

## **Brexit Revisited**

*Europe Didn't Work: Why We Left and How to Get the Best from Brexit*

Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson

London: Yale, 2017, £10.99 (p/b)

*Brexit Unfolded: How no one got what they wanted  
(and why they were never going to)*

Chris Grey

London: Biteback Publishing, 2021, £14.99 (p/b)

### **Bartholomew Steer**

**I** wrote in *Lobster* 80 on whether Brexit was a conspiracy or a cock-up.<sup>1</sup> Water has passed under the bridge since then and I can report that the question posed at the end of the article has been answered:

The interesting question is that which preoccupies all co-pilots in the world: in what circumstances are the controls taken from the pilot's hands? And what could be the consequences of delaying too long?

The good news is that the co-pilots have snatched the controls away from the pilot. Unfortunately the bad news is the plane hasn't changed direction, yet.

Perhaps it is too soon to expect that but at least it is a good opportunity for a stock take and to revisit old questions. The first one I examine in this article is whether the Lexit (Left Brexit) arguments still stack up in the light of experience. I have thus chosen to review the 2017 book, *Europe Didn't Work: Why We Left and How to Get the Best from Brexit*, by Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson. I go on to discuss the more recent book, from 2021, *Brexit Unfolded: How no one got what they wanted (and why they were never going to)*, by Chris Grey.

There have been a host of books on Brexit<sup>2</sup> since Elliott and Atkinson's was

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/80/brexit-cock-up-or-conspiracy/>>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/4dapk3kc>> or <<https://www.economist.com/economist-reads/2022/06/20/our-brexit-editor-picks-seven-books-to-help-make-sense-of-the-issue>> and <[https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/141237.Books\\_About\\_Brexit](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/141237.Books_About_Brexit)>.

published in 2017. Many people were (are) sceptical of the claims made for the EU, particularly monetary union; suspicious of the destination sought by the enthusiasts of the European 'project'; and disappointed by the reality of the European experience. 'Europe Didn't Work' reflects their attitude to Brexit.

The book provides a very good background to the debates that have taken place over the last fifty years in the UK. It draws a distinction between Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and the European/French Catholic/Enlightenment tradition of a centralised approach, delivered top-down. It compares the Soviet Union, as an example of an Enlightenment project gone wrong, with the Euro in which 'there was a refusal to admit that the concept was flawed even when all the available evidence pointed to the contrary'.

It shows there is a clear parallel between how the statement that 'socialism hasn't really been tried' is used to prop up the argument for a truly socialist society – in theory, at least – and the belief that the answer to the EU's problems lies in an ever-closer union. Elliott and Atkinson argue further that the dogged refusal of the Euro architects to reconsider is akin to accusing populations of 'suffering from false consciousness' – i.e. they fail to understand that the pain they are suffering is actually in their own best interests. The authors also note how that attitude has been particularly displayed toward the weaker economies of Europe, who have protested against the harsh results of the Euro in practice.

They thus essentially equate The European Project to Stalinism, just not serving the idea of socialism but rather a German banker's cunning plot to impose a 'sound money, free market' straitjacket, immune to democratic influences.

The second argument they make is that European unity was never an economic project but mainly a political project. They claim the EU was an act of will, not a result of narrow economic calculation. Simultaneously they allude to the fact that the ruling coalition in Europe exercising its will is led by Germany, which is the winner from the Euro project, effectively providing a subsidy to German exports. There is thus an element of anti-German resentment in the book, with more than just an overtone of 'we didn't fight two world wars for this'.

Most surprisingly they use a quote from Jean Monnet – 'Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for these crises' – to indicate that he was an enthusiast for European failure because it would provide a pretext for further integration. I interpret Monnet's remark as an indication that he believed European cooperation and unity would be always seen as a pragmatic solution to real problems of the day, rather than a pre-

ordained path to be actively promoted by pursuing failure. The authors' use of this quote may be an aside but it is a weak one.

