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Speaking Like a Eurosceptic: The Rhetoric and Metaphors Undermining the EU

Introduction

Accompanying the rise of populist and nationalist movements across Europe is an increasingly critical outlook towards the European Union (EU) that can be seen everywhere from the headlines of newspapers to coming off the lips of politicians. This Euroscepticism finds issue with the EU's approach in addressing the "migrant crisis", financial shocks from the 2008 recession, and other perceived overreaches by the increasingly supranational institution. The most recent culmination of this phenomenon is the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from EU membership referred to as Brexit following a 2016 referendum. This was followed by nearly four years of negotiation amidst accusations that the media and politicians ignored facts and misled voters. On the other side of Europe, Viktor Orbán went from leader of the right-wing Fidesz party on the fringes of Hungarian politics to prime minister under a xenophobic, anti-EU platform. He now stands as one of the leading anti-establishment figures and made headlines for his rejection of the Brussels mandated refugee relocation quota. Even in the Netherlands, one of the founding members of the EU, far right populist parties with a

Eurosceptic platform have grown in numbers and media presence. Relatively unknown only three years ago, Thierry Baudet founded the Forum for Democracy (VfD) party as a more radical alternative to the mainstream Dutch rightwing parties and won a majority in the country's provincial legislature in a historic upset of an election in March 2019.

These three examples represent a range of differently iterated backlash against the EU, but despite their diversity in origin these movements employ a similar way of conveying their messages to mobilize these sentiments. A reliance on specific metaphors and rhetoric, amplified by repetition, are the primary tools by which these politicians can sway sentiment against established institutions and policies. Many of the statements and talking points often run contrary to facts and statistics, much to the frustration of opponents. Eurosceptic, populist politicians, often with the additional mouthpiece of the media, have turned the EU into a symbol for the mismanagement of Europe through repeated metaphors and rhetoric invoking such comparisons as familial imagery and a collapsing European identity.

Methodology and Literature Review

Examining the usage of the overarching institution of the EU as a condensation symbol can be done with an analysis advocated by Murray Edelman that relies on the outlook of politics as “an abstract parade of symbols” whose processes “become easy objects upon which to displace private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes” (Edelman 5). A bureaucratic organization as extensive and encompassing as the EU is a vaguer institution than many European's national governments, and the additional complexity behind the policies, branches and legislative procedures contribute to this ambiguousness. This primes the EU for use as an object to project anxieties and

uncertainties for the many economic, social, and political issues facing Europe. Building upon this premise, Edelman then asserts that people “read their own meanings into situations that are unclear or provocative of emotions” (Edelman 30). These personal misgivings can also be coaxed into political support by further promotion of the EU as a scapegoat and symbolic opposition in their narrative.

The articulation of the EU as a condensation symbol to provoke negative emotions by these Eurosceptic politicians can be explained using cognitive scientist George Lakoff’s approach to discourse analysis through his metaphor theories. Specifically used here is his work on conceptual metaphors, and he describes this system as “a conventional way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another, often unconsciously” (Lakoff 4). When applied to the political realm, this system holds that the framing issues in morally charged metaphors and similar types of figurative language can be studied to show the social values they are couched in. Repetition through political speeches and media outlets reinforce the loaded metaphors and make them appear to be part of everyday speech when in reality they hold underlying moral and political messages. The main interaction the general public has with politics is through symbolic and metaphorical structures that are conveyed to them through the speeches of politicians and coverage by the media, hence the focus of this paper on the way language is used by these outlets. One of the metaphorical structures Lakoff has identified as often being used by conservative speakers to frame issues from their viewpoint is that of the ‘strict father’ that is a subset of the larger ‘nation as a family’ metaphor. Although Lakoff admits that his ‘strict father’ structure (and its counterpart the liberal ‘nurturing parent’) structure are primarily intended to be applied to the American

political system, Orbán 's tendency to frame issues around family metaphors and his (as well as Baudet's) leaning to several moral values of the 'strict father' model make this conceptual metaphor applicable. Some of the shared traits with the 'strict father' include a focus on strength, self-discipline, maintaining the status quo, general disdain for more liberal values, and especially in the focus of this analysis "a resentment of illegitimate authority... toward any moral authority seen to be illegitimately meddling in their lives" (Lakoff 79). This illegitimate moral authority would be that of the EU in this scenario.

