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Ontological (In)security and Brexit: 'Islandness' Identity and an Emotional Choice*

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Abstract

Over the past century, the United Kingdom has transitioned through various international roles, from a global superpower during its imperial era to a key partner within the European Union. Brexit, however, has triggered what many scholars describe as a foreign policy 'identity crisis'. This paper challenges this conventional narrative by applying an ontological security framework to investigate how EU membership and the European integration process themselves represented an identity crisis for many Britons. The analysis explores the emotional motives behind Brexit by examining how Euroscepticism, combined with a desire to reclaim Britain's 'islandness' identity, contributed to the decision to leave the European Union. Employing a thematic narrative analysis, the research examines the interaction between identity-based motivations and broader political and historical contexts to reveal new understandings of the multifaceted factors driving Brexit and its enduring effects. By investigating ontological security concepts such as existential threat, continuity disruption, and the restoration of narrative identity, the paper argues that EU integration itself, rather than Brexit, was perceived by many as the principal threat to Britain's biographical narrative and national identity. These insights contribute to understanding how identity-based anxieties influence major political decisions and carry implications for policymaking and EU–UK relations moving forward.

Keywords: European Union, Euroscepticism, Existential Anxiety, Narrative Identity, United Kingdom, Brexit

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1. Introduction

During the last century, the United Kingdom (UK) has witnessed itself in different roles in the international arena, from a global superpower and the ‘emperor’ of the Commonwealth, further back to a postwar diminishing power in a holistic look more recently. The UK’s withdrawal from the European Union (EU) has led to what many scholars have identified as a foreign policy ‘identity crisis’. However, within an ontological security framework, the paper ventures to explore the dark side of the moon on this phenomenon and ask how being part of the European Union itself, has been an identity crisis in Britons’ mindsets.

The UK was the last country to join many of the EU’s collective agreements. In the meantime, the Kingdom never became a member of Schengen, and the European Monetary Union remained loyal to its national currency -the pound- and was not involved in various areas of the union such as budget regulation, common agricultural policy, and social aspects, and until the time of Prime Minister Tony Blair, the UK had not joined the Union’s social policies of included in the Maastricht Treaty, and in the end, Brexit -the UK’s withdrawal from the EU- revealed the truth that Churchill once stated:

... We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonality. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed (Reash & Riley, 2013).

The June 23, 2016 referendum was a significant shock in the European Union. Although it was expected that Britain’s exit from the European Union (Brexit) would be ruled out by obtaining four points, people did not accept David Cameron’s 4-point plan and his

arguments to stay in the Union, and 52 percent of voters ended their 42-year membership in the Union by choosing Brexit (Clarke et al., 2017, pp. 440-3). Diving Britain into Old and New, Brexit emerged from people who benefited from voting against the cosmopolitan elites who integrated Britain into the Union. In other terms, Brexit was as much a vote against Europe, as it was against globalization and multiculturalism (Reash & Riley, 2013). This raises the question of why pro-European activists were unable to shift public opinion toward remaining in the European Union. It is true that media propaganda has had its effective role, but certainly, if there were no emotional and social grounds for leaving the EU, no campaign could have succeeded in attracting 17 million British votes. In fact, Britain's withdrawal from the European Union was the anger of the original and old people of Britain: Those who seek to return New Britain to the same old island they have known for centuries. With regards to the significant number of European immigrants that affect English nationality and culture, along with integrating to Europe which has been leading to narrowing the Kingdom's sovereignty, Brexit was a return to islandness as much as Englishness. Simply put, those who have had a strong connection to traditional English identity have been typically more wary of European Union integration. This Euroscepticism clarifies why there is an inverse relationship between age group and support for the EU integration, where over-65s were more than twice as likely as under-25s to have voted to 'leave' the Union in the Brexit referendum (Moore, 2016). Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that British citizens who hold stronger 'islandness' narratives experienced greater Euroscepticism and ontological insecurity during EU membership, which in turn made them more likely to support Brexit.

Looking at international relations through a materialistic lens, power relations might seem more objective and straightforward than when we look from an ideational perspective. In this sense, we could simply highlight ‘fear’ -in the face of a threat- when physical harm -objective damage- is about to happen. In this context, the UK clearly witnessed a decline relative to other great powers which Vucetic calls a ‘Brexit’ from the top-tier league that occurred sometime before the mid-1950s (Vucetic, 2021, p. 17). However, in an ideational analysis, where the states’ existential anxiety is assumed as an important factor rather than a physical threat (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342), we might face a more complicated emotion in explaining decision-making or a political choice. In simpler terms, by prioritizing ontological security over physical security, OS scholarship emphasizes the significance of biographical narrative, identity, and existential anxieties (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 2023, p. 2). The anxiety here is, therefore, not because of physical or objective harm, but for the emotion of shame that emanates from the difference between autobiographical narrative or narrative identity and actual behaviour (Steele, 2005, p. 527) in times of a ‘critical situation’. Our central argument here is not to enter a material-ideational debate, but to clarify how ontological assumptions of security can explain the reasons behind Brexit more profoundly.

