Theorizing Brexit: UK/EU Relations and International Relations Theory

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Abstract

Brexit, the UK withdrawal from the European Union, provides quite a challenge for theorists of international relations. Causes, effects as well as systemic, nation-state and individual analyses have yet to capture its essence which will inevitably have major regional repercussions. This presentation focuses on explaining the nation-level nature of the withdrawal by utilizing international relations theories. Neorealist analysis alludes to state interests and great power behaviour with the EU distribution of power a threat to UK national interests. Neoliberalism points to how free trade and democratic values have effectively been weakened by the perception of an overly centralized EU which has historically impacted on a UK reluctant to embed itself more in institutions such as the Euro and the Schengen zone. Marxist approaches examine the capitalist nature of the union and how Brexit is a counter hegemonic reaction to globalism. Constructivism articulates how UK nation-state identities produce a Self in opposition to an EU Other and how after nearly 50 years of membership, the UK remained heavily resistant to Europeanization. How does each theory provide an explanatory framework for understanding the event? How relevant is the nation-state unit of analysis for examining an action which was initiated by the domestic vote of citizens but also shaped by the systemic roles of the EU? Which theoretical approach most leads itself to further research in examining Brexit and also scrutinizing whether its impacts will produce a more unified or more fragmented Europe?

Keywords: Brexit; UK; European Union; International Relations Theory

1. Introduction

Robert Kagan's famous 2003 essay titled Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order highlighted some fundamental differences between the philosophical and strategic cultures of the US and Europe. Most bluntly, the US operates in a Hobbesian mould, exercising raw material military power on a global scale, while Europe is nestled in a Kantian matrix of ideals, rules and perpetual peace. Britain, somewhat straddles both worlds:

> One cannot generalize about Europeans: Britons may have a more "American" view of power than many Europeans on the Continent. Their memory of empire, the "special relationship" with the United States forged in World War II and at the dawn of the Cold War, and their historically aloof position with regard to the rest of Europe tend to set them apart. (Kagan, 2003, p. 5)

One of the most recent incarnations of Britain's rivalrous Lockean role concerns Brexit, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union following the nationwide referendum in June 2016. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called it "a wake-up call" (Barber and Chazan, 2020) and President Macron of France warned it was a "historic alarm signal" for Europe (Jamieson, 2020). As such, calling it "by far the most important historic event known by our continent since the fall of the Berlin Wall" (Grant, 2016) is no exaggeration. Naturally, a flurry of arguments has been produced to elucidate the reasons for the outcome of the UK referendum. Commonly articulated explanations for the 'No' vote include the fears of immigration, the threat to national identity of a European superstate, the Europhobic press, sovereignty, the broader global rise of populism, a reaction to the dynamic of political globalization as well as the product of economic hardship (see, for example, Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). As comparative political explanations, such focuses tend to internalize and domesticate the event and effectively divorce it from the very relations that may have influenced it. It is certainly not the case that such explanations do not have prescience. Nonetheless, one lacuna may be in the employment of international relations theories with regard to understanding Brexit from a more macro-theoretical perspective. IR theories may help join the domestic conditions with the systemic constraints of the regional and global system.

The paper proceeds as follows. Although beyond its scope to identify and explain the many nuances and schools that reside within IR theories, each section briefly overviews the theories of neorealism, neoliberalism, Marxism and constructivism to extrapolate the core arguments each theory posits. Then, Brexit is explained within the theoretical assumptions and underpinnings of each paradigm. This empirical section attempts to introduce some theoretical perceptions of the event and does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis. The conclusion summarises the findings and presents the case for which theoretical approach may well have greater explanatory power for a deeper investigation of the event.

