

# 1 Identity

---

Who do the British think they are? In the aftermath of the vote for Brexit, numerous commentators argued that the whole dispute around membership of the EU reflected a British identity crisis. After World War II the UK did not come to terms with its loss of empire and loss of world leadership. The Brexit process, furthermore, revealed deep divisions bearing on the self-image that British citizens held. The very idea of ‘identity’ is not as simple as it seems at first sight, however. And the ways in which identity manifests itself in the mind, in society and in politics are many and various, appearing in complex combinations. Individual identities interact with social experience and political input. But identities are not only an individual matter – they are also collective, the two aspects interacting and changing over time. They are only partly ‘natural’, and often are imposed by cultural norms or political constraints.

The focus in this chapter is primarily on national identity. Integral with this type of identity is the mental division of those perceived as belonging to the national body and those perceived as not belonging. Immigrants are frequently seen as those who don’t belong and much of this book therefore probes the role of anti-immigration attitudes, their overlap with racism, and the part played by immigration issues in pro-Brexit propaganda. Brexit itself can be seen as an identity problem specifically framed in terms of whether Britain ‘belonged in’ the EU, and whether ‘immigrants’, European or not, belonged in Britain.

Believers in Brexit think of the British as unique in almost all respects, indeed as a unique race. But they were not unique in their obsession with national identity.<sup>1</sup> They were just one manifestation of an identitarian ideology that ran across Europe and elsewhere around the turn of the century. The ingredients of identitarianism included distrust or fear of multiculturalism and global interdependence, instead preaching the separateness of sovereign nation states, essentially along ethnic lines. Commitment to this kind of political thinking involves an alien ‘other’ perceived as a threat, if there is no genuine threat. In the case of Brexit devotees, the ‘other’ was built up as

<sup>1</sup> Šarić and Stanojević (2019), Ashcroft and Bevir (2021).

a twofold conflation made up of invading immigrants threatening British borders and an oppressive EU stifling British sovereignty.

By what means do ideas of national identity, such as those exhibited in Brexitism, establish themselves, spread and become powerful political forces? The answer proposed in this chapter and in the rest of this book is: by means of language and its deployment by demagogic political actors. The first section below examines the conceptual components of national identity. In the second section we survey the identitarian movements that provide the context for Brexit ideas and policies. The third and final sections examine closely the part played by attitudes towards immigrants in the 2016 referendum, and how it was that negative attitudes were mobilised.

### The Idea of Identity

Philosophical discussions around identity stem from an intuition that individual objects do not change in some fundamental respect over time. Perhaps this is an intuitive assumption that is necessary for humans to function in their environments. There is a concomitant concept which has to do with how objects and creatures are different from one another. Logically this leads to the concept of categories – that is, the grouping together of entities sufficiently similar to be regarded as ‘identical’. This is a cognitive operation that can be regarded as part of human mental architecture. It is flexible and dynamic. Whether something belongs to a category with similar members in it depends on your perspective, or whether your viewpoint is close or distant. That is the case for physical perception, but physical perception in physical space transfers to the mental operations of abstraction and generalisation.

There is another human cognitive operation that will bring us to our main concern in this chapter: the consciousness on the part of an individual that they are both different from and similar to other individuals in various ways. The extension of this is that whole clusters of individuals can become mutually conscious of similarities that differentiate them from other groups that they identify. In Pelinka’s words: ‘In any society, there is a strong urge to define the self, to be a specific self, to seek an identity. The search for identity implies the exclusion of others – or better – of social segments defined as others.’<sup>2</sup> In this search for collective self-definition, it is characteristics such as skin colour, religion, costume and language that become the focus of attention. Intra-group discourse can reinforce or weaken concentration on such details. Human languages play a crucial role in the formation of identity awareness at the level of the social, and political, group, distinguishing the self’s group from that of others and producing bonding. Further, identity

<sup>2</sup> Pelinka (2018), p. 624. Cf. Enos (2014).

formation is accompanied by a strongly felt need for self-preservation and group-preservation, resulting in increased vigilance and anxiety vis-à-vis other individuals and groups.

All the above tendencies can be selectively focused and promoted by individual actors via various channels of communication. Discourse centred on collective identity can become politicised, as happened in the twentieth century, with disastrous consequences. In *The Concept of the Political*, the Nazi philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt asserted that the ideas of political identity, sovereignty and autonomy are grounded in the opposition of friend and enemy. The ‘enemy’ can be anyone or any institution regarded as alien, as an ‘other’ that is threatening to the self.<sup>3</sup> This binary self–other pattern of political thinking reared its head once again towards the end of the twentieth century, associated with the rise of new right-wing movements across Europe.<sup>4</sup>

It may well be the case that, psychologically, it is entirely normal for there to be an ‘other’ in relation to which personal and group identities are formed. Such identities are not necessarily negative: benign others play an important role in personal identity development (in childhood, for instance). It is under certain socio-political conditions, and in nationalist and national-populist rhetoric, that the ‘other’ must be negative (evil, oppressive, invasive, powerful, etc.), while the self is a victim. In other words, in-group mutual recognition can be bolstered by antipathy towards, and also fear of, out-group others. This kind of mindset is the hallmark of nationalist and anti-immigration discourse. It is important to note that such a mindset does not always originate in the minds of the individuals of a group. It is just as likely, if not more so, to originate in demagogic leaders with their own particular interest in power. Such leaders present themselves as ‘the voice of the people’. This is not to say that disadvantaged, ‘left behind’ and alienated individuals do not have authentic needs, something that the demagogues may not even seriously care about.

Perceptually and cognitively, identity is sameness. But sameness is not always easy to detect, and there are always different ways to draw boundaries around clustered entities. Difference is easier to detect, so this is often what human individuals and collectivities tend to look for, picking out different sorts of features or characteristics upon which groups can be based. Integral to this human habit of selective focus of attention are two processes involved in constructing identities. One is the drawing of boundaries around collections of selected things; the other is the ascribing of naturalness to such collections. As social scientists frequently note, communities are constructed, and identities are constructed. The construction processes themselves are essentially mental and conveyed by way of language.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Schmitt ([1932] 2007), on whom see Müller (2003), Sedgwick (2019). Cf. Musolff (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Wodak et al. (2013), Wodak (2015), pp. 25–6. <sup>5</sup> De Cilia et al. (1999), Wodak et al. (2009).

