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In the year leading up to the 2016 European Union (EU) membership referendum, a group called 'Historians for Britain' published an article in *History Today*. Their central thesis was that "the United Kingdom has developed in a distinctive way by comparison with its continental neighbours." Its unique legal system, principles of Parliamentary sovereignty and "ancient universities" all contributed to the country's status as distinct from the continent.¹ A powerful rejoinder, entitled "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated," came a few days later, with a ten-page list of signatories. The article pointed out that the claim of British exceptionalism was nothing new. Furthermore, they found it unconvincing: many of the values that 'Historians for Britain' identified as 'British' were in fact more universal and parliamentary sovereignty was a more recent aspect of British politics than had been suggested. Overall, these "Fog in Channel" historians encourage an understanding of the UK's relationship with Europe that emphasises a complex, contested, and continuous process of interaction, rather than one which solely stresses difference or separation.²

Now, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, similar themes to those in "Fog in Channel" are picked up in "Contemporary European Historians on Brexit," an excellent roundtable published in the journal *Contemporary European History*. The issue, which includes 20 essays of approximately 2000 words, opens with a discussion of the wariness with which many contemporary historians approach writing about current affairs. Nevertheless, Jessica Reinisch puts forward three reasons why historical perspectives on Brexit are relevant.³ They can reveal the misconceptions between the UK and its neighbours, show selective uses and understandings of British and European history, and demonstrate the ways that current debates about Britain's place in Europe may alter understandings of the past.

One of the main strengths of the roundtable is the way in which it illuminates the contradictory terms in which the outcome of the 2016 referendum has been and continues to be explained. One has only to cast their memory back to the day the result was announced to recall the surprise among commentators when it was revealed that 51.9% of voters had cast a ballot marked 'Leave.' The *Guardian* described it as the "biggest shock to the political establishment in Britain and across Europe for decades."⁴ Even Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party and one of the biggest proponents of a 'Leave'

¹ "Britain: apart from or a part of Europe?," *History Today*, 11 May 2015.

² "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated," *History Today*, 18 May 2015.

³ Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction: Contemporary European Historians on Brexit," *Contemporary European History* 28:1 (2019) [Hereafter *CEH*]: 1-5.

⁴ Anushka Asthana, Ben Quinn and Rowena Mason, "UK votes to leave EU after dramatic night divides nation," *Guardian*, 24 June 2016.

vote, said he believed Remain would “edge it.”⁵ For others, the result was more understandable, especially when viewed as the inevitable outcome of the ‘awkward partnership’ between the UK and Europe, one of the predominant narratives of Anglo-European relations that was first popularised by Stephen George in the 1990s.⁶

The contributors to the roundtable question whether the outcome of the referendum should be viewed with such astonishment. Martin Conway demonstrates that moments of British engagement on the continent are “on the whole untypical.” Since the 1920s, British policymakers have “displayed a consistent tendency to choose other options over that of a close engagement with Europe.”⁷ In a similar vein, Anne Deighton points out that crucial decisions taken between 1948 and 1951 about the UK’s participation in Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s “three circles” of foreign policy (the Empire/Commonwealth, the Anglo-American relationship and Europe) may help us to understand 2016. In those years, the UK opted for association with the continent, rather than formal integration, and stalled efforts at building federal European institutions. As a result, the UK was a late-comer to the European integration project.⁸

Another key strength of the roundtable is the discussion of different characterisations of ‘Britain and Europe.’ The ‘awkward partner’ narrative has dominated perceptions of the UK’s relationship with the European Communities (EC)/EU during its 47 years of membership. For various reasons it has overshadowed other understandings UK-EU relations and it is important to acknowledge “the adversarial mode of thought that many in the UK have used to analyse the integration process.” Yet, as Piers Ludlow argues, “reality has been rather more complex.” There have been moments of “constructive engagement” especially when it came to the creation of the Single Market and the successive rounds of enlargement.⁹ Furthermore, as Monika Baár and Paul van Trigt show, the ways that one sees the UK’s relationship with Europe depends on the actors being studied. British disabled activists, for example, were engaged with the EU’s institutions in developing Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, which provides protection against discrimination, while at the same time the British government was more uncooperative.¹⁰