The current study, therefore, tries to look at the cause and root of the Brexit phenomenon by using the ontological security theoretical framework. With the aim of better understanding the factors affecting Brexit, the main question of the research is focused on: How the narrative identity or biographical narrative of ‘islandness’ in the United Kingdom has influenced the political culture of the British people and determined their mindset of national interests, which finally, affects the British foreign policy

decision-making. To explain the phenomenon of Brexit and understand the relationship between narrative identity, political culture, and Brexit, this research, applying a thematic narrative analysis, explores how Britons who voted 'Leave' define the British islandness identity, focusing on how their psychological, social, and political dimensions interact to take Brexit on the stage.

To explore our argument, the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on ontological security and Brexit, addressing key contributions and gaps. This is followed by an explanation of the methodological approach, particularly the use of thematic narrative analysis to examine the emotional and identity-based undercurrents of Brexit. The theoretical framework section outlines key OS concepts such as existential anxiety, continuity disruption, and restoration of narrative identity. The main argument then turns to how biographical narratives - especially centred around Euroscepticism, emotional memory, and the idea of 'islandness' - shaped perceptions of national identity and motivated the Leave vote. The paper ends by reflecting on the broader implications of its findings, acknowledging certain limitations and suggesting how the argument may inform future research and comparative political contexts.

2. Background

Drawing on the fields of political sociology, the study of ontological security in international relations has increased dramatically over the past two decades (Steele, 2005; Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006; Subotić, 2015). Contributions to this special issue by Mitzen (2018) and Alkopher (2018) demonstrate the importance of ontological (in)security to the study of Brexit and

European integration (see also Browning, 2018; Kinnvall et al., 2018). While many of these works primarily focus on theoretical development, yet they have effectively established ontological security as a valuable framework for understanding political phenomena like Brexit, creating space for more case-specific studies such as the present one.

In this context, integration into or separation from a union, for example, the EU in our case, can be explained as a social phenomenon both in terms of identity and knowledge about one's self, as again in our case, in the Brexit debates over whether the United Kingdom is more "ontologically secure" within or without the EU.

In an era of European crises over political legitimacy, economic austerity, loss of confidence in the EU, and the rise of far-right populists, the topic of Brexit has become a rather emotional subject. This study uses ontological security theory to understand emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, and passion in the Brexit debate in order to demonstrate the wider value of the political sociology and psychology of the Brexit phenomenon. In the following, we delve more in-depth into the more recent literature where identity and emotions are considered subjects of Brexit.

According to Manners (2018), emotions served as essential factors in determining the direction of the Brexit debate. The campaign relied on emotional appeals that activated feelings of fear, anger and nostalgia among voters. The feelings of fear and nostalgia among the British population helped establish separate identities between 'us' (the British) and 'them' (the Europeans and immigrants), which reinforced perceived differences and bolstered Brexit support. Manners identifies these emotional dynamics as essential to the political psychology, which led the UK to exit the

EU. His contribution effectively connects emotional stories to political conduct, but his analysis mainly focuses on elite campaign speeches, without fully investigating popular or grassroots narratives.

Hughes (2019) emphasizes that Brexit is primarily a psychological event that requires examination beyond political and economic aspects, as emphasized in his book *The Psychology of Brexit*. He argues that individual and collective emotions, along with psychological experiences and cultural identities both shape Brexit and are deeply affected by it. Hughes maintains that to understand Brexit, we must examine how people experience emotions and construct their identities during this transformative social event. He states that political and economic aspects remain crucial, yet frequently divert attention away from Brexit's deeper emotional and psychological layers. Essentially, Hughes asserts that Brexit reflects a complex interplay of emotions, identities, and mental states, making it crucial to study the psychological impacts and processes involved to fully grasp its significance. Hughes' book delivers valuable information about Brexit emotions; however it mainly focuses on the psychological factors such as collective and individual mental health in explaining behaviours.

Geopolitics and Identity in British Foreign Policy Discourse: The Island Race is the first book in which Whittaker (2023) examines Britain's geopolitical identity and how it is expressed in foreign policy discourse. It demonstrates how British imperial thought, related to its island status, has remained important for the British Members of Parliament in their debates on contemporary issues. It presents an exciting and provocative new reading of modern British foreign policy that decentres traditional notions of rationalism and pragmatism by foregrounding the much-neglected

aspects of identity and geopolitical space. As British foreign policy-makers wrestle with how to define Britishness outside of the EU, this analysis provides a fresh perspective. It presents a much-needed historical contextualization of long-standing concepts such as insularity from Europe and a universal aspect of world affairs. The author presents an innovative historical view of British insularity through his research, but his emphasis on elite foreign policy discourse might not reveal how these ideas affect ordinary people.

In examining the intricate relationship between Brexit and national identity, Browning's work (2018), *Brexit, Existential Anxiety and Ontological (In)security*, stands as a significant point of reference, in a different direction. Browning contends that the Brexit issue is not just political and/or economic, but it has grown to be the source of anxiety and insecurity for many Britons in the UK. He takes a look at the process of leaving the European Union that has probably deepened insecurities about identity, belonging, and the future. Browning's work highlights the ontological disruptions triggered by Brexit itself, though it tends to foreground the anxieties of Remain voters and gives less attention to how EU integration may have been perceived as threatening to the majority who voted Leave.