2. Theory and Brexit

2.1 Interests and Power: Neorealism

Realism, as is well known, has many variants and possesses an impressive historical pedigree. Classical realism focuses on human nature, neorealism looks more at the structure of the international system which makes leadership and statecraft ethics redundant, while neoclassical realism seeks to offer a fusion, in which "… states assess and adapt to changes in their external environments partly as a result of their peculiar domestic structures and political situations" (Schweller, 2006, p. 6) with political leadership operating as an important influence on state outcomes. Stemming from the 17th Century European historical experience of a continent marred by *animus dominandi*, or the lust for power, and reaching its hiatus during the Cold War, one can argue that "the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power." (Morgenthau, 1978, p.5) Anarchy is a key component of the international system and state power and capabilities are the tools necessary for survival within the Hobbesian jungle.

Neorealism, or structural realism, seeks to explain international events in terms of the system structure, the distribution of power between states rather than the internal makeup on

individual states (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2012, p. 56). Foreign policy decisions are zero-sum game oriented, and problems occur not due to production, which is an economic argument, but due to the political problem of distribution (Waltz, 1959, p. 202). The distribution of capabilities determines the state's position in the international system and the lack of an overarching authority due to the problem of anarchy gives states precedence.

Britain's rocky relationship with the European Union has not been framed by conflict, which is the principle focus on neorealism. Nonetheless, neorealism can help explain Brexit in three main ways. First of all, the exercise of power very much frames the relationship as being a long series of clashes of interests with respect to how state capabilities might best be played out within the EU arena. In the current period, there exists the fear that a no-deal agreement between the UK and the EU will lock both entities into a 'Brexit Cold War' (Waterfield, 2019). Neorealist logic might posit that this mini Cold War has been redolent since Britain's entry into the EEC in 1973. UK and EU power relations are produced due to the UK historically favouring an intergovernmental approach has frequently being at odds with an EU more reflective of supranational or federal ambitions. A dominant reading of the EU permeating many psyches of British political elites has sought to configure the EU as a superstate in the making. The Labour MP Tony Benn articulated this position throughout his career by remarking in his memoirs: "[t]he huge Commission building in Brussels, in the shape of a cross, is absolutely un-British. I felt as if I was going as a slave to Rome" (1989, p. 180) and "I can think of no body of men outside the Kremlin who have so much power without a shred of accountability for what they do." (1989, p. 343) Such arguments were echoed most notably by Margaret Thatcher, in her Bruges Speech in 1988:

> Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality. (Thatcher, 1988)

As such, neorealism first of all lends itself to understanding a power imbalance within which an EU authority increasingly exercises a supranational status.

A second and related issue concerns the evolution of the EU. Two strains of neorealism are worth articulating. Offensive realism seeks to achieve security using the tool of domination while defensive realism argues that states uphold moderate policies to attain security due to the existence of anarchy (Lobell, 2010). The EU is undeniably an entity that has expanded its power potential since its inception. The EEC moulded from being an economic union to a financial one with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty which set the early ground rules for the single currency. Furthermore, the political nature of the union is perhaps best exemplified in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty which created a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and afforded new competences in justice, freedom, security, energy and climate change. Originally called the Constitutional Treaty, 'No' referendums in France, the Netherlands and Ireland did little to stop the ever-growing remit of the organization. As such, neorealist analysis may well view Brexit as a reaction to an EU enshrined by an evolving hegemonizing power as against a UK defensive realism seeking to cling to less centralized and more restrained policies.

A final point focuses on state centricity. The EU has been regarded as *sui generis* and, in the words of the former European Commission President Jacques Delors, "un objet

