Performing Brexit: How a post-Brexit world is imagined outside the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Theresa May's claim that 'Brexit means Brexit' demonstrates the malleability of the concept. The referendum campaign showed that 'Brexit' can be articulated to a variety of post-Brexit scenarios. While it is important to analyse how Brexit gives rise to contestation in the United Kingdom, Brexit is also constructed from the outside. Brexit signifies more than the technical complexities of the United Kingdom withdrawing from the European Union. It works both as a promise of a different future and performatively to establish a particular past. Brexit works as a frame with potential to shape perceptions in three domains. The first is identity. How does 'Brexit' shape national and European identities in distinct national environments? The second is how Brexit shapes understandings of geopolitical reality and influences conceptions of what is diplomatically possible. Third is the global economy. How does 'Brexit' work within intersubjective frames about the nature of global economic order?

Introduction

Theresa May's claim that 'Brexit means Brexit' demonstrates the malleability of the concept. The referendum campaign and its aftermath show that the idea of 'Brexit' can be applied to a variety of imagined post-Brexit scenarios. In the United Kingdom, the lack of a formulated plan by the UK government has resulted in ongoing debates and uncertainty over possibilities ranging from 'hard' Brexit to 'soft' Brexit (Wallace, 2016: 814). While it is important to analyse how rival imaginings give rise to particular forms of political contestation in the United Kingdom, it is also the case that Brexit is constructed

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and imagined from the outside. This article explores how Brexit has been interpreted outside of the United Kingdom, operating as a signifier with symbolic value.

Understanding how Brexit is imagined outside the United Kingdom is important for three reasons. First, it helps to construct identities that lend support for particular political projects. At times of crisis, political actors seek to make sense of events by evoking existing identities that resonate in their respective national contexts. Crises can therefore reflect identity discourses (Galpin, 2017). External perceptions of Brexit can contribute to shaping British identities. Within the European Union (EU), pan-European and national debates not only construct particular national stereotypes but also shape domestic ideas about a European hierarchy of states (Adler-Nissen, 2017). Brexit has also been considered the result of a new international cleavage between 'cosmopolitans' and 'nationals' (Delanty, 2017: 112) that shapes attitudes to European integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Second, outside constructions of Brexit are linked to the negotiating positions of the United Kingdom's external partners. The UK government has focused on a 'global Britain' that trades freely with the world (May, 2017). Brexit thus presents a challenge to the United Kingdom's diplomatic relations, requiring new multilateral and bilateral agreements with international partners (Glencross, 2016: 48). A key question for the UK government will therefore be how its negotiating partners respond to its demands (Wallace, 2016: 814) and the extent to which outside perceptions match with its objectives or destabilise British self-understandings. To lead in foreign policy, a country 'also has to be constructed as a leader by the actors in its negotiation environment' (Elgström, 2007: 952). How the United Kingdom's international partners perceive their relationship thus becomes key as Brexit negotiations proceed.

Third, Brexit can be considered not just a UK phenomenon, but part of wider European and global populist backlash against globalisation (Calhoun, 2017; O'Rourke, 2016) and the decline of democratic capitalism (Delanty, 2017; Rosamond, 2017; Streeck, 2014). The considerable political and academic attention paid to the possibility of 'contagion' to other member states with significant Eurosceptic movements has led to calls for a theory of European disintegration (Rosamond, 2016). Brexit can thus be placed in the context of the wider nature of the global political economy. On this basis, this article investigates what Brexit signifies outside of the United Kingdom in these three overlapping domains: identity, diplomacy and global political economy.

The article is divided into four sections. The first develops a theoretical framework of performativity to analyse how the discourse of Brexit creates that which it purports to describe, promising actions and constructing identities. This approach points us to the way in which Brexit can be taken to mean a variety of things across domains, countries and time. The second section examines the role Brexit plays in how German actors construct national and European identities and how it relates to questions of sovereignty. The third section analyses how Brexit shapes understandings of geopolitical reality and feeds into conceptions of what is diplomatically possible at the global level. The fourth section focuses on how far 'Brexit' works within competing intersubjective frames about the nature of the global economic order.

A performative theory of Brexit

Theoretically, we are interested in understanding Brexit in performative terms. Accordingly, speaking about Europe is not a matter of simply describing the EU but, as

Diez (1999: 599) argues, 'tak[ing] part in the construction of the polity itself'. Speaking about Brexit does not simply describe a given reality; it also constructs it. The performance aspect of Brexit takes two overall forms: it promises a particular future and it constructs a past. Here, we draw on insights from J. L. Austin and Judith Butler. To understand how Brexit works as a promise, Austin's speech act theory helps us understand the performative speech act, most prominently, by Theresa May: 'Brexit means Brexit and we're going to make a success out of it'. In the Butlerian understanding, the discourse of Brexit does not express some 'true' nature of British identity, geopolitics or economy. Rather, it creates that which it seems to represent: namely, a post-Brexit Britain and post-Brexit world—and in doing so, it also constructs a particular past. Overall, understanding Brexit as performative assumes that the very language of Brexit does something politically.