The Symbols That Sold Brexit

Brexit has come to represent the greatest culmination so far of the Eurosceptic platform's anti-EU agenda, and was a historic event steeped in rhetoric, metaphors, and symbolism that primed the UK for the decision to withdrawal. The overall political attitude in the UK, in large part due to the angled media coverage, was overtly hostile towards the EU and "the debate about the EU is one which is conducted almost entirely in terms of emotion" (Hawkins 6). This primed Brexit and the EU to be open to personal interpretation by the British as condensation symbols for their own misgivings and complaints, even in the face of facts stressing the negative economic and political implications factors that would accompany detachment from the EU: "The referendum campaign became a lightning rod for broader social and political discontentment and, as in all referendums, voters were motivated by a range of issues which became subsumed under, or conflated with, the by economic dislocation and a broader rejection of the political culture and the political elite which dominate this" (Hawkins 9). Invoking Edelman, this context for conflation with personal issues amongst an emotionally charged atmosphere created a new condensation symbol with Brexit as a means to

take action. This also allowed for the negation of facts presented by the Remain proponents and the inability to effectively argue their talking points about the benefits of EU membership, and the emotional aspect of the dialogue was further heightened by “using highly inflammatory imagery around immigration and associations with the National Health Service – perhaps the most emotive of all British Political debates” (Hawkins 7). It was also used to counter pro-EU talking points with rhetoric that referred to arguments to remain (such as pushing forward economic data) as “scaremongering” and nicknamed the Remain campaign “project fear”.

The discourse surrounding Brexit also omitted several more grounded factual aspects that would have detracted from the issue as a Eurosceptic condensation symbol. Examples include the omission of Northern Ireland’s border during the referendum campaign from the government pamphlets stating their official position on Brexit and the actual process behind EU quotas assigning refugee disbursements across Europe compared to the immigrant invasion images being pushed. This was a process facilitated in part by major British media outlets in their coverage of the debate: “the mainstream coverage in the print and television media was characterised by almost a complete absence of evidence informed discussion the choices facing the UK politically and economically, and a highly reductionist understanding of the political issues at play” (Hawkins 6). Other issues that were oversimplified and skewed in their presentation include the possibility of the UK to be undermined in the decision making processes as a member of the EU and the hinderance that Britain would face due to other European countries, like historical rivals France and Germany during decisions requiring Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). This means of deciding policy was seen as a

“potential threat to the British national interest which much be curtailed wherever possible,” omitting from the conversation any acknowledgment that “QMV may allow the UK to pass measures that are in its interest and which may otherwise be blocked” (Hawkins 23).

This all coincides with another key aspect of the British Eurosceptic framing around Brexit, which is the metaphor that the UK is incompatible with the EU and holds a separate national identity. From this view, the EU is seen as an overreaching and elitist project in which the UK is not alienated has no control (as is seen in the discourse around QMV) but is also subservient to it (Hawkins 5). This portrayal of the EU as the “antithesis” of the UK falls into the populist strategy of defining a separate entity as an opposition to rally against, which is only reinforced with references to unchecked immigration. The implication of this relationship is again highly emotional in its presentation and “chimes with the feelings of disconnection and loss of control which underpinned the consistently low levels of support for the UK’s participation in the European integration process and, ultimately, the vote to leave” (Hawkins 4). British media, especially more right leaning outlets such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, was largely complicit in building this narrative to frame Brexit with. Alternative discourses pushed by pro-European groups were sidelined by the lack of “evidence informed discussion” around political and economic choices that the UK had that oversimplified the situation to the benefit of the Leave campaign. Other repeated rhetoric in media outlets in the period building towards Brexit formed an account in which “the EU is something which is ‘done to’ the UK, and is a threat to its interests and independence which must be guarded against” (Hawkins 8). This Eurosceptic framing that dominated

UK political discourse was reinforced by repetition and metaphors, the most prominently used of which relies on the notion of “Britain at the Heart of Europe” that was been coopted to reflect the dialogue the UK and the EU are (and need to be) separate entities.

