceptions of citizenship and belonging that promise to re-establish appreciation for traditional lifestyles (Mudde, 2007; Bobo, 2017; Bonikowski, 2017).

More often than not, cultural backlash explanations are presented as opposed to economic deprivation approaches. Proponents emphasize that it is not economic deprivation that provokes resentment, but cultural cleavages (Wodak, 2015). Accordingly, it is not economic benefits, but references to a sense of belonging, to national traditions and exaggerated demarcation from ‘the others’ that are the most important populist sources of mobilization (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Cas Mudde (2007, p. 119) for example emphasizes this point in a chapter on the appeal of European populism called ‘It’s not the economy, stupid!’. Similarly, with regard to Brexit, Mathew Goodwin (2016) commented that ‘identity trumps economics in revolt against elites’, suggesting that the success of Leave was rooted in strategies explicitly subordinating economic interests to identity issues. In such accounts, economy and identity are referred to as mutual exclusive spheres that point to mutually exclusive explanations. This dichotomous understanding also becomes apparent in several studies that analyse cultural and economic factors as alternative causes of populism. By means of

4 This emphasis on culture vs economy relies on earlier work on the European radical right. Then, authors such as Kriesi *et al.* (2006) or Mudde (2007) have identified culture as an additional dimension to describe new political oppositions.

falsification, they attempt to clarify whether the current populist moment is *either* a question of economy *or* identity (Curtice, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Rippl and Seipel, 2018; Chan *et al.*, 2020). Overall, the predominance of cultural backlash approaches is justified by the claim that the economic, understood as socio-economic circumstances and respective economic interests, cannot convincingly explain the populist conjuncture.

This article critically engages with the dichotomous understanding of economy versus identity that underlies much of cultural backlash literature. In their attempt to oppose economic deprivation models that focus on economic structures and objective interests, cultural backlash explanations tend to discard economic factors altogether—and therefore fail to recognize how ‘the economic’ serves as a powerful discursive motif that can be charged with identity and tradition.

The concept of economic identity that I develop in the next section proposes to bring ‘the economic’ back into culturalist explanations. In this vein, it contributes to a recent strand of *integrative approaches* that sets out to overcome the dichotomy of economy vs. identity. Like Noury and Roland (2020, p. 435) in their germane literature review, scholars increasingly call for perspectives that explore the interaction of economic and cultural factors in order to understand populist conjunctures. As the central column of Figure 1 summarizes, such integrative approaches differ according to whether their explanation focuses on political demand or supply, but they also differ according to how precisely they conceptualize the relation between ‘the economic’ and ‘the cultural’.

A number of studies have taken up the plea for a more integrative approach from a political demand-side perspective (Figure 1, upper centre). They explore how voters’ cultural attitudes are influenced by economic contexts, and how in turn, cultural values mitigate the perception of objective economic circumstances. For example, Gidron and Hall’s (2017) focus on *status anxiety* emphasizes how both economic and cultural changes depress social status (cf similarly O’Reilly 2016). Closely related to my argument in this paper, Gest *et al.* (2018) propose the concept of ‘nostalgic deprivation’, i.e. the perception of being increasingly deprived and marginalized with respect to economic, social and political power. Most pertinent for the Brexit case, Carreras *et al.* (2019) use aggregate data of districts to show how objective economic grievance fosters specific cultural attitudes—that in turn made actors more prone to support Brexit. Studies like these tie resentment and disconcertment on the political demand-side back to ‘the economic’, which is understood as tangible economic context and material grievance.

The concept of economic identity that this paper proposes is consistent with some of the major assumptions of these studies. I particularly build on the idea of status and deprivation as multidimensional phenomena and I reiterate how economic conditions need to be interpreted through cultural frames in order to become politically performative. However, my perspective also deviates from these integrative approaches in one important respect. While they conceptualize ‘the economy’ as a sphere of hard-fact, a-historical interests and material grievances that may interact with but remain distinct from culture and identity, I suggest to consider ‘the economy’ in itself as cultural, i.e. as an important narrative frame that can be charged with identity, tradition and nostalgia.

The framing of economic arguments both by populists and political mainstream has indeed been explored by those few studies attempting to integrate economist and culturalist approaches from a political supply-side perspective (Figure 1, lower centre). Valentina Ausserladscheider (2019, with Wood, 2021), for example, claims that economic nationalism

(Nakano, 2004; Pryke, 2012) has become an important frame for populist discourse. In this perspective, economic nationalism refers to economic policies being justified as primarily promoting the interests of a culturally constituted nation and its natives. It emphasizes that in populist campaigns notions of national economic interest serve to legitimate diverse economic agendas even beyond protectionism (cf. Helleiner, 2002; Clift and Woll, 2012). Turning to Brexit, Matthew Watson (2018) argues that British mainstream politics and particularly the Remain campaign have long addressed 'the economy' merely as an abstract justification, i.e. a sphere that appears intangible and detached from the interests of those 'let down' by neoliberal politics. In line with my own empirical findings, Watson then assumes that Leave was able to successfully provide a less abstract and more relatable account of 'the economy'.

The concept of national economic identity, which I will specify in the next section, is closely related and highly complementary to the perspectives of Ausserladscheider and Watson. I share their basic conviction that exploring how populists frame their economic agenda is crucial for understanding the current populist conjuncture. However, referring to such economic frames in terms of economic *identity* allows for different vantage points with respect to both dimensions indicated in Figure 1. Most important, it does not only consider how populists use interests of a cultural nation to legitimate their economic agenda, but also captures how populists indeed frame economic concerns *as* cultural, i.e. as being in line with national traditions and heritage; as not only being beneficial but as being historically 'appropriate' for the nation. 'The economic' thus becomes a component of national identification, charged itself with emotions of nostalgia and belonging—which overall aligns my approach closer to culturalist perspectives.⁵ Besides, Ausserladscheider (2019) explicitly positions economic nationalism approaches as integrative supply-side explanations, suitable to bridge economic and culturalist explanations in order to make sense of populists' economic narratives. In a similar vein, the subsequent empirical study uses the perspective of national economic identity to explore and understand populist narratives. Yet, identity, as a basic sociological concept that is at once collective and individual, also lends itself to explanations that focus on the political demand-side, i.e. voters' subjective perceptions of deprivation and respective political preferences. My approach is therefore not strictly limited to supply-side explanations.