The Brexiteers developed their own narratives of ‘Britain and Europe’ and the essays by Pertti Ahonen and Thorsten Borring Olesen dispel the myths behind their arguments. When one examines the economic division of Europe in the 1960s or cheap-labour migration in the 1970s, the promises that the UK could return to the European Free Trade Association or use Brexit as a vehicle to stop incoming migrants are shown to be empty promises.¹¹ So too, Axel Körner shows, are the

⁵ Charlie Cooper and Katie Forster, “EU referendum: Nigel Farage says it ‘looks like Remain will edge it’ as polls close,” *Independent*, 23 June 2016.

⁶ Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community* third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁷ Martin Conway, “Brexit: 100 Years in the Making,” *CEH*: 6-9, here 6.

⁸ Anne Deighton, “Brave New World? Brave Old World?,” *CEH*: 31-34.

⁹ Piers Ludlow, “The Historical Roots of the ‘Awkward Partner’ Narrative,” *CEH*: 35-38, here 35 and 38.

¹⁰ Monika Baár and Paul van Trigt, “British and European Citizenship: Entanglements through the Lens of Disability,” *CEH*: 50-52.

¹¹ Pertti Ahonen, “Of Walls and Fences: Brexit and the History of Cross-Border Migration,” *CEH*: 4245 and Thorsten Borring Olesen, “Back to the 1960s or Further Back? Brexit as a European Dilemma between Past and Future,” *CEH*: 39-41.

falsehoods behind the belief, which was propagated by people who advocated for a Leave vote, that other countries in Europe had an “admiration” for the UK.¹²

The UK’s withdrawal from the EU will mark a major rupture in what was the established pattern in Anglo-European relations since the UK acceded to the European Communities on 1 January 1973. But it would be wrong to see that event as having been either predetermined or a complete surprise. Instead, there is a mixed picture. At times, the UK has been a reluctant European, at others it has been engaged and constructive. To its credit, this roundtable as a whole eschews a singular explanation or characterisation of the UK’s relationship with the EU.

Another key strength of the roundtable is the extent to which the authors avoid Anglo-centrism. There have been vastly different experiences of European history which have informed different narratives about the purpose of and need for strong European institutions. Dominik Geppert’s essay emphasises that from a German perspective, European integration was a way back into Europe after the crimes of the Nazis. For the British, however, entry to the EC came “right at the beginning of a period of economic and political stagnation.”¹³

Furthermore, when viewed from the vantage point of Athens, Krakow, or Madrid, the decision to leave the EU, and its consequences, look rather different. Nikolaos Papadogiannis points out that in Greece, Brexit has given rise to a discourse about the ways that “EU and German policies may have estranged the British from the EU.”¹⁴ This builds on the already vocal criticism of German policy in Greece since the beginning of the debt crisis and the bailout referendum. The Poles want the terms of Brexit to be favourable to their citizens that live and work in the UK. This has resulted in the paradoxical situation described by Adam Hudek, whereby “despite the desire of the Brexiteers to forget about Central Europe, its states remain ‘Britain’s natural allies’, and their requirements have to be acknowledged in the negotiation process.”¹⁵ At the same time, there is a deep disappointment among many Eastern Europeans, as Maria Bucur points out, about the xenophobia that took hold in British public imagination in the lead-up to Brexit.¹⁶ Finally, as Xosé M. Núñez Seixas explains, Brexit has changed the long-standing view held among Spaniards of the UK as a role-model, something which is all the more significant given that the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence was seen by some as “a possible path to be imitated by the Spanish political elites.”¹⁷ By looking at Brexit from different places on the continent, a wide range of perspectives are incorporated into what can be a parochial debate.