The third and key argument is that the results achieved by the EU in practice are dismal. This has actually swayed voters in various parts of the EU to reject steps for ever greater unity and integration and to vote for a narrow nationalistic set of parties to represent their interests. Economic growth has been limp in comparison with other parts of the globe. More of the same is seen as a road to nowhere. Voters, if given a choice, express it as best they can by voting in increasingly unexpected ways: in Italy, for a comedian; in the UK, for a clown: almost anyone offering a different local solution to problems associated with the EU.

Tantalisingly the authors argue that the 'project' could be redeemable. The creation of a banking union, a common fiscal policy (implying more transfers from rich to poorer nations), debt write-offs for struggling countries and more expansionary macroeconomic policies could do the trick. If it were only allowed to succeed. That being the real problem, they claim – stamping down the idea of it having any chance, because it would be unacceptable to the leading forces in Europe.

The book showcases the debate about the Euro as demonstrating not only the folly of the European project but also that the authors themselves, who consistently argued against the Euro over the period, were right all along. The book concludes in self-congratulation before adding an epilogue looking back on the period between 2015 (when Cameron offered a referendum under pressure from the Brexit Party) and 2017. This covers the attempts at renegotiation with the EU, the referendum campaign and the immediate aftermath. It strikes them that it was no coincidence that the development of the Euro coincided with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. It was a time of optimism, the 'end of history', and the triumph of unfettered globalisation and market forces. They have to thereby acknowledge that the subsequent rejection of European policy initiatives to promote more integration was really a rejection of globalisation and the negative impact this has had on many newly exposed to these forces.

Nothing much has changed since the UK referendum result. Post-2016 economic growth was sluggish in both the UK and Europe, so Brexiteers, including the authors, regarded this as a sign that the dire predictions of Remainers were false. In the epilogue, written in 2017, even before a Brexit deal had been agreed, and trade was taking place as though nothing had really changed, the authors clutch at the straws of a May Government writing a new industrial strategy, and a shift away from deficit reduction as the basis for an economic policy. They expected Brexit to turn out well. There was, they

considered, no realistic prospect of the EU getting its act together.

On the question of the cultural divide between the Anglo-Saxon world and the EU it is clear that the authors have never read *Chosen People* by Clifford Longley.<sup>3</sup> By choosing to draw a sharp dividing line between the two traditions, the authors risk fostering old schisms created by Henry VIII (Protestantism vs Catholicism), and the triumphalist religious right-wing forces in America (who escaped from Old Europe). This is dangerous territory, with Nazi echoes of Blood and Honour being deeply embedded in the culture. It is no coincidence that the EU was specifically designed to move away from such animating notions. Neither does it seem to be a coincidence that Trump's America and Johnson's UK seemed to be moving backwards to notions of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, rooted in the belief that God is on their side.

### **Cultural exceptionalism**

Let's be clear – and I direct readers Clifford Longley's book for chapter and verse – there are no grounds for cultural exceptionalism and the belief that the superiority of a particular culture is sufficient grounds for breaching human rights laws, imposing economic domination or being immune to respecting the views of others. It's pernicious and dangerous propaganda. It may have been and

is influential, (but) it is simply not true – and never was. The historical evidence alone refutes it, whatever we make of the theological issue. And while it injected a powerful dynamic into the life of the two nations [the UK and USA] that believed it about themselves, the theory let them also believe that they had the right to pursue their own interests even when they ran counter to the interests of others. (Longley p. 281)

As it happens, there is no special relationship between the US and the UK. The US would have preferred the UK to remain in the EU. Obama, Trump and now Biden did not encourage the UK with the prospect of a trade deal, except one on US terms. Moreover Biden is particularly keen to avoid undermining the Good Friday Agreement.

*Realpolitik*,<sup>4</sup> a German word with non-exclusive rights to its use, means pragmatic politics. Who could not argue that muddling through is the operational driving force of the EU, whatever the high-flown rhetoric?

The authors' second complaint, that the EU is a political project and not a purely economic one, can seem significant only to someone who was not

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<sup>3</sup> Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: the Big Idea that Shapes England and America*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realpolitik>>

paying attention. It was no secret that the European Iron and Steel Community, the forerunner to the EU, had motives wider than the purely economic. The main one was to make war between France and Germany impossible.