Overall, in the pursuit of understanding the current populist moment, the concept of national economic identity sets out to overcome overly dichotomous understandings of economy vs. identity. The perspective I propose emanates from culturalist explanations but brings the 'the economic' back in as an important discursive motif that can be charged with tradition, nostalgia and emotion. This integrative approach clearly leans towards culturalist and supply-side explanations of populism (cf. position in Figure 1) and is applied as such in the subsequent empirical study of the Brexit campaign. Yet, national economic identity could also serve as a conceptual bridge towards economic deprivation explanations that rather focus on the political demand-side. A tentative impression of this bridge is provided in the conclusion of this article. But to begin with, the next section develops 'economic identity' as an analytic concept that emphasizes how economic institutions, practices and

5 While most economic nationalism literature adopts an instrumental-realist perspective and focus on national economic interests, Crane's (1998) ideational approach emphasizes the importance of national identity. It is discussed in the next section.

conventions can themselves become important components of national heritage. As such, they are susceptible to being politicized in identarian discourse.

3. Economic identity: an economic sociology perspective

Most sociological research does not understand the nation as a 'natural' entity (e.g. Gellner, 1983, p. 48ff). Benedict Anderson's well-known concept of nations as *imagined communities* makes this most explicit. The nation is first and foremost seen as an idea, 'a cognitive frame through which people apprehend social reality' (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 429). Nationhood is consequently driven by shared assumptions about the nation's foundations, character and virtues, an image of what construes the nation and what distinguishes it from others. This basic construal is referred to as national identity.

Perceptions of what sets 'us' apart from 'them' are rooted in historically contingent characteristics and often involve multi-layered images. Scholarship distinguishes between ethnic, cultural and civic ideal types of national identity (Lepsius and Campbell, 2004; Smith, 2009; Bonikowski, 2016). The former, also referred to as primordial identities, draw on ascriptive criteria like race, ancestry or country of birth. Such conceptions are considered the predominant mode of identification in traditional, pre-modern communities characterized by ethnic homogeneity. The emergence of the modern multi-ethnic nation state is then associated with two less restrictive ideas of national belonging: cultural identification refers for example to shared language, religion, cuisine or customs, whereas civic identification refers to the pride in political or legal institutions.

Irrespective of ethnicity, culture or citizenship being the major reference point, national identification draws on the idea of a shared past. While communities may also aspire to a common future (Ybema, 2010; Suckert 2022), the perception of a common history is a defining element of national identities (Olick and Robbins, 1998, p. 122ff). Nations are 'communities of memory' (Bellah *et al.*, 1985, p. 153) that rely on a sense of continuity. References to shared traditions, heritage, myths and heroic ancestors foster awareness of the community predating and transcending the individual. For historians like Koselleck (1981) or Anderson (2006) the emergence of the modern nation state corresponds with national cultures of remembrance.⁶ In the British case, which this study focuses on, references to the country's extensive traditions have been acknowledged as particularly important (Marcussen *et al.*, 1999; Wright, 2009).

However, the perception of shared pasts cannot be equated with historical facts or actual common experience. Not history per se, but the stories being told about history matter. Building on the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) for instance show that national traditions are not a revival of actual historic practices. Instead, the authors depict how traditions are 'inventions': constructed interpretations of the past facilitating collective identities in the present. These interpretations are acquired through socialization and passed on from generation to generation. In the processes of re-narration, mnemonic frames about cultural, civic or ethnic heritage are discursively enacted and adapted (Handler and Linnekin, 1984; Giddens, 1994).

6 Similarly, the possibility of a genuinely European identity has often been disputed with reference to the lack of a European pre-history (Smith, 1992).

From an economic sociology perspective, the marginal role of economic factors within the literature on national identity is surprising. At best, economic infrastructure, for example mass production, is regarded as a vehicle for the diffusion of national identities (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). While Smith (1992, p. 60), for instance, mentions the economy as constitutive for modern nation states and even enlists economic aspects as potential components of national identity, this idea is never elaborated. Instead ethnic, cultural and civic issues are depicted as the only legitimate building blocks for national identities. Even more so, a focus on economic aspects is seen as conflicting with the emergence of collective identification and emotional attachment. Scholars doubt, for example, that the primarily economic union of the EU is capable of inspiring a genuinely European identity (Lepsius, 2006). Involuntarily reiterating the mantra of neoclassical economics, economic ideas are depicted as universal and a-historical. They are seen as rational ‘hard facts’ that unlike ethnic, civic or cultural factors can neither be charged with affect nor serve the purpose of collective identification. Similar to the dichotomy presented above, economy and identity are considered as opposing concepts.

The shortcomings of such an ‘analytic separation of economy and nation’ within the literature on national identity has also been observed by George Crane (1998, p. 67). In his attempt to bring national identity back into the debate on economic nationalism and thus complement this strand with an ideational approach, Crane emphasizes the necessity of an extended understanding of national identity ‘that encompasses representations of economic life as well as socio-cultural memories’ (1998, p. 56). Drawing on new economic sociology, this article takes up Crane’s call and proposes to consider economic elements as potential sources for national identification. If considered as economic heritage, economic institutions, practices and conventions can inform a nation’s identity.

New economic sociology does not see the economy as functional system decoupled from other social spheres. For economic sociologists, the economy—understood as institutions, relations and conventions of production, exchange and consumption—is mutually intertwined with wider society. Scholars have particularly shown how culture is not an antithesis to the economy, but how instead cultural values and norms are superimposed onto economic action (DiMaggio, 2005). Cultural conventions are inscribed into economic practices, both enabling and constraining them. Vivian Zelizer’s seminal studies on ‘the social meaning of money’ (Zelizer, 1997) demonstrate, for example, how money—the economic institution par excellence—is not only a means of payment but also a cultural symbol used for social distinction. She observes how actors refer to local or regional currencies that affirm their distinctive cultural identities. Although Zelizer primarily focuses on communities beneath the national level, she shows that money can substantiate collective identities. Emotional discourses about ‘the weakening of sterling’ or the ‘return to the D-Mark’ illustrate that national currencies and respective monetary policies are not only subject to ‘neutral’ financial facts but are attached to mnemonic narratives and national identities (Sørensen, 2016). Similarly, Nina Bandelj (2008) has shown how attitudes towards economic globalization and economic practices such as FDI relate to a nation’s historically shaped cultural repertoires and social identities. Accordingly, diverse economic institutions, practices or conventions can become sources of national identification.