Drawing on cognitive linguistics, we can delve further into the details of how minds operate in constructing identities. There is a particular cognitive-linguistic process that is at the core of identity construction – the activation of the CONTAINER image schema. Image schemas, as outlined in the Introduction, are cognitive structures that arise from the interaction between human bodies and their environment. These structures provide the building blocks of many kinds of conceptualisation, which in turn provide the base for linguistic meaning. Thus the CONTAINER schema emerges from experiencing our bodies as enclosures, as themselves being inside enclosing spaces, as entering and exiting enclosed spaces (e.g. buildings and rooms).<sup>6</sup> Further, it is natural to project CONTAINER onto more abstract non-spatial entities, such as social groups, political parties, social organisations, nations, and supra-national entities such as the EU. You can be ‘in’ or ‘out’ of such containing ‘spaces’, you can ‘enter’ or ‘exit’ them. Thinking and talking in this way can trigger various socio-psychological and emotive effects. For example, being ‘in’ (or ‘inside’) can mean protection and security, or it can mean being imprisoned; being ‘out’ (or ‘outside’) can mean freedom, or it can mean exposure and insecurity. The meaning of expressions of this type depends on, and also evokes, the schema CONTAINER. Verbally embedding this schema in Brexit discourse was a powerful propaganda device, perhaps all the more powerful for being under the surface.

Self-containing identities proliferate in contemporary societies. In many cases they are liberating, but they generate complexity and can yield new divisions. The social world has to a large extent accommodated hitherto unimagined kinds of identity complexity. But there are individuals who find such complexity difficult to accept – and such individuals can turn themselves into identity groups that seek simplification. That is often the case with national populist movements, for the members of which the concept of ‘nation’ may seem to provide a simplifying and thus reassuring solution. Something of this kind played a part in the lead-up to the Leave campaign among those sections of British society that Sobolewska and Ford call ‘identity conservative’, as opposed to ‘identity liberal’.<sup>7</sup> The authors show that ‘identity conservatives’ – those people who find social and cultural change intimidating and resist it – were likely to vote for leaving the EU. They were also likely to feel intimidated by, and to oppose, immigration. Part and parcel of populist pro-Leave discourse was the deployment of notions of ‘foreigner’ and ‘immigrant’. Such categorisations are cognitively rooted in the CONTAINER schema. It provided resonances that were easy to activate by demagogues who see their political interest in doing so. As will be seen, the combination of anti-EU identitarianism and anti-immigrationism was decisive for Brexit.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson (1987), pp. 21–3. On containment, see also Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), Chilton (1996), Charteris-Black (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Sobolewska and Ford (2020), pp. 43–8. Compare Goodhart’s (2017) ‘Anywheres’ and ‘Somewheres’.

### Identitarianism

The UK was not alone so far as national identity movements were concerned. There exists a group within the European Parliament since June 2019 calling itself ‘Identity and Democracy’ (*Identité et démocratie*), which consists of national populist parties from across the EU. These are: the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ)), Belgium’s Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang* (VB)), the Czech Republic’s Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* (SPD)), Denmark’s Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti* (DF)), Estonia’s Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* (EKRE)), Finland’s Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset* (PS), formerly known as ‘True Finns’), the French **National Rally** (*Rassemblement national* (RN), formerly known as the *Front national*), Germany’s Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD)), and Italy’s League (*Lega Nord*, or more fully, *Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padonia*). Spain’s Vox party and Italy’s Fratelli d’Italia maintain links with these and similar groups. And Britain’s UKIP and Brexit Party (later rebranded as Reform UK) belonged to the predecessor of the Identity and Democracy group, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (*Europe des nations et des libertés*).

The whole Brexit movement in the UK reflected the central themes of this set of parties in the European Parliament. Their common ground consisted of various kinds and degrees of Euroscepticism – an insistence on national sovereignty, the idea that European culture was being eroded, tight controls on immigration, and opposition to the possible accession of Turkey to the EU. Whatever the specific differences among the various elements in the Identity and Democracy group, the overarching concept was ‘identity’. It provided a general concept that could be made the focus of attention and could be linked with other national-populist frames, such as ‘the people’, ‘the British people’, and so forth. These patterns of thought could be communicated rapidly throughout different segments of a population. In fact, the patterns of thought found in Identity and Democracy and in the Brexit movement were part of the rise of right-wing and far-right movements across Europe. These had their own political actors and political theorists, who impacted institutions of representative democracy and produced extreme forms of identity ideology.

The aggressive mobilisation of the idea of ‘identity’ is most explicit in the declarations of the pan-European far-right movement that includes various groups adopting ‘ethnopluralism’. This term does not mean what it might appear to mean at first sight. It is not the same as ‘ethnic diversity’ or ‘multiculturalism’ but denotes an ideology advocating the segregation of homogeneous ethno-cultural entities on a global scale. It is a product of far-right thinking that began in France in 2002 under the name *Les Identitaires* (Identitarians), becoming a political party in 2009.

The movement is an umbrella for a network of national groups: Austria has an *Identitäre Bewegung Österreich* (Identitarian Movement Austria, started by Martin Sellner, who was refused entry to the UK in 2018). Germany and several other European countries have equivalent groups. There is also a ‘Generation Identity United Kingdom and Ireland’, launched on Facebook the year after the referendum on EU membership. This offshoot of the identitarian movement is linked with the anti-Islam activist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, publicly known as Tommy Robinson, who was prominent on the far right in the two decades leading up to the referendum. Robinson was a member of the British National Party (BNP) from 2004 to 2005, and of the British Freedom Party in 2012. More influentially, he was co-founder in 2009 of the anti-Islamist English Defence League (EDL), of which he was also leader until around 2013.<sup>8</sup> In 2015 he was involved in the formation of Pegida UK, which was an attempt to found a British branch of the prominent German anti-immigration movement Pegida (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West)). The UK branch was launched in 2016 under the leadership of Anne Marie Waters and Paul Weston, with Robinson as advisor. Anne Marie Waters also founded and heads the anti-Islam group For Britain, as well as Sharia Watch UK, founded in 2014. Weston had been a member of UKIP and had stood as one of the party’s parliamentary candidates in the 2010 general election. He later left UKIP to join the briefly existing British Freedom Party along with members of the EDL and BNP, before moving on to yet another far-right outfit, Liberty GB.