The UK eventually succeeded in joining its wider manifestation, the European Economic Community in 1973. And it did so because it wanted to share in the benefits of a growing European market and participate in the European institutions created: the forerunners to the present European Commission, European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Court of Justice. Indeed, thanks to UK participation in the EU, there was a move by the EU to accept policies advocated by the UK.

In the words of Jacopo Barigazzi, writing for Politico:

From the EU's signature achievement, the single market, to its eastward expansion after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in many other areas, UK thinking was highly influential in determining the direction of travel. As Britain finally departs the bloc on Friday after three and a half years of bitter Brexit arguments, it leaves behind an EU that would have been very different without it.<sup>5</sup>

The distancing that took place over time occurred because the Conservative Party stepped back from other political alliances in Europe and identified itself as representing a nationalistic position, spurning political allies. Far from the EU setting itself up to fail – as an excuse for further integration – David Cameron seems to have set up the Conservative government to fail – in getting its way with the EU – as a means of proving that the Conservative Party could outdo UKIP in standing up for UK interests. In doing so Cameron drew on inspiration from die-hard Thatcherites, and accounts from various authors, that the EU and its manifestations were the replacement for the USSR as the 'evil empire'.<sup>6</sup>

Elliott and Atkinson's best argument remains the relatively lacklustre performance (allegedly) of the UK and EU economies, and the painful experience of establishing the Euro across widely different countries in Europe.

The EU had failed as an effective counterweight to the negative effects of

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<sup>5</sup> 'Britain leaves its mark on Europe', Politico, 29 January 2020 at <<https://www.politico.eu/article/britain-leaves-mark-eu-brexit/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Connolly, *The Rotten Heart of Europe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995)  
John Laughland, *The Tainted Source: The Undemocratic Origins of the European idea* (London: Little and Brown, 1997)  
Christopher Booker and Richard North, *The Great Deception: The True Story of Britain and the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003)

globalisation. Most recently we have seen the EU seeking to accelerate the 'digital transformation' of the EU economy as a Macron/McKinsey-inspired wet dream of more neoliberalism as the cure for a failure to keep up with the US and the Far East. The European Central Bank, meanwhile, resolutely set its priority as price stability rather than economic growth. The economic levers in its hands seemed to be in the grip of German bankers intent on preaching protestant rectitude to ill-disciplined countries – which amounted to every country apart from itself, and even itself at times.

### **Thatcher, Blair and Brown**

The policy choices that the UK made and then induced the EU to follow, were promoting globalisation and reducing protectionism through Thatcherism, and then the pro-globalisation bent promoted by Blair/Brown. This latter resulted in a baleful decision not to control Eastern European immigration as the EU expanded eastwards. But rather than addressing its own decisions, the UK has blamed the EU itself for the adverse impacts of these policies.

On the question of the Euro and monetary union it seems to me that Atkinson and Elliot are bigging-up this issue and their (correct) analysis of its consequences to undermine the whole enterprise. Claims that the EU is under effective Bundesbank control seem less convincing as the European Central Bank has injected substantial resources – both to fend off the financial crisis in 2008/9 (Euros 2.2 trn) and in the Covid crisis of 2020/22 (Euros 0.8 trn). After Brexit, no new countries have sought to follow the UK and leave the EU, not even Greece with its problems so well described in this book. It seems obvious to most that there is strength in numbers, rather than being in isolation in a hostile wider world.

The UK misdiagnosed its own relatively poor economic performance in the period 1946-1970 compared to the countries within the original EEC: it didn't properly attribute the positive impact of post-war reconstruction as the key factor in Europe. Furthermore the relatively weak EU GDP growth performance since 1980 can be attributed to new two key factors: the expansion of the Far East market, particularly since China moved to get full membership of the WTO in 2001; and to the extraordinary costs of absorbing East Germany (estimated at 2 trn Euros) and other eastern European countries into the EU.

As acknowledged earlier, globalisation has been a factor affecting both the UK and the EU alike. That politicians in the UK diverted attention to the EU for the UK's own lack of competitiveness and poor economic performance is a dishonest way of avoiding the blame that properly belongs to the legacy of Thatcherism as opposed to anything for which the EU is responsible.