As with ethnic, cultural or civic factors, references to the past appear crucial for economic identification. What is considered a national economic virtue is often shaped by notions of collective memory and continuity. For example, the powerful idea of free trade as

particular British virtue is often related back to the 19th century and the ‘myth of the repeal’ (Howe, 1997, p. 5), i.e. the abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws which were blamed for high wheat prices and associated famine. This change in British trade policy was at the time promoted by an enormous publicity campaign which instilled many of the narratives still influential today (Suckert, 2020). Led by the Anti-Corn Law League and its spiritus rector Richard Cobden, it claimed that economic state intervention and the restriction of free global markets would make food excessively expensive and thus harm the man in the street for the benefit of undeserving state elites (Spall, 1988; Pickering and Tyrell, 2000). The repeal of the Corn Laws was then celebrated as the liberation of the working class and enabling the rise of Britain as the centre of world trade and imperial power. These historic narratives associated with free trade have become part of Britain’s economic identity and are still used to justify economic policies as ‘British’ or criticize them as ‘non-British’. Piers Ludlow (2015) shows that in parliamentary debates in 1971 both promoters *and* critics of EU accession referred to liberal traditions of cheap food and related internationalism, which were identified as particular British virtues. Opponents accused each other of not shedding ‘a single tear at the abandoned tomb of Richard Cobden’ (Hansard, October 25, 1971, col. 1263, cited according to Ludlow, 2015, p. 24). As we will see, this same economic tradition and the historical narratives associated with it are to be found in the Brexit campaigns of 2016.

Hence, economic identity⁷ is to be understood as a set of shared assumptions about what economic practices, institutions and conventions should characterize a nation’s economic system and distinguish it from others. Economic traditions, i.e. mnemonic narratives about the economic past of a country and its historic economic virtues and principles, are major references for economic identity. They serve as an ideational background against which economic interests are formulated, macroeconomic developments and individual circumstances are assessed as positive, negative, appropriate or unfair.

Sociological research emphasizes that national identities cannot be understood as a coherent bloc, but rather as ‘a stable repertoire of competing narratives, which fluctuate in relative dominance and leave lasting imprints on policy and public consciousness’ (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 436). Consequently, economic identity is only one possible component of multidimensional national identification. It is complementary to cultural, civic or even ethnic modes of identification. To what extent the self-consciousness of a nation draws on economic factors remains an empirical question. Likewise, economic identification can similarly draw on multiple, different and even opposing frames and traditions, referring to both progressive and conservative ideologies. A nation can see itself as a workbench of the world, but also as a digital economy hub; as an advocate of free trade, but also as a traditional stronghold for trade unions. The actual economic history of a country serves as a basis. In order to become perceived as traditions that citizens identify with, history must, however, be taken up in discourses and established as an interpretative repertoire that relates to the present and the future.

7 In his study on the attempt to change Argentinians’ financial practices, Fridman (2010) also refers to the notion of ‘economic identity’ as a synonym to national mentality, but does not specify the concept. The term ‘identité économique’ is used in a similar way but not further elaborated in French analyses of Todd (2008) as well as Salais and Storper (1995)—and in both cases omitted in respective English translations.

The concept of economic identity, as developed in this section, clearly relates to the level of nations. It describes a set of assumptions and narratives about what economic practices, institutions and conventions are deemed characteristic and appropriate for a nation and distinguish it from others. However, the reference to ‘identity’, a basic sociological concept that is both collective and individual at once, also indicates the explanatory potential of national economic identities below the level of nations. Like other components of national identity, these economic frames need to be enacted by individuals and are—often actively—translated into individual or subordinate collective identities (Thompson, 2001; Edensor, 2020). National economic identities can inform more narrow identities such as, e.g. the German engineer, the French worker, the American entrepreneur or the British consumer. As such, they can shape individual economic behaviour, economic policy preferences or perceptions of deservingness of those who consider themselves as ‘belonging’ to the nation.

By emphasizing how economic aspects can themselves become mobilized as viable components of national identification, the concept of economic identity can serve to bring ‘the economic’ back into identity and discourse-centred explanations to new populism. While the underlying perspective emphasizes many of the basic premises of cultural backlash approaches—e.g. the importance of culture, interpretation and socially mitigated perceptions—it cautions not to cede economic aspects to alternative, rational-choice modes of explanations. Economic practices, institutions and conventions are not merely ‘hard-facts’ but inherently cultural. Therefore, they can (and should) also become the object of culturalist analyses. Acknowledging economic identity as a powerful discursive motif complements cultural backlash approaches—but it also facilitates a rapprochement towards economic deprivation models and therefore complements recent integrative approaches. The subsequent sections exemplify the explanatory benefit of an economic identity perspective by showing how national economic traditions shaped the Brexit controversy and its outcome.

4. The Brexit campaign: data and methods

On February 23, 2016, David Cameron kept his election promise and confirmed an EU referendum to be held in June of that year. It was then, if not before, that the public debate on Brexit intensified. Various movements started to organize their campaigns to promote or oppose Britain’s withdrawal from the EU. Table 1 gives an overview of all alliances, parties and organizations systematically included in this analysis. Associated with heterogenous ideologies, stakeholders and institutional affiliations, these groups constitute important carriers of both the Leave and Remain campaigns that are here analysed as discourse. Following discourse-analytical frameworks established by Rainer Diaz-Bone (2006) and Reiner Keller (2018), the campaigns are understood as interrelated statements bound by the topic of EU withdrawal. In such political discourses knowledge about what is, what was and what should be is publicly negotiated. Though national identity is performed in many everyday practices, it is in such instances that the underlying assumptions become articulated most explicitly (Bonikowski, 2016). The discourse analysis presented examines the ‘deeper structure of the discursive formation’ (Diaz-Bone, 2006, p. 1). It reconstructs the underlying temporal order as well as recurring interpretive frames (Keller *et al.*, 2018, p. 32).

Table 1. Alliances and number of analysed campaign documents

<i>Leave</i>		156	<i>Remain</i>		224
BeLeave	Vote Leave's youth campaign	13	Another Europe is Possible	Umbrella group of left-wing pro-European associations aiming at reforming the EU	5
Better Off Out	Campaign of the right-libertarian Freedom Association	21	Britain Stronger In Europe	Cross-party coalition, official lead campaign organization	43
The Bruges Group	Eurosceptic, right-libertarian association	7	British Influence	Neoliberal, pro-European association	2
Conservatives for Britain	Alliance within the Conservative Party	3	CampaignToRemain	Social media campaign	25
Grassroots Out	Cross-party alliance	3	Conservatives In	Official alliance of the Conservative Party	24
Green Leaves	Alliance within the Green Party	4	EU-UK	Campaign initiated by artists	12
Labour Leave	Alliance within the Labour Party	3	Greens for Europe	Alliance within the Green Party	28
The Leave Alliance	Umbrella group of Eurosceptic, right-libertarian associations	3	Labour In for Britain	Official alliance of the Labour Party	50
Leave.EU	Formerly 'The Know', cross-party umbrella group with strong ties to UKIP	38	Left Unity	Umbrella group of left-wing pro-European associations	12
Left Leave	Umbrella group of left Eurosceptic associations	13	Liberal Democrats	Campaign of the Liberal Democrats Party	7
Lexit-Network	International alliance of left Eurosceptics	9	Others:		4
Trade Unionists Against the EU	Umbrella group of Eurosceptic trade unionists and left-wing parties	2			
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	Party for the Independence of the UK	14			
Vote Leave	Cross-party alliance, official lead campaign organization	26			
Others		2			