Across Europe, identitarian movements and parties were developing in ways that enabled them to enter existing democratic institutions and change them, or attempt to do so. Their activity either brought them to power as governments or put them in a position to challenge governing parties and significantly shift their policies. This is what happened in the former Soviet nations of Eastern Europe. In Poland, the right-wing populist party Law and Justice had its roots in the anti-Soviet Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement of the 1980s and was part of the 1990s coalition that had been led by Solidarity. Law and Justice left the coalition in 2001, advanced through the political system, won the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005, and again in 2015. With a majority in the parliament, its policies became increasingly authoritarian and illiberal. A similar development marks Hungary’s Fidesz movement. Formed in 1988, the Fidesz activists stood for human rights and democracy, challenging Soviet domination. After registering as a political party under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, Fidesz entered the National Assembly in 1990, and shifted step by step to its present national-populist, anti-human rights, anti-immigrant and authoritarian position.

<sup>8</sup> MacDonald (2013), Alessio and Meredith (2014), Busher (2018), Pilkington (2016).

The right-ward shift was not confined to Eastern Europe. A salient example is the rise of Matteo Salvini in Italy. Salvini moved through local politics as leader (from 2013) of the Lega Nord and became a member of the European Parliament in 2004. He was a Eurosceptic, in line with UKIP's Nigel Farage, who was already a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) representing the radical anti-EU position. As one of the most prominent leaders of the national-populist surge of the 2010s, Salvini disseminated an ideology centred around xenophobia, nativism and authoritarian governance. He networked widely with the other European populist leaders, cooperating for example with Marine Le Pen of the far-right French Front national. Le Pen's party was to significantly increase its hold over the French electorate under its new name, National Rally, gaining 42.5 per cent of the votes in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections.<sup>9</sup> In the UK, UKIP, as will be seen throughout this book, managed to challenge the governing Conservative Party, shifting it significantly to the right and reinforcing its existing anti-EU tendencies.

The UK's Brexit movement and the post-Brexit Conservative government of Boris Johnson were a constitutive part of the spread of national populism across Europe. Its various strands were widely networked and riven with disputes. Nonetheless, it was a dynamic vehicle for a set of ideas whose conceptual core was identity. The internet, with its capacity to coordinate like-minded activists, is central to Generation Identity and similar networks across Europe. In 2019, Generation Identity Europe had 70,000 followers on X (at that time known as Twitter), 11,000 on Facebook, 30,000 on Telegram and 140,000 YouTube subscribers.<sup>10</sup>

The new identitarian ideology originates in France, notably in the early twentieth-century writing of Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras.<sup>11</sup> Barrès and his followers propounded the idea that nations are natural entities that have undergone a course of evolution and a struggle for survival. They take it for granted that certain nations have reached a stage of stability, with a cultural essence that should remain stable and be preserved in perpetuity. The concept of nation is not analysed as a collection of individuals with certain characteristics, nor as a legal construct, nor as Rousseau's concept of *le peuple*.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is imagined as an entity with its origin in 'the earth', its varied natural members consciously living in the light of their history, culture and traditions. Changes brought about by external influences disturb and can destroy the nation, so should be prevented. Internal changes in social and cultural values should also be rejected and prevented, including changes in, for example, the roles and status of women, foreign influences in the arts, and liberal attitudes relating to

<sup>9</sup> Beauzamy (2013). <sup>10</sup> Ebner (2020), chapter 12.

<sup>11</sup> De Orellana and Michelsen (2019a, 2019b). <sup>12</sup> Krulic (2007).



race, sexuality and marriage. Barrès was an ethnic nationalist, linked culture with race, and was openly anti-Semitic.

These kinds of ideas were present in the French Nouvelle Droite and the Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE) organisations, founded in 1969 with a resurgence in the 1990s and 2000s. The founders, Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye, have influenced not only the French far right but also their British and American counterparts. Among the earlier themes of Barrès and Maurras, they promoted the idea of 'organic democracy'. This included opposition to the mixing of ethnicities, to multiculturalism, and to the presumption of human equality. In contradistinction to the traditional conservative right, there was opposition to capitalism, and also to Christianity. It was de Benoist who introduced the term 'ethnopluralism', which carried the implication that ethno-culturally homogeneous white people could lay exclusive claim to European territories.

New Right tendencies in general reject liberal representative democracy, instead favouring direct democracy best exemplified by referendums. Certain currents also eschew populism and assert the role of elites in spreading the claim that Europeans possess a distinct ethnic identity. Some members of the New Right movements espouse the conspiracy theory of the 'Great Replacement', most recently and starkly formulated by the French writer and extreme-right presidential candidate (in 2012) Renaud Camus. In his 2011 book, *Le grand remplacement*, Camus claimed that European liberal activists are conspiring to replace existing European populations with Muslim populations. The word 'replacement' now evokes its own conceptual frame, developed within the extreme right's discourse network. It is now used by politicians on the right who have entered mainstream politics, including, for example, Heinz-Christian Strache of Austria's Freiheitliche Partei and Dries van Langenhove of Belgium's Vlaams Belang. In 2017, Camus started the National European Council of Resistance (Conseil national de la résistance européenne), with all the historical associations that 'Resistance' has for the French and other Europeans. This organisation has been supported by the Bloc Identitaire (now Les Identitaires). Camus claims as one of his influences Enoch Powell, to whom we return in Chapter 5.

One of the catchwords in replacement conspiracy theory is 'Eurabia', encapsulating a set of ideas about the supposed domination of Europe by Islam.<sup>13</sup> These ideas merge with a strand of thought revolving around the idea of 'clash of civilisations', found among both French- and English-language writers, of whom the most cited are Daniel Pipes, Bernard Lewis, and Samuel Huntington. Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' theory was taken up by Guillaume Faye in his *The Colonisation of Europe: Speaking Truth about*

<sup>13</sup> Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), pp. 143–4.



*Immigration and Islam*, where one of his arguments is that immigration should be resisted in order to preserve what he regards as separate biological and cultural groups, for instance, on the two sides of the Mediterranean. The book was disavowed by de Benoist.