Britain at the Heart of Europe

In Andreas Musolff’s commentary on Brexit and the metaphors used to overshadow the facts, he comments that “political communication as being chiefly the conduit for factual information is in itself an ideologically biased construction and not a realistic description” (Musolff 2). This mirrors Edelman’s assumptions on how “accuracy is not the important characteristic of political language, but the appraisals common to members of a group” (Edelman 115). The group in this case would be those dissatisfied with Britain’s bond to the EU, and one prominent phrase highlighted by Musolff came to substitute a rational analysis of the complexities of the UK’s membership. Perhaps the most obvious example of a metaphor’s power to build a framework that distorts facts is in the name of “Brexit” itself because it leads to the conclusion that the withdrawal from the EU is simply the process of exiting something: “It creates the idea that Britain can stop being an EU member state by walking through a door or out of a building. The metaphorical framework of “exit” invites ideas like escaping prison, entering sunlit uplands, and so on—all of which are simple, easy, and quick” (Tapper). This distorts the actual complicated nature of untangling the many different regulations and legal aspects that the separation from the EU actually entailed.

Other, more subtle metaphors that evolved over time also factored in to obfuscating the reality of the situation.

The phrase “Britain at the heart of Europe” is one that has dominated political dialogue amongst politicians and the media and has shifted in meaning since it was initially introduced in a speech by Prime Minister John Major in 1991 in an optimistic tone. This “highly conventionalized idiom” (Musolff 5) frames the European Union as a body in which the UK is a vital organ as well as at the center of affairs. While his administration ended up not living up to this promise completely, the metaphor continued to be used in a more positive light and more commonly when quoting the Prime Minister as a reference point for his policies. As time went by its usage in the media became more of a sarcastic commentary until it became “a mantra-like catchphrase with little currency outside Britain and no connection with EU policy” according to writer M White (Musolff 8). However, the phrase persisted in both media and political rhetoric due to “pressures of coherence”. It had become, as Edelman would describe, a hortatory language element that was now an ambiguous term directed at the general public to persuade them on the idea that EU membership was not beneficial.

The metaphor was further altered in dialogue to convey the image of the EU as a diseased body, one that was infected or contained a non-functioning heart as criticisms against the European projects persisted. It would fall into the dimension of ritual discussed by Edelman, where politicians and euro-skeptical media would use the phrase through the strategy of “chronic repetition of clichés that serve simply to evoke a conditioned uncritical response” (Edelman 124). Actual thought into a Britain-EU relationship was replaced by an emotion-laden metaphor that “from a British-

nationalistic and/or euro-sceptical viewpoint, the concept of 'Europe as a body/person' makes little sense except that of a *sick* or *dying body*, and the denunciations of that body's *heart* as being *sick, dying, hard, cold, rotten*, which we found in euro-sceptical discourse, fits this scenario very well" (Musolff 11). Using this metaphor in discourse over Brexit makes the facts irrelevant, as any financial contribution to a "dying body" would be a waste and migrants arriving from an "infected" EU would be "unhealthy" for the country as a whole. This abstraction of the relationship allowed grievances to be projected onto a simple metaphorical symbol of an unhealthy partnership and reassured many in the UK that their suspicions about the EU were validated.

Hungary's Eurosceptic Turn

Viktor Orbán and the strategy employed by his ruling Fidesz party in Hungary reflects many of the same rhetorical and discursive strategies that Brexit campaign evoked, albeit with a different agenda in certain regards. While not advocating the withdrawal of Hungary's membership from the EU, Orbán has presented himself as a force of active dissent against many values and policies advocated by the EU, with a hardline stance against immigration on the forefront of his platform. Much like the metaphor that pits the UK as the antithesis of Europe, "Orbán sees himself as the continent's ideological counterweight to Merkel" (Zerofsky). This references his repeated efforts to counter more liberal and integration-focused EU policies advocated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been instrumental in expanding and deepening EU influence and has been a vocal proponent for a humanitarian response to the 2014 refugee crisis. This counterweight is maintained by Orbán by using a series

of metaphors that rely on repetition of familial notions as well as framing the debate around the EU as an issue of security.

