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To cite this article: Kalypso Nicolaidis (2020): In praise of ambivalence- another Brexit story, Journal of European Integration, DOI: [10.1080/07036337.2020.1766456](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1766456)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1766456>



Published online: 29 May 2020.



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ARTICLE



In praise of ambivalence- another Brexit story

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a defence of ambivalence as a response to the political polarisation of our era using multiple languages to present its case from psychology to sociology, political science, philosophy and critical theory. It suggests that the Brexit story can be told in a different key, whereby the politics that have led to entrenching 'leave' and 'remain' identities overlay a harder to assess ambivalence about the EU both in the UK and in the EU, a dynamic referred to as the 'Machiavelli Trap.' Accordingly, we ought to ground the future relationship in the recognition of the 'Brexit paradox' (you can leave and therefore you shouldn't), and its implications for the core principles that have shaped the Brexit debate and negotiations. In the end, the paper offers a plea for a politics that allows citizens to tune into their constructive ambivalence about the fundamental tension between control and cooperation which pervades both Brexit, EU and global politics at large.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 February 2020
Accepted 5 May 2020

KEYWORDS

Brexit; Ambivalence;
European Union; Mythology;
Machiavelli; Polarization

"Evil takes root when one man starts to think that he is better than another." Nobel poet laureate Joseph Brodsky

"To say that existence is ambiguous is to assert that it's meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won." Simone de Beauvoir

"Democracy is a political system for people who are not sure that they are right." Elmer Schattschneider

Am I ambivalent about Brexit? Well, yes and no, would probably be the answer of many of us. Irony aside, it is this mindset that I would like to explore here. It is possible to be both ambivalent about the value of Brexit for the UK and the EU project and at the same a convinced remainer (Nicolaidis 2016a, Nicolaidis2019). If tragedy is a clash between 'right' and 'right,' as Amos Oz famously quipped, so is the politics of belonging and the philosophy of separation opened up by Brexit. Is Brexit about British or European dysfunctionality, both or neither? About freedom, hubris, redemption, unity? Whether we disagree within the UK or across the channel, 'us vs them' will not do. We must agree to disagree with just enough civility to sustain our togetherness (Bejan 2017). It may be the case that admitting ambivalence and the vulnerability associated with it can encourage such 'mere civility' as a prerequisite to deliberation and compromise, albeit between 'right' and 'right.'

Admittedly, to speak of ambivalence in the context of Brexit might seem odd. Brexit has been billed as one of the paroxysmic examples of the intense polarisation which has gripped out societies in the last decade.

The evidence over 'global polarization' is overwhelming and incontrovertible, as illustrated by countless studies of socio-political identities and electoral politics. Increasingly, citizens no longer seem to disagree only about the best means and most competent parties to achieve shared ends but take their cues from generally divisive frames which cannot easily lend themselves to incremental compromise – a shift referred to as from valence to position issue (Hay and Benoît 2020).

Moreover, analysts of electoral politics and of Brexit in particular have shown that this is not any old polarization but 'mass affective polarization' whereby people exhibit heightened emotional attachment for their own group and hostility towards the other side, cutting across longstanding partisan divisions and leading in turn to generalized intolerance (Curtice 2019, Evans and Menon 2017, Hobolt 2016, Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2020, MacKuen et al. 2010). These new identities tend to reflect pre-existing, but less-politicized, social traits which were mobilized in the context of the referendum and turned into strongly held and divisive newly salient opposites over a very short period: 'Leave' vs 'Remain'. Rather than diminishing, the divisions that emerged have often been exacerbated in the UK (Curtice and Montagu 2019). The more these positions are linked to the acquisition or confirmation of socio-political identities through which people want to be recognized, the more they become entrenched. As a result, the multiple social cleavages which characterise our societies, instead of being translated differently across different issues, have suddenly been compounded along a single political axis. If we believe that normal politics works best as open competition for power between diverse views, whereby the winning combination varies over time and across issues, then civilized political intercourse is at risk if conflicts crystallize between polarized groups. In short, according to this story, the Brexit divide may not quite have been the stuff of civil wars but the signs have been alarming of a body politics torn apart by ideological cleavages built on social-economic chasms, further blown-up by social media hysteria.

Ominously, we are told that the Brexit vote and its aftermath scale up to the whole of Europe, reflecting two irreconcilable poles: for or against the EU, and therefore for or against Brexit. Across member states, old and new tribes clash over such fundamentally opposite outlooks as whether we should cooperate or 'take back control', open or close our borders, believe in cosmopolitanism or 'sovereignismo.' Are you open or not to new experiences? I will tell you which side you are on. And we know that the divide maps onto fundamentals: age and education. So when politicians on both sides frame the European political landscape in terms of 'us vs them', they are only reflecting what is there already – right?

Thankfully, social reality is more complex. After all, the core choice at stake is as old as human social life – how do different individuals or groups choose between cooperation and control (Nicolaidis 2017b)? In truth, most people actually understand and value both sides of the equation in their everyday life, only with different emphasis: the urge to regain control over one's circumstances *and* to work with others (I like to refer to my adolescent daughter who asserts control of her bedroom one moment, only to cooperate in the family dinner preparation the next). When a 'remainer' derides the leaver's mantra of 'taking back control,' doesn't she also recognize its attraction? When a leaver derides the 'ties that bind' as too binding, doesn't he also acknowledge their attraction? Similarly,

when an EU citizen derides Brexit Britain, doesn't she also appreciate the strange boldness of it all? If they don't do it aloud it could be because ambivalence, or holding 'mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone' (Oxford dictionary), is not a comfortable state of being for most of us. This is at least my starting hypothesis.

Widespread ambivalence about the EU should be no surprise. Here we have the dream: an amazing political invention to fine-tune the balancing act between rescuing and transforming the nation-state, with governments at the helm and fidelity to the whole, indeed control and cooperation wrapped into one. But the age-old challenge of finding the right balance between mutual deference and mutual interference will always be an unstable equilibrium (Nicolaidis 2017a). Even tempered by national government control, the old Eurocrats' dream of delegation of power to non-majoritarian bodies and ever-expanding supranational oversight cut off from day to day politics has taken its toll in social, political, and economic costs (Chalmers, Jachtenfuchs, and Joerges 2016). There should be no stigma from admitting: 'I am not sure,' the EU is good and bad, both sides can be right.

I argue for a politics where we all engage without taboo around these tensions so as to allow citizens to tune into their own constructive ambivalence, connecting the European question with intuitions from everyday life. I argue against one-sided narratives that simply reinforce preexisting biases. And I argue that Brexit might paradoxically help create more space for such an ethos if we can leave behind the macho politics of Brexit 1.0 and design a kinder, gentler approach to Brexit 2.0 (Weiler 2017).

I sought to contribute to this call in the hope that speaking politics against the backdrop of Biblical and Greek myths could help open up a space for a more multi-vocal democratic conversation (Nicolaidis 2019). After all the Brexit process is both a negotiation between partially conflicting, partially overlapping interests, as we liberals would have it, and a clash of seemingly un-negotiable narratives. Thinking through the prism of myths, I argued, may help us recover the ironic stance of modernity by offering a critical distance from whatever story we tell ourselves, and by placing question marks around our collective self-righteousness. By flirting with tragic choices, the absurd and the desperate ironies entangling human beings, myths remind us that ambivalence may be suppressed, denied or avowed, but is our birth-right not just as individuals but also as collectives. To praise ambivalence is to rehabilitate the virtue exemplified by Ulysses' story of departure for Troy when he wavered between loyalty to place and the promise of eternal glory. Adorno and Horkheimer may have traced back the oppression of modern society and the reifying power of reason to his self-denial during his encounter with the sirens, but don't we know better? Ulysses was not meant to be one or the other, reason or passion, humble or grand, controlled or in control. He gave us heroic ambivalence, and from there the relevance of everyday ambivalence to politics.

