Understanding Euroscepticism: How British hostility to the EU contrasts with opposition elsewhere in Europe

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The UK's referendum on EU membership may well be one of the main stories of 2016, with the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, recently suggesting that it could be held as early as the summer. Montserrat Guibernau writes on how we can conceive of Euroscepticism in both the UK and other EU countries. She writes that understanding Euroscepticism requires an account of a range of different elements, including identity, attitudes toward globalisation, and responses to diversity within nation states.

The UK and the EU are both changing. The UK stands as a world power and, as such, it continues to look for recognition while maintaining a distinct identity and status, which includes a special relationship with the United States. In turn, the EU embraces a considerable number of nation states, which, so far, have been prepared to relinquish some aspects of their own jealously guarded sovereignty in order to benefit from membership of an economically prosperous and dynamic internal market, which has turned the EU into a phenomenally successful economic global player.

However, the depth of the economic crisis, exemplified by Greece, has brought instability and it seriously threatens the survival of the EU, as we know it. As a result, Euroscepticism, defined as criticism of the EU and opposition to the process of political European integration, is currently rising in both the UK and in the EU.

Yet, in some cases, nation states employ the EU as an excuse for action or inaction within the domestic arena and, at times, they even use it as a scapegoat, thus fuelling nationalism and reinforcing national identity. The variety of Euroscepticisms within the EU confirms the co-existence of different political cultures among EU member-states. At present, the economic crisis has contributed to highlighting the relevance of Euroscepticism in Britain and the EU.

Euroscepticism in not restricted to wealthy countries such as the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, or Finland. On the contrary, the economic down turn has prompted the rise of Euroscepticism in Greece and Spain, whose position towards the EU has shifted from enthusiasm to deep disappointment. There is even resentment and anger about the contrast between what many regard as a wealthy Germany, that has enormously benefited from the EU and the creation of the euro, and a poor South now struggling to survive amid corruption scandals and very high unemployment, in particular, among young people.

Eurosceptic views in the UK question and reject the idea of a political union among the member states of the EU and they stand against further political integration. However, they support the idea of a common European market. Eurosceptic views defend the exceptional and unique character of Britishness; this refers to the identity of the nation and its sense of forming a distinct community. In some instances, Euroscepticism is a response to 'too much' diversity; an attempt to control social and political change, to preserve the past and protect a way of life that is fading away.

European identity was initially conceived as a top-down institutionally generated identity designed to foster solidarity bonds among a diverse population. It was also aimed at nurturing some incipient feelings of loyalty towards the EU. However, the economic crisis has changed this, and now we are witnessing a dangerous mixture of resentment about corruption, bad management, failed expectations of prosperity and progress, and, in some instances, a retreat to authoritarian politics and style, pointing at division rather than solidarity among European peoples. We are living in a world overwhelmed by diversity and faced with phenomenal challenges such as those posed by climate change, social inequality, poverty, illiteracy, terrorism and war.

In the West, material progress is considered a key objective for millions of people that will never be able to achieve it. In this environment, resentment, conflict and violence encounter a fertile ground. It is in the world of scarcity and limited resources that democracy, solidarity and freedom are in danger of being replaced by authoritarian politics. This brand of politics is almost invariably eager to point at those regarded as different as responsible for society's ills: an easy scapegoat attacked under the (fictional) pretext that it will save and protect the community.

Currently, identity and belonging are acquiring unprecedented power within a fluid environment marked by high levels of uncertainty about the future. Identity refers to the set of attributes that make each person unique, each community different, and these attributes are, in turn, the outcome of a complex mesh of exchanges and relationships involving a range of people, situations, values, ideologies and objectives.

Belonging implies some form of reciprocal commitment between the individual and the group. For instance, citizens identify with 'their' nation, and it is within its boundaries that they enjoy certain rights. In return, the nation demands loyalty, and in extreme circumstances, such as war, citizens are compelled to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the nation. Belonging fosters an emotional attachment; it prompts the expansion of the individual's personality to embrace the attributes of the group, to be loyal and obedient to it. In return, the group offers a 'home', a familiar space – physical, virtual or imagined – where individuals share common interests, values and principles or a project.

Above all Euroscepticism firmly believes that EU integration weakens the UK, since it attempts to control social and political change with the aim of preserving the image of a golden past. However, as painful as it may be, we have to recognise that there is no way back. The varieties of Euroscepticism within the EU confirm the co-existence of dissimilar political cultures closely connected with a range of distinct historical backgrounds among EU member states.

There are a number of key questions implied by these issues. First,to what extent is Euroscepticism a response to 'too much' diversity? Is it an attempt to fix identity at a time when globalisation and technological progress make that impossible? Alternatively, in what ways has EU membership transformed the UK's view of the EU? Does the UK belong to the EU and, relatedly, what are the signs and the markers of belonging to the EU? These are questions which will be touched upon as part of a new research project, 'Contrasting Euroscepticisms in the UK and the EU'.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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