Our study, however, proposes a counter-narrative to Browning's argument. Contrary to his identification of Brexit as an ontological security disruptor, this research contends that the process of integrating into the European Union has, in fact, been a source of ontological insecurity for a substantial portion of the British population. Rather than finding reassurance in the departure from the EU, more than half of British citizens and long-lasting biographical narrative -referred to as the Brexit vote proportions-

have experienced heightened existential uncertainty and insecurity as a result of integration with the European Union.

The paper, therefore, ventures to challenge the prevailing view that Brexit is a primary source of ontological insecurity for the majority -even narrow- of British citizens. By examining the emotional and psychological impacts of EU integration, the study aims to uncover how the process of becoming part of the European Union has, in fact, been a significant driver of existential anxiety and identity-related insecurities in Britain. Through an analysis of public sentiment and the cultural narratives surrounding British identity, this paper argues that the feelings of insecurity and anxiety associated with the EU's influence have contributed to the desire to 'leave', positioning Brexit as a reaction to, rather than the cause of, ontological insecurity. Simply put, while acknowledging that Brexit has generated fear, or even, as Browning posits, ontological insecurity for some British groups, the current research suggests that the integration into the EU itself has been a more substantial source of ontological unease, prompting a reassertion of British identity through the decision to depart Europe.

3. Methodology

This study employs a thematic narrative analysis approach within the framework of ontological security to analyse the impact of British 'islandness' identity on public reaction to Brexit. The research aims to determine how emotional narratives tied to national identity, sovereignty, and cultural continuity led to the political decision to leave the European Union.

The data was a purposeful selection of both primary and secondary sources, which emerged during the Brexit referendum

period. The study used primary materials that included speeches and press releases from leading Brexit campaign figures, statements and transcripts of parliamentary debates and major media coverage from Leave and Remain campaigns. Social media posts and op-eds written by Leave supporters -identified through thematic hashtag analysis (e.g., #TakeBackControl, #Brexit)- are also included. These were complemented by secondary sources, such as political memoirs and academic literature about identity, emotional appeals, and political psychology in the Brexit context.

All materials, therefore, were subjected to thematic narrative analysis, in which texts were examined for recurring emotional frames related to independence, sovereignty, fear of integration, and nostalgia for Britain's imperial past ['good past']. Coded excerpts were then grouped into three themes -existential anxiety, continuity disruption, and restoration of narrative identity- which reflect the core dimensions of ontological (in)security literature. These categories illustrate how disruptions to Britain's self-narrative of 'islandness' triggered existential anxiety and Euroscepticism, motivated collective efforts to restore a coherent sense of national identity through political action.

While the study does not include other types of primary data such as interviews or ethnographic observation, this qualitative textual analysis offers an interpretive understanding of how Brexit became emotionally resonant across different layers of British society. The analysis reveals the ontological conditions under which a political phenomenon like Brexit gains traction - particularly through the cultural reactivation of historical narratives like 'islandness' and imagined futures. In a broader context, situating these narratives within the ontological security framework allows for deeper insight into how political decisions are shaped

not only by material interests but also by emotionally charged understandings of who *we* are and where *we* belong.

4. Theoretical Framework

Ontological security (OS) is conceived as the fundamental necessity of social actors (people, groups or states) to make their identity continuous and coherent across time (Laing, 1960, p. 39). Giddens supports this continuity through the basic trust that is established between a mother and her infant, where normality and the routines and frameworks that go with them are seen to provide security and endurance (Giddens, 1991, pp. 38–39). They are like a protective cocoon, which enables the actors to meet existential questions concerning self-identity, existence and relationships with others and the outside world (Giddens, 1991, pp. 48-55). Hence, ontological security is concerned with the processes through which social beings establish and sustain their 'self' throughout time. This is a multiple dimensional concept, which has been investigated within the fields of psychology (Laing, 1960), sociology (Giddens, 1991), and international relations.

The ontological security literature in international relations explores the complex interrelationships between identities, routines, and narratives as the fundamental building blocks of agent-structure interactions. Within the ontological security framework, narrative identity and existential anxiety are seen as playing a key role in determining an actor's motivations and political priorities (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 755; Mitzen, 2006, p. 342; Steele, 2008, p. 23). As opposed to materialists, OS scholars argue that material capabilities are not as important as the self-identities of an actor and how they perceive their global standing (Steele,

2008, p. 2). Ontological security for states is attained through the exercise of sovereign power over one's citizens via the setting of parameters regarding how people live their lives (Auchter, 2020, p. 132; Leduc, 2021, p. 139) and the preservation of coherent stories through which people can situate their identity within that of the nation (Krolikowski, 2018; Bolton, 2021, p. 138). Therefore, OS literature shows how identity formation is important in the policy-making process and state sovereignty.