politique non identifié" (cited in Phelan, 2012, p. 367). State-centric theories such as realism might appear inadequate at explaining international organizations which ultimately do not constrain states. However, several British political discourses have historically framed the European Union project as a Franco-German project. A dizzying array of pejoratives to describe both the French and German national characters can be easily found in the history of UK-EU relations. Early references during the UK's first referendum over continued EEC membership in 1975 are pertinent. The Labour Minister James Callaghan labelled France as "one of the oldest and most nationalistic of countries" (1987, p. 306), Baroness Castle lamented how "[t]he French get their own way to an alarming extent" (1990, p. 472) with the journalist Hugo Young reporting one minister who exclaimed, "'[t]he language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton'… was threatened by the French demand for linguistic hegemony in the EEC; 'Non, merci beaucoup'" (1998, p. 273). Germany too has faced its fair share of opprobrium. The longest serving Cabinet minister under the Thatcher government Cabinet argued that "[t]he more Europe was federated, the more Germany would be dominant" (Howe, 1995, p. 638). In addition, a former Chancellor noted that "Germany was determined to have the euro for political reasons" (Lamont, 1999, p. 120) and Margaret Thatcher herself stated that Germany "[h]as veered unpredictably between aggression and self-doubt" (Young, 1998, p. 358). Although these are elite-driven opinions of national character, and leadership roles do not fit into neorealism, one can argue that these images are reflections of perceived power capabilities of the EU which are driven most forcefully by France and Germany. Far from being shaped by minor powers, the EU, like any other organization, takes its animus, drive and policies from powerful states.

2.2 Trade and Values: Neoliberalism

Liberalism also has an extensive past. Individual freedom, democracy, trade, progress and modernization all operate as key categories for understanding its more optimistic stance. Born out of the experience of Anglo-American political and economic development, a hegemonic Britain in the 19th Century established free trade and a stable monetary system in which the pursuit of international economic order took precedence over the political interests of states (Pease, 2019). Liberal theorists have faith in human reason to overcome the lust for power even if they disagree about the scale of the obstacles that litter the path to human progress (Smith, 1992, p. 404. Cited in Jackson, Sørensen and Møller, 2019, pp. 108-109). Contemporary variants have highlighted the concept of complex interdependence within which self-interested states are bound to others for mutual benefit and effectively highlights that "states and their fortunes are inextricably tied together" (Nye and Keohane, 1977). Economic independence produces wealth creation whereas raw military power creates its opposite. In addition, states do not function as the only important actors, social welfare issues are as much a part of the international agenda as security concerns and cooperation is an inherent norm that produces national and global betterment (Genest, 1996, p. 140).

There are two dimensions in relation to neoliberal thought that help explain Brexit. At first glance, the UK would appear to be behaving anti-liberally with an isolationist decision to ostracize itself from its largest trading bloc. In 2018, UK exports to the EU were £291 billion which was 45% of all UK exports (Ward, 2019). One influence of the decision to leave the EU however is also predicated on the UK's global rather than regional scope. The former

Prime Minister Theresa May, articulated this vision in the World Economic Forum in January 2017:

> I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike. I want Britain to be what we have the potential, talent and ambition to be. A great, global trading nation that is respected around the world and strong, confident and united at home. (May, 2017)

The EU is seen as an economic straitjacket which stultifies global trade. As a customs union, it privileges intra-European trade but penalises inter-European commerce. An Economist article alluded to this argument several years ago:

> Something close to a Cutty Sark vision for Britain — nimble, free and ready to roam the globe in pursuit of profits — fills the dreams of Conservative politicians and policy types. ... Now, with euro-zone turmoil often in the news, their most potent lines of attack assert that Europe is a sclerotic, ageing, debt-crippled dead-end — that Britain is shackled to a "corpse", to quote one Tory MP. (Bagehot, The Economist, 2012)

> A second insight liberal thinking furnishes concerns the issue of democracy and broader values. Again, a litany of examples over recent history have placed he anti-democratic nature of the EU in firm opposition to a British Eurosceptic tradition. Within realist thinking, political freedom is associated mostly with the concept of sovereignty; that the EU is a threat to the sovereignty of states. Within liberal tradition, one can argue that political freedom is mostly linked to democratic traditions; that EU law overrules the UK parliament and other functions. Debates over whether to trigger Article 50 which formally initiated the UK's withdrawal from the EU were held in early 2017. Many references to the inviolability of parliamentary sovereignty and popular sovereignty abound. For example, one prominent Conservative Party member said:

> The reason we fell into the terrible cataclysm of the second world war following the great depression was the absence of democracy and, most importantly, robust democracy and strong democratic institutions with open trade. Such democracies simply will not do that. My sense was that the European Union's direction of travel from Maastricht was bound on a course that was going to lead to the UK ultimately deciding that it can no longer stay within it. (Duncan Smith, 2017)