Continuing this current of thought, the word ‘Eurabia’ was popularised in English by the British author Bat Ye’or (pen name of Gisèle Littman) in her 2005 book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, which has led to numerous publications in the same vein. Examples are a much-read *New York Times* article (‘The way we live now: 4-4-04; Eurabia?’) by the historian Niall Ferguson and the 2017 book *The Strange Death of Europe* by Douglas Murray. In this kind of discourse, the term ‘Eurabia’ is often used to refer to what is claimed to be the gradual penetration of Europe by Islamic people and culture. Proponents point to increased immigration in the 2010s, demographic trends favouring immigrants of Arab and Berber origin, terrorist atrocities, and a passive stance on the part of the West. Bat Ye’or used the term ‘dhimmitude’ in the 1980s and 1990s, and in her 2001 book *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*. The word is supposed to denote a state of surrender and dependency under which the Islamic world has held the Judaeo-Christian world since the eighth century.<sup>14</sup> Geert Wilders, like Marine Le Pen, supports the ‘Eurabia’ and ‘dhimmitude’ thesis, both claiming to preserve the Judaeo-Christian tradition of Europe. Across Europe extreme-right politicians and activists have deployed such ideas. The supposed threat of Islamisation hovered in the background to much anti-immigration rhetoric during the Brexit campaign.

Establishing a polarity between self and other, more concretely between some inclusive group ‘we’ and certain contextually understood ‘others’, is fundamental in identitarian thought – as it is in Brexitspeak. In 2004 de Benoist, influenced by the writings of Carl Schmitt, published an article titled ‘Nous et les autres: problématique de l’identité’, translated into English as ‘On identity’.<sup>15</sup> One of de Benoist’s central ideas is a distinction between an individual’s ‘objective’ identity and their ‘subjective’ identity. The first is presented as determined by ethnicity, religion, family and nationality. The second is supposed to be freely chosen over time. But de Benoist contradicts himself when he states that an individual’s identity is ‘dialogical’, always under evolution. If this is so, then it should be difficult to claim that identities are fixed by birth and birth culture, thus in need of protective separation from other identities – unless one ideologically insists on the priority of birth identity over free choice of identity or particular identities. Such an insistence is often

<sup>14</sup> The word ‘dhimmitude’ is a lexical blend of Arabic *dhimmi* and the ending *-tude*. *Dhimmi* is a legal term used historically for non-Muslims living within an Islamic state.

<sup>15</sup> This essay was published by de Benoist in the monthly journal *Éléments* in 2004. The English translation, by Kathy Ackerman and Julia Kostova, appeared in *Telos*, also in 2004. It was published in French again in 2006, in *Krisis*, a publication of which de Benoist is the director.

derived from rigidly opposing in-group to out-groups. According to de Benoist, the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘others’ is the foundation of all collective identities, and dialogue between them as separate equals is the natural order.<sup>16</sup> True, he does declare that exclusionary non-egalitarian attitudes towards the ‘other’ are ‘pathological’. But again this is not consistent with his statements, or with the inferential drift that brings users of his work to think of ‘we’ as superior. It is not clear that he escapes the ‘pathology’ he describes.

De Benoist concludes his article, ‘Nous et les autres’, with remarks on language. ‘Certainly, language is not an absolute marker of identity’, he writes, since one can speak a European language without being European and ‘a people’ can keep its identity even if it loses its language. ‘Nevertheless’, he continues, ‘language has functioned as a major sign of recognition. In providing a tool for mutual understanding, it has created a connection from the outset.’<sup>17</sup> In other words, he wishes to retain some firm connection between a language and ‘a people’. Further, he has the idea that languages express ‘categories’ of the world and values that are unique to those who speak them. These are ideas that echo those of Romantic nationalists like Herder and Humboldt, and the later language relativism of Benjamin Lee Whorf. As in much of de Benoist, there is an element of truth in this, but it contains an unspoken assumption – that the normal or natural condition is for communities to speak one unifying language. He does not mention the fact that many communities the world over are bi- or multilingual, and have been for millennia, so far as we know. What is more, though bi- and multilingual speakers do report that they switch between (slightly) different views of the world, the fact is that underlying all languages are universal patterns of structure and meaning. Such observations show it *is* possible to grasp other people’s world views, and because this is so, monolingualism is not a precondition for community.

The important point is that Brexit and its ideology are not isolated phenomena. They are part of the far-right identitarian movement that spread across Europe as well as other parts of the world. It took various forms. Brexit was the UK’s version. Central to asserting a national identity is the construction of a foreign other, and it was hostile xenophobic attitudes, specifically towards immigration, that the Brexit campaigns deliberately activated.

### Immigration

The objective facts concerning increased migration into the UK over the past thirty years are now well known from reliable polls and surveys that are much quoted by social scientists.<sup>18</sup> At the end of World War II, the UK, like other

<sup>16</sup> De Benoist (2004a, 2004b, 2006). <sup>17</sup> De Benoist (2004b).

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), Mounk (2018).

European nation states, had emerged with high ethnic homogeneity. In the 1950s, the UK's ethnic minorities were counted in tens of thousands. A University of Warwick report found that from 1966 to 1980, the minority ethnic population of the UK more than doubled in size, increasing from 886,000 to 2.1 million.<sup>19</sup> The report cites more data indicating a further growth of over half a million during the 1980s, with minority ethnic groups forming nearly 5 per cent of the population by 1989–91 (and the report notes that this could be an underestimate). In the present century, the 2011 UK Census found that from 2001 to 2011, the percentage of the population of England and Wales identifying as white British decreased from 87.4 per cent to 80.5 per cent.

In certain places, an increase in non-white numbers had greater psycho-social impact than elsewhere. These were places that had previously been used to much greater white British homogeneity. The best-known example is Boston in Lincolnshire. Analysis of the 2011 Census by the Lincolnshire County Council Research Observatory, which reports socio-economic trends, found that between 2001 and 2011 the number of Lincolnshire residents who were born outside the UK more than doubled, the non-white population making up 2.4 per cent of the total population in 2011 compared to 1.4 per cent in 2001 (still small when compared with the national non-white population of 14 per cent).<sup>20</sup> In 2012 *The Guardian* drew the following picture from the 2011 Census:

In 2001, the biggest foreign community in Boston comprised 249 Germans. Census figures then showed Boston as having a population of 55,753, with 98.5% indicating they were white British. Ten years on, 10.6% of the town's 64,600-strong population comes from one of the 'new' EU countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia or Romania.<sup>21</sup>

In Boston 75.6 per cent voted Leave.