Sovereignty, or the very idea of what it means to be a state, is therefore seen to be a primary condition for both internal identification and external recognition (Krickel-Choi, 2021, p. 31), any entity failing to provide such security, seeing to it that it loses recognition as a sovereign state (Krickel-Choi, 2022, p. 8). This understanding positions state subjectivity within the state-centric international order, where sovereign states are the principal agents of security (Grzybowski, 2021, p. 13; Pratt, 2017, p. 82). Importantly, focusing on the state as an OS seeker, instead of simply an OS provider, helps to offer a more sophisticated understanding of its relationships within the international system. These interactions are vital in preserving the state's 'self', even when its sovereignty, identity or other core aspects are called into question. This expands the lens to include how global contexts, such as international norms and pressures, can either strengthen or undermine the state's ontological security (Krickel-Choi, 2021, p. 32). Accordingly, a state's selfness, or what it means to be a state, depends not only on recognition of sovereignty, but also on the continued existence of the state as a coherent and sovereign entity (Steele, 2005, pp. 519–20; Mitzen, 2006, pp. 351–2; Hom & Steele, 2020; Grzybowski, 2021).

Mitzen and Steele for example, have stressed the role of identity

needs in influencing state behaviours and political actions, with Mitzen highlighting the exogenous factors such as structural pressures (Mitzen, 2006, p. 354), while Steele looks at the internal factors such as social groups and biographical narratives (Steele, 2005, p. 32; Steele, 2008, p. 60); he argues that routine continuity is generated internally from a state's capacity to sustain its biographical self-narrative -a narrative which it uses to justify its actions. While there are differences in the way various scholars have interpreted OS, the one consensus in OS research is that ontological security demands can drive states' high policy decisions in domestic as well as foreign domains.

In the case of Brexit, both internal factors and structural (external) factors work in combination to produce it. Structural pressures, such as those coming from European integration, are clearly important, but the UK's national identity and its biographical narrative as a former empire are also powerful (Howe, 2008, p. 161). The role of European identity in this context is often a source of scepticism for parts of the British population who are more likely to identify with the UK's biographical narrative, and hence less inclined to want to incorporate an European identity. This desire is also seen in various public reactions such as street demonstrations and the referendum that led to Brexit, which shows the struggle between national and transnational identities within the European Union.

Applying the theoretical framework of ontological security, which has been developed by Kinnvall (2004), Innes and Steele (2014,) and Mitzen (2018), we see that identities are products of psychological, social and geopolitical processes. These identities are both integrative and disintegrative. Britain's special historical experience as a former empire and a single power in the twentieth

century makes European integration difficult because it goes against the UK's historical self-image. Through the lens of ontological security, Brexit can be seen as a manifestation of the UK's desire to maintain its position as a great power. This image, which is based on the imperial past -or 'good past'- of the UK, determines how this country constructs its identity and justifies its actions in international relations (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 2023, p. 4).

While it is correct to say that the Brexit Referendum can be seen as a source of destabilization, for example for those who voted to remain in the European Union, this argument needs to be developed. Simply put, Browning (2018, p. 345) looks at this destabilization from the perspective of 'Remainers', who, following Brexit, express feelings of disconnection and disorientation. To many in this faction, the EU was a recognizable and reassuring organization that gave them a sense of security and stability. They tell a story of how Brexit has made them strangers in their own home -the UK- and how they feel alienated (Browning, 2018, p. 342). This experience of disruption is in line with other ontological security theory discussions about how shifts in political structures can create identity uncertainties among individuals.

Nevertheless, Browning's analysis presents a plausible explanation of the ontological insecurity suffered by Remainers, despite the fact that comparable anxieties were also felt by those who voted 'Leave'. This study suggests that the ontological insecurities that informed the Brexit vote were not restricted to one side of the political spectrum. Indeed, for many in the electorate - the Leavers- the UK's membership of the EU was itself the source of insecurity. A large number of Leavers were uncomfortable with

the UK's membership of a supranational organisation that they regarded as having reduced national sovereignty and undermined deeply entrenched cultural and historical narratives of insular British identity and independence.

From this perspective, the Leave campaign's promise to "take back control" was not just a political slogan, but a response to deeply rooted fears and anxieties regarding the erosion of national identity and agency. For Leavers, Brexit was a symbol of the possibility of returning to a stable and coherent self-narrative, one based on more traditional notions of British sovereignty, autonomy, islandness and Euroscepticism. In this way, Brexit can be understood as an attempt to regain ontological security for those who had been dislocated by the EU's impact on British life. Therefore, Brexit is what Remainers ontologically saw as a chaotic break from stability (Browning, 2018, p. 353). Reframing this argument through aligning ontological security literature with the English School of IR, for those who voted to leave, EU membership was associated with a loss of control over key aspects of British life, from immigration to economic regulation. These voters saw EU as a 'secondary institution' that interfered with Britain's ability to keep up its 'primary institutions', the long-standing principles of sovereignty, nationalism, and self-governance that had been the bedrock of British foreign policy for centuries. Primary institutions: British sovereignty and identity -are the core, enduring practices of the state; secondary institutions: the EU -is seen as temporary or less important to a state's fundamental self-conception (Buzan, 2004, p. 120). In this framework, Britain's core values of sovereignty and identity have been threatened by the EU's expansion into these areas, thus inducing a high degree of ontological insecurity in those who felt that the UK was being

absorbed into a larger European identity at the expense of its own historical and cultural heritage.