Brexit as a performative speech act

Following speech act theory, performative utterances are sentences that not only describe a given reality but also change the social reality they are describing. J. L. Austin (1962: 5) argued against a claim that utterances always 'describe' or 'report' something, which he calls 'constatives'. In contrast, he wrote, there are performatives, utterances that are not true or false, and that are a part of the doing or promising of a certain kind of action. Austin's famous example is from the marriage ceremony: 'I do' (take this man to be my lawful wedded husband). In our case, Theresa May made a promise of success: 'Brexit means Brexit and we're going to make a success out of it'.

Some speech acts are written into international treaties, whereas others create a moral obligation (Fierke and Wiener, 1999) or an existential threat requiring immediate action (Buzan et al., 1997: 27). The meaning of a speech act is largely determined by its specific context, as the same sentence can have different meanings with different audiences (Fierke and Wiener, 1999: 727). Integral to a speech act is the intention of the speaker to take action through language (Diez, 1999: 601). In the case of Brexit, Theresa May's speech act may be intended to gather political support for the UK government, reassure the population or inform international partners about national intentions. A speech act also requires an audience, where context is key: 'we're going to make a success of it' would mean something very different in the German or French context, where interests may lie in protecting the European economy or limiting the success of domestic Eurosceptic parties. The key analytical question emerging from this understanding of Brexit as a speech act is *What kind of promise for the future does Brexit hold outside the United Kingdom, across the three domains at which we are looking?*

Brexit as performative

In contrast to Austin, Judith Butler (1993: xii) argues that all speech acts are performative, serving to define identity. Performativity is 'that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains'. The concept places emphasis on the manners by which identity is brought to life through discourse. Just as with Austin, the performative element of her theory suggests a social audience. For Butler, the 'script' of gender performance—what is seen as appropriate for men and women—is transmitted from generation to generation in the form of socially established meanings that are reproduced and internalised.

In performing Brexit, then, actors perform identities, while 'constrained by cultural and historical practices' (Zaiotti, 2011: 543). Applied to international relations, Butler's approach views the identity of the state as constituted through discursive practices over time (Campbell, 1998: 10). As with gender, such performances of state identity inevitably involve the construction of difference, of an 'Other'. Central to this idea is the construction of boundaries which 'serve to demarcate an "inside" from an "outside," a "self" from an "other," a "domestic" from a "foreign"' (Campbell, 1998: 9). Therefore, performativity in politics is also linked to constituting in- and out-groups.

Nevertheless, while for Butler (1988: 526) social orders as reproduced through repeated performances constitute subjects, they do not determine them. There is always the possibility of agency: more precisely, ways of acting out within the system in ways that are subversive or transformative of it (such as drag, cross-dressing and other queer forms of identity that produce new possible ways of being in society). The way out of the performative trap is therefore resignification—practices that have the effect of changing the meaning of words. So here the analytical question is *How is Brexit being 'scripted', embedded in pre-existing discourses about what the United Kingdom and EU's past has been (and how Brexit is being subverted)*?

Below we examine both how Brexit functions as a promise of a future and how it is being 'scripted', embedded in pre-existing discourses, thereby helping to produce certain identities and particular pasts.

Brexit and national and European identities

This section provides some illustrative examples of the performative role of Brexit in constructing European and national identities primarily from the German context. As Brexit negotiations proceed, political leaders in the EU need to be responsive to public opinion in their own national contexts, particularly those countries such as Germany and France with national elections taking place in 2017. As a key actor in Brexit negotiations, German public opinion about Brexit is particularly relevant. Here, we focus on two main issues: *representations of the other (the United Kingdom)* and *representations of the self (the nation-state and Europe)*.

Post-Brexit Britain seen from the outside

Brexit serves to (re-)construct *external images of the United Kingdom* that are embedded in pre-existing, and often competing, discourses. Interestingly, Brexit is either constructed as a break with or continuation of the past, thereby either naturalising the image of an open, pragmatic and trustworthy partner in Europe or naturalising a British identity as the 'awkward partner' (George, 1994) and a 'stranger in Europe' (Wall, 2008). This binary reflects an ongoing conflict between conceptions of the United Kingdom as a European country, which Churchill envisaged, and British exceptionalism rooted in the history of the British Empire (Delanty, 2017).

In German media coverage, one general position suggests that Brexit signifies a departure from the traditions of a nation that is viewed as an integral part of Europe. This portrait represents for Britain a loss of the cosmopolitan, *Cool Britannia* image popularised in the 1990s (Calhoun, 2017: 63). Brexit highlights a perceived mismatch between how the British have previously been understood and what Brexit represents for them now. For example, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* describes the Brexit vision as a 'rejection

of the island's self-confident, liberal cosmopolitanism' (Schipper, 2016: 34). Along the same lines, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2016: 41) notes that the 'supposedly deeply-rooted British virtues such as soberness and pragmatism made way for hysteria and xenophobic narrow-mindedness'. Here, Brexit thus defines not just what the United Kingdom is understood to have represented in the past, nor what post-Brexit Britain promises to be, but also reiterates what values are important in this German context: cosmopolitanism, tolerance and pragmatism.