The exceptional experience of Bostonians does not alter the overall picture: low-immigrant areas voted more strongly for Leave. The scattergram in Figure 1.1 shows this clearly.

Lawton and Ackrill, who reproduce this graph, point out that, nationally, 'of the 270 districts that had a *lower* proportion than average of people born outside the UK in 2011, in 229 (85%) the majority vote was for Leave. Of the 78 districts with a *higher* than average population born outside the UK, only 44% voted Leave [my emphasis].'<sup>22</sup> So there is evidence that high levels of

<sup>19</sup> Owen (1995), p. 2; cf. Mounk (2018), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Lincolnshire Research Observatory, 'Country of birth, ethnicity and nationality of Lincolnshire residents', [www.research-lincs.org.uk/UI/Documents/country-of-birth-ethnicity-and-nationality-of-lincolnshire-residents-census2011-112013.pdf](http://www.research-lincs.org.uk/UI/Documents/country-of-birth-ethnicity-and-nationality-of-lincolnshire-residents-census2011-112013.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *The Guardian*, 11 December 2012, [www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/dec/11/census-boston-east-ern-european-immigration](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/dec/11/census-boston-east-ern-european-immigration).

<sup>22</sup> Lawton and Ackrill (2016), critiqued by Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), pp. 165–6.

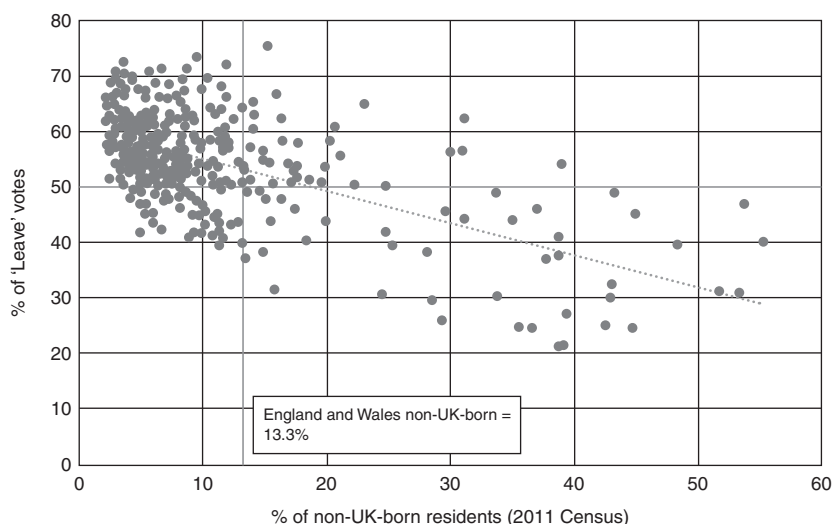


Figure 1.1 Scattergram for low-immigrant areas voting more strongly for Leave.

*Source:* Electoral Commission 2016, EU Referendum by Local Authority. Also ONS Crown Copyright, 2012, Table KS204EW: 2011 Census: Country of birth, local authorities in England and Wales. Reproduced by Lawton and Ackrill (2016).

<https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-how-areas-with-low-immigration-voted-mainly-for-brexit-62138>

immigration did not necessarily predict Leave. Lawton and Ackrill's (brief) explanation of this skewed pattern is as follows. In areas of relatively low immigration where a relatively high white population *also* suffered significant levels of economic deprivation, voters went for Leave because they held migrants, or foreigners in general, to blame for their suffering. But this is only part of the explanation, as other studies indicate. For instance, a Joseph Rowntree report by Goodwin and Heath (2016) does show correlations between socio-economic deprivation and Leave voting but also emphasises the importance of educational opportunities or lack of them, together with the role of attitudes and values.<sup>23</sup> Further, any simple relationship between deprivation alone and voting Leave is put in doubt by Dorling and Tomlinson, who show clearly that a statistical correlation between deprivation and voting Leave had low probability (the correlation coefficient is given as 0.037, positive but close to zero).<sup>24</sup> In fact, on their evidence, Leave voting was somewhat higher

<sup>23</sup> Goodwin and Heath (2016). <sup>24</sup> Dorling and Tomlinson (2019), p. 306.

in 'Middle England' (deciles 4 to 7 by levels of deprivation) than in the most deprived areas. Dorling and Tomlinson's comment on these findings is important:

It was not people who were poorer who voted Leave in high numbers, but people who found the propaganda that immigrants created problems believable. They tended to live in areas of low immigration. In areas of high immigration, everyone was more likely to vote Remain.<sup>25</sup>

Without direct experience of immigrants, non-white and non-English-speaking people, those identifying as white British in low immigrant areas were more likely to believe anti-immigrant propaganda. As for the wealthy, the wealthiest group of all tended to vote Remain.<sup>26</sup> However, there were wealthy individuals who were in a position to strongly influence the pro-Brexit vote in all domains of propaganda. The crucial point is that, overall, anti-immigrant propaganda was believable, or made believable, for a significant number of electors, whoever they were.

### **Blame the EU**

The propaganda did not simply switch on anti-immigrant attitudes in credulous people at the moment of the referendum. Can we be sure that such attitudes did not exist before the referendum? More importantly still, how did the EU come to be associated with immigration at all? With regard to the first of these questions, there is clear evidence that something certainly did change at the time of the referendum, as can be seen from Figure 1.2.

The bar chart in Figure 1.2 shows, for the years 1975 and 2015, the relationship between how the people polled viewed immigration and whether they supported leaving the EU. The relationship changed significantly and can be explained by the increase in the number of immigrants coming into the UK from the 1990s on and by the rise in numbers of migrants from the EU after 2004.

With regard to the second question – how the EU came to be associated with immigration into the UK – this key question involves several considerations. In the public mind, prior to 2016, concern about immigration was probably outstripped by concern about the economy following the crisis of 2008. Yet, for a long time in the UK, reaching back at least as far as Enoch Powell, there was a persistent undercurrent of anti-immigrant sentiment. This undercurrent

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 306.

<sup>26</sup> See bar chart in Dorling and Tomlinson (2019), p. 299. This chart is reproduced by them from Daniel Gordon Watts. The original is available at [https://twitter.com/marwood\\_lennox/status/925760600755658752?s=03](https://twitter.com/marwood_lennox/status/925760600755658752?s=03).