It goes without saying that praising ambivalence is not a universal or unconditional statement. An extended essay would require a discussion of when or under what conditions – scope conditions in the jargon. One cannot, should not, be ambivalent about genocide, torture, exploitation of course. Moral progress, on say human or labor rights, requires absolute commitment and sustained social struggles. Suffice to say that ambivalence is in play with the clash of equally commendable social values and that I consider its rewards in response to a *particular* state of things, namely polarization over Brexit. At

a minimum then, I seek to praise ambivalence as an epistemic virtue, and as a political virtue only in the right context.

Where is such an improbable space to be found? What are the chances that we may recover ambivalence as a political virtue? Given the overwhelming evidence of polarization, on what grounds is such a proposition even plausible? I am certainly not equipped to offer empirical testing for it. Instead, I merely hope to suggest where we might look, in a space where psychology, politics, sociology, anthropology and philosophy meet – as well as the arts, where ambivalence reigns supreme. I will start by discussing the condition of ambivalence in general terms drawing on insights from psychology to politics and suggesting the hypothesis of the ‘Machiavelli Trap’ which connects personal attitude with political behavior. Next, I argue that we ought to ground the future relationship between Britain and the EU in what I call the ‘Brexit paradox’ which turns our ambivalence about Brexit into the main anchor of the future relationship by highlighting the virtue of free association. I then turn to implications for the four core principles that have shaped the Brexit debate and negotiations (namely, unity, indivisibility, integrity and autonomy), mindful along the way of the lessons that can be learned by adopting the lens of ambivalence, be it of the heroic or of the everyday kind.

I. Ambivalence and the Machiavelli trap

We can find inspiration for praising ambivalence in many unrelated parts of political thought and culture. Owning up to our ambivalence allows us to engage with the complexity of the world by shaking off programmatic certainty. It is about resisting dogma and recognizing that equally valid alternative options can coexist. It has close affinity with powerful ideas of liberal tolerance. Echoing Kołakowski’s ‘secret awareness of contradictions in the world,’ Wendy Brown playfully notes that Karl Marx was truly ambivalent about capitalism and what it had accomplished as he put it ‘in scarce 100 years’ – until that is, politics forced him to ‘get on message’ (Clarke 2019). In Simone de Beauvoir’s existential ethics of ambiguity, human existence is about experiencing our dual nature as combinations of matter and consciousness, which we must recognize in ourselves but also in others. Our propensity for contempt and oppression is in part a result of treating the ‘other’ as though he or she is only a material thing, rather than a free, multivalent thinking human being (De Beauvoir c1948 [1947]). Embracing such ontological ambiguity and our political ambivalence go hand in hand, and together enlarge our margins of freedom. These margins were probably what Karl Popper was after at the end of his life, when he explored the way human beings rightly change their view of the world by engaging with probabilities and propensities that might shake prior beliefs about causalities (Popper 1990). So why is ambivalence so easily belittled?

From psychology

Psychologists, and in particular social psychologists, have not only long sought to diagnose ambivalence per se, but also the panoply of strategies which groups and individuals deploy to cope with it. As a pioneer, Freud first explored the strain we feel from ‘pairs of contrary component instincts’, and from ‘the law of ambivalence of feeling, which to this day governs our emotional relations with those whom we love most’, potentially

leading to the neurotic oscillation between polar extremes (Freud 1918). Although ambivalence speaks to simultaneous attitudes, ‘two opposing reactions or beliefs at the same time,’ or ‘concurrent attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action,’ it can manifest itself sequentially, in its original psychoanalytic meaning as a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite (Young 1995). From not being sure ‘what I think,’ to ‘who I like,’ to ‘who I am,’ ambivalence spans an ambit from mere uncertainty to schizophrenia. As if we were in a state of political quantum superposition, like Schrodinger’s infamous cat, alive and dead at the same time. No wonder that while we all experience it at least in some contexts some of the time, it is not a state we easily live with, wishing for our superposed states to collapse into one. Thou shall be a Remainer or a Leaver.

Indeed, while feeling ambivalent for oneself is demanding, owning up to it is even harder. For ambivalence usually confronts not only and inner but also outer hostile environment. For one, detractors interpret non-committal statements associated with it as evidence of unconscionable *indifference* with the important question of our time. Second, it is true that the less one-sided individuals are in their attitude, the more impressionable they may become, the less predictable they future action (Moss 2010). As ambivalence thus results in indecisiveness, not taking a clear position, ‘sitting on the fence,’ it tends to register as *cowardness*, or at least fickleness or superficiality, that of a person of weak will or, in another vernacular, lacking in ‘masculinity.’ Third and most ominously, the ambivalent citizens forfeits her tribe and its legitimate struggles for recognition. If she hails from a prior state of belonging to a group defined by stable beliefs, she becomes a *traitor*, no longer ‘on our side’ regardless of his or her continued partial adherence to the shared beliefs in question. Thus, our polarized political landscape seems to stand as grand exercise in un-mixing whatever mixed feelings we may wish to hang on to.

Thankfully for the ambivalent soul, extensive experimental research from social psychology paints a more nuanced picture, based on subtle diagnostic strategies.

For one, ambivalence should not be confused with indifference. Strong conflicting attitudes, ‘love-hate’ feelings are clearly not neutral ones. They just reflect that simple categories of people or ideas often do not survive scrutiny. To demonstrate that deep ambivalence does not rest on lack of deep convictions, some social psychologists have moved away from measuring attitudes using one or even two-dimensional perspectives which flatten opinions as middle of the road ‘averages.’ Instead, they adopt multidimensional models whereby each of us can be thought of as a network of separate attitudinal hubs which form a web of contributions to a given attitude about a particular object, the result of contradictory social attachments and values related to cultures, classes, gender and the likes (Maio, Haddock, and Verplanken 2018). Thus, attitude towards an object can fluctuate within a relatively short span without requiring any permanent change in one’s complex underlying beliefs. When it comes to Brexit, I may believe all at once in the value of individual self-determination, the primacy of national institutions and European strategic autonomy. And it is also possible to see everything that is good about EU membership, from geopolitical strength to free trade, and at the same time everything that is bad, from cumbersome bureaucracy to undemocratic culture. And as a result to oscillate between wanting to be ‘truly in’ and ‘truly out.’

Second, ambivalence can remain unacknowledged by the individual experiencing it, tucked away as what psychologists call ‘objective’ or ‘potential’ ambivalence, which represents the simultaneous endorsement of both positive and negative attitudes towards a given subject (‘the EU is good/bad for the UK’). This is more likely to become ‘subjective’ or ‘felt’ ambivalence (eg ‘I am conflicted about my position’) when both positive and negative attitudes are accessible consciously (what psychologists call simultaneous accessibility), when preference for consistency is lower and the person thus less likely to ignore new information, and more importantly for us, when a decision, such as a vote, needs to be made (Van Harreveld et al, 2009). It is plausible to assume that for many in the UK or in other countries, attitudes to the EU shift from potential to felt ambivalence only when one is asked to decide. And the question arises: can politics better reflect people’s latent ambivalence?