A second major position, however, understands Brexit as a continuation of the 'national myth of British exceptionalism' (Gamble, 2012: 473). Some articles give rise to constructions of the United Kingdom as a country that has always been different. Sometimes they highlight the United Kingdom's strong tradition of parliamentary sovereignty. *FAZ*, for example, discusses a British attitude 'that they should not be led by an elite or be told by foreigners what to do' (Thomas, 2016: 9). Alongside this caricature, many articles describe the British mentality as resting on the historical experience of empire, where Europe is constructed as Britain's 'Other' (Gifford, 2006). For example, one describes a nostalgic middle England that 'wishes the old England back, an England that possessed a global Empire' (Lapido, 2016a: 5). Also in response to May's speech, *Die Welt Kompakt* published a front-page story: 'Little Britain: Prime Minister Theresa May is leading Britain into isolation' (*Die Welt Kompakt*, 2017). In a Butlerian sense, Brexit thus signifies a continuation of the past; it is a uniquely British phenomenon, a function of its particular historical experience.

These images also reveal a high level of cultural knowledge about the United Kingdom, particularly its imperial history but also popular culture that is unlikely to be matched by British knowledge of Germany. British (Eurosceptic) media representations of Germany primarily invoke the Nazi past (Anderson and Weymouth, 1999), also reflected in the referendum debate when, for example, Boris Johnson claimed that the EU is comparable to Nazi Germany with 'different methods' (Ross, 2016). Thus, we can see a starkly asymmetric relationship between the United Kingdom and other EU member states. It also presents British exceptionalism and the British empire—colonialism—as the antithesis of European integration. As such, Brexit is scripted into a particular 'European' political culture—consensus-oriented, cosmopolitan and based on the sharing of sovereignty. In some cases, Brexit represents a shift in perception of what Britishness means abroad, defining Brexit and post-Brexit Britain as based on irrationality and intolerance. In other cases, it serves fundamentally to differentiate Britishness from Europe.

Britain as the Other: Constructions of Europe and the nation-state

Second, Brexit provokes public *constructions of Europe and the nation-state*, embedded in discourses on what it means to be European (Risse, 2010). In the case of Germany, Brexit is embedded in particular discourses about European integration. On the one hand, Brexit highlights Germany's multiple European/national identities and serves in the debate as a justification for the continued sharing of sovereignty, a reminder of Europe's role in constraining German power (Katzenstein, 1997). Germany's European identity is thus reproduced against its Nazi past as its historical Other (see, for example, Adler-Nissen, in press; Galpin, 2017). In a commentary in the *FAZ*, for example, then German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2016) mentions the interwar period, warning that 'if a unified Europe […] breaks apart and falls away, then the odds of a better, more peaceful and just world would be much worse'. He argues that Germany seeks not to be

the dominant power, but to work closely with its neighbours and in so doing 'show our particular historical experiences' (Steinmeier, 2016).

However, Brexit is also embedded in competing ideas about European identities and often serves to oppose further integration. In the German discourse, Brexit reproduces new divisions in Europe through constructions of Northern Europe in contrast to the 'South', based upon Germany's conception of a Europe true to Germany's 'ordoliberal' economic model (Galpin, 2017)—a form of neoliberalism based on free markets enforced by rules of the state (see also Nedergaard and Snaith, 2015). *FAZ*, for example, writes that Brexit will shift voting weights 'in favour of countries that tend to support redistribution and protectionism—that is, towards the south' (Kafsack, 2016). Britain is constructed as part of a 'Northern Europe' that stands for 'economic discipline' and opposes Europe-wide redistributive policies. This construction also brings to the fore a clear paradox of Brexit, in which the British debate largely ignored Britain's role in shaping the EU's liberal economic agenda, while that role clearly is acknowledged outside the United Kingdom.

This acknowledgement gives rise to an emphasis on the importance of the German–British relationship. For example, one article in *Die Welt* notes that 'the scepticism of the Brits, their non-conformism and their liberalism were always the motor of Europe … Today it needs a German-British axis' (Seibel, 2013: 1). Such calls for a close relationship contrast strongly with representations in the British debate that place Germany in the weaker position dependent on British trade (Dominiczak, 2016). Within the EU, many other states emphasise a close partnership with the United Kingdom. In the Netherlands, for instance, Anne Mulder from the ruling People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) noted that it 'will have major consequences for the European economy and the geopolitical balance. The Netherlands is losing an important ally in Brussels negotiations' (Dutch News.nl, 2016).