In fact the post-1989 performance in largely successfully incorporating

Eastern Europe and Southern Europe more fully into the EU is a considerable achievement, not unappreciated by the long list of new applicants, including Ukraine. That there have been no obvious and immediate short-term dividends (to UK eyes) can only be a criticism from those lacking the long-term perspective that is removed by focusing on short-term book-keeping niceties.

So although the analogy of a difficult divorce has been used to gloss over the current difficulties with Brexit – with an implication that the quicker it is put behind the parties the better it will be – there are others who argue that the seduction and the shotgun marriage lie at the root of the relationship. For example in his book *Reluctant European*,<sup>7</sup> Stephen Wall – a former UK permanent representative to the EU and later adviser to Tony Blair – attributes the UK's initial ambivalence in 1950 to what was to become the EU (due to a wish to cling onto Empire) as colouring later attitudes. The UK joined only with some reluctance in 1973 and Margaret Thatcher's premiership from 1979 to 1991 set the stage for an antagonistic relationship that culminated in the 2016 referendum. *The Worm in the Apple* by Christopher Tugendhat<sup>8</sup> places the blame on the politicians who led the UK into the EEC in the first place, because they failed to explain to both their parties and the public how joining the EU mean some loss of sovereignty.

So these authors identify that it was the circumstances of the wedding of the UK and the EEC in 1973 – of a sense of desperation, of false promises, of a disappointing consummation and of (a purported) grim reality ensuing – that helped set the scene for Boris Johnson and the Brexit divorce. The country was duly offered 'sunny uplands' and improved economic prospects for the UK and the renewal of national self-confidence associated with 'taking back control'.<sup>9</sup>

## **Brexit Unfolded**

**W**hich brings me to the second book. The process by which the UK was seduced and then walked out is laid out in *Brexit Unfolded* by Chris Grey, a Professor of Organisational Studies.<sup>10</sup> This examines the period immediately

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European* (Oxford: OUP, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Tugendhat, *The Worm in the Apple* (London: Haus Publishing, 2022)

<sup>9</sup> 'Take back control' is, of course, the phrase coined by Dominic Cummings who continues to influence British politics by denouncing the competence of the Boris Johnson ('a shopping trolley smashing from one side of the aisle to the other') and of the government and political parties in general. If you believe him and his supporters, it was 'Dom that won it' for the Vote Leave Campaign. Regular snippets of his thinking appear at <<https://tinyurl.com/2z279v54>> or <[https://dominiccummings.substack.com/p/snippets-5-no10-farce-ukr-tory-strategy?utm\\_source=email](https://dominiccummings.substack.com/p/snippets-5-no10-farce-ukr-tory-strategy?utm_source=email)>.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Grey, *Brexit Unfolded* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2021)

before the referendum in 2016 and up to 2022. It is the distillation of a regular blog<sup>11</sup> Grey has maintained since 2016 while building a reputation as the doyen of Brexit commentators. By focusing on a specific period, the author neglects the history and a wider account of the influences dictating policy but does provide a good technical overview of the debates and inconsistencies of the arguments used over the last few years. To an extent, therefore, he reflects the confusion, fantasies, and irrationality of that debate. In his own words it provides an account of the contested terrain. But, as we read the progress and the conclusions of the book, we are transported back to those recent times and it helps us to look back and to make better sense of it all ourselves.

He summarises the Lexit position as being about sentiment: Europe is a land of foreigners hostile to UK interests; the EU is a business club, closing off democratic interests, while simultaneously embracing the hyper-capitalist US as a potential bosom buddy. This summary by Grey of the Lexit position therefore omits the protectionist element of the Social Europe project – the creation of a protectionist wall to prevent the race to the bottom, that a free market in goods and services might bring. Those with a longer memory will recall the standing ovation given to then President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, by the Trade Union Congress when he explained this in 1988.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Grey's account of Lexit believes the US and the WTO will protect the UK's interests – and the free market – to guarantee its future success. This puts more faith in globalist neo-liberals in the Conservative Party and in the US than in fellow social democrats in Europe. National interest is seen as paramount, thus closing off links to allies in Europe and the nature of the viper at the bosom (the US). The analogy that comes to mind is leaving the frying pan for the security of the fire.