The corpus created for analysis includes different, albeit comparable, formats of campaign material. It focuses on 'advertisement-like' documents, i.e. written and graphic contributions not exceeding four pages, directly addressing potential voters and ascribable to one or more campaign groups.⁸ Individual statements were not considered. The corpus includes ads published in print, online or social media, but also brochures, banners, posters, website content, caricatures and newsletters. A database provided by LSE Digital Library⁹ was complemented by further research. Internet, Facebook and Twitter accounts were systematically searched for all groups. The Internet archive waybackmachine¹⁰ allowed access to content no longer available on the original website. Conventional internet searches generated further material. The resulting corpus contains 380 documents, with 156 and 224 documents associated with Leave and Remain respectively (see Table 1).

A first analysis looking for recurring economic policy ideals, found economic issues to be an important topic for both camps. As a by-catch, however, it also indicated that references to the past were of particular importance for the Leave campaign. Therefore, a subsequent study systematically analysed how the campaigns normatively refer (positive, negative) to different time horizons (past, present, future). Drawing on content-analytical tools, the coding process was informed by inductively developed guidelines. Respective codes were assigned to units of meaning¹¹ by two analysts using the QDA software Atlas.ti. For the first 60 documents, we coded according to a consensual approach; to ensure intersubjective code assignments, results were intensively discussed, reflected and guidelines adapted accordingly (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 74f). In the second round of independent coding, an intercoder agreement of 90% was achieved (future 89%; past 93%, present 86%).¹² Although these measures can only give a crude idea of the validity of qualitative analyses (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019), they reveal the coding process to be sufficiently robust.

A final step of qualitative in-depth analysis and interpretation served to iteratively examine respectively coded segments and work out distinctive economic traditions and historical patterns of interpretation. The results of this qualitative discourse analysis are presented in subsequent sections. Quotations derived from the original campaign material serve to

8 Short, 'advertisement-like' documents offer concise representations of political arguments. The analysis focused on these documents to assure comparability while capturing the essence of the divergent campaigns. However, discarding more comprehensive campaign documents such as manifestos, campaign newspapers and background analyses may have excluded more complex lines of economic argumentation on both sides.

9 LSE 2019. *The Brexit collection* | LSE Digital Library <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/brexit/2016> (accessed January 14, 2019).

10 Internet Archive 2019. *waybackmachine*. <http://archive.org/web/web.php> (accessed October 29, 2019).

11 The PI qualitatively segmented each document into appropriate units of meaning that provide a coherent argument (usually one to five sentences and related illustrations) (Campbell *et al.*, 2013). Within our corpus we identified 1.553 units of meaning.

12 The quantified assessment of intercoder agreement is based on the assignment of six possible codes to units of meaning. Agreement on a unit was assumed when a particular code was assigned by both analysts or not assigned by both. Each unit could be assigned to more than one code. For this approach to unitization and simple proportion agreement method (instead of, e.g. Krippendorff's α) see also Campbell *et al.* (2013) and Kuckartz and Rädiker (2019).

exemplify findings whereas quantified representations indicate how ‘typical’ they are for the overall corpus.

5. The importance of economic arguments

Advocates of cultural backlash perspectives argue that sovereignty and immigration rather than economic issues were decisive for the Brexit referendum (Curtice, 2016; Clarke *et al.*, 2017). Fear of foreign influence was undeniably a crucial concern: Threats to national sovereignty were mentioned in half of the Leave ads analysed (49%), problems of immigration in almost a third (28%). Though the relevance of both issues emphasizes the importance of demarcation and identification for the campaign, it does not, however, imply that economic issues were irrelevant. Instead, sovereignty and immigration were intertwined with economic concerns.

Similar to what Lamont *et al.* (2017) have found for American populism, the Leave campaign depicted immigration as a primarily economic threat.¹³ On a poster already published in the 2014 European Election, UKIP, for example, pointed an outstretched index finger at the viewer and asked ‘26 million people in Europe are looking for work. And whose jobs are they after?’. Rather than highlighting cultural or civic concerns, migration is depicted as an economic problem. While Leave also played on resentment against those perceived as ‘culturally different’,¹⁴ migration was explicitly associated with job losses, tight housing markets or the economic costs for social and educational systems. The headline on a leaflet distributed by the Bruges Group summarizes these concerns: ‘Immigration makes it harder to attend a good university, obtain a well-paid job, and secure affordable living accommodation.’

In a similar vein, sovereignty was addressed as an economic concern. VoteLeave for example paired the image of a dirty carpet and a long-needed vacuum cleaner with James Dyson’s quote: ‘We will create more wealth and more jobs by being outside the EU than we will within it and we will be in control of our destiny. And control, I think, is the most important thing in life and business.’ Labour Leave provided a similar, economically oriented understanding when deploring lost sovereignty: ‘The UK Parliament is not allowed to decide how best to support key sectors like manufacturing, farming & fishing.’ Overwhelmingly, sovereignty was depicted as the power to define national economic policies without interference by others.

Since the EU is first and foremost an economic union, it may not seem surprising that its consequences for immigration and sovereignty are addressed from an economic point of view. However, it emphasizes that economic aspects were important for both campaign camps. Overall, two-thirds of the campaign documents analysed refer to economic aspects as a primary or ancillary argument. As Figure 2 shows, Leave and Remain campaigns do not differ substantially. If anything, Leave’s argumentation appears slightly more economic.