The authors also seek to understand the 2016 referendum not only in terms of UK-EU relations, but also in terms of other histories. Ferenc Laczó and Mate Rigo suggest that there may be comparisons to the positions of the East Central European states in the aftermath of the First World War and after the end of the Cold War.¹⁸ Another way to see Brexit is in terms of

¹² Axel Korner, “Britain – the Sicily of Europe?” *Continental Perspectives on Britain’s *Amour Propre**, *CEH*: 23-26.

¹³ Dominik Geppert, “The Power of History: British and German Views of the European, National and Imperial Past,” *CEH*: 14-18, here 15.

¹⁴ Nikolaos Papadogiannis, “Brexit from Greek Vantage Points: Changing Histories in the United Kingdom and Greece,” *CEH*: 27-30, here 29.

¹⁵ Adam Hudek, “The United Kingdom and Central Europe: A Dream of an Alternative,” *CEH*: 61–64, here 63.

¹⁶ Maria Bucur, “Brexit: A Tipping Point towards New Tribalism,” *CEH*: 65-68.

¹⁷ Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, “Spanish Historians and Brexit: On Special Paths and Historical Normality,” *CEH*: 19-22, here 21.

¹⁸ Ferenc Laczó and Mate Rigo, “New Versailles or a Velvet Revolution? Brexit and Exits of Central and Eastern European History, 1916–2016,” *CEH*: 57-60.

the rise of right-wing nationalist groups. David Motadel indicates that such groups are not a new phenomenon and have long maintained “core enemies,” usually supranational organisations which are viewed as “subversive to national sovereignty.”¹⁹

Michal Kopeček and Vladimir Tismaneanu consider Brexit alongside the kinds of Euroscepticism and populism that are taking root in many post-Communist states.²⁰ As Kopeček argues, there are common elements among these populist Eurosceptics such as “defending the interests of the nation and people against supposedly elitist, bureaucratic and liberal-cosmopolitan-globalist projects.” In light of the rise of populist parties such as Fidesz in these post-Communist states historians should, he urges, rethink “the nature of 1989 as a turning point in the history of the region” (76).

Finally, when considering the Brexit vote in terms of the history of British democracy, the 1975 referendum on EC membership of course comes to mind. However, there are other possible comparisons, as is shown by Pieter Lagrou’s exploration of the “informative popular consultation” in Belgium in March 1950 over the return of King Leopold III. From this standpoint, Brexit can be seen as a warning about the challenges facing parliamentary democracy and the “recourse to the referendum” as a tool for resolving political impasses.²¹

The idea that the present debates about British history and Britain’s place in Europe may alter readings of its past is central to the roundtable. Maciej Janowski argues that if historians compare Brexit with nineteenth-century nationalism, we may need to consider whether the masses in East and Central Europe were more modern and the UK’s public more traditional than some current assumptions would imply.²² Any attempt to categorise narrowly ‘the UK’s public’ or ‘Leave voters’ would, of course, be problematic. This in turn raises important questions about the models and concepts that historians may need to employ in order to explain Brexit.

The roundtable expertly accomplishes its stated goals of unearthing the misconceptions and contradictions in our current understandings of UK-EU relations and the causes and consequences of Brexit. It shows the ways in which history has been employed selectively to portray the UK and its relationship with European integration in particular ways, and suggests the ways in which Brexit may change our conceptions of British and European history. It stands as an exemplar of how historians can make critical interventions in current affairs.

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¹⁹ David Motadel, “Nationalist Internationalism in the Modern Age,” *CEH*: 77-81, here 80.

²⁰ Michal Kopeček, “Sovereignty ‘Return to Europe’ and Democratic Distrust in the East after 1989 in the Light of Brexit,” *CEH*: 73-76 and Vladimir Tismaneanu, “What Went Wrong and Why? Nationalism versus Democracy in Eastern and Western Europe,” *CEH*: 69-72.

²¹ Pieter Lagrou, “Plebiscite or Parliament’ Brexit and the End of the History of British Political Model,” *CEH*: 10-13, here 12.

²² Maciej Janowski, “Steampunk Nationalism,” *CEH*: 53-56.