Furthermore, Brexit is also used by those opposing deeper political union or who criticise the EU's democratic deficit themes embedded in communitarian or nationalist discourses. *FAZ* cites an Alternative for Germany (AfD) regional party leader, Björn Höcke, who states that the Brits 'have left the path of collective insanity and decided in favour of democracy and national sovereignty'. Federal spokesperson Alexander Gauland also blames Angela Merkel for Brexit, arguing that she 'has driven Britain out of the European Union with her open borders' (FAZ, 2016), thus embedding Brexit into national debates about immigration and refugees.

Brexit can therefore be considered performative in the Butlerian sense: it reproduces pre-existing notions of British, European and national identities, and also highlights divisions between cosmopolitan and communitarian identities. However, it is also a powerful speech act outside the United Kingdom, promising a new, more stable future or the beginning of a new world order.

Brexit, diplomacy and geopolitics

When it comes to geopolitical imaginaries and conceptions of what is diplomatically possible, Brexit has led to a range of different interpretations across the world. Interestingly, many of these readings appear to be in contradiction. In the following, we will focus on three illustrative examples of the diplomatic promise of Brexit: *multilateralism* (liberal world order, security communities), *post-imperialism* (Commonwealth, Anglosphere) and *bilateralism* (special relationships, partnerships and 'gateways'). The examples illustrate that what Brexit means depends not only on *who* you are but also from *where* you see it.

Brexit as a threat to multilateralism and the promise of European unity

First, Brexit has given rise to a range of different threats and promises about multilateralism and the international liberal order. Such ideas also relate to identity discourses, by emphasising shared values and interests, community boundaries and a common threat from an Other. One geopolitical discourse portrays Brexit as an existential threat to the Western-dominated liberal world order. Beginning with the transatlantic security community, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned against Brexit, saying that 'a more fragmented Europe would threaten Europe's shared security' (CBC News, 2016). Stoltenberg argued that Brexit signalled more than the United Kingdom leaving the EU; it created uncertainty about the global order and international cooperation. Interestingly, Japan became the most vocal advocate of multilateralism. In a 15-page letter, Japan underlined that it was committed to 'further cooperate with Europe with a view to maintaining the rules-based global order' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2016: 2).

Following the referendum result, US President Obama sought to build a narrative about a resilient international order despite Brexit, promising the unifying ability of 'our shared values, including our commitment to democracy and pluralism and opportunity for all people in a globalized world' (Parkinson, 2016). China also supported the United Kingdom remaining in the EU, but this view was articulated as a way of ensuring a strong EU that could counter the United States—a vision of multipolarity. Ai Jun (2016), writing for the state-owned newspaper *Global Times*, explained:

> A multipolar world requires more powers, which are independent of the US, to participate in international governance. The EU is supposed to be one of them. But the leverage of a divided Europe is bound to be limited. That's why China wishes to see a united and strong EU.

China's pro-Remain rhetoric is thus embedded in a discourse about multipolarity, whereas the United States' pro-Remain discourse is scripted into a discourse about a liberal, essentially US-led, world order.

Within the EU, most member states emphasised the resilience of European integration. From this perspective, Brexit is a performative speech act as per Austin: Brexit is a crisis, the EU-27 exists, and it will remain unified. The day after the referendum, German Chancellor Angela Merkel maintained that 'only together can we continue to assert our values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law and our interests' (Der Spiegel, 2016). This narrative brings the EU-27 discursively into being prior to the United Kingdom's actual departure—redrawing the boundaries of the EU and reflecting the United Kingdom's insider/outsider status (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Shackleton, 2016). Meeting at a summit in Bratislava without the United Kingdom, the heads of state and government of EU-27 promised a stable and prosperous future. Echoing May's promise to make a success of Brexit, the summit's joint declaration stated that:

> In the aftermath of the wars and deep divisions on our continent, the EU secured peace, democracy and enabled our countries to prosper […] We are determined to make a success of the EU with 27 Member States, building on this joint history. (European Council, 2016: 1)

As part of this narrative, Brexit is constructed as a crisis that will unite the EU-27 against a common threat. Against this promise, *Die Welt* argues that Brexit is considered likely to strengthen the 'centrifugal forces' in the EU (Schiltz and Tauber, 2016: 2), as the risk of a

Eurosceptic domino takes hold. For example, David Cameron, in calling for a referendum to appease his party, is considered in *Die Welt* to have 'jeopardised the future of a whole continent' (Lapido, 2016b: 4) The performativity of Brexit, therefore, is not simply about the social construction of subjects. Rather, it is a discourse that inscribes boundaries between subjects and reifies them in that very process. Taken together, this multilateral discourse promises that the world is—or rather should be—the same after the shock of Brexit: governed by binding international rules, democracy and pluralism.

Brexit and the promise of a New World Order

The election of US President Donald Trump challenged the discourse of a continued liberal world order. Trump argued that Brexit marked the beginning—or indeed the promise—of a new world order based on national independence and identities. Here, a Europe of sovereign nations is discursively constructed against a common threat—Brussels. Trump interpreted Brexit as a parallel to his own election: 'People want to take their country back. They want to have independence in a sense. […]And it is happening in the United States' (quoted in MacAskill, 2016). In France, Front National's Marine Le Pen shared this interpretation. For Le Pen, Brexit was 'the beginning of the end of the European Union. And I hope the birth of the Europe of nations, a Europe of cooperation that we've been propounding for years' (Walt, 2016).