Third, and relatedly, attitudes about one’s attitude vary. Cognitive consistency theories rest on the premise that the desire to avoid inconsistency in thoughts, feelings, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes or behaviors, is a powerful determinant of human behavior. Indeed, consistency arguably rests at the core of social order (Macaj 2020). Faced with ‘cognitive dissonance’, a descriptor coined by Festinger in 1957 to ground our instinctive drive try to reduce psychological discomfort, we seek to return to a simple state, key in turn to satisfactory relationships with others (Festiner 1957). But experimental psychologists help us understand when some cognitive inconsistencies are more agonizing than others, for it is not necessarily the dissonance itself that causes the upset but how an individual constructs it. In this story, it is critical to distinguish between ambivalence and inconsistency – ‘mixed’ feelings or attitudes can coexist in tension but not in contradiction (A and non-A). And the introduction of new facts or arguments affects the ambivalent or one-sided person differently. The latter will resist change for fear of experiencing cognitive dissonance. In contrast, the former may well find one of her attitudinal polls reinforced and switch opinion. There is also compelling evidence that when someone is faced with a ‘heart vs. mind conflict,’ affect tends to win over cognition without overpowering it. This tension was pervasive in the Brexit context but we find it elsewhere around Europe.

As a result, studies have found that ambivalent attitudes are less stable over time and less predictive of behavior (Haddock 2003). They are less resistant to changing contexts, as different parts of one’s cognitive network get activated over time. Critically, ‘knowledge structures’ as experimental psychologists call them can be seen in two ways. On one hand, they can anchor strong one-sided informed attitudes, less likely to be manipulated. But they can also underpin ambivalent attitudes and indecisiveness which result in less biased and more extensive thought process, as information processing takes longer than for univalent attitudes given a propensity to integrate multiple viewpoints into one judgement (Conner et al, 2008). In complex situations, ambivalent individuals will be more concerned with making invalid judgments when confronted with new ways of looking at a problem (Clark, Wegener, and Fabrigar 2008). And they will be more empathetic. In short, as open-minded and self-questioning people, ambivalents will allow new facts or arguments to change their minds.

To politics

Scaling up from social psychology to sociology and politics is a perilous exercise. This is not the place to review the debates between political sociologists, political scientists and philosophers on how political preferences are formed and transformed through some mix between individual choice and social interaction. Suffice to say that social reality is layered. If politics as Robert Dahl once said, is a side show in the great circus of life, something else may be the case behind the curtain. We can entertain the hypothesis that behind the polarised political picture stands a multitude, if not majorities, of ambivalent individuals, enough such to matter in our body politics, each a different version of quantum superposition, only emerging into a single state when the (ballot) box is opened and the vote is cast. What is the equivalent then of opening the box and collapsing the wave function in our political societies?

There are in fact many potential leads in the literature which I tentatively suggest can be pooled under the idea of *The Machiavelli trap*, a loose appropriation of the great Renaissance political thinker as someone who fought to uphold high moral standards and restore the democratic freedoms of his beloved Florence – albeit under a mask (Benner 2017). As with Hume, Machiavelli's interest in history grew out of an appreciation of the role of contingency and custom in shaping political choice – what is often seen as a conservative mind set, but actually is also well understood by activists on the left. Hence, his concern for finding ways of making more resilient the incipient democracy of his time.

To be sure, Machiavelli's true convictions, his egalitarian and secular politics, had to be hidden in his apparent 'dilemmatic' *Prince* where pronouncements extracted from polar reductionism, antithetical either-or relationships, could be reversed with such apparent ease that they lost their credibility. If *The Prince* was in fact a subtle critique of princely power, we know from *The Discourses* and other writings how Machiavelli rejoiced in the empowerment of citizens. To grossly simplify, the Machiavelli trap suggests that citizens get trapped into opting from one pole or the other, even if their 'real' choice would be neither, by bad politics and the corrosive impact of power games. Polarization, then and today, would thus be less about preferences than processes and political dynamics which manage to unmix whatever mixed feelings people may have had. In the process, not only is the ideal Republic lost but with it the ideal of a politics for people who are not sure that they are right.

'Knowing where the trap is, said the great Frank Herbert, that's the best way of evading it.' So let me suggest a few probes that may help us know where the *Machiavelli trap* may be and how to escape it.

First, we can look to the political sociology of the last fifty years. Colin Crouch convincingly argues that if ordinary citizens have progressively lost the kind of social identities that were once easily translatable into political identities through the circles of recognition that defined their lives, from trade unions to associations and social movements, it is no surprise that our politics have become more fluid (Crouch 2018, Pizzorno 2018). Past struggles over inclusion and exclusion have receded from our collective memories. Given the growth not only of the precariat but of precarity itself, it is not surprising that our post-industrial societies fail to produce socially anchored political identities to replace them (Standing 2014; Azmanova 2020). Nor is it surprising that our citizens need to find new

alternatives. To the extent that outcomes sought through voting have more to do with self-identity than policies, *the nation*, undefeated as an anchor of belonging, is an obvious choice. Nevertheless, nations are tropes that can be mobilised for all sorts of collective missions, good and bad – from eradicating poverty and winning wars against fascism, to eradicating the Jewish people or winning wars against neighbours. Nationalism or national ‘firstism’ must be distinguished from national identity, pride or culture, to apprehend citizens ambivalence with regards to the European project (Barnett 2017). Indeed, focus group research has long shown the co-constitution of pro-national and pro-EU attitudes (Duchesnes et al, 2013).

Second, political economy analysis can point to contingency under apparent polarization. Polarization may prey on the cultural and economic insecurity felt by the losers from globalization and those who feel culturally marginalized, but the drift to the extremes is itself partly a function of welfare state policies which protect or compensate the so-called ‘left behinds’ (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016). Fascinatingly, the best predictor of support for Brexit in the UK seems to be changes in housing prices reflecting one’s contingent socially ‘desirable’ status (Ansell and Adler 2019). Euroscepticism can be the contingent impact of neoliberal excesses. If this is the case, ‘forgotten’ ambivalent citizens may seek more radical leaders, not because of some deep identity shift but because they at least do not treat them with contempt.

Third, we can question how we access people’s political beliefs. What if at least some of people’s attitude to the components of leave and remain (attitudes to non-nationals, to nationalism, to Europe) did not fall into this binary but rather within a network of separate attitudinal hubs as discussed above? To be sure, survey analysts themselves have long pointed out that belief systems do not surrendered easily to empirical study or quantification (Converse 2006 [1964]). Individuals might feel pushed for an answer when polled and be forced into an either-or which does not reflect their underlying conflictedness about issues (national center for social research 2019). For those attuned to sociological ambivalence, attitude surveys function as ‘a distorted structure of reality that minimizes and possibly delegitimizes both ambiguity and ambivalence’ (Smelser 1998). Neither polls nor *a fortiori* votes, provide revealed preferences but conversions of individual ambivalence into univalence. More generally, this either-or logic applies to a wide range of political acts that can be regarded as ‘truce points’ in the eternal process of temporarily resolving ambivalent and conflictual situations and rendering one side of public ambivalence temporarily unacceptable and non-legitimate (Smelser 1998). While World and European Values Surveys provide a wealth of data reflecting the mental, moral and political landscape of populations around the world, the political culture approach to political behavior cannot easily reveal people’s ambivalence. But we can ask how the shifts it observes – say from materialist to post-materialist values, from collective security to individual autonomy, from state authority to state legitimacy – affect people’s propensity to uphold ambivalent positions (see *inter alia*, Inglehart 2018).