In contrast to what cultural backlash theses suggest for the political supply-side, the success of the pro-Brexit movement therefore cannot be explained by neglecting economic perspectives in favour of identity. Leave and Remain both adopted economic arguments. However, they embedded these arguments differently. The following sections discuss how

13 The case for migration as an economic threat is also made by Frerichs and Sankari (2016).

14 Nigel Farage’s controversial Breaking Point poster probably being the best-known example;

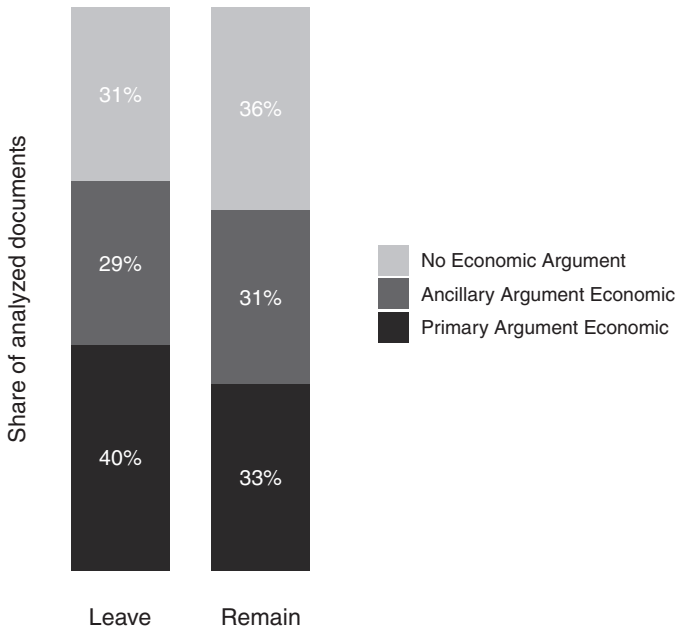


Figure 2. Importance of economic arguments for the Brexit campaigns; share of analysed documents ($n=380$).

economic traditions and positive references to a shared past were an essential part of the Leave campaign.

6. Shared pasts as a source for identification

Political campaigns are symbolic struggles in which not only votes but the interpretation of the world are at stake (Bourdieu, 1991). They are governed by a basic distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, formulating ideals to be achieved and evils to be avoided. By describing what is and what should be they also involve a temporal dimension: Political campaigns refer to the present by assessing the current state of the world; they refer to the future by linking political projects to hopes and fears (Mische, 2009). They offer contested interpretations of the world of today and tomorrow.

In contrast to the future and the present, the past seems to elude attempts at political design. Political decisions, like the UK withdrawal from the EU, cannot change what has been. The past should therefore be of little interest for political campaigns. However, in line with Zygmunt Bauman’s (2017, p. 61f) thoughts on the politics of memory (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003) being central for the rise of ‘new populism’, my analysis reveals narratives of the past as a crucial element of the Leave campaign.

Figure 3 gives a quantified overview of adopted time horizons and their evaluation as desirable or repellent. It shows the share of campaign documents and units of meaning assigned with corresponding codes at least once.

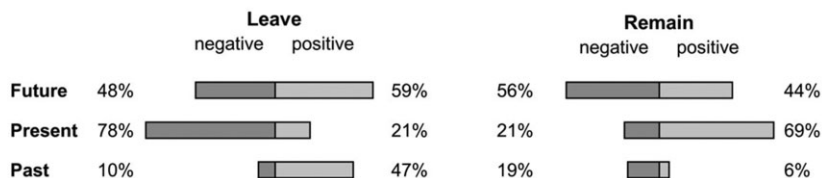
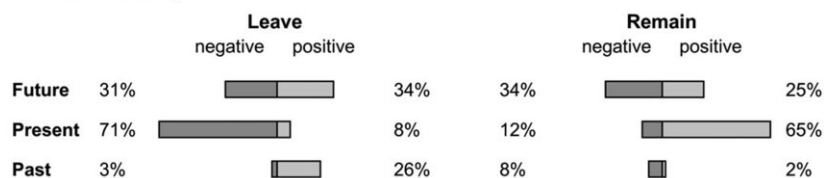
Share of campaign documents*Share of units of meaning*

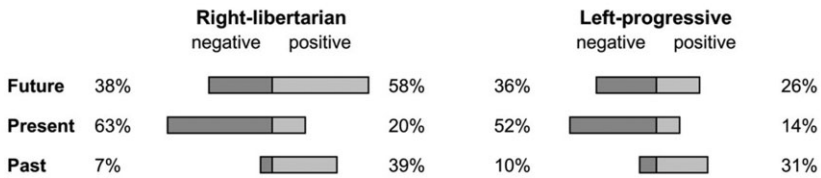
Figure 3. Temporal orientation of the Brexit campaigns: share of documents/units of meaning assessing respective time horizons.

As expected, both campaigns were mostly concerned with the future and the present, i.e. time horizons each of which featured in about 80% of the documents analysed. While Remain favoured the status quo of EU membership and judged the present as positive (69% of Remain ads), Leave, eager to move on, depicted the current situation as altogether negative (78% of Leave ads). This assessment of the present was often complemented by narratives of potential futures. Both sides offer positive scenarios, but a surprisingly large proportion of their campaigns (56% of Remain ads and 48% of Leave ads) presented the future as a threat. EU supporters, vilified as ‘Project Fear’ by their opponents, for instance, depicted a hand grenade and warned: ‘Once pulled out, the pin cannot be put back in’ (Stronger In). Similar dystopias were diffused by the Leave campaign. Next to the image of an armed and hooded soldier, the Bruges Group depicted a potential EU army as an economic and security threat: ‘Militarisation: A Dangerous Future’.

The most substantial difference between Leave and Remain campaigns is, however, the way they evaluated and stylized the past as a longed-for horizon. For Remain, the past was of little concern, featuring only in every fourth document. Mostly negative, these few references presented the past as something the world was fortunately able to overcome. Conservatives In, for instance, feared that ‘Britain out means a return to the early 20th-century chaos of warring states against each other.’

In contrast, the Leave campaign used collective memories of a favourable British past. Almost half of all Leave documents analysed referred to the past as source of pride. Moreover, the past was not presented as ‘long ago’, but as traditions still defining Britain today. ‘The history of Britain for a thousand years has been as a merchant and maritime power playing its full role in European and world affairs while living under its own laws.’ as for example the Leave Alliance wrote on their homepage. The Bruges Group celebrated British virtues of the past: ‘But that was back in the 1950’s. [...] Today’s EU is a betrayal to those virtues’. Similarly, Better Off Out dismissed those doubting Brexit with a historical

Share of campaign documents



Share of units of meaning

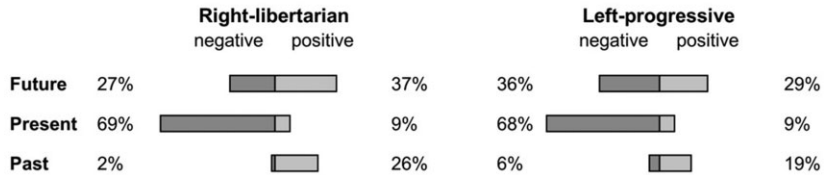


Figure 4. Temporal orientation of right-wing and left-wing Leave alliances: share of documents/units of meaning assessing respective time horizons.

reference: ‘That belies our history, it belies the facts of our global trade and it belies the strength of our country.’ In these examples, the past is presented as common source of national identification. It is not a universal sphere, but ‘our’ past: British history, British experiences and British virtues.