Therefore, Brexit can be seen as an attempt to bring back control over the British biographical narrative, a narrative that for many Leave voters had been undermined by the UK's integration into the European project over the years. Boris Johnson's much-quoted line about the UK being able to "have its cake and eat it" (Dallison, 2017) captures this yearning to go back to the time when the UK had more immediate control over its economic and political fate. In this sense, Brexit was not only a political and economic decision, but also a psycho-political attempt to create coherence, continuity, and unity of the self.

To sum up, while Browning (2018) offers useful insights into the ontological insecurity of Remainers, this analysis must also explain the insecurities that Leave voters, who comprised the majority of the voters, also experienced. While integration in the EU was considered a source of strength and stability by some, for many others, it was seen as a source of weakness and instability that threatened Britain's deeply held narratives of the British identity. Through the lens of ontological security, one can see that the Brexit vote was a way for people to try and regain control over the narrative of Britain's identity, sovereignty and future in the face of what they saw as external threats from the EU. The dilemma of two perspectives between those who considered the EU as a beneficial force and those who deemed it as a threat, highlights the intricacies of the Brexit debate and its connection to issues of identity, security, and Britain's role in the world. In the following section, we will discuss how the psychological concept of 'islandness' as a biographical narrative helps to explain why Brexit was more of an emotional decision than a rational one, for a

collective need of 'independence', and therefore, Brexit is as much a psychological and emotional choice as it is a political one to perceived threats to Britain's sovereignty and cultural heritage.

5. Biographical Narrative: Euroscepticism, Emotions, and Psychology of 'Home' and 'Island'

Your [revolutionaries] chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society and had everything to begin anew. You began ill because you began by despising everything that belonged to you ... If the last generations of your country appeared without much luster in your eyes, you might have passed them by and derived your claims from a more early race of ancestry. Under a pious predilection for those ancestors, your imaginations would have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom, beyond the vulgar practice of the hour: and you would have risen with the example to whose imitation you aspired. Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves. Thanks to our [English] sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers (Burke, 1790, p. 71).

To fully grasp the emotional and psychological factors driving Brexit, it is essential to acknowledge that the perception of Europe as "foreign" is deeply rooted in English nationalism, literature, and thought. This view is not a recent one, and has its origins over centuries. For instance, the works of Edmund Burke, a key thinker of the British conservatism in many regards (Eccleshall, 1990, p. 39) contain a reference to this view as far back as the 18th century. In response to the French Revolution, Burke's critique of France was also a wider scepticism about Europe, and an emphasis on the

resistance of Britain to European influence. He praised Britain's ability to uphold the moral and intellectual achievements of its past, rejecting the philosophical and political movements that were sweeping through revolutionary France. For Burke, Britain was not merely a nation, but a leader of civilization, with its church and aristocracy as the twin pillars of moral authority and national strength.

This nationalist sentiment was not only anti-French Revolution, but also anti-European in a broader sense (Wilson, 2014, p. 91). Burke's writing reflects a historical narrative that framed Britain as distinct from -and superior to continental Europe. Even at a time when figures like Napoleon Bonaparte were celebrated across Europe, British newspapers and streets were filled with cartoons and pamphlets mocking the French Revolution and the notion of European unity, sparking a pamphlet war in London (Pasciuto, 2023). Throughout history Britain has seen itself as a nation surrounded by seas with a cultural background that influences its present identity. The effort to safeguard this identity and the acknowledgment of their seclusion are key aspects of British patriotism. To Britons the picturesque countryside symbolizes an enduring connection, to history and fosters a feeling of historic continuity. As George Orwell noted, the British national identity "has a flavour of its own. Moreover, it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature" (Choat, 2003).

Burke's views stood in contrast to those of his contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, who saw British history as marked by injustice and corruption, particularly in its aristocracy and Church (Taylor, 2003, p. 64). While Wollstonecraft supported the revolutionary ideals emerging from France, Burke's scepticism

toward Europe resonated more strongly within English political thought and nationalism. This divide between the two thinkers mirrors the modern debate between advocates of European integration -Remainers- and those in favour of Brexit -Leavers. Much like today, the intellectual and political victors in Britain at that time were those who opposed deeper ties with Europe.

This historical foundation is crucial to understanding how the concepts of 'islandness' and 'Euroscepticism' have shaped Britain's narrative identity and its approach to foreign relations, particularly with Europe.¹ English literature and political thought have long aligned with Burke's vision, promoting a sense of Britain as a separate and exceptional entity -an island nation, distinct from the European continent. In other words, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward, English writers and thinkers developed a form of nationalism that intertwined with Britain's imperial ambitions, creating a powerful narrative of British exceptionalism.