Fourth, we can ask about the role of elites. In the two decades leading to the announcement of the referendum in 2015, Ipsos/Moris and YouGov polls show that Britain’s relationship to the EU was not a salient priority for the British electorate. Eurosceptic obsession was confined to a hard core of politicians and commentators (Clements et al, 2013). The British Social Attitudes Survey shows a jump of support for

leaving the EU from 22 to 41% between 2015 and 2016, while hovering between 10 and 15% in previous years since 1992. In the same vein, empirical studies in the United States consistently suggest that ‘ordinary citizens’ today are more ambivalent, less extreme, less ideological than elites, and that polarization on policy positions is significantly stronger at the elite level (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). This is not surprising to the extent that ordinary citizens simply know less about politics and therefore edge their bets on the middle ground. Moreover, people’s political attitudes seem to refer to intrinsic attractiveness or averseness without the kind of strong ideologies adopted by political elites (Converse 2006 [1964]). This may mean that people put up with immoderation from some of their politicians and for highly contingent reasons end up in the polarized camps which leaders build for their followers.

Fifth, we can ask whether political strategies like ambiguity and compromise actually reflect citizens’ ambivalence. Scholars have long debated the causes and consequences of ‘strategic ambiguity’ or position-blurring on the part of political parties (Nasr 2020). Rational parties in a two-party system, Downs argued initially, ought to ‘becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity,’ especially when these policies might be unpopular for parts of the electorate (Downs 1957). But does it follow that ambiguous party strategies are rewarded by ambivalent voters? The incentives to blur positions might as well reflect a divided electorate rather than divided electors, and ambivalent voters could as well punish shirking politicians for obfuscating the underlying tensions between the issues at stake. Did the ambiguity exhibited by the labor party in the Brexit saga reflect an impossible reconciliation between opposing views or the ambivalence of part of its electorate? Similarly, what of the apparent impossibility of compromise over the three years following the vote? Throughout Theresa May’s premiership, polls in the UK incontrovertibly showed that voters did not support leaving the EU with some form of soft Brexit – little more than a quarter on each side in the Spring of 2019 (Cooler and Pagel 2019, Curtice 2019). Is this because they were extremists, or could it be that the ambivalent voters among them would not necessarily support a ‘reasonable compromise’ if it was seen as the ‘worse of both worlds.’ Confronted with the prospect of pay-without-say, a quarter of Leavers felt so negatively about the ‘soft Brexit’ option that they preferred Remain over it (Cooler and Pagel 2019). Some degree of ambivalence can lead to an oscillation between two poles over and above choosing the middle ground.

Sixth, we should expect that ambivalent citizens who are less entrenched in their views are more vulnerable to tipping points, single occurrences that may tip the scales among their menu of relevant facts. In the Brexit story, David Cameron’s return from Brussels apparently empty-handed in February 2016 led many ambivalent citizens to switch sides from ‘remain and reform’ to ‘leave if it can’t reform.’ Tipping points may also come from collective psychological transfers as ambivalent citizens take their cues from events that do not affect them directly but from which they make new inferences. The treatment of Greece by Brussels, for instance, seems to have had a profound impact on part of the British electorate who saw an insensitive coercive bureaucracy trample on the civic freedom of the only other country that can compete with Britain for the title of ‘oldest democracy in the world.’ No matter that a significant majority of the Greek population, unconditionally attached to its ‘Europeanness’ did not read these unfortunate events as a reason to leave the union all-together. Brits who were already ambivalent about the EU found in the spectacle enough reason to reject it.

Last but not least, we can look for processes which ‘reveal’ underlying citizens’ ambivalence even in the presence of affective polarization, in other words, a kind of political reverse engineering. The ambivalent citizen can either oscillate between poles, support compromise positions, or retract from the game altogether depending on the ambivalence-friendliness of the political system. We could ask under what conditions a preference for compromise may emerge among ambivalent voters who have become entrenched in polarized positions. Citizens’ assemblies offer an interesting experimental ground for such reverse engineering, often landing participants on a new comfort zone where contradictory impulses are more likely to be recognised (Renwick et al, 2017). The National conversation on immigration for instance, which organized citizen debates across 60 UK towns and cities in 2019 generated much more balanced views than through a self-selecting online survey (Katwala 2019). Are these instances of deliberative rationality where compromise can be arrived at through the exchange of reasonable arguments? Or is the dynamics of a more permissive kind, whereby citizens are empowered to tune into their mixed feelings?

None of these probes need convince us that ambivalence reigns. But they might at least allow us to revisit Brexit not as a story that reflects the polarization of a continent and its societies, but as an ambivalent odyssey, whereby politics could reflect that part of the citizenry’s mindset that harbors mixed feelings, and elites could tap into the possibilities that such a contrapunctual key may offer.

II. Ambivalence acknowledged: the Brexit paradox

Who can deny that Britain’s EU partners have been deeply ambivalent about its departure individually and collectively, and that this ambivalence will continue to define the relationship for years to come. On one hand, sadness, reflecting deep attachment, leads to an accommodating approach to the negotiations, truly seeking the most ambitious association ever with a non-member state. On the other hand, and increasingly over time, annoyance, reflecting the deep frustration with a country that has given up the rules of an EU game it has contributed to design, combined with the fear of contagion, has led to an aggressive approach to negotiations, above all committed to demonstrating the strategic advantage of EU membership. Being both soft *and* tough with the UK, committed to constructive negotiations *and* to damage limitation, this ambivalence has been felt throughout.

It is probably the French who in Europe have had the hardest time coming to terms with their neighbor’s willingness to leave *l’Europe qui protégé*, suffused as they are with a sense of deep intimacy betrayed, intimacy between the two most-alike countries in Europe, historically, militarily and diplomatically, and for this reason fearing any move that could contribute to making Brexit a success. France is not alone on the continent to continue to fear the poison of Brexit infiltrating the nooks and crannies of its sociopolitical fabric, even if up to now, Brexit has been more about vaccination than about contagion.

But what if Brussels and the French had the precedent story the wrong way around: if we demonstrate how hard it is to leave, even if this hurts both sides in the process, no one else will want to. What if instead Brexit could stand as a more elevated precedent, a gift from departing Britain to the its former EU partners: Brexit means that ‘you can

leave the EU – and therefore you shouldn't. Welcome to the Brexit paradox (Nicolaidis 2019).

You can leave the EU – and therefore you shouldn't

You can leave the EU ... The Brexit paradox calls for Europeans to face up to the ambivalent value of exit. Whatever one might think of Brexit as *this* specific exit, exit as a norm is actually a good thing, reflecting an EU principle that ought to be valued above all others: the principle of free association. In this sense, Brexit can serve as a demonstrative sacrifice, making manifest that the essence of a union is defined by the way one may or may not leave it: we are together by choice (Nicolaidis 2019).

... and therefore you shouldn't. We can think of the Brexit paradox as a case of positive deterrence. The more credible the promise that you can leave, the less likely that it will be acted upon. Witness how EU support shot up, including in the UK, after the vote. Brexit can bolster citizens' attachment to EU membership simply by countering the image of an ever more state-like, coercive, federal state banning secession and inviting civil war, as with the 'United' States, 1865. The dislike for introducing article 50 on the part of some of the Europhile participants in the 2001 Convention reflected their blindness to the symbolic value of enshrining exit in EU treaties. Both sides must face the contradiction: Leavers that the EU cannot be a supranational Leviathan clipping its member states' sovereign wings if it is leavable by a simple majority vote in a member state. EU leaders that making it difficult for the UK to leave or live alongside the EU negates its essence. Why should we prefer a Union where people stay for fear of the consequences of leaving rather than from a continued commitment to togetherness?!