The Leave campaign addressed the past as a desirable future and the future as a revival of a (seemingly) golden age: ‘We will take back control and return to what we were’. This statement by Leave.EU exemplifies how the future is presented as a promise to return or reverse, to revitalize, regain, take back, revise, be again or in other respects restore a past state of the world. Omnipresent imperatives such as ‘Take back control’ (e.g. UKIP) or ‘BeLeave in Britain again’ (BeLeave), appeal to a resurgence of national identity and a world compatible with British traditions. They imply a temporality directed not towards a progressive future, but towards preserving the past.

Of course, nostalgic appraisals of the past are a typical conservative motif. And indeed, the most distinctive statements originate from right-wing Eurosceptics, especially from UKIP. However, a detailed qualitative analysis reveals similar references to heritage by left-wing Brexit activists. Left Leave for example argued: ‘The EU did NOT give us our rights. To say that it did is a disservice to The Matchgirls who brought us trade unions, to the Suffragettes, to the Ford Dagenham women who won us equal pay’. This ad refers to seminal industrial conflicts that remain prominent in recent pop culture and are firmly anchored in Britain’s collective memory. Such historic references appeal to a nostalgic image of a proud British working class who knew how to fight for its rights. Figure 4 shows that both right-wing and left-wing movements promoting Brexit¹⁵ relied on favourable images of the past. Though they stressed

15 Drawing on self-descriptions or affiliation with unambiguous parties, Green Leaves, Labour Leave, Left Leave, Lexit-Network and Trade Unionists Against the EU were considered left wing, whereas Better Off Out, The Bruges Group, Conservatives for Britain, The Leave Alliance, Leave.EU und UKIP were considered right wing.

other aspects and referred to different traditions, both right-wing and left-wing campaigns resorted to politics of memory and appeals to historically rooted collective identities.

Not all nostalgic narratives adopted by the Leave campaign are genuinely economic. However, in line with the dominance of economic arguments depicted in the previous section, economic traditions played a pivotal role. The examples provided so far show historical frames depicting Britain as a global economic power and merchant, a union stronghold or a promoter of liberal free trade—thus addressing distinctive elements of a British economic identity. The next section will consider in more detail recurring interpretative frames for economic traditions presented as ‘British’.

7. Economic traditions as historical frames of interpretation

Drawing on the first sections of this paper, phenomena can serve as traditions regardless of whether they have ‘objectively’ shaped history or not. Accordingly, British economic traditions are understood as interpretative frames with historical references. This includes, first, narratives about what is long-standing, worthy of preservation and identified as specifically British (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). Economic traditions can explicitly refer to the past or old, ‘time-honoured’ British institutions. But second, I also consider narratives that are more implicitly historic. Such frames of interpretation are anchored in collective memory because they are prominent in public discourse for generations and have become related to past eras and historic leaders. Such traditions have repeatedly been ‘revitalised’ (Thackeray *et al.*, 2018, p. 4) in public Eurosceptic discourse. For most of the traditions depicted these explicit and implicit historical references are intertwined. They all promote the past as an ideal that Britain should economically strive for.

British worker. The emblematic figure of the British worker (Moser and Schlechtriemen, 2019) and his misery is repeatedly used to criticize the present and contrast it with the ‘good old days’. For example, UKIP showed a man wearing helmet, boots and yellow vest, begging in the streets, and claimed: ‘EU policy at work. British workers are hit hard by unlimited cheap labour.’ Similarly, the Bruges Group warned ‘Again the working people of Britain see stagnation in our living conditions.’ In such ads, the figure of the (white, male) worker (Bonnett, 1998), who is under threat but worthy of protection, personifies the decline of ‘Britishness’. Both right-wing and left-wing Leave alliances employed nostalgic images of British workers appealing to a population well beyond the actual working-class milieu (Balthazar Ana, 2017; Todd, 2014).

Workers’ rights. Industrial conflicts and the rights workers had acquired were also addressed as economic tradition. Left Leave praised them as British achievement: ‘Equal pay legislation came out of the struggle of the women sewing machinists at Ford Dagenham in 1968, not from the EU. Most health and safety legislation originates in the 1970s, a time of union strength. The national minimum wage was won by the labour movement—not given to us by the EU’. Such references to seminal labour disputes glorify a past before Margaret Thatcher brought down the trade unions. They depict Britain as a traditional union stronghold and evoke the image of a proud British working class that used to fight for its rights. This fighting spirit is presented as an anchor of shared national economic identity.

British industry. Historical frames of the British working class and labour disputes were related to a set of genuinely ‘British’ industries, particularly steel and fishing. Both sectors are of marginal economic importance for Britain today, but were fiercely defended in the

campaign. For example, Grassroot-Out combined pictures of unions on strike and flaunting 'Save our Steel' banners with the statement: 'Employment in the steel industry has fallen from 320.000 in 1971 to just 24.000 last year. Vote to leave the EU and protect British Industry.' The past of the steel industry, its heyday in the 1970s and subsequent decline were used as a symbol of the lost strength of Britain and its working class due to the EU. Similarly, the EU was blamed for the waning of the fishing industry: 'British Fishing Industry in Decline', claimed Better Off Out and marked on a map 'surrendered UK fishing waters'. While service sectors account for the bulk of British jobs and GDP today, they were not explicitly discussed by Leave. What is at stake, therefore, is not actual economic relevance, but the symbolic and nostalgic significance of those sectors for Britain's national identity. Steel and fishing are depicted as traditions that *should be* at the heart of British economy—and that are threatened by the EU.

Democratic sovereignty. Protecting British industries was related to the idea of a strong state, sovereign in economic matters. Labour Leave, for example, insisted that the EU should not interfere in national subsidies: 'Brussels stops us spending on OUR priorities for jobs in manufacturing, energy, regeneration, agriculture or fisheries.' Explicitly referring to a long tradition of democratic sovereignty (Ludlow, 2015; Schmidt, 2020), the promoters of Brexit argued that only legislation passed by the British Parliament should affect the British economy. Leave.EU argued: 'Since 2010, the EU has introduced over 3,500 new laws affecting British business [. . .] The UK is one of the world's oldest democracies, with a robust and mature legal system. Consequently, we believe that we should be free to have the final say over any laws that are implemented in our country.' Democratic sovereignty was presented as a British heritage and a prerequisite for economic protectionism.