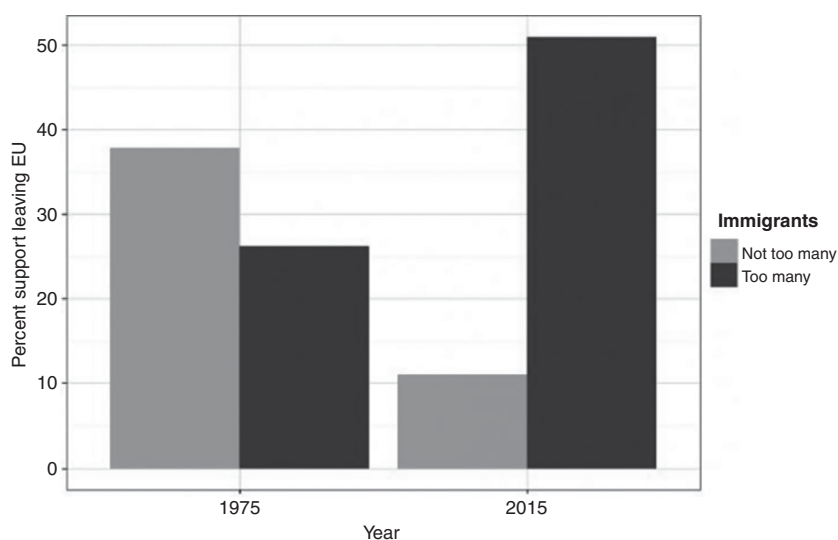


Figure 1.2 Relationship between immigration and Europe in 1975 and 2015.  
 Source: Evans and Mellon (2019).

<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/immigration-and-euroscepticism-the-rising-storm/>

had not gone away and was capable of being re-activated at any moment by demagogues.

Such re-activations, however, need a particular political conjuncture. One of the most significant contextual factors in the re-activation of anti-immigrant feelings was the enlargement of the EU, when former Eastern bloc states were admitted and acquired freedom of movement rights under existing EU rights. This context provided the opportunity for pro-Leave propagandists to connect the EU with immigration. As in all propaganda, there was a germ of truth in such a connection. But the pro-Brexit proponents achieved their ends through misrepresentation of what freedom of movement in the EU actually was and still is.

The free movement of persons is a founding principle of the EU and the principle cannot be changed. However, there were and are strict controls on *entry into* both the EU and the related Schengen Area, and anyone originating from outside the Area requires a visa. Despite this, migrants without visas – asylum seekers, refugees, some economic migrants and likely some criminal elements – still manage to enter the Area illegally and travel across its unchecked internal borders. But it is important to note that member states of the EU, including of course the UK in 2016, had the right under EU legislation to ‘restrict the freedom of movement and residence of Union citizens and their

family members, irrespective of nationality, on grounds of public policy, public security or public health'. The same piece of legislation includes the provision that 'Member States may adopt the necessary measures to refuse, terminate or withdraw any right conferred by this Directive in the case of abuse of rights or fraud, such as marriages of convenience'.<sup>27</sup> The Brexit lobby ignored this legislation and the electorate largely remained ignorant of it.

Under the Brexiters' label 'immigrant', there were actually three categories entailed by the EU framework of free movement. These were fudged by Brexit hardliners. First, there were the long-standing citizens of the EU (the so-named EU-15 countries) who all had the right of free movement within the EU. Second, there were the more recent migrants from the former Eastern bloc countries who gradually acquired free movement rights in the years following their accession to the EU in 2004 and 2007. And third, there were migrants who had illegally entered the EU space one way or another, made their way to the Channel and attempted to enter the UK. All three categories of migrant were conflated under the term 'immigrant' in pro-Brexit discourse, and their entry into the UK was blamed on EU 'freedom of movement'. In addition, Turkey, was represented as if it were already a source of massive immigration into the UK caused by the EU's free movement provisions – though Turkey was not a member of the EU and not likely to be. Such distortion of the facts enabled pro-Brexit propaganda to present immigration as an imminent danger that could only be prevented by the UK leaving the EU. The details of how exactly the pro-Brexit rhetoric built up the threat of an immigrant 'invasion' are examined in Chapter 6.

In 2015 many European countries experienced a refugee crisis, precipitated by large numbers of asylum seekers mostly fleeing the civil war in Syria. When the crisis impacted UK public perception, pro-Brexit campaigners seized another opportunity and proceeded to stir fear of immigrants, blaming the EU as the cause of the increased numbers of 'immigrants'. The reaction to the crisis across the EU was varied, and in the UK also the public mood was changeable. The *Daily Mail*, for instance, contrary to its usual stance on migration of any kind, at first campaigned in favour of child refugees – on 4 September 2015 it had published a distressing photo of a dead Syrian child washed up on a Turkish beach.<sup>28</sup> But a few months later, in the run-up to the referendum, the paper changed its tune. The following May, the *Mail* announced what it called David Cameron's 'major U-turn on refugee children as he opens the door for some living in camps inside Europe'.<sup>29</sup> In the subsequent online forum, contributors

<sup>27</sup> EU Directive 2004/38/EC, Chapter VI, Article 27, clause 1. See Guild et al. (2019).

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Mail*, 4 September 2015, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3222148/Six-hours-setting-tragic-journey-claim-life-leave-lifeless-Turkish-beach-little-Aylan-sleeps-photograph-boy-alive.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3222148/Six-hours-setting-tragic-journey-claim-life-leave-lifeless-Turkish-beach-little-Aylan-sleeps-photograph-boy-alive.html).