In the Netherlands, before his sound defeat in the Dutch parliamentary elections in March 2017, Geert Wilders (2016), leader of the Freedom Party (PVV), argued that Brexit was only the beginning of a 'Europe's Patriot Spring'. Also for Germany's AfD, Brexit promised a new European future. The day after the referendum, party leader Frauke Petry declared that 'the time is ripe for a new Europe, for a Europe of the fatherlands' (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016). Thus, among Brexit's international supporters, Brexit constitutes the promise of a different future, and a different world order.

Subversive post-imperial imaginaries

Second, Brexit gives rise to a range of *post-imperial* associations, not just within the United Kingdom but also in former British colonies. One important idea during the referendum campaign was that Brexit would reignite 'the Commonwealth' (Chabe, 2016). Brexit is thus embedded in identity discourses helping to (re)constitute the United Kingdom as an empire, but also reminds former colonies of the nature of their relations to London. However, rather than consolidating the promise of a successful Brexit, based on its imperial past, many post-imperial associations outside the United Kingdom subvert this very discourse.

Prior to the referendum, the message from the 53 members of Commonwealth was that the United Kingdom should remain a member of the EU. As Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary-General, explained, 'the Commonwealth does not set itself up in competition with Europe—we are partners' (James, 2016). Speaking directly to the Commonwealth agenda, Director of the African Growth Initiative at Brookings Institute Amadou Sy and research assistant Mariama Sow claimed that Brexit would mean 'reduced British outwardness when it comes to global development issues, as well as decreased bilateral development assistance and trade' (Sy and Sow, 2016). Several Commonwealth countries, including Australia, New Zealand and India, expressed interest (in principle) in free trade deals, but demanded easier migration from these countries

into the United Kingdom than currently permitted (Onslow, 2016). When Theresa May visited India to discuss a post-Brexit trade deal, Indian diplomats discussed Brexit as an opportunity to improve the 'human dimension of the relationship with the UK', and specifically the visa issue. This discourse from key Commonwealth countries thus subverts a core argument in the Leave campaign: namely, that Brexit would help to control migration into the United Kingdom.

A more curious connection between Brexit and British (post-)imperialism can be found in the Iranian response to Brexit. The deputy chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, Massoud Jazayeri, states, 'England should pay the price of years of imperialism and committing crimes against humanity', explaining that the price would be Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom demanding independence (Borger and Wintour, 2016). This Iranian discourse is not only subversive of the dominant Brexit discourse. It also involves a resignification of the imperial past, where the British empire is constituted not in the discourse of a visionary and 'truly global' Britain, but is portrayed in terms of domestic tensions and identity conflicts within its imperial core. From a queer perspective, by bringing such identity mismatches into light, external interpretations of Brexit may have subversive effects on British identities.

Brexit and the many special relationships

Third, Brexit has revealed that a very large number of states appear to have some sort of 'special relationship' with the United Kingdom. Here, Brexit is clearly performative in the Austinian tradition, promising the continuation of bilateral relationships. Beginning with the 'special relationship' par excellence, that of the United States, Obama promised that 'the United Kingdom's membership in NATO remains a vital cornerstone of US foreign, security, and economic policy', and Vice-President Joe Biden highlighted the long-standing US-UK relationship, promising that 'that very special bond will endure' (quoted in Berensen, 2016).

Another related metaphor for bilateral diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom is that of 'gateway', with a range of countries describing the United Kingdom as their closest allies in the EU. Japanese Prime Minister Abe stated that 'Japan attaches importance to our relationship with the UK as a gateway to the European Union' (quoted in Stewart, 2016). Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi explained that he hoped that the United Kingdom would remain in the EU as it was India's 'gateway to Europe' (McLain, 2016). Again, Turkey's ambassador to the EU, Selim Yenel, emphasised that Brexit might have consequences for the EU's ability to deliver promises to Turkey, as the United Kingdom is 'one of [Ankara's] biggest backers in the EU' (quoted in Peker, 2016).

Perhaps most interestingly, before the referendum, in October 2015, China officially stated that the United Kingdom could help promote the development of strong China–EU relations. As China's Xi Jinping explained to the UK Prime Minister, China 'hopes Britain, as an important member of the EU, can play an even more positive and constructive role in promoting the deepening development of China-EU ties' (quoted in Bounds, 2015). China's position was not linked to protecting values or ensuring support for multilateral cooperation. Instead, what Obama and Xi have in common was that they both saw the United Kingdom as their economic and political 'gateway' into the EU. In contrast, several African leaders reacted more pragmatically, many predicting that Brexit would have limited impact on their bilateral relations. However, the President of Nigeria hinted at his country's dissatisfaction with the result, saying that he hoped

the West African country could enjoy 'greater cooperation and consolidation of shared interests' with the United Kingdom 'despite the outcome of the referendum' (quoted in Gaffey, 2016).