Our public services. Taking up this protectionist tenor, the Leave campaign often advocated the expansion of British public services. 'Stop the United Kingdom taxpayer from sending £350 million a week to Brussels—money we could spend on our own schools, hospitals, armed forces and police,' Grassroots Out argued. Leave particularly focused on the National Health Service (NHS), a welfare institution that most citizens support and still associate with a British self-conception based on solidarity (Jeffery, 2007). The symbolic and historic value of the NHS provided a central argument against the EU: 'Let's fund our NHS instead,' Vote Leave claimed on numerous flyers, posters, online ads and their catchy red campaign bus. The traditional NHS epitomized an economic order in which the state guarantees central infrastructure for all citizens and protects them from markets: 'The NHS deserves the very best! . . . Outside the European Union, we can improve quality of care, reduce health tourism and ensure the NHS is not privatized under TTIP.' (Better Off Out). 'Our public services' were idealized as traditional element of the British economy—and worthy of protection.

Rolling back the state. While Leave used economic traditions to advocate state intervention, they simultaneously referred to British traditions of economic liberalism. A central frame presented the EU as excessive state bureaucracy 'slicing away our protections against an overweening state.' (Better Off Out). The idea of 'rolling back the state' was depicted as a British tradition going back to Margaret Thatcher's famous Eurosceptical 'Bruges Speech' in 1988 (Forster, 2002). In many ads, the EU was criticized for wasting British citizens' money 'squandered on grand parliamentary buildings and bureaucratic follies.' (BeLeave). UKIP, for example, juxtaposed the image of tired British workers in a crowded bus with a picture

of a well-dressed European bureaucrat riding in a luxury limousine, and claimed: 'Your daily grind funds his celebrity lifestyle. The UK pays £55 million a day to the EU and its Eurocrats.' This argument resembles a traditional populist narrative present in British public controversies since at least the Corn Laws: a state elite that benefits from intervening in the economy at the expense of 'ordinary British people' (Suckert, 2021).

Your food bill. Similarly borrowing from the historical discourse of the Corn Laws and its free trade implications, Leave depicted the EU as a threat for traditionally low British food prices. Illustrated by a cart full of food, Better Off Out stated: 'You are paying too much for your weekly shop' and criticized the EU for economic interventionism: 'A combination of quotas, taxes, subsidies and other policies all push up the prices that we pay for food.' Similarly, Labour Leave argued: 'The CAP [Common agricultural policy] adds £7 a week to each household's food bill.' The remarkable prominence of this interpretative frame indicates the historically rooted symbolic relevance of low food prices as an epitome for a functioning British economy (Ludlow, 2015, p. 24f). Consumption is not only a central pillar of the British growth model (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2016) but also an important component of national economic identity.

British free trade. In line with rejecting state interventions, the Leave campaign has often played on free trade as British achievement and tradition. Better Off Out, for example, opposed EU membership by this historically laden statement: 'For a thousand years the United Kingdom was free, independent and trading with the rest of the known world.' Similarly, a caricature of Leave.EU depicts David Cameron and Nick Clegg on a tandem which, despite their efforts, does not move because they have to pull along a large grey elephant wearing an EU shirt. A signpost indicates the destination they cannot reach: 'Global Trade'. In such ads, free economic exchange is presented as a genuine British virtue and tradition (Thackeray *et al.*, 2018, p. 4 ff.), endangered by EU bureaucrats.

British influence. Drawing on the virtue of free trade, Leave also referred to Britain as a global trading power. Britain is supposed to have lost its historically befitting position due to the EU. A withdrawal would finally restore Britain's former economic strength and global influence. For example, BeLeave promised 'Voting Leave would bolster our global significance and make our economic clout stronger than ever before.' Moreover, Leave suggested that once re-established as the global economic power it was supposed to be, Britain could again become a champion for free trade: 'We regain our seats on international institutions like the World Trade Organization so we are a more influential force for free trade and international cooperation.' (Vote Leave). Influencing the fate of world economy was presented as a promise for the future, but also as reviving a long-standing British tradition.¹⁶

Commonwealth and the open sea. The British desire to be a global power was not only linked to claims for economic dominance but also, as Winston Churchill would have it, to a longing for the 'open sea'. Leave argued that the European project was too narrow, and instead Britain should be economically oriented towards the entire world. BeLeave for instance quoted Boris Johnson: 'Outside the EU we will at last be able to do free trade deals with the US, with China, and the growth economies around the world. Let us lift our eyes to the horizon.' Britain's global orientation was often illustrated with references to former colonies and Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth was promoted as an alternative, traditionally British form of

16 Piers Ludlow (2015, p. 30f) shows that the desire to keep this tradition alive was an important argument for joining the EU in the 1970s.

internationalism (Adler-Nissen *et al.*, 2017, p. 580 ff.). ‘The government would also be free to push for new global trade deals, and reinforce its links with the Commonwealth.’ Leave.EU stated and Better Off Out complained: ‘Historic Commonwealth bonds with Britain are being lost.’ Here, Commonwealth and Empire are used as historically charged symbols for a global economic order worthy of being re-established. It conjures up a past in which Britain dominated the world—and therefore could easily afford to be open to it (Thackeray *et al.*, 2018, p. 7).

These frames of interpretation illustrate how Leave alliances across the political spectrum relied on economic traditions to strengthen their arguments. The campaign arguing for withdrawal referred to traditional economic institutions and Britain’s past economic strengths; it adopted narratives tested in historic controversies and anchored in collective memory. Leave deliberately engaged in what can be termed ‘politics of economic memory’ and made the economy a matter of identity. This combination of economy *and* identity might have helped to conceal the conflicting and often opposing economic ideals Suckert (2019) of the Leave campaign. Rather than agreeing on specific economic policies, the heterogenous movement agreed on a common perception of the economic past: a nostalgic utopia that merits revival.

8. Conclusion: from economic identity to perceived economic deprivation

The political opponents of British EU withdrawal have commonly explained the outcome of the referendum as an instance of ‘identity trumps economics’. In line with cultural backlash approaches, Leave’s success has been attributed to the campaign’s strategy to focus on national belonging and demarcation instead of properly discussing the economic costs and benefits of Brexit. In this account of the referendum, the Leave campaign did not convince voters with economic arguments (or even mislead them into neglecting them), but merely responded to voters perceiving their traditional identities as being threatened.