I see three main corollaries to the Brexit paradox.

First, the EU will need to reckon more deeply with the relationship between *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* as suggested by what we cantake to be Hirschman's reflection on ambivalence (1970). Exit is a classic response to membership in any social group – from families, to trade unions, nations or the EU – meant to manage our mutual dependence but which in doing so entails mixed feelings of entrapment and commitment. That escape only comes at great cost in itself breeds ambivalence toward membership, but if enacted can dispel the negative side of that ambivalence associated with dependence (Smelser 1998). Alternatively, the EU's sustainability is predicated on the bet that its member states and their citizens can work their ambivalence into institutional arrangements through voice, in Hirschman's words, 'to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs'. The more costly exit appears to be the more important voice becomes. In other words, only democratic legitimacy, not fear, can bread loyalty within a post-Brexit EU. And for those in Britain who rightly or wrongly felt that exit was their only voice, the Brexit paradox entails a self-denial of voice, since exit will not eradicate mutual dependence. If this is true, EU decision-makers should consider the fact that Britain's loss of a say at the table is by far the biggest demonstration of 'the strategic value of membership.' Conditionality game around market access are but a distraction from this fundamental.

Second, much will rest on the evolving political status of the UK both formally and in Europeans' political imaginary. In time, we will see more clearly what a disassociation covenant should entail to suit this inversion of enlargement. As such it will be about recognizing that a new animal has been born in the international system: the 'former EU

member state', with the 'special' rights and responsibilities this entails. The label and idea is shunned both in London and in Brussels these days, each for its own reasons, even if both sides would in the years to come, benefit from framing the relationship as 'special' if only to ward off third countries demands for equivalent treatment. More symbolically, would it not be belittling EU membership to treat a former member state as any old third country? Can the UK simply deny that it is part of the EU's DNA and therefore co-responsible for it? Having gone through withdrawal pains, the British people will have learned more about the EU than most inside it, including that the tradeoff between cooperation and control is real and that it is impossible to choose entirely one or the other. Each side will recover the belief and confidence that it has taken back control. That being each other's most important trading and security partner, unique in size and proximity, is only threatening if loyalty is taken out of the equation, a loyalty that can exist between 'equal and sovereign partners,' a favorite formulation of Boris Johnson's government. Anything else is strategic myopia.

Third, in light of the two preceding points, instead a disastrous precedent internally, Brexit could eventually become an ambitious precedent externally. After all, the EU has long sought to grant conditional access to its market as its main leverage of global power. Its evolving future relationship with the UK could revisit this precept towards greater equality, and in this, either stain or enhance the EU's global reputation – its avowed commitment to multilateralism as diffuse reciprocity, and more generally as a seeker of trade liberalisation (Nicolaidis 2018). In this way, ambivalence about Britain in EU circles could be made productive. And the British might realize that an ambitious agreement is actually easier to design than something akin to a standard deal for a non-standard relation.

The what vs the how

In the end, the Brexit paradox works best for the EU if one and only one country is willing and able to demonstrate that you can leave, while others infer that you shouldn't, courtesy of British exceptionalism (Nicolaidis 2017b, 2019, O' Toole 2018). British national identity has by far least been subject to the kind of Europeanised identities described by Risse and others, whereby in all other EU countries, a majority of the national population declare itself 'national and European,' as opposed to hovering around a third in the UK (Risse 2015). But since much rests on the ways in which national political elites connect the European project with national narratives which resonate with the public at critical junctures, it would be imprudent to conclude that Britain will remain the exception (Lacroix and Nicolaidis 2010).

Indeed, I suggested above that the contradictory impulse towards cooperation and control is universal, even if only the Brits in Europe were asked to resolve this tension in a yes or no vote won by a slim margin. The modern era's growing interdependence amplified by liberal economic policies has exacerbated the loss of control due to the need for cooperation and therefore hand-tying. Integrationists seek to convince citizens that the two go together: cooperation becomes a way for states to reassert control both over each other and over corporations. In any case, they say, control is but an illusion in today's interconnected world. The social contract which legitimised the post-war autonomous nation-state cannot be recreated. In short, cooperation equals control.

Nevertheless, this does not make the tradeoff and the contradictory pulls that it implies less real. Even if ambivalent, citizens will fall on different sides of the fence, leaving all governments subject to the twin pressures of those (exporters, students, patients, idealists) who value cooperation over control, and those (import competing, migrant competing, identity sensitive) who value control over cooperation. Only small minorities advocate either extreme. Sovereignism may have made its come back in the world today, but most Europeans appropriate it in a more minor key, acculturated as they are to savouring it as a guilty indulgence. Conversely, it is not clear that the majority of citizens who continue to support the EU do so without care for the direct control that it leaves their country, region or city.

In fact, European publics seem to want both more cooperation and more control. When asked ‘what’ the EU should do, significant majorities of Europeans, including in the UK, still believe that their countries should cooperate on a great sways of issues (Eurobarometer, 2016–2019). Their problem however arises with the ‘how’, the aversion to seeing ‘Brussels’ override national majorities or indulge in coercive interventions short of the kind of reciprocity that would justify it. As there are a great many variations on Euro-ambivalence, this tension may express itself differently in different countries. Cautres, Chopin and Riviere, for instance, find that the French offer ‘diffuse’ support for the EU *in abstracto*, yet withdraw ‘specific’ support when it comes to assessing its effectiveness or trusting its institutions and their capacity to serve French interests (2020). The tension is most pronounce among the third of the electorate self-identifying as ‘neutral’ (which they take to be synonymous with ambivalent) whose verdict seems to be: Europe, a beautiful idea in theory but does not work in practice.

Italy is another case in point. However much the electorate harbors very mixed feelings about Brexit (Piccolino et al. 2019), Italians remain clearly pro-European (70%), but have lost an uncritical confidence in the fact that decisions at European level can be positive for their country according to survey data by the Italian Center for Electoral Studies (De Sio, 2019). In Italy as elsewhere, citizens are not neatly grouped around two poles, ‘europeans vs sovereignists’ but are focused on specific ways in which the EU must change (76% for better support the countries affected by the economic crisis; 73% to share the costs of refugees with other countries; 71% for more flexible economic policy). To be sure, Brexit appears to have bolstered support for taking a harsher line with Brussels, mostly among supporters of the Five Star Movement/League (Piccolino et al, 2019). Nevertheless, majorities across the political spectrum want to preserve national sovereignty even in areas where coordinating policies could potentially help the country (65% on tax; 65% on economic policy; 59% on social policies; 52% on defense; 51% on immigration). It seems that Italians are no longer confident that once these policy-areas are centralized, resulting EU policies will be in line with their interests (Carrieri 2019). More cooperation after all might not mean more control.

In short, scepticism about the EU is a complex and indeed ambivalent story (Cautres, Chopin, and Riviere 2020). European citizens tend to be unhappy with the ‘how’ short of wishing for European disintegration. In her seminal work, Catherine De Vries (2018) describes the many shades of Euroscepticism targeted at either policy or regime characteristics, and how people tend to use as a benchmark the way they imagine their own country faring on its own. Interestingly, even as the Eurozone crisis exacerbated structural imbalances within the EU, transformative eurosceptics (reformers) gained ground over

existential eurosceptics (exiters), converging with disappointed Europhiles on an ambivalent space where Hirschman's entrapment and commitment coexist and activists proclaim: 'Another Europe is possible.'