## **Narcissism**

Grey mentions the grandiosity and super confidence of Brexiteers, the irrationality of many of their ideas, and their lack of definition of what success means and how to achieve it. He doesn't name the disorder, although others have: it is national narcissism,<sup>13</sup> led by the biggest narcissist of them all.<sup>14</sup>

Not all Brexiteers are narcissists but many of their leaders, in whom they have put their trust, are. Other leaders have been intimidated and have therefore accommodated themselves to Brexit's risks (May, Cameron); others

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<sup>11</sup> <<https://chrisgreybrexitblog.blogspot.com>>

<sup>12</sup> See <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p046ghy0>>.

<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/britain-narcissist-nation>>

<sup>14</sup> <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson-wont-quit-because-27412673>>



have seen it as a necessary price for personal glory (Truss). Opponents have been ruthlessly eliminated (at least 17 Tory MPs were deselected or forced to stand down in 2019) and others were forced to swear allegiance to its Brexit leader. Still others have ducked out of the argument by accepting the Referendum vote as the deciding matter, despite its advisory nature, and its terms not being clear or understood.

Grey himself continues to believe it's all a terrible mistake based on misunderstandings (cock-up theory) – for example, on the meaning of sovereignty as a black and white matter. In fact the sovereign has been constrained and subject to law and democracy in one form or another since the Magna Carta. English history, as most understood it, has seen decisions made to decapitate the sovereign, import a Dutch King and Queen, a German royal family, and the sovereign's adherence to democracy itself has been only reluctantly and belatedly accepted.

According to Grey:

Committed brexiteers really do believe their own propaganda and, in particular, really do believe that 'sovereignty' confers unrestrained freedom. In this sense, the fantasy of what being a 'sovereign equal' means as a non-EU member was the mirror image of their equally erroneous belief that sovereignty had been lost by virtue of being an EU member.

And allied to that was the persistent paranoia that, as a member the UK had been ruled by the EU and as a non-member was being punished by the EU. (Grey p. 216)

Grey also points to the contradictions inherent in immigration policies, identified as one of the key drivers of Brexit. On the one hand Brexiteers support 'nativist' or nationalistic policies in seeking to reduce immigration; but simultaneously they proclaim a globalist free market, free trade policy. These are incompatible and demonstrate 'a failure to understand the regionalisation of economics and the multipolar nature of international relations'. (pp. 250-251) Thus white Eastern European immigrants are being replaced by brown and black immigrants from India, Africa and the Far East – not quite what some voters in the 2016 referendum envisaged.