At the heart of English nationalism is the concept of 'home' which has referred to the island of Britain in contrast to foreign territories across the sea. The return to the island was seen as a return to safety, to a promised land for a chosen nation, much like Jerusalem for the Israelites. This deep-seated tradition of retreating to the safety of the island in the face of foreign influence, particularly European influence, remains a central theme in the English political discourse (Wilson, 2014, p. 91). The European

1. This reflects Britain's historical narrative of separateness from Europe, where non-European immigrants from former colonies were accepted into British society as contributors, while European immigrants were perceived as cultural rivals. This distinction fuelled anti-European sentiment and shaped immigration attitudes, becoming a major factor in the Brexit vote. The desire to protect Britain's insular identity led to scepticism toward European integration and the EU.

‘foreigner’ has historically been viewed with suspicion, while Britain itself was framed as a land apart, an exceptional ‘home’, to which its people could always return.

This historical and emotional context sets the stage for the discussion of Brexit as a modern manifestation of this island identity. The psychological attachment to the biographical narrative of Britain as an independent and insular nation plays a central role in understanding the emotional drive behind Brexit. By analysing this ‘islandness’ through the lens of ontological security, we can see how Brexit was not only a political and economic choice but also a psychological and emotional response to a perceived threat to Britain’s long-standing national identity.

5. 1. The Emotional Appeal of Islandness

To understand Brexit as a political choice made on emotional rather than rational grounds, we first need to define what we mean by ‘islandness’ in relation to the British collective identity. The identification with the biographical narrative of Britain as an insular and sovereign island nation thus explains why people voted to leave the European Union.

As pointed out earlier, Brexit was not only a rational or economic decision, but also an emotional reaction to the perceived threats to the British identity. At the centre of this lies the idea of ‘islandness’, which has historically helped to create Britain’s biographical narrative and, in doing so, reinforced a sense of British difference from Europe (Whittaker, 2016, p. 148). The image of Britain as a sovereign and self-sufficient ‘island home’ has, for centuries, defined the collective identity of the British people and propelled the idea that the nation is different from the

European continent with regard to its values, governance, and culture.

To understand Brexit in this emotional light, it is necessary to consider the role of emotions in political choice. According to ontological security theorists, emotional needs dictate much of political behaviour whenever people feel their identity is at stake. The Leave campaign clearly played on these emotions by stirring up fears about sovereignty, control and national identity. To many voters, leaving the European Union was a way to get back control of Britain and regain its sovereign status. The Leave campaign used emotionally charged rhetoric aimed at the perceived decline of British sovereignty and the impact of European migration. This was a message that spoke to the voters who felt that they had no place in Europe (Weinberg, 2020, p. 5).

On the other hand, the Remain campaign was based on the rational arguments, such as the economic implications of Brexit, the loss of trade partners, and the risk of political loneliness. Although these arguments were factual and logical, they did not capture the emotional reasons that informed the decision of many Leave voters (Cole, 2016). The feeling of loss of control of the nation, cultural identity, and the ability to govern themselves was what drove many Brexit supporters. These emotions were more compelling than the economic arguments put forward by Remain campaigners because they hit the mark on the psychological needs for autonomy and sovereignty. Furthermore, the psychological processes such as the avoidance of losses as compared to the acquisition of gains known as the loss aversion helped to influence the support for Brexit. Top among the Leave campaign message of 'controlling immigration' was the fear of the EU bureaucracy (Cole, 2016). By stimulating this fear, the Leave campaign was

able to appeal to the emotions of the voters who felt that Britain's identity and sovereignty was being eroded by the EU. The campaign also used national pride to push for a return to what it called a 'golden age' of British dominance of world affairs, unencumbered by European restrictions. This emotional story of restoring Britain to its former position of strength resonated particularly with older voters, who were more likely to identify with the British imperial past (Hughes, 2019).

Furthermore, immigration was used extensively in the emotional call for Brexit. The Leave campaign mastered the art of stirring up fear on the issue of European immigration, which it asserted was a threat to British culture and values. The fear of European immigrants taking their jobs, using public services, and changing the cultural landscape of Britain, which has been a source of concern to many Britons, was used effectively. These anxieties, which were based on historical images of Britain as a homogeneous island nation with a distinct culture, were stoked by the Leave campaign, which promised to take back control of the borders and immigration policies.

In the end, it was the emotional narrative of islandness that was the most significant factor in determining the result of the Brexit referendum. Through the use of emotional strategies such as fear, loss, and pride, the Leave campaign was able to reach out to the voters at an emotional level. In contrast, the Remain campaign did not address these emotional issues, which left it with no connection to the voters, which highlights the role of emotions in politics.

5. 2. Historical Narrative and British Imperialism: The Psychology of Euroscepticism

To understand the emotional appeal of 'islandness' or island identity in the context of Brexit, one must consider the psychological and historical aspects of the issue. Islandness is an important aspect of Britain's geopolitical identity that has led to the perception of the country as unique and exceptional. This exceptionalism as a concept, which is rooted in the belief that Britain is different from Europe [Euroscepticism], and thus has a special place to play in the world, has been a driving force in British foreign policy for many years, and it has been particularly difficult for the British political elite to redefine what nationality means (Wallace, 1991, p. 69). The psychological barrier to insularity was at its highest during the height of the British Empire, and this has led to the consolidation of a collective identity of independence and sovereignty (Weinberg, 2020, p. 4). This is largely related to how Britain has engaged with the European Union, and it is at the root of much of the Euroscepticism that has been evident in the British public for decades.