While heterogeneity in public preferences would render a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing Euroscepticism unsuccessful, these publics are not lost to the European project if their ambivalence can be channeled through appropriate narratives and reforms rather than alienated through 'us vs them' slogans. Differences in national outlook cannot obscure the structural reality that there are only better or worse answers to the same sets of globally recurring dilemmas thrown up by our ubiquitous liberal capitalist modernity – control vs cooperation, deference vs interference, local vs global, order vs justice. The idea of an exceptional EU as some special *sui generis* project embarking on a reinvention of shared sovereignty may just cloak the banality of it all.

Nevertheless, shouldn't the EU's claim to exceptionalism be predicated on its capacity to accommodate the many variations of exceptionalism in its midst, what it proved incapable of with the UK? Isn't this the key to 'exit interruptus'? At its best, the EU could serve as a multifaceted mirror in which all the exceptionalisms it contains can be reflected and deflected in equal measure, a machinery designed to turn exceptions into differentiated rules, and exceptional countries into rule-bound ones. Some will say that British exceptionalism in the EU rested in part in its vulnerability to this logic when other countries were more cunningly assertive – whether by formally defending their constitutional integrity like German's Supreme court or simply by ignoring or subverting EU law. Could it be that the EU lost the British people because they took its laws too seriously? What better grounds for ambivalence, on all sides.

III. Ambivalence as subversion: unity, indivisibility, integrity, autonomy

Now that the UK has left, what would the next phase look like if both sides were to tune into their ambivalence? Let me only touch on four of the core pillars around which the negotiations have revolved, pillars that will continue to support the new edifice.

Unity

In the years since the Brexit vote, EU officials have never tired of trumpeting European unity even claiming that such unity has been its greatest foreign policy success of late. Great Britain might have prided itself for centuries on its capacity to divide and conquer in order to protect its own interests – but not this time! Here is a Union, impeded by oneness in spite of its growing geopolitical solitude, a Union which cannot unite against the great autocrats of our new global order, the likes of Xi, El-Sisi, Putin, Erdoğan or even Trump, but which has done so against one of its own, even as this target of unity still sat around the common table. How ironic. The fact that unity must be kept in negotiations such as these is understandable of course, but why the uniquely avowed pride, the claim that unity is a success in itself, even in the face of this glaring contrast?

I have argued that if we understand the meaning of Brexit as sacrifice, we should not be surprised by the unifying function played by exiting Britain as scapegoat (Nicolaidis 2019). To be sure, since Britain chose its destiny, this is simply a self-sacrifice. And an ironic sacrifice at that, where the scapegoat does not really die at the end. Moreover, there is no

doubt that the EU itself and its institutions have long served as one of Europeans' favorite scapegoat, alongside migrants or muslims. Be that as it may, if we go back to the archaic function of scapegoating, it becomes easier to understand why Britain has taken over the role. The point here is not to argue over whether our modernity is so thin that we are bound to repeat the patterns recognizable in archaic societies (Girard 1982). Rather, self-reflexive awareness about the function of scapegoats in human intercourse can help in the necessary distancing called for by an ambivalent stance. René Girard tells us about societies gripped by intense conflict whereby collective relief can only be had by expelling a person or a group in the hope of restoring social order. The unassailable violence which always lurks beneath our civilizing schemes can be channeled through victims of substitution. Shaken at its core by plague after plague, European unity can only be recovered thanks to a member state dispensable enough to be sacrificed, but precious enough to be sacrificed meaningfully. Britain, *pas tout à fait la même, pas tout à fait une autre* has turned out unwittingly as the perfect scapegoat.

We may believe in the safe civilizational distance between the unanimous expulsion of say, Oedipus Rex from Thebes, and the unanimity we find with regards to Britain in Brussels. And yet we are reminded of how hard it is for any political community, and *a fortiori* such an insecure one as the EU, to resist redemptive sacrifice. If this is so, the polity must demonstrate to itself that the solution will be unanimous, the banishment verdict believed by all. And the laws dictating the deed must not be improvised but be presented as set in stone, the product of a societal *acquis communautaire*. In the Brexit story, redemptive unity, the EU's primary creed, expresses itself through unanimous delegation to a single negotiator reading a single edict, and the reluctance on the part of member states to indulge British attempts to sustain bilateral conversations.

In the process, however, ambivalence cannot entirely be suppressed. Europeans of all stripes channel their inner Monty Python to ask 'what have the British ever done for us anyway' ... 'apart from save our continent's freedom, and so on ...' From Italy to Spain to Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia or Slovakia, every EU country seeks to sustain a special relationship with the departing UK, even while swearing allegiance to the remaining EU twenty-seven. Constructive ambivalence between applauding the departure of these foot-draggers and missing their expert footwork remains the new normal. Indeed, many continue to mourn British leadership on the continent even while Britain had convinced itself that it had vanished. For Britain was everyone's great balancer – of the French on behalf of the Germans, of the Germans on behalf of the French, and of both on behalf of the periphery. It managed to champion smaller states, including in the east or south of Europe, while claiming its place in the trio of core powers. In time, individual EU states might channel their ambivalence towards a new kind of 'embedded bilateralism' with the UK.

More existentially, admit that our yearning for unity is only matched by our desire for separateness? From Warsaw to Rome, from Oslo to Tallinn, I have heard it as a guilty whisper: Unity terror, that is what it feels like sometimes – 'when it comes to Brexit, Brussels does not even allow us to agree to disagree, as we usually do.' 'Unity over Brexit is the price we have to pay if we want concessions elsewhere.' 'Not only are we losing a partner, but we must pretend that we agree to its treatment.' 'Unity in diversity' may be a unanimous EU mantra but its meaning betrays many variants. Sustained togetherness usually rests on continued autonomy. Europeans with different material interests,

historical memories or symbolic attachments will continue to relate to Britain and its withdrawal according to different versions of ambivalence.

Indivisibility

The 'indivisibility of the four freedoms' has been and continues to be the heart of the Brexit matter (Fabbrini 2017). After all, if EU negotiators had not insisted on it during the pre-Brexit negotiations in February 2016 and had allowed Britain a temporary exception on free movement of people, Prime Minister David Cameron might have won the referendum. Even after the vote, the UK might have coalesced around an EEA model if it had been offered the capacity to invoke an emergency brake on free movement even while staying part of the single market. Such an EU stance might have been justified by the effect of Britain's admittedly misguided unconditional open border policies in 2004 (ironically acting as the most European of all EU states if free movement serves as the benchmark), combined with the UK's attractiveness as a job's destination, and its incapacity to keep up on the provision of public services. To be sure, the UK could have better implemented migration management measures already allowed by the EU. It could have tried to reign in non-EU migrants, although family unification laws made this especially challenging. But a realist EU approach might have accommodated the difficult challenge of building the equivalent of Oxford city's schools and hospitals every year, in light of the British migration conundrum.

A mischievous observer might find this dispute reminiscent of the indivisibility of the Holy Spirit in the Christian doctrinal debates of the first millennium cloaking power conflicts in the Roman Empire over imperial unity. With different prevailing versions of doctrinal purity, unity was lost between East and West while safeguarding unity would have meant heeding advocates for coexistence through a plurality of theologies about the relationship between the son and the holy ghost and finding both sides to be right on interpretation.