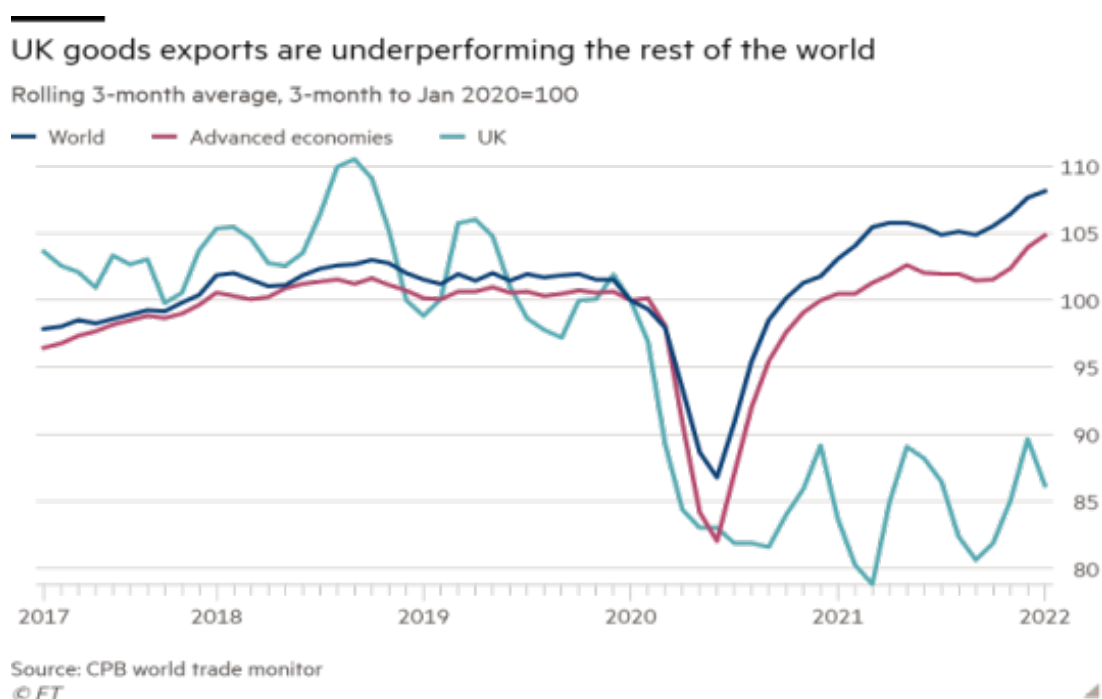
In doing this, Grey has identified a reluctance to face up to the trade-offs that exist in all negotiations. In his words:

a soft Brexit that would have kept Britain close to the single market would have meant following most EU rules with no say in making them. A hard Brexit, which is what has actually happened, avoids that outcome but at the cost of trade and

non-tariff barriers with Britain's biggest market—as well as a border in the Irish Sea.

In the view of the *Economist*, this explains why 'such trade-offs were always going to mean that Brexit would leave nobody fully satisfied'.<sup>15</sup> Rather than face up to this, all political parties continue to follow the example of Boris Johnson and assert that they can have their cake and eat it. Those who think the Labour Party under Keir Starmer is an exception should look at his interview with Robert Peston.<sup>16</sup>

In my view this is no time for equivocation. We are where we are. It is vital that normal trading is restored. If that means agreeing to EU standards, then so be it. This is the logical outcome if a level playing field is a meaningful phrase. No one is openly saying that they want to reduce standards of food, medicines or industrial products; it would also help restore trust on trade in services. If accepted, this may disappoint those that want to move to a Singapore-on-Thames model discussed in my earlier article,<sup>17</sup> but the bird in the hand in terms of the EU market is far bigger than the advantages being sought elsewhere. For those who doubt it, this diagram from the FT illustrates the actual impact on trade in goods that Brexit has had.



<sup>15</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/jawzdw4f>> or <<https://www.economist.com/economist-reads/2022/06/20/our-brexite-editor-picks-seven-books-to-help-make-sense-of-the-issue>>

<sup>16</sup> <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/is-starmer-trying-to-have-his-brexite-cake-and-eat-it->>

<sup>17</sup> <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/80/brexite-cock-up-or-conspiracy/>>

The EU and the UK may have different traditions and ways of thinking, but nothing is set in stone forever. Dialogue and diplomacy need to be restored to open up opportunities and, if a price has to be paid, then so be it. It is not as if trade hasn't grown and relationships developed over 50 years.<sup>18</sup>

You can be both a sceptic and a realist. This could mean that despite everything it would be better having a semi-detached status with Europe, which would see the UK outside of the EU but within the single market. It works for Norway and other nations and worked perfectly well for the UK until now. For some reason Theresa May seems to have believed that it was the European Court of Human Rights that was an obstacle to immigration control and that this was an EU institution. She was wrong.

First, the ECHR was established in 1950 by Winston Churchill amongst others. Second, it has nothing to do with the EU; if refugees turn up on our doorstep then the UK is under an international (i.e. wider than the EU) obligation to process claims for asylum properly. It was the UK government that decided not to control the flow of East European EU migrants in the first place; it was not imposed on the UK.

It was the fashion of the day in the 90s to see liberalisation and globalisation as the answer to all questions. We know now (and some of us did at the time) that they throw up their own problems. But leaving the room is not often the solution. It seems that the EU is a handy scapegoat for problems which lie closer to home.