It is important to note, however, that while the image of Britain as an isolated 'island nation' is often promoted, for much of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain was part of a racially stratified imperial system that operated to its advantage (Lee, 1997; Davies, 1999; Lavery, 2005; Monod, 2009). The integration into the European Union, with its shared decision-making structures, represented a loss of this privileged position. British identity cannot be disentangled from its imperial history and the modes of governance that persisted well into the 20th century. In the immediate post-war period, Britain, as a diminishing superpower, still clung to its empire and the Commonwealth, even as it began

integrating into the European project. The British Nationality Act of 1948, for instance, designated the populations of Britain, its dominions, and its colonies as British subjects, later evolving into Commonwealth citizens. This understanding of citizenship was further complicated by the introduction of 'EU citizenship', which brought in a new form of belonging that did not fit easily with more traditional British notions of sovereignty (Bhambra, 2016).

Ontological security theory offers a way of understanding how the above-mentioned historical narratives affected the psychology of Brexit. This theory holds that individuals and states seek to sustain a coherent and continuous sense of self in order to avoid existential anxiety (Karp, 2018, p. 65). For many, Britain's membership of the European Union was a challenge to this continuity (Manners, 2018, p. 1220) of the normal story of Britain as a free, sovereign island nation. This, in conjunction with the EU's focus on joint sovereignty and the collective decision-making process, seemed to erode Britain's sovereignty, which many Brits did not feel like they wanted to settle for. This disruption was followed by a high level of existential anxiety; the Leave campaign was able to take advantage of this anxiety by offering a solution to the problem through Brexit, which would enable Britain to regain control of its sovereignty and, in effect, its historical identity of independence (Whittaker, 2016, p. 79).

The idea of Britain as an island nation has been central to the construction of British identity throughout history (Sanford, 2022). This physical distance has enabled Britain to evolve a distinct political and cultural identity that was often expressed in opposition to that of its European neighbours. This feeling of apartness was also bolstered during the imperial era when Britain considered itself as a universal power with its influence and dominion

spreading across the entire globe. This, in turn, gave rise to the concept of 'islandness', which came to be associated with Britain's sovereignty and nutritional self-reliance, thus creating a strong psychological relation with the idea of Britain as an independent sovereign state without any interference from Europe.

This narrative was, however, complicated by Britain's membership in the European Union. For many, the EU was not only a political or economic union, but an attack on 'Great' Britain's biographical continuity as an independent and leading nation (Manners, 2018, p. 1224). The process of European integration was considered by many Leave voters as a threat to the historical identity of Britain as an insular and independent country. Existential anxiety was particularly pronounced among the older generations, who experienced Britain's imperial decline and regarded the EU as yet another manifestation of the country's diminishing global standing.

This psychological connection to islandness is tied to the rise of Euroscepticism that reflects a deep distrust of European integration and tendency to maintain national sovereignty (Daddow, 2004, p. 9). We mentioned earlier that for many Leave voters, Brexit was not just about reclaiming political and economic control, but about restoring Britain's biographical narrative and reasserting its independence from Europe. What Whittaker (2016) calls 'islandness', or the 'Island Race', reveals a geopolitical story of a British imperial identity that had to do with an imaginary distance from the continent. Historically, Britain has been psychologically and politically detached from European affairs and has framed itself as a global power, not a European one. The psychological dimensions of islandness also explain the deep-rooted Euroscepticism that shaped public sentiment toward Brexit.

Euroscepticism has long framed Europe as a competitor, with Britain standing apart as a superior and distinct entity. The rise of economic nationalism and populism, particularly in the aftermath of the 2007 global financial crisis, further amplified these sentiments (Crafts, 2019). The Leave campaign's message of regaining control from European powers echoed greatly with voters, mainly people who felt disconnected from the European project.

Social psychology, and more specifically, the theories of Henri Tajfel on social identity, also add weight to this story. Tajfel's theory also stresses on the fact that group identity is developed in relation to the 'others', a process which played a key role in the Brexit referendum (Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012, p. 52). British voters who voted Leave passionately defended the idea of a unique and sufficient Britain, which had no reason to be part of the EU. Leave campaign was able to portray the issue as a battle between the real British identity and the external threat, called the EU, creating great suspicion towards the European integration.

Therefore, it is possible to state that the concept of islandness and the need for ontological security were the main factors that influenced the Brexit vote. These interconnected factors explain the complicated dynamics of emotion, psychology, and identity that led Britain to exit the European Union. The Leave campaign appealed to the core of the British identity by emphasizing the country's past as a unique and autonomous island nation. Posing ontological security and islandness as key concepts through which one can analyse Brexit, offers a richer appreciation of the psychological dynamics behind the decision and the part that historical narratives play in determining political actions.