A thousand years later, Brexit can be thought of as the first great schism of the European Union which too is the result of a doctrinal war about indivisibility. The doctrine was not spelled out in EU Treaties, which contain various aspirations in each of four realms pursued inconsistently and separately from 1958 onwards (Barnard, 2018; Taylor 2017) – trade in goods, after all, is a substitute not a supplement to the movement of capital and labor. It was then constructed incrementally at the turn of the millennium, dreamed up at a Malta summit or elsewhere (no one seems to know) and became 'as untouchable as the queen of England', as an EU politician once told me. But in fact, every sacred text invites discretion in interpretation as well as contestation of such discretion. Does indivisibility mean that the freedoms are distinct but at the same time one? That when one freedom is missing the others are distorted? And is indivisibility not the obligation and privilege reserved for members only, rather than third countries? Why treat the UK as it was a member in this one way only? Much in the future of Europe will continue to rest on making sense of the indivisibility doctrine.

In the process, the doctrine might be challenged on the economic front by those asking whether it make sense to shrink mutual benefits from trade in pursuit of doctrinal purity where temporary or partial constraints on free movement actually hurt the UK's competitive advantage. UK public opinion at least does not spell Brexit in these terms

(since 2016, never have less than 86% been in favor of allowing EU companies to sell goods and services freely in Britain, and vice versa, Curtice 2020).

And the doctrine will also be challenged politically, as citizens in Europe come to see free movement as the best and the worse of things, depending in part on whether they are ‘nomads’ or ‘settlers.’ The recent tightening of the posted workers directive or the new ECJ jurisprudence on access to benefits in the host country are likely to represent first steps in a more constrained interpretation of free movement, as demanded by a new coalition between the vast majority of settlers and ‘demographically panicked’ countries turning against emigration. In the process, the higher ideal of free movement as a political expression of citizenship rather than only an economic right will sadly become collateral damage. Hard to imagine that this ambivalence will not affect the future relationship.

This while the UK public offers a mixed picture when it comes to immigration. For one, the divide is not as stark as would seem. After the EU referendum, nearly three-quarters – including nearly two-thirds of Remainers – favored non-discrimination between Europeans and non-Europeans, presenting a potent balancing value to non-discrimination between Europeans and British citizens (even if the figure had decreased to 58% by 2019) (Curtice 2019). Moreover, issues of immigration have already lost some of their public salience between 2016 and 2019 – with a decrease from 45% in 2016 to less than 20% of those seeing it as one of the most important issues facing their country (Ford, 2019). And between 2016 and 2019, those believing that Britain should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ be willing to ‘allow people from the EU to come here freely to live and work in return for allowing British firms to sell goods and services freely in the EU’ moved from 49% to 60% (Curtice 2019). During the national conversation on immigration already mentioned, most people seemed willing to make nuanced judgements about the relative costs and benefits of different forms of migration, frustrated over government performance, open to skilled migration and students, with other allowance where needed as a function of managing social impacts (Katwala 2019). It remains to be seen whether UK and EU governments take on an intelligent enough approach to accommodate this constructive ambivalence.

Integrity

Talk of indivisibility on the part of the EU has been nested under a broader yet equally nebulous principle, namely ‘integrity.’ But do its citizens know what it means? Is it about the health and resilience of its single market and institutions, and by the same token that of the UK? Or does it refer by any chance to the older meaning of the word, as consistently adhering to one’s proclaimed principles? Perhaps ambivalence lies less in a clash of integrities between the two sides than in the tension between these two meanings of integrity.

The idea of integrity for the EU radiates outwards from the integrity of the single market as the economic foundation of the whole enterprise. Accordingly, the single market operates as an ecosystem which predicates access on taking part in the design, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of single market rules, rules meant to protect its consumers and the stability of its financial systems. Whether national standards are harmonized or mutually recognized, the sustainability of the single market is

a dynamic process. A country that leaves the common regulatory area leaves the process, no matter how aligned it might be at the beginning.

It makes sense to argue that the UK cannot both wish for more access than any other country in the world and yet set out to diverge freely from outcomes of past regulatory cooperation. Simply relying on dispute settlement to keep the EU happy misses out on a critical ingredient: institutionalized trust. But the EU on its side must be put to the test of consistency - or integrity in the second sense. If the criterion is a technical one about on-going regulatory compatibility, it is not clear why the EU couldn't apply externally to Britain some variant of the subtle principle of managed mutual recognition it has fine-tuned for decades internally especially in the area of services (Nicolaidis 2017a, 2018, Weatherill 2018). Where there is no harmonization, it could create mechanisms to ensure regulatory compatibility as a basis for free trade with its closest trading partner, an ambitious the EU has harbored on the external front since the 1990s. The EU's integrity in the second sense (consistently doing what it proclaims) may be tested if it appears to frame its reluctance in terms of regulatory requirements when its main concern is elsewhere, namely competition or even rivalry. To be sure, concerns for single market integrity are backed by a genuine fear of 'unfair' competition that cannot be ignored. Accordingly, the UK could end up with more influence in the EU from the outside than it had from within, as the various actors involved in the EU regulatory process look over their shoulders to its regulations and refuse to be put at a disadvantage by, say, slightly different UK rules on artificial intelligence. Fair enough. But isn't there also a hidden worry on the EU side about 'fair' competition, what the UK might be able to achieve - especially when it comes to new technologies - unencumbered by the EU's rigid strictures?

When concerns for integrity are extended to level playing field matters, only indirectly related to the trade in question - from social to environmental standards, to tax or subsidies - do we clearly know what kind of differences between the two sides may constitute a risk to market integrity, especially in areas that are not regulated by the EU, where the UK is unlikely to diverge, or where some of the member states will clearly be more 'divergent' for years to come (Nicolaidis 2020)? If, all in all, there does not appear to be a widespread wish among the UK public for post-Brexit Britain to diverge from the regulatory regime of the EU, even when these are presented as 'EU rules', it should be possible to deal with these concerns through monitoring and dispute settlement mechanisms.

From the EU viewpoint, integrity in the end requires an appropriate governance structure for the future relationship as a whole. Coming back to Hirshman, we can ask, does the UK's exit entail both the end of 'entrapment' and the end of 'commitment'? The UK's response has been unequivocally yes, as if these went hand in hand, insisting on loose ad-hoc arrangements for the future from which either side can simply walk away. The EU wants to hold on the commitment part of the equation. One does not simply walk away in an inter-dependent world, its officials argue, 'walking away' is not a credible nuclear option and, if exercised, would hurt both sides. A sustainable relationship must therefore be nested within institutions and generally pre-established procedures. Isn't it in the UK's own interest anyway to signal in this way its commitment to the less influential member states in the east and south of Europe who tend to be excluded from ad-hocism?