Stemming from the Kantian argument of perpetual peace, democracies, in short fight do not fight one another. As Alexis de Tocqueville argued in Democracy in America:

> When the principle of equality spreads, as in Europe now, not only within one nation, at the same time among several neighboring peoples, the inhabitants of these various countries, despite different languages, customs, and laws, always resemble each other in an equal fear of war and love of peace. In vain do ambitious or angry princes arm for war; in spite of themselves they are calmed down by some sort of general apathy and goodwill which makes the sword fall from their hands. (Tocqueville, 1988, pp. 659-660)

Democracy is attached to the parliamentary demand to respect the popular vote as "[p]eople in the UK voted to take back control" (Redwood, 2017). Freedom is also attached to democratic institutions which are homegrown, organic and independent from foreign interference with one Labour member arguing "I believe that it is liberal democratic structures that deliver economic success and peace" (Stuart, 2017) and a Conservative member contending that "literally thousands of laws were imposed on the people of this country not only without scrutiny but without debate" (Gove, 2017).

Other values exist too. The former Director-General of the WTO, Pascal Lamy, stressed the links between human rights and trade rules in which "individual freedom and responsibility, non-discrimination, rule of law, and welfare through peaceful cooperation among individuals" (cited in Morrison, 2017) It seems difficult to accept that the UK will link any future trade rights to regimes that are obligated to respect human rights. However, as a soft power initiative, such concerns are becoming more essential in the public eye. The UK government has had influence in creating the Ethical Trading Initiative, the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, the UN mandated Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and was committed to upholding the UN 'Protect, Respect, Remedy' Framework (Morrison, 2017). In short, within a regional realist jungle in which the UK could not under any pretensions dominate, its best hope of globalizing its presence might be through values-oriented organizations and aspirations.

2.3 Hegemony and Globalization: Marxism

Central to Marxist interpretations of the international system is the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Hegemony, or supremacy, describes a "contested and shifting set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership." (Strinati, 1995, p. 170). Economic elites cannot simply grab and maintain power. What is required is the consent of other groups in order to consolidate their power. The union of these social forces that enable hegemony is called the 'historic bloc'.

Early references configure the EEC as a 'capitalist club' with its agenda geared towards the interests of corporate profits at the expense of the rights of labour. Statements from British political figures in 1975 labelled it as a "club of relatively privileged nations which want to maintain their positions" (Spearing, 1975), "the largest capitalist club in the world" (Short, 1975) with "the Treaty of Rome as a Magna Carta for the barons of multinational mega-corporations." (Short, 1975). The forging of the 'historic bloc' was a gradual process. The 1986 Single European Act which was to remove barriers to trade and help instigate the single market by 1992. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 also may be seen as a stage in the solidification of EU hegemony. Paving the way for the single currency, the adoption of the euro created a level of monetary union which placed burdens on members states in terms of government debt and inflation and effectively supranationalized the authority of the EU. However, the act perhaps most associated with shifting the EU from being an elitist to an egalitarian project which consolidated its 'historic bloc' status in the 1980s was the notion of 'social' Europe. The then President of the Commission Jacques Delors gave a speech to the Trades Union Congress, Margaret Thatcher's chief antagonist, and emphasized the social dimension of Europe. The speech has an enormous impact in converting core Labour Party supporters and policy influencers to pro-Europeanism. References to the bolstering of social protection in the wake of the single market, the

improvement of workers' living and working conditions, health and safety protections as well as collective bargaining helped hegemonize the EU. Delors affirmed:

> Europe matters to each and every one of us. As your General Secretary says things have changed. There will be more change, as your excellent report demonstrates. We are living through a peaceful revolution in which we must all participate. We must all adapt. This is why the challenge of 1992 is now being taken up by trades unions across Europe. The Commission will respond. (Delors, 1988)

From being perceived as an exclusive bourgeoisie project aiding the interests of capital, the EU had successfully transformed itself into a champion of workers' rights.