In sum, in terms of bilateralism, the United Kingdom is at the same time the closest trading partner for Japan, ensures good China–EU relations, defends Turkish interests in the EU, discloses security information to the United States, and all the Commonwealth countries have special partnerships with United Kingdom. These stories about 'special relationships'—although substantively often very far from the arguments of Leave campaign—might help explain why many British voters felt safe in believing the promise that the United Kingdom would be a 'truly global Britain' outside the EU.

Brexit and the global economy

The eventual withdrawal from the EU of one of the world's largest economies will have global repercussions. We focus here on the ways in which Brexit has shaped competing subjective visions of the global economy. Brexit has been embedded in discourses about the global economic order that, similarly to discourses on identity and the geopolitical world order, reflect an international versus nativist cleavage. The insertion of Brexit into these discourses has revealed some intriguing paradoxes within (particularly) conservative discourses on the global economy.

Within economic thought there is a traditional division between liberalism and economic nationalism. Economic liberals tend to advocate the advance of market society and the minimisation of the interventionist reach of government. Economic nationalists premise economic justice on whatever is best for the nation at any given time. Economic liberalism has been associated with the recent period of globalisation in the world economy, while the rise of economic nationalism has often been associated with retreats from globalisation.

A good deal of evidence suggests that the vote for Brexit—as well as the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency—was associated with a backlash against globalisation (see also Blyth, 2016; Wilson, 2017). Withdrawal from the EU under the mantra of 'taking back control' implies a victory for a form of economic nationalism. Yet, the pro-Brexit coalition involved not only nativists mobilising the 'losers of globalisation' around an anti-immigration message but also hyper-liberals who understood the EU to be a regulatory impediment to the delivery of a truly free market order (Finlayson, 2016). One of the most interesting features of Brexit is thus this coalition between two largely antithetical positions often seen as ideological rivals (Zürn and de Wilde, 2016).

The cleavage between these nativist and globalist political economy positions is also highly prominent in external meaning making around 'Brexit'. The focus here is on claims about how the United Kingdom's departure from the EU should reshape the ordering principles of the global economy and how, in turn, these visions confirm pre-existing normative claims about economic order.

The relationship between the United Kingdom and the global economy brings to mind Winston Churchill's view of the country at the intersection of three great circles of external relations: the British Commonwealth and Empire, the sphere of transatlantic relations and the English-speaking dominions, and the soon to be united Europe. Thinking retrospectively, the three circles metaphor has been used to capture the defining dilemma of British foreign policy since 1945 (Gamble, 2005; Sanders and Houghton, 2016). The

three circles can be seen as rival economic spaces, embodying alternative value sets and philosophies of political economy. Here, we sample varieties of each discourse as they apply to each of the 'three circles'.

A new transatlantic economic space?

'Transatlantic' has two distinct meanings in post-Brexit discourse. First, for some actors, the term 'transatlantic economy' describes the progressive integration of the US and *EU* economies. This process is one of market making and liberalisation (as exemplified by the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership agreement), and is inclusive of all component EU member-state economies. Thus, the Trans-Atlantic Business Council (TABC—an association of around 70 US and European multi-national corporations) sees Brexit as potentially disruptive of the existing transatlantic economic order. The TABC sees the EU's single market as providing a 'predictable, common regulatory framework', whereas Brexit 'introduces substantial levels of legal, commercial and economic uncertainty' (TABC, 2016: 1). One fear is that Brexit will deprive the EU of its most forceful advocate of economic liberalism and free trade (Jackson et al., 2016: 2). Advocates of this position regard the maintenance of a transatlantic liberal order as crucial to resisting the rise of new potential hegemons such as China individually or Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) collectively (Duina, 2016). Thus, the risks posed by Brexit have broader geo-economic implications for the sustainability of the neoliberal project.

The TABC advocates an arrangement between the United Kingdom and the EU-27 that disturbs as little as possible the existing benefits of the single market. Put into the terms laid out above, this position—effectively ruled out by the UK government—envisages clear benefits of maintaining a North Atlantic liberal economic space, within which the jurisdictionally separate US, EU and post-Brexit UK economies would continue a relatively seamless integrative path. This version of the transatlantic economy is premised on long established practices that have shaped and naturalised the US-EU economic relationship into this particular conception. What critical scholars have long seen as the emergence of a transatlantic neoliberal order (Gill, 2016; Ryner and Cafruny, 2017) can be read in our terms as a Butlerian form of performativity.