<sup>29</sup> *MailOnline*, 4 May 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3573053/David-Cameron-announces-major-U-turn-refugee-children-opens-door-living-camps-inside-Europe.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3573053/David-Cameron-announces-major-U-turn-refugee-children-opens-door-living-camps-inside-Europe.html).



span the paper's usual line – that these child refugees were probably adults, probably 'economic migrants', that they would be a burden on public services, and that having them enter the country would be contrary to UK citizens' will. Some discussants maintained that such claims were good grounds for supporting UKIP. In all likelihood, the forum constituted a filter bubble. But a key observation, made by Goodman and Narang, was the frequent association of immigration with EU membership.<sup>30</sup>

Was the readers' association between immigration and EU membership a spontaneous reaction on the part of the public, simply arising from enduring hostility to immigrants? Or was it intentionally stirred up by 'believable propaganda'? There is clear evidence that the reaction was not entirely spontaneous, but an intended component of pro-Brexit strategy and a consequence of pro-Brexit propaganda that a lot of people found believable. The evidence comes in an article carried by *The Telegraph* on 19 April in 2016, written by the political campaign consultant and former Conservative Party strategist Sir Lynton Crosby. He wrote:

Currently 41 per cent of the British population would vote Leave. But 52 per cent say that leaving the EU would improve the UK's immigration system. There is therefore a misalignment – this shows that there is at least 11 per cent of the British electorate who are not voting Leave despite believing it will improve the state of immigration in the UK. This demonstrates that for this section of the population, immigration is not important enough or relevant enough an issue at present to bring them around to voting for Leave.

Crosby's conclusion was: 'If the Leave campaign can make the changes to the immigration system or advocate changes that would result from Brexit and so make them more important in voters' decision making, there is up to 11 per cent of the population they can win over.'<sup>31</sup>

Crosby's percentages are in line with part of the statistics for the year 2015 in the bar chart<sup>32</sup> shown in Figure 1.2. According to Evans and Mellon, just over 50 per cent of people 'who believe too many immigrants have been let in would [vote to leave the EU]'. Crosby makes an equivalent statement, with a similar percentage. In the Evans and Mellon chart, the number of people who believed that there were *not* too many immigrants and who would vote to *stay* in the EU was down by more than a third compared with 1975. From Crosby's viewpoint, of course, an even greater swing was desirable, given the April 2016 polls that showed actual voting intentions. He cites a figure of 41 per cent of voters intending to vote to leave – though it is unclear how many of these also thought there were too many immigrants. Taking the figure of 52 per cent who thought there were too many immigrants, he claimed there was a 'misalignment'.

<sup>30</sup> Goodman and Narang (2019). <sup>31</sup> *The Telegraph*, 19 April 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Evans and Mellon (2019).

His argument was in effect that the Leave campaigns needed to persuade anti-immigration voters to see the benefits (to them) of leaving the EU. Although Crosby was not an official advisor to either of the main Leave campaigns, his claims were very influential. This is reflected in the way Leave propaganda, supported by a large part of the media, immediately set about reinforcing an association between immigration levels and EU membership.

In the ten weeks before referendum day 2016, the media stepped up the quantity of its anti-immigrant messages. This phase has all the appearance of being strategically planned by pro-Brexit editors under the prompting of Brexiter politicians and their business backers. Moore and Ramsay, of King's College London, published an analysis of all online newspaper and magazine articles – 14,779 in total – that referred to the forthcoming referendum during the ten weeks of the official campaign (15 April to 23 June).<sup>33</sup> These included national press, digital-only news services, and online news services. Their methods were quantitative and qualitative content analysis. They summarised the way the sympathies of these publication outlets were distributed:

- Eight endorsed Leave: *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Sunday Express*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Spectator*.
- Eight supported Remain: *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *Daily Mirror*, and *New Statesman*.
- Buzzfeed, HuffPo UK, Vice UK, *Daily Star* and *Daily Star Sunday* did not formally endorse either side, though the editorial perspective of the first three leaned towards Remain, while the *Daily Star* strongly favoured Leave.
- The BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky were required by law to be neutral.<sup>34</sup>

In the earlier stages of the referendum campaign, the economy was the most frequently mentioned issue, while immigration came second. Articles predicting the damaging economic consequences of leaving the EU were routinely dismissed by the Leave side as 'scaremongering' or 'project fear'. However, immigration-related articles and mentions more than tripled over the course of the campaign. From week three, about ten days after Crosby's *Telegraph* article, there was a marked increase in such coverage, with a further spurt in the last campaign week.<sup>35</sup> On the front pages of the newspapers in Moore and Ramsay's study, immigration-related topics outstripped economy-related ones by ninety-nine to eighty-two.<sup>36</sup> Most front pages on immigration were explicitly linked to the EU. The fact that a few front-page articles about immigration were not explicitly related to the referendum need not detract from their relevance, since readers are likely to interpret their relevance in terms of the day-to-day news context. It was the pro-Leave papers that most often put

<sup>33</sup> See also Levy et al. (2016). <sup>34</sup> Moore and Ramsay (2017), pp. 3–4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp. 28, 36–113. <sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp. 8–9, 40–2.

immigration on their front page (seventy-nine of the ninety-nine front-page immigration-related headlines).

On the qualitative side, Moore and Ramsay show that the coverage of immigration was predominantly negative, migrants being blamed for social and economic problems, especially in the public services. Turks, Albanians, Romanians and Poles came in for special opprobrium. The most active outlets in this were, predictably, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*. But there is more to say about how exactly the negative attitudes towards immigrants were stimulated by the language deployed by the media.

In this media language, immigration is blamed on the EU in a framework of fearmongering. The year before the referendum, the *Daily Mail* had linked the November terrorist attacks in Paris with the Syrian refugee crisis, making the claim that the EU's free movement rights made it possible for Islamist extremists to enter the UK. The association of immigration into the UK with the EU is not always explicit. Readers would make such an association on the basis of context, relevance and expectation. Three examples where such implicit association could have occurred are:

- UK's open coastline shambles: 4 missed warnings (*Daily Mail*, 31 May 2016)
- Migrant Crisis in the Channel (*Daily Express*, 30 May 2016)
- Migrants pay just £100 to invade Britain (*Daily Express*, 1 June 2016).<sup>37</sup>

In these headlines, there are prompts for emotional and conceptual reactions that are characteristic of Brexit discourse. Such prompts are the words 'warning', 'crisis' and 'invade', each of which can trigger feelings and thoughts of danger and threat. In particular, 'invade' activates the schematic image CONTAINER and it also depends on prompting mental representations of migration as a violent threat. The meaning of 'invade' is part of the mental frame for 'war', and, more subtly, assumes the image of a metaphorical container whose boundaries can be penetrated from outside. We shall encounter this kind of language many times throughout this book.