The presented discourse analysis of the Brexit campaigns partly challenges this account. I find that Leave’s focus on migration and sovereignty was not at the expense of economic arguments. Instead, Leave made economic consequences even more central to their campaign than Remain. Yet, the analysis reveals that Leave’s economic arguments were excessively related to nostalgic frames, drawing on Britain’s economic traditions and glorious economic past. Instead of brute economic calculus and appealing to economic interests, Leave referred to the nation’s economic identity. My qualitative analysis of campaign material reaffirms that identity did matter for the reasoning of Leave—but so did arguments about the economy.

The case of Brexit illustrates why even culturalist perspectives should not altogether discard economic aspects in their explanations of the rise of new populism. The analysis of campaign material strengthens scholarly pleas to consider economy and identity not as mutually exclusive but entangled factors. While, however, much of the respective literature reminds cultural backlash explanations to acknowledge the economic ‘context’ of cultural attitudes, the presented study highlights how economic aspects can themselves become salient as discursive motif, charged with identity and tradition. As such, ‘the economic’ becomes accessible to a genuinely cultural analysis. Indeed, the prominence of economic arguments depicted in this empirical study may be attributed to the economic nature of the particular bone of contention in this campaign, the European Union. Yet, the salience of

economic identity invites scholars interested in populism more broadly to acknowledge economic practices, institutions, and conventions as potential anchors of national identification and study them as elements of national culture.

Recognising ‘the economic’ as an important discursive motif thus advances culturalist approaches. However, the concept of economic identity can also mitigate the antagonism towards economic deprivation approaches and therefore contribute to scholarly attempts for a more integrative perspective. It allows for a conceptual bridge between ‘economy’ and ‘identity’. While the article has so far focused on one side of this bridge emanating from culturalist approaches, this conclusion provides a —tentative—impression of what the other side of this bridge might look like. How can the concept of economic identity enhance our understanding of voters’ economic deprivation and contribute to a more comprehensive explanation—both for Brexit and beyond?

Economic deprivation explanations have highlighted that those with lower income and education levels have tended to vote Leave. However, they find it difficult to explain why Brexit has also appealed to older people and the white middle class but less so to precarious urban service workers or poor migrants. Moreover, the claim that those economically deprived opted for Leave out of ‘objective economic interests’ is complicated by the fact that the economic consequences of leaving the EU were far from obvious (Gartzou-Katsouyanni *et al.*, 2022). Particularly as Leave promoted a diverse—if not to say incongruent—set of economic policies, individual voters were hardly capable of estimating in advance the future cost and benefits of withdrawal. Here, the concept of national economic identity can broaden economic deprivation perspectives and address some of these critical lacunae.

In line with a reasoning promoted, e.g. by cultural political economy (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008), such an approach would start from the assumption that any given economic situation needs first to be interpreted to mobilize interests and policy preferences (cf. also Blyth, 2002). As some of the more interpretative approaches to populism have argued (e.g. Gidron and Hall, 2017; Gest *et al.*, 2018), deprivation does not need to be assessed by scholars but perceived by voters to become politically performative. Therefore, accounting for objective economic conditions *and* the frames adopted to interpret them could make economic deprivation an even more plausible explanation for the rise of new populism. The concept of economic identity can facilitate such a shift from ‘objective’ to ‘perceived’ economic deprivation as major explanatory factor. Economic identities, i.e. shared assumptions about what economic practices, institutions and conventions should characterize a nation’s economic system, can serve as one crucial reference for subjective economic ideals and expectations of what one ‘deserves’. If actual experience excessively deviates from such socially constructed ideals, actors may perceive the situation as deprivation and support alternative economic policies. To become decisive, such interpretative frames of economic identity need to resonate with voters, i.e. the political demand-side, but they also need to be embraced and promoted by the political supply-side of campaigns.

As I have shown, the promoters of Brexit appealed excessively to Britain’s economic identity by celebrating (divergent) époques of British economic history and promising to revive them. Simplified and often incoherent images of an economic past were promoted as an ideal of ‘how the economy should work’. Against such nostalgic narratives, present and future within the EU were presented as a betrayal to the country’s economic identity, i.e. a continuing decline risking to further disregard appreciated economic traditions. However, such narratives of economic nostalgia instil a perception of economic deprivation not relative to

one's peers in the present (Burgoon *et al.*, 2019) or one's potential to economically succeed in the future, but a perception of economic deprivation relative to what one *could have expected in the past* (cf. also Gest, 2016).

Legitimizing economic arguments with reference to economic traditions like Leave did, surely bears potential to resonate better with some groups of voters than others. It appeals particularly to the poor, precarious and less educated who suffer from the economic status quo. To them, a return to the economic past promises a future that is different than the present, but not as uncertain and hard to assess as an entirely open future. Economic nostalgia may however seem less appealing to those with a migration background or urban service workers—because they were typically not depicted as part of the glorious economic past Leave meant to revive. And indeed, despite their 'objective' deprivation, these actor groups have largely tended to support Remain. Finally, acknowledging Leave's emphasize on economic identity and economic traditions also helps to understand why the Leave campaign resonated particularly well with older people and a 'declining' middle class, i.e. voters that have indeed witnessed a different economic past but can no longer aspire to a future of improvement (Bronk and Jacoby, 2020). In a constantly changing world these voters fear to lose the economic status they assume to have 'deserved' in the past.

Conventional economic deprivation approaches explain populist voter preferences as 'rational' cost-benefit calculus in response to voters' objective economic grievances. A perspective that combines the economic deprivation rationale with the concept of economic identity, would maintain that economic circumstances matter. Yet, in line with some of the more integrative explanations of populism, it emphasizes that economic circumstances only become performative as 'perceived deprivation', i.e. if they resonate with respective frames of economic identity and deservingness. As the case of Brexit shows, populist discourse can instil such interpretative frames by drawing on nostalgic images of a 'better' economic past.

In this vein, the concept of economic identity can serve as a conceptual link: between objective economic conditions and the ideational frames necessary to interpret them; between political demand of voters and political supply of populist movements; and between economic imaginaries of the past, the present and the future. This capacity to link opposing perspectives makes the concept of economic identity apt not only to open up cultural backlash approaches, but to contribute to the broader literature attempting to integrate divergent accounts of populism. Though the concept still requires more comprehensive empirical adoption and further theoretical development, the empirical study of the Brexit campaigns indicates the explanatory potential of this perspective. It can advance the conjoint scholarly efforts of bridging culturalist and economist explanations to populism. In the attempt to better understand the populist renaissance that keeps threatening our societies, crossing this bridge appears inevitable.

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