It is not as though the UK has nothing to offer. The EU gains more than the UK from free-ish trade with the UK, but the EU will defend its market and the privileged position for key sectors, as well as its own standards. This is not a threat to UK interests. I detect no enthusiasm among the general UK populace for chlorinated chicken, hormone-injected beef and other dubious and unregulated products available on the world market.

Cheap food throws up more problems than it solves. The problems of the obesity epidemic and antibiotic resistance can be laid at the door of a lightly regulated and highly industrialised agricultural and processed food sector. The UK has also been disingenuous over the years in identifying the costs of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as a burden to the UK; the immediate result of Brexit has been for the UK itself to continue to subsidise its farmers using funds set aside from money previously routed through the CAP. A withdrawal of this support would have catastrophic consequences for UK agriculture.

It is far easier for the UK to cooperate in the task of regulating and

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<sup>18</sup> <<https://www.inet.ox.ac.uk/news/brexit/>>

negotiating fair trade deals than setting itself the task of re-inventing the wheel and duplicating the efforts of others. I could be persuaded to the contrary, but I do not recall any instances over the last 50 years where UK interests have been so ignored as to imperil UK membership of the EU. Instead it seems that the costs of globalisation for UK communities has been unfairly attributed to the EU; resentment from the poorly paid in the UK towards EU migrants has been stirred up rather than mitigated (by, for instance, ensuring NHS and local government are properly funded to cope with population changes that should have been paid for by the benefits of economic growth that immigration brought). Not surprisingly this deliberate deflection, away from the UK government's responsibility for the consequences of its own policies, has led to a misplaced local rebellion – against the EU rather than the UK government.

Having reviewed both books, however, I have a sense of dissatisfaction at not having got to the bottom of the story. Neither the reasons for leaving the EU from the Left, nor the description of the Brexit process as cock-up, are sufficient. For that, a better engagement with the books by Laughland, Booker, and Connolly listed above at footnote 6, is required. I have read them over the course of the last 25 years presenting the view of the forces hostile to the EU without accepting that they offered a full explanation for relationships between the EU and UK. Luuk van Middelaar in *The Passage to Europe*,<sup>19</sup> published in 2013, attempts a more measured approach but with such a degree of tedium that I imagine many readers have failed to finish it. What is clearer now, however, is that Brexiteers did read Laughland, Booker and Connolly; and believed every word of it.

These authors portray the nation state as the supreme form of the genuinely democratic political body. The notion of delegating upwards to a supranational body responsibility for the negotiation of trade deals, trading standards, arrangements for security and defence, banking supervision and monetary policy is unthinkable. Although the world has a large number of supranational bodies – from the UN, WTO, IMF, World Bank, WHO, ASEAN, to WEF, the large consultancy bodies, and large private multinationals – all of which are bound by the World Wide Web, common shared technology standards and world markets in commodities and much else, this somehow doesn't count.

Theirs is the neo-liberal point of view that the optimal arrangement is for states to be weak, thereby setting the scene for private, free individuals to essentially exercise their freedom to work, trade and do business with minimal supervision, regulation or controls in place. Only in this way can the economic

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<sup>19</sup> Luuk van Middelaar, *The Passage to Europe* (London: Yale, 2013)

theories written by Adam Smith in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and the success of the UK in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – be fulfilled and extended.

The blame for the fact that great economic success has not been achieved since 1973 is attributed to the EU under German dominance. The first seventy years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is seen through the prism of two world wars that had been fought against the perceived driver of current EU policy: Germany. For Brexiteers to go along with the continuation of German dominance is essentially to betray the dead of those wars.

Anyone who questions the economic history of this account, pointing to the existence of national rivalries, disguising imperialistic wars of conquest, looting and wealth transfers, would be left unsettled by reading these books. It is simply not credible that all this is merely the operation of blind free trade and market forces, nudged along by small states content to defer great issues to matters of background law setting.