But to the UK, this simply feels like brushing entrapment under the carpet. The EU's talk of integrity is simply another way of keeping it tied to a decision structure it will have little power to influence. The threat to its own constitutional integrity may have historically been bound up with the principle of parliamentary consent, but these days, the more challenging threat is to its territorial integrity, and in particular the fear that Northern Ireland may become an EU protectorate. We will endlessly rehearse in the years to come the tradeoff between EU insistence on checks somewhere before entry on its single market in Ireland to protect its market integrity, and UK insistence on its own territorial integrity. If extraterritorial presence has for century been accepted as legitimate, when does it become colonial imposition? Will the EU trust the UK's integrity (of the second kind) in the long run to guard against unfit goods and services penetrating the single market? How will this trust in turn relate to how the British states maps onto British public opinion (since three in four Brits are against the sale in Britain of chlorinated chicken, while even more are opposed to hormone treated beef)? Fascinatingly, debates over integrity will arise within the UK as they have within the EU. Will central power in London learn to tolerate margins of differences between its constituent parts, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, aping to some extent the managed mutual recognition system of the EU single market? Will it jettison dogmatic talk of constitutional integrity for engagement with its own constitutional intricacies?

More generally, respect by the EU for the constitutional integrity of its member states and by the member states for the EU's integrity is a daunting enough balancing act from within. Extending this balancing act to a former member state rests on the way in which all the actors in this drama interpret ideas such as loyal cooperation, commitment and the kind of trust that it implies. Integrity in the end is in the eyes of the beholder.

Autonomy

The challenge posed by Brexit in the end can be seen as one of reconciling two competing claims to autonomy with each side upholding the autonomy not only of its legal order but of its decision making and institutions across the board. To be sure, not all regulatory jurisdictions are born equal when it comes to trading off autonomy with access to the EU's market and programmes. Indeed, the only significant power held by the EU on the global scene is this access which leads governments and corporations around the world unilaterally to adopt its standards (Egan and Nicolaidis 2001, Bradford 2012). At the regional level, the EU has been spoiled by its own regulatory hegemony. This is not a realm of reciprocity and multilateralism: the EU requires unilateral adaptation from its main neighbor simply because it can. Autonomy, therefore is an EU way of saying that its legal and institutional set up is complicated enough as it is without accommodating requests by outsiders to take part in making the rules that will ultimately affect them.

Can the EU insist on overly unequal treaties, unilaterally setting its mode of regulatory equivalence or recognition on the back of its overwhelming market power without raising issues of legitimacy? The French and others may hope that with the help of global disorder the UK will realize that it is in its interest to remain in the EU's orbit (Kauffmann and Ricard 2020). But the UK seems to believe in two-way gravity. If Norway can countenance what it calls 'fax diplomacy' because it is super rich and super cool, such a *modus vivendi* would be unsustainable in the UK. As a result, Brexit may be the first

instance of negotiations over close, ambitious, neighborly relations where the EU is confronted with a symmetric demand for autonomy. Indeed, if the EU can insist that the UK must not lower its standards, it cannot force it to regulate upwards without interfering with such autonomy, thus excluding the kind of dynamic alignment on which at least some in the EU have insisted, especially with regards to state aid (Eeckhout 2020, Nicolaidis 2020). Will there be a rethink of the EU's propensity for unidirectional rule-making? Can potential divergence be governed differently?

In the end, greater mutual autonomy can only be sustained through conflict management which means addressing the perennial political question of who decides. Who decides who is right when both sides disagree on whether national rules are still compatible? It is not so hard to devise a system of adjudication *a la* EFTA court where the EU could be allowed, say, to withdraw equivalence and thus market access, but which could not compel the UK to change its non-compatible rule, thus preserving formal autonomy for the UK.

Citizens in the end may come to understand Brexit as theatre, a theatre of sovereignty whereby control is taken back only to be shared again, one way or another. What part they will accept to play remains to be seen.

Conclusion

It is possible for European citizens to believe both that their Union must be more than a transactional, cost-benefit association while at the same time valuing the option to call it quits. In this essay, I have argued for owning up to our ambivalence as a way to escape the 'Machiavelli trap' of polarization and imagine a more constructive politics of separation than what has transpired until now in the Brexit negotiations. In order to do so, I have offered a tentative foray in fields outside IR and European studies to bring debates over Brexit into a space where the study of macro-political systems and of the micro-foundations of social processes meet. Ambivalence is not a pathology but fundamental to human nature. It is not about being confused, apathetic, or indifferent. Nor does it imply giving up struggles when they matter or shying away from passionate debate over political disagreements. Nor am I in search of a hidden majority or advocating an elusive convergence in the middle to ward off polarisation. Instead, I started from the simple observation that our inner lives are defined by simultaneous contradictory emotions, a truth that often stays hidden. And our social lives depend on our capacity to talk with others with whom we disagree. The two are but two sides of the same coin: as you start listening to your own other side, you become more prone to listening to others. The power of ambivalence can even lie with our capacity to undermine our own confidence (O'Connell 2019). If we are to create openings for conversations across political divides, we need to rely on a more integrated and composite idea of ourselves and others.

It may be apposite to look for such a composite idea in the universe of post-coloniality, whether as a real condition, a theory or a mindset. The post-colonial is imbued with a narrative of ambivalence as the product both of colonial socialization and post-colonial contestation (Enwezor 2010; Jabri 2012). For Edward Said, postcolonial modernity involved two, mutually co-constituting 'melodies', the 'Eastern' and 'Western' where we find competing post-colonial fears and desires, and multiple meanings at once (Chowdhry 2007). Homi Bhabha offered the figure of the postcolonial metropolitan subject,

oscillating between despondence and integration, her origins and her place of residence. She may be a split personality as with Fanon's 'black skin/white masks,' but better still a hybrid whole, combining her own and the colonizer's cultural identity. In this story, an ambivalent stance may start in a place in limbo, not knowing where I belong, and yet end up a space of Kantian enlarged consciousness, the sense of knowing everywhere at once. Ambivalence can be horizon-widening if understood 'not simply as conundrums that defy understanding but as ambiguous moments for expanding, developing, growing' (Lee 2016). And it migrates from individual agency to geopolitics as when states combine responsibility and contestation, compliance with and resistance to the existing international political order (Mpopu-Walsh 2020). Importantly for us here, the postcolonial is not something 'out there' but cannot fail to be valid for the relationship between Europe and itself, a foil for our European condition (Mbembe 2008). If Europe is both source and target of ambivalence, can Brexit be reinvented as a post-colonial relation?

In the end, Brexit raises the age-old question that has bedeviled human intercourse and haunted our continent for much longer than the existence of the present European Union or even the Westphalian era: what is the right balance between mutual deference and mutual interference in relations between countries or indeed between groups and individuals? How can we let each other be when what we each so affects others? How can the EU best embody the spirit of 'institutionalized empathy' while eschewing hegemony (Nicolaidis, 2016b)? How can humility and perplexity be rehabilitated as critical virtues in our complex European democracy (Innerarity 2018)? If these and other questions sparked by an ambivalent lens can be debated openly and without taboos across Europe, if in the process sacred cows were to be slaughtered on both sides, Brexit could turn out to be a pivotal moment whereby neither side plays a part in the scapegoating of the other. Instead, people on all sides need to tune into their latent ambivalence, that which we often keep hidden for fear of being accused of indecision, indifference, weakness, or even treason. Whether as 'leavers' or 'remainers,' British citizens will learn to recognize that they share the same tradeoffs as everyone else in Europe and beyond between cooperation and control, and that it will not do to forget one side of the equation. Their cousins, EU citizens, will continue to argue over the best way to translate this balancing act in their shared project and to conduct their transnational conversation in a spirit of transformative fidelity – faithful to the EU's endangered original ideal of mutual recognition. Above all, tuning into our constructive ambivalence simply means that our future remains open and our democracies more resilient, as we freely contemplate the many facets of our complex shared social world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Olivier Costa, Thomas Christiansen, Richard Bellamy, Molly Cochran and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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