It is not just a matter of stirring negative emotions by such means, however. The Brexit movement was facilitated by, and exacerbated, a period of political misinformation, exclusion of information, 'fake news', deliberately misleading language, and downright lies. False or misleading statements were made in the press about the EU, across a diverse range of topics, often packed into a single article. Just two days before the referendum, the *Daily Mail* carried a lengthy article headed 'Daily Mail Comment: If you believe in Britain, vote Leave. Lies, greedy elites and a divided, dying Europe – why we could have a great future outside a broken EU'. After several paragraphs intended to illustrate these claims about the EU, the writer cites a Pew Research Centre poll,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

claiming it demonstrated that the EU was unpopular even with people in its member states. The writer tells readers:

We needn't look far for the explanation [of the EU's alleged unpopularity]. For not only is the euro destroying livelihoods, but the madness that is the free movement of peoples has brought waves of migrants sweeping across Europe, depressing wages, putting immense strain on housing and public services, undermining our security against criminals and terrorists – and making communities fear for their traditional ways of life.<sup>38</sup>

Readers do not have time to stop and dissect what they are reading; that is why it can affect them unconsciously. And politicians, their propagandists, and the journalists who support them know that. In fact, all orators and demagogues know it, as will be seen again in this book. The long second sentence in the above extract compresses several manipulative assertions about the EU:

The euro is destroying livelihoods.  
 The free movement of peoples has brought waves of migrants.  
 The free movement of peoples is madness.  
 Migrants are sweeping across Europe.  
 Migrants depress wages.  
 Migrants put immense strain on housing.  
 Migrants put immense strain on public services.  
 Migrants undermine our security against criminals and terrorists.  
 Migrants make communities fear for their traditional ways of life.

The assertions contain word choices that press both emotive and conceptual buttons. The most revealing example is the wording used in the allusion to the EU's freedom of movement rights – 'the free movement of peoples has brought waves of migrants'. It is a significant distortion that is easy to overlook but none the less capable of reinforcing ingrained misconceptions. The EU legislation actually speaks of the free movement of 'persons', not of 'peoples' *inside* the EU. There is an obvious difference in meaning between *persons* and *peoples*. In using the word *peoples*, the *Mail* was implying that whole alien populations were on the move. It also misleadingly conveyed the idea that it was the right of free movement *inside* the EU that was the cause of 'waves of migrants' from *outside* the EU entering the UK. These distortions were key for the Leave campaigns.

Some of the word choices in this *Daily Mail* article are standard both in anti-immigration discourse and in discourse about the EU. In the expression 'waves of migrants', the meaning structure at work is a conceptual metaphor, one that maps the conceptual frame of *migrant* onto the conceptual frame of *waves* (part of the parent frame *ocean* or *sea* or more generally any

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Mail*, 21 June 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3653385/Lies-greedy-elites-divided-dying-Europe-Britain-great-future-outside-broken-EU.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3653385/Lies-greedy-elites-divided-dying-Europe-Britain-great-future-outside-broken-EU.html).

mobile liquid mass): A MOVING GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS IS A MOVING LIQUID. What this transfer does conceptually is turn a large number of individual humans (migrants) into an unindividuated mass that is mobile and hard to resist. There are numerous potential metaphorical entailments. The metaphor packs a lot of associated ideas into one or two words, and spawns other related vocabulary across talk and text of all kinds about migration – words like ‘flow’, ‘flood’, ‘influx’, ‘surge’, for example, as well as ‘sweeping across’, which is said of water in the sense of traversing large areas of ground surface. Yet another entailment of this metaphor comes from the fact that water as a moving mass exerts physical force – reflected in discourse in the word ‘pressure’. As Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate, the rhetorical representation of immigrants as a destructive invasive mass has a long and influential history in British political discourse after World War II.<sup>39</sup>

The ‘wave’ metaphor is only one in a set of similar words used to represent incoming migrants in the populist press. Many of these words are ‘associated with natural disasters, epidemics, or incipient catastrophe’<sup>40</sup> – a device that also avoids referring to individual human beings. Large numbers of people may also be referred to by means of words denoting animals on the move – ‘flocking’, ‘swarming’, ‘stampeding’, and ‘over-running’ an area of ground. Immigration often appears alongside expressions that include the meaning ‘out of control’, as in ‘soaring numbers of immigrants’ or ‘spiralling immigration’. The idea of a continuing process is often combined with the idea of pain and suffering: ‘unsustainable’, ‘intolerable’, ‘relentless’. Such word combinations are used not to refer to the suffering of refugee migrants, but to the supposed suffering of the British population. Violence, too, is associated with the migrant, largely through military terms such as ‘storming’, ‘invading’, ‘besieging’. National borders ‘creak’, ‘buckle’, ‘collapse’, ‘implode’. There is a conceptual coherence among all these vocabulary items. I am not suggesting that journalists put these ideas together explicitly, but the way popular discourse can work is by the repeated activation of conceptual schemas that hang together around a core narrative that prompts alarm and anxiety in response to perceived danger.

The coupling of the EU with unwanted migrants is an integral part of identitarian ideology – the base on which Brexitspeak rested. At the centre of Brexitism is a national self, a ‘we’, with an exceptional history, which, when it loses its self-assurance, requires an alien ‘other’ to shore itself up. Any account of the UK’s departure from the EU must include the UK’s historic relationship with empire and loss of empire. The perceived threat of an immigration ‘invasion’,

<sup>39</sup> Several scholars have commented on metaphors for migrants, e.g. Hart (2011b, 2013), Musolf (2012), Taylor (2020, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Moore and Ramsay (2017), p. 78.

combined with the perceived threat of an expanding EU, provided what was needed. A not dissimilar pattern of thought is found in the nationalist identitarianism that has emerged both in Europe and in America. The most powerful part of the pro-Brexit campaign was the way in which its rhetoric repeatedly represented migrants as ‘entering’ a space that is ‘ours’, while simultaneously representing EU membership as ‘being in’ an alien space to which ‘our’ historic self does not belong. Making sense of Brexit certainly needs analysis of its economic, demographic, social and political setting. But there is a missing link in the explanatory chain. We cannot understand the referendum result without examining the propaganda campaigns that produced it. Making propaganda believable is achieved by deploying language designed to turn minds. That is why analysis of the linguistic workings of pro-Brexit demagogues will be an essential part of explaining how Brexit happened. One of their favourite devices is the little word ‘we’. The next chapter looks at the question: Who do ‘we’ think they are?