This has produced the belief that EU membership is unalterable. The free movement of labour and capital are part of the process of globalization, the most recent transformative phase in capitalist growth, and similarly produces a "logic of no alternative" (Hay, 2003). However, the globalizing processes inherent within the EU have produced a counter hegemonic backlash. This is evinced by the splurge in European populist parties that tend to be united in their anti-immigration, anti-globalization and Eurosceptic rhetoric. The Danish People's Party, Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance, the Law and Justice Party in Poland and the United Kingdom Independence Party are just a few. Brexit, consequently, is a means to halt the economic and political globalization of the EU. And as at least one scholar has indicated, the uneven development which causes such decisions in the first place may well be due to the broader ideological dominance of neoliberalism, rather than the specific machinations of institutions like the EU (Jessop, 2018).

2.4 Identities and Culture: Constructivism

The Constructivist turn developed with a dissatisfaction from materialist theories. The way a state such as the UK behaves might not be due to the materialistic concepts of balance of power and distribution of capabilities or through the desire to exercise sovereignty and freedom but through the identity of the state which has been produced through lengthy social, historical and cultural processes. Constructivism posits that "[i]dentities are the basis of interests" (Wendt, 1992, p. 398) because "they tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are." (Hopf, 1998, p. 175). Actors have multiple identities that fluctuate in importance (Wendt, 1994, p. 385) and a real understanding of state action must take into account a myriad of identifiers which include national identity, cultural images, historical myths, strategic culture and so forth. In short, to understand why a state does what it does, one needs to know who it is.

A focus on identity certainly provides some explanatory factors in the UK's decision to leave the EU. Two elements are worth highlighting. The first concerns the articulation of certain historical domestic readings. After all, one can point out that the UK was a member of the EU for nearly 50 years and yet its 'Europeanness' arguably never seemed to become fully absorbed neither in the opinions of the public nor within British political elite thinking. Its "awkward partner" status (George, 1990), "semi-detachment" (George, 1992) and "reluctance" (Geddes, 2004, p. 1) is well researched and Brexit is simply the playing out of that which has already been occurring for half a century. One historical reading is that of the 'island story', which the English historian Lord Blake encapsulated:

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> England's coastline has helped to shape both the history of the English nation and the psychology of the English character ... The long centuries during which the land was free from invaders meant that there could be a continuity of tradition impossible on the war-torn continent ... We come to the cliché that Britain is an island, a fact that has been subtly decisive in so many aspects of her history. (cited in Crick, 2008, p. 71)

Other such identifiers that have anchored the UK separationist viewpoint might include the inherent Euroscepticism evident within British history (Daddow, 2006), Protestantism (Clark, 2000), monarchy (Cannadine, 1983) and Empire (Thompson, 1997). Empirical evidence also suggests that a strong sense of belonging to England, was more likely to produce a 'Leave' vote in the electorate (Mann and Fenton, 2017). The UK, through deep-seated historical and cultural attitudes, has framed the EU negatively and Brexit is the next stage in its evolution. As such, the UK Self has been constructed in opposition to the European Other.

A second way in which a constructivist approach can be employed is via the more structural cultures of anarchy. Articulated by Wendt (1999), cultures of anarchy include Hobbesian enmity, Lockean rivalry and Kantian friendship and the potential for we-feeling and collective identity are forged through the dominance of four master variables. These are interdependence: the level of dependency between actors; common fate: the survival, fitness or welfare of states depends on what happens to the group as a whole (e.g. global warming); homogeneity: the level of alikeness between states; and self-restraint: an essential component for collectivising identity. The UK, despite common confusion, has not decided to leave Europe but the European Union. Lockean rivalry may well be motivated to forge alliances, special relations and opportunities elsewhere. However, although the post-war experience of Europe may be shrouded in Kantian peace, and more rivalrous state such as the UK might simply see such a peace as a convenient cover for masking the activities of European nations no less self-interested that the UK's own, interdependence, common fate and homogeneity ought to be no more binding on European states than any other regions' states. These variables are universal rather than regional. European identity might function as a fig leaf and recent spats and disunity between European states – over the 2003 US led war on Iraq, over the best response to the 2007 global financial crisis or even the lack of a pan-European policy over the current Coronavirus epidemic – might all reveal that Europe is not bound by particularly high levels of interdependency, common fate or homogeneity. The lack of conflict between European states may well be an established norm so a Hobbesian response is simply not permissible. Nonetheless, when peace prevails, Kantian logic dominates. When threats appear, Lockean rivalry abounds. From an identity perspective, the British state might simply configure the EU as a more competitive, self-serving entity than its member states.