The second conception of the transatlantic economy works from a different geographical premise. Here, the key spatial parameters of that economy are *Anglo*-American rather than *Euro*-American. By implication, the Anglo-American economic space would find itself in a competitive relationship with the European economy. In one prominent guise, this emergent form of conservatism presents itself as a revived version of the purest form of 19th-century economic liberalism. As the American writer Kevin Richardson (2017) puts it, 'the argument for free trade contains within it practically the whole of conservative economic thinking and a great deal of conservative thinking beyond economics'. Richardson's essay reflects on, inter alia, the award of a major prize by the National Review Institute to the British Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Daniel Hannan for his role in persuading the United Kingdom to leave the EU. Hannan—like other key figures behind the 'Leave' campaign—presents himself as an old-style free-marketeer, keen to reassert the virtues of minimal state intervention, low levels of regulation and tax cuts (Hannan, 2017a).

This version of transatlanticism portrays the EU not as an agent for the propagation of free markets, but rather as an interventionist bulwark that prevents the realisation of a

market society. The delivery of Brexit becomes the means to protect core economic liberal values. But the very act of announcing 'Brexit' is an assertion, in an Austinian sense, of the idea of Anglo-American economic liberalism. Writing for the free market think tank the Cato Institute, Hannan compares Brexit with the American revolution: 'all the grievances that animated your patriot leaders apply equally to us. Let me put it even more simply: you guys voted Leave in 1776' (Hannan, 2017b: 2). His piece drops the names of multiple conservative and free market thinkers and purports to offer an ethical case for free markets. It is an Anglo-American vision of political economy performed across policy-facing platforms.

Richardson and Hannan make it clear that their version of future economic order would stand in opposition to the economic nationalist orientation of the newly elected US President Donald Trump. Richardson makes this point especially clear, seeing it as 'incompatible with a politics based on property rights, individual liberty, and the traditional moral and social order' (Williamson, 2017). Needless to say, this argument raises a paradox for conservative economic liberals who articulate an Anglospheric version of economic freedom. Both the advance of Brexit and the Republican successes in the 2016 US elections relied heavily upon the mobilisation of nativist (and thus economic nationalist) sentiment among voting publics. US economic liberals thus face the paradox of securing political power with the support of constituencies whose understanding of economic priorities is zero sum and 'America first' in orientation (Hankia, 2017).

Economic nationalist policies might, for a time, be consistent with the maintenance of an Anglo-American market order. But, by definition, they can only support such a vision to the extent that they serve the perceived economic interests of the United States. Meanwhile, the Euro-American conception of liberal order is threatened by the types of anti-globalisation backlash that both enabled Brexit and brought Trump to power.

Empire 2.0?

The fate of the Commonwealth 'circle' was a matter of significant public debate in the run up to the United Kingdom joining the European Communities in 1973. The idea of reviving the Commonwealth as a vibrant economic space has come back into fashion in the context of Brexit. Membership of the EU prevented the United Kingdom from partaking in any initiative to create a Commonwealth free trade area, an idea that has now re-emerged, even if some Whitehall officials have dubbed it (disparagingly) 'Empire 2.0' (Blitz, 2017).

Some of the loudest voices advocating the construction of a new Commonwealth economic space have emerged from Australia. In objective terms, it is clear that Australia is an Asia-Pacific economy. Only 1.4% of Australian exports go to the United Kingdom, and 1.3% of UK exports flow in the opposite direction (Evans, 2016; Parris, 2017). Nevertheless, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott welcomed Brexit as liberation from the 'statism and bureaucracy of Brussels' (Cleverly and Hewish, 2016: 4) and laid out a clear vision of what the post-Brexit relationship between the United Kingdom and Australia should look like:

> The movement of goods between our two countries should be absolutely free of tariffs or quotas. And each country's product and service standards should be recognised in the other. … Provided people are coming to work rather than to take advantage of social security or health services, Australians should also be free to live in the UK and vice versa. (Cleverly and Hewish, 2016: 4–5)

Here, Abbott transplants the basic operating principles of the EU single market to an imagined future economic relationship between the United Kingdom and Australia. This view resembles the second (Anglo-American) version of transatlanticism noted above: an affirmation of faith in economic liberal principles combined with a critique of the EU as an impediment to open and free markets. As Wellings (2016) notes, there is a tradition of Eurosceptic discourse in Australia. Its advocates tend to portray the EU as illiberal, but they also form part of a broader cultural politics of the right that unites politicians across the Anglosphere. Once again Brexit seems to have emboldened two types of sentiment: market liberalism (with an Anglosphere twist) and 'Australia First' nativism (McDougall, 2016). The upshot (and the unifying thread) is a political economy nostalgia for a return to a pre-1973 version of the Commonwealth where economic relations between the 'white' nations is privileged.

It should be said that this position remains a marginal (if revealing) strand of discourse—even within Australia (Evans, 2016). The Commonwealth itself took a pragmatic non-committal position on the referendum—even if some of its member states were very vocal that Brexit would have severely negative economic effects for them (The Commonwealth, 2016b). This impact is particularly true of the many less-developed countries (LDCs) within the Commonwealth, which have relied upon EU preferential arrangements to gain access to the UK market. Here, we move from nostalgic discourses about the revival of the White Anglosphere as a liberal economic space to questions that are existential for small developing economies (The Commonwealth, 2016a). The Commonwealth's own analysis of post-Brexit trade scenarios acknowledges that the UK government is likely to pursue a liberal trade policy, but also fears that Commonwealth interests will be crowded out of Article 50 negotiations (Stevens and Kennan, 2016).