6. Limitations, Future Research, and Comparative Insights

While the ontological security perspective succeeds in revealing emotional and identity-based drivers of Brexit, its focus on 'security of being' necessarily means it sidelines material and economic influences that shaped voter choices. Methodologically, the study depends on narrative data and specific text selection, which produces results that could lead to potential biases and overlook grassroots voices with lower digital presence, while failing to prove causal relationships between ontological insecurity and voting results. Conceptually, the application of state-centric OS framework to individual identity narratives creates a simplified model of the intricate interrelations between personal, regional and structural elements that guide political decisions. Building on these insights and acknowledging our limitations, we outline possible avenues for future research, along with comparative case studies that can deepen our understanding of ontological security dynamics.

6. 1. Empirical and Demographic Studies

Future research should expand its focus from studying prominent texts to involve direct interactions with individuals whose identity motivated a political choice. In our case, for example, in-depth interviews and focus groups comprised of participants from various regional locations, age groups, and socioeconomic levels would illustrate how the concept of 'islandness' connects with daily concerns about financial issues, public services and community solidarity. Researchers could benefit from creating survey instruments to measure ontological insecurity, which would enable them to analyse collective anxiety over time, particularly within

younger and cosmopolitan groups. By weaving together these qualitative and quantitative approaches, scholars can base ontological security literature on actual experiences of various British people and test how deeply identity narratives, material conditions, and emotional drivers combine to shape political behaviour.

6. 2. Comparative Case Analyses

Research based on comparative case studies would help better understand how ontological security functions in different political environments. For instance, the 2017 Catalan independence movement used Madrid's cultural policies to create an existential threat against Catalonia's self-narrative, which resulted in secession through language and heritage-related grounds (Basta & Barrio, 2023). Similarly, populist movements across the United States and Europe demonstrate how fears of cultural displacement fuel demands for political 'sovereignty'. An outstanding different instance is the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum that can further demonstrate the promise of ontological security studies to explain diverse political phenomena, where Indigenous communities sought ontological security not through separation, but by embedding a constitutionally enshrined 'Voice' as a form of 'being-with' the settler state (Chipato & Chandler, 2024). The rejection of this referendum revealed the conflict between including more people in a national story and maintaining an established national narrative. Whether through 'being-against' or 'being-with' state structures, these cases showcase how ontological security dynamics can operate across very different political and cultural contexts.

7. Conclusion

This paper aims at exploring Brexit through the concept of ontological security, with a focus on how the emotional and the psychological aspects of the 'islandness' contributed to the referendum result and the public opinion in general. The study was designed to go beyond conventional economic or political explanations of Brexit and more importantly, to problematise the dominant discourse of Brexit as an existential threat and ontological insecurity. However, it has been shown that historical discourses of British sovereignty and exceptionalism, combined with anxieties regarding identity erosion were key in determining the decision to leave the European Union.

This paper has found several key insights. First, the concept of 'islandness' as historical experience of separation, independence and self-governance was seen to be significant in the construction of the collective British identity. This long-standing narrative created the perception that Britain is different from and superior to Europe and hence there was no need to feel psychologically attached to the European project. Second, the research established that the process of European integration was not uniformly stabilizing for many Britons, but rather a challenge to this historical narrative. Membership of the EU was perceived as a threat to sovereignty and therefore caused a sense of alienation and existential anxiety. These sentiments were most apparent among the older generations who regarded the EU as a continuation of Britain's post imperial decline and a threat to long standing practices of autonomy and control. Third, the Leave campaign was successful because it was able to tap into the emotional currents of fear of immigration from Europe, loss of national pride, and the need for control. It was through branding Brexit as a means of

‘getting back control’ that the campaign was able to resonate with the need for ontological security and the story of British independence. This is because ontological security is about the need to maintain continuity with familiar narratives of the self and its relationships in order to feel secure. As our hypothesis predicted, Leave-oriented texts contain heightened existential anxiety over sovereignty loss, more disruptions to Britain’s national identity narrative, and stronger demands for narrative identity restoration (e.g., through ‘take back control’ campaign) compared to Remain discourses. This demonstrates that islandness-driven ontological insecurity underpins Brexit support.

The relevance of this study extends beyond the immediate concern with Brexit because it contributes to the understanding of the role of emotions, identity, and narrative in political decision-making. In an environment of increasing populism and nationalist movements, the Brexit case shows that political choices are motivated by historical narratives and psychological requirements as much as, if not more than, rational and materialistic calculations. This insight has implications for political actors and policymakers to consider the emotional and identity-driven basis of voter behaviour when national identity is seen to be under attack by external forces, integration projects or globalization.

In conclusion, this study has argued that Brexit was not simply a political or economic decision, and definitely not the source of ontological insecurity, but a very emotional and psychological way of dealing with the perceived loss of the narrative identity of Britain. The idea of ‘islandness’ in so far as it is theorised within the concept of ontological security helps to explain how biographical narratives and existential anxieties influenced the referendum result. In the end, Brexit is an attempt to restore British

sovereignty and to create a strategic continuity of a country that had been a great power and an important player in the international system. The study's findings add to the current discourse on nationalism, identity, and regional and global integration to understand how identity, emotion, and politics influence modern political choices in a world that is becoming more interconnected.

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