3. Conclusion: Unifying the Strands

Neorealism places the UK within a regional international system in which an imbalance of power is dictated. As a state on its own, it cannot hope to shape a regional organization in its own image and consequently viewed separation as a natural development from that dynamic. Neoliberalism might highlight how trade and values can be found elsewhere and a UK without its EU membership does little to stymie its European values or commitments to regional and global commitments. Marxist analysis investigates the counter hegemonic response that Brexit is an example of and may well tie such an event into a

broader rise of European populist sentiment. Constructivism may well highlight the identity differences between the UK and Europe and how Brexit is simply the latest invocation of a state built on difference rather than similarity to its neighbours.

However, is there any means to unify paradigms which are predicated on such diverse assumptions? All theories in one way or another posit the importance of the role of the state even if the theories privilege the international system or economic classes and the like. A fruitful way forward may well be the area of role theory. Operating within the discipline of social psychology, which links it most closely to constructivism, role theory conveys states, just like individuals, as behaving according to the role perceptions they have of themselves as well as the perceptions of others. In the words of the American sociologist Robert E. Park:

> …everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. We are parents and children, masters and servants. . . It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (1950. Cited in Reitzes and Reitzes, 1993, p. 47)

Utilized within foreign policy analysis, role theory has cultivated a number of definitions. Role expectations are the roles others expect us to perform, role performance is the actual actions that are taken, while national role conceptions are the policymakers' definitions and of the kind of rules, decisions and actions appropriate for their state (Holsti, 1970, pp. 245-246). Holsti's influential analysis produced six roles for the UK of which three were dominant in the 1960s: 'regional-subsystem collaborator' as a state committed to cooperation with others, 'regional protector' with regard to the protection of Singapore and Malaysia and 'faithful ally' in terms of the Anglo-American alliance. More recent scholarship has highlighted the UK as 'leader', 'partner' and 'independent' (Aggestam, 2004) while others have located its roles as 'contributor to the international system', 'promoter of defence and security', 'regional-system collaborator' and 'international broker' (Macleod, 1997, pp. 171-174).

To conclude, role theory offers a number of theoretical advantages. Firstly, it functions as a tool for understanding the identity and role of the state. Irrespective of whether state interests, values and identities are shaped by the domestic audience, by the structure of the international or regional system or by the individual psychologies of decisionmakers, roles produced provide an account of who the state is. Secondly, role theory enables a multi-disciplinary approach which effectively fuses elements of other theories. The distribution of power in the international system from a neorealist perspective can be absorbed into the role the state has. For example, states that have limited capabilities cannot configure themselves as possessing a 'hegemonic' or 'global role'. Similarly, superpowers cannot identify themselves with an 'isolate' role. A neoliberal emphasis on freedom, democracy and values can also be captured within role theory. Additionally, a role theoretical reading of the EU can reveal whether a neo-Gramscian perspective has empirical validity by examining how much of the ideological power of the institution is mirrored in the role of the state. As such, role theory is a unifying approach. Finally, role theory bridges the divide between theory and practice. Role conceptions are the being while role performances are the doing. Role theory helps link the manner in which the state sees itself to the way in which it behaves in the international field. A role theoretical focus on the pre- and post-Brexit United Kingdom could well provide an interesting comparative case. Similarly, an investigation of other European states' roles may

well help us understand if Brexit is a one off, or whether it is a contagion. As an enquiry into the state-based roots of Brexit, role theory offers a pertinent means to understanding the act.

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