It follows that there is no clear imaginary of 'Empire 2.0'. In fact, the two positions explored here are polar opposites. Strikingly, a revival of the pre-1973 Commonwealth economy along liberal lines takes little account of the actual patterning of economic relationships that has developed since. As Murray-Evans (2016) notes, the complex development of the EU's relationships with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states has significantly reconfigured the United Kingdom's own relationships with its former colonies. Moreover, that relationship sits very much within an outward projection of *European* economic space.

A new European economy?

We have already seen how one influential version of transatlanticism is premised on the continuation of US-EU economic space, while key voices in the Commonwealth are keen to maintain extant trading relationships with the EU after Brexit. In other words, Brexit is not only an opportunity for the radical re-imagination of economic space in an Austinian sense; it has also prompted rehearsals of the virtues of prevailing economic configurations in a more Butlerian sense.

The 'European economy' has always been a potentially contested idea, amenable to a variety of political economy value sets (Rosamond, 2012). The progressive 'neoliberalisation' of the European economy with the United Kingdom as a driver is an established theme within EU political economy research (see De Ville and Orbie, 2014; Gill, 2016). This theme raises the question of whether Brexit creates discursive space for alternative understandings of European economic space such as 'social Europe'. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC, 2017) deploys the idea of 'social Europe' with some

frequency, but so far its focus on Brexit has been on the status of mobile citizens in the Article 50 negotiations. Gerhard Bosch—an academic advocate of 'social Europe', states that 'The trade union movement in Europe […] no longer has any convincing plans for European reform' (Bosch, 2017). Social Europe versions of the European economy have loud and zealous advocates (Varoufakis, 2017), who deliver powerful Austinian speech acts. But the relative absence of organisational support (from, for example, coordinated action by trade unions and parties of the centre left) means that Butlerian performance (and thus routinisation) of the idea of 'social Europe' is underdeveloped.

More orthodox voices are naturally concerned that existing patterns of economic governance are not disturbed by the United Kingdom's withdrawal. Equally, the United Kingdom should not be allowed to secure competitive advantages over the EU-27 as a result of Brexit. For example, Germany's Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble has been keen to emphasise that, once out of the EU, the United Kingdom will still be subject to international rules on investment incentives and G20 rules on tax avoidance (Wagstyl and Chezan, 2016). This way is another in which post-Brexit economic futures are constrained discursively. From this viewpoint, escaping the juridical strictures of the EU would not exempt the United Kingdom from a variety of economic policy obligations. The vision of European regulatory space is one where the EU is embedded within a broader international economic space.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the value of understanding Brexit in performative terms. This perspective allows us to invert the default mode of representing Brexit as being driven by particular identity concerns in the United Kingdom. Instead, we have focused on how Brexit helps provide subject positions to countries and organisations around the world, giving them vital importance. As we have shown, Brexit is not just a tectonic event for the United Kingdom. It also serves to construct other national identities and reinforces particular images of bilateral and multilateral relations and the global economy.

At a global level, the language of Brexit is performative, embedded in pre-existing discourses about Britain, Europe and the nation-state as well as the global order, and it helps construct particular pasts. Brexit, however, also leads to other often directly opposing performative speech acts, promising the status quo or a new, prosperous future, not for the United Kingdom, but for the rest of the world. For instance, Brexit has led to the promise that the EU-27 will remain united and to declarations of commitments to multilateralism across the world. For others, Brexit promises a radical shift towards a new world order, a new Europe of nation-states as well as the global power shift away from the West. At the same time, we have seen how Brexit both reproduces pre-existing conceptions of Britishness, as well as long-standing, and often competing, discourses on European and national identity. Brexit also divides neoliberals across the world, producing quite different geo-economic imaginaries depending on how market liberal ideas are articulated to distinct conceptions of economic space.

In conclusion, while it is important to grasp the changing strategies through which UK leaders articulate Brexit and European integration, this task should not come at the expense of exploring the many ways through which the rest of the world identifies Brexit as a threat or possibility. From a performative perspective, Brexit does not threaten the EU or the multilateral system, per se. Instead, the dangers identified in Brexit serve as foils against which other nation-states constitute their identities, testifying to the importance of examining the discursive formations that enable specific politics. From this

perspective, Brexit represents not just choices for the United Kingdom or Europe but presents other actors around the world with opportunities to assert their own ontological existence. This reality has real-life implications for the United Kingdom's position in the Brexit negotiations. Rather than consolidating the promise of a successful Brexit, based on its imperial past and special relationships, the many different and competing Brexit imaginaries outside the United Kingdom subvert this very discourse of success by revealing its inner tensions. Yet, in doing so, Brexit also reveals contradictions and cleavages in other nations' identities and geopolitical and economic imaginaries.

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