For example, a review of Laughland's *The Tainted Source: the Undemocratic Origins of the European Idea* sums up the arguments against the nation state that emerged pre-WW2 in the following terms,

Nations were . . . denounced as destructive and self-destructive, irrational, destabilizing, and unable to defend themselves in isolation. Among the shambles attributed to national sins and failings, federalists, one-worldists, and advocates of efficiency campaigned against nations and their apparatus. Too small, anachronistic, and adversarial to meet the challenges of the modern world, nations were obsolete. Too slow and cumbersome to handle difficult political conundrums, representative institutions were derelict. Democracy itself was walking wounded, its moods not to be trusted, its sporadic bouts of self-affirmation suspect. Countries would be better managed like a commercial enterprise, by specialists who could ensure their efficient functioning.

The fabric of society had become too complicated for clumsy confusion. Politics were messy and illogical. Dismantle political structures, it was demanded, and replace them with economic ones. Goal-oriented administrations not subject to capricious electoral opinions would organize the continent rationally, abolish conflict, establish harmony.<sup>20</sup>

Laughland therefore sees the EU as the logical expression of these ideas and being guilty of two major flaws: it is against the nation state; and it is guilty of economism – the view that politics consists essentially in the

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<sup>20</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/3md6vfb8>> or <<https://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/all-ones-eggs-in-one-basket-case-review-of-john-laughlands-the-tainted-source-th-985>>

administration of economy and society. The state's power, in his view, should be judicial not administrative, upholding the rule of law and ensuring the free functioning of the market.

Laughland knows that in the Continental tradition the state is not there to uphold the free legal decisions of its citizens but to direct them, and especially to direct the economy. That is precisely what he does not like. Yet, if for hundreds of years states have regarded themselves as self-contained economic spaces, the extension of that view to European scale is not extraordinary. If government has long been exercised by specialists, not grown out of society but trying to act on it, management by one lot of technocrats is no more shocking than government by another lot of technocrats.<sup>21</sup>

In retrospect Remainers did not engage fully with the arguments against European co-operation, and institutional integration, in the promotion of European interests. But neither have Brexiteers been transparent in the goals they are pursuing (at least when facing the general public – it's clear enough in the sources I cite) for fear of frightening the horses.

*The spectacle of the Brexit process therefore has been about the hijack of democracy, through the subterfuge of a referendum to authorise huge constitutional change, riding on the back of a protest vote against the globalist forces to which Brexit itself would give freer rein.*

This is neither a conspiracy (although the lines are clear if you have the most elementary detection skills) nor a cock-up (although Grey pays handsome tribute to this idea). Instead, it's a cruel joke on the UK in return for the British Empire. Having fought two world wars to preserve the Empire against a foe that wanted to follow the UK path;<sup>22</sup> having helped create a post-war world based on multinational institutions that has expanded trade out of all recognition; having tied potential enemies within those institutions; and having helped defeat the largest threat (although in retrospect the USSR was never much of a threat), the UK has now set itself on a new path: to lead a quest for national glory to sunny uplands, dominated by small states, free trade and liberty for tax-avoiding oligarchs.

This joke is no laughing matter however. Some writers, and opportunists, have seen that stirring political upheaval can be good for investors, who are in a better position than most to discern megapolitical trends to pick bargains (the time to buy is when there

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<sup>21</sup> See Weber review, cited in the text at footnote 18.

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Sarkisyanz, *Hitler's English Inspirers* (Belfast: Athol Books, 2003)

is blood in the streets – Baron Rothschild).<sup>23</sup> But most observers see things differently: a preposterous national stance, driven by blind ideological faith, in a national story once told to a limited group of dying embers of empire propping, up the bar in the local Conservative Club, waiting in vain for the German car industry to reopen barriers to free trade and for the US uncle to bail the UK out.

You can see why our EU allies, and Biden, look a little perplexed. And why even now there are many that have not given up hope that the UK will come to its senses and, like the mythical co-pilot with which I began this, take action to avoid the looming mountain.

*Bartholomew Steer is now retired (and living in France).*

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<sup>23</sup> James Dale Davidson and Sir William Rees-Mogg, *Blood in the Streets* (London: Summit Books, 1987)