One common tactic of Orbán in his speeches is to both separate Hungary's interests from that of the EU while also maintaining that Hungary is an integral part of the European "family", but only by shaping that this family consists of white, European Christians. When in Strasbourg addressing the European Parliament on September 11, 2018 on the recently released Sargentini report criticizing rule of law in Hungary, Orbán said "You will denounce the Hungary which has been a *member of the family of Europe's Christian peoples for a thousand years*". This correlates the EU member states to a larger European family (building off the 'nation as a family' metaphor), but distinguishes the family as having an ancestry rooted in Christianity. This subtly alienates the incoming immigrants at the heart of the rule of law debate (who are primarily Muslim Arabs fleeing conflict in the Middle East) as outside of his definition of the European family. Orbán continues using familial terms throughout the rest of his speech: "Hungary is being arranged by people who *inherited* democracy", "You would strip Hungary of its right to represent its own interests within the European *family* that it is a *member of*". In his closing remarks, Orbán shifts the debate in violating the rule of law to that of a disagreement within the family in keeping with the larger metaphor: "We have – and will continue to have – *disputes*: we think differently about Europe's Christian character, and the role of nations and national cultures; we interpret the essence and mission of the *family* in different ways; and we have diametrically opposed views on migration". This frames what is a violation of EU code under Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union into a normal family squabble with an opinionated

relative, something natural as all families have 'disputes' from time to time, rather than a legal infraction.

This framing of Europe as inherently white and Christian is a key aspect of another metaphor that is commonly employed by Orbán, being that of European civilization under threat. In a 2016 speech to constituents in Hungary, he stated that "The nature of civilization disaster is that it does not happen overnight. Instead it proceeds slowly, but inexorably, as differences in fertility rates and repeated flows of mass migration change the composition and culture of the European population." This metaphor illicit an image of a homogenous, historic legacy of Europe (defined under his terms) that is being eroded by current choices stemming from Brussels and channels misgivings about immigration onto the condensation symbol of the EU while ignoring actual statistics about the processes that go into the relocation quota. The Brussel's efforts and factual responses to these criticisms are further undermined by attacking the legitimacy of the EU through the complexity of their bureaucracy that would negate proper decision making for Hungary: "Essentially, Budapest is eager to problematize the EU's overall position and Brussels' policy orientations stressing its most likely negative effects on European affairs... The EU's position and policy orientations towards the crisis are portrayed as anti-democratic and unlawful" (Önder).

In another speech at the 11th World Congress of Families in Budapest, Orbán once again returns to the motif of family and family values, but in his introduction uses related language to criticize EU leadership in a different manner by referring to Brussels agenda as an assault to traditional family values: "In Europe the political and media mainstream is driven more by liberal ideology, which relativises *values* and which

traditional families find so offensive”. The EU’s openness to immigration is chief among this ‘liberal ideology’ and is incompatible to Orbán’s view of the family. This parallel falls in line with the ‘strict father’ model’s disdain for authority that oversteps its boundaries and slides into illegitimate moral authority. Orbán continues to phrase this overreach by Brussels by creating a frame in which it puts children at risk through allowing greater migration: “... And not let in anyone who provokes even the mildest suspicion of wanting to attack *our families and our children*”, “What more do we need for people everywhere in Europe to understand that we want to live in a continent where playgrounds echo with *the happy cries of children*, rather than with the sirens of police cars and ambulances?”, “We in Hungary take the view that we can only *protect* our future if we *protect our young ones*. If we cannot *raise them in safety*, we jeopardise our future.” Orbán effectively states this metaphor of familial protection against threat in one concluding sentence: “Hungary will therefore *protect its families* at all costs, regardless of the opposition that may come from Brussels.”

In this address to Hungarians, Viktor Orbán utilizes a ‘strict father’ moral guideline that falls into the subcategory of ‘abusive father’ in that “the government (EU), like the abusive father, may be seen as inherently abusive, neglectful, ignorant, dangerous, and potentially out of control. This means citizens have to protect themselves from their government” (Lakoff 274). The EU has displayed a dangerous ignorance and neglect in their promotion of liberal ideology and immigration, and Orbán has pledged protection to Hungarians from this security lapse under his phrasing. This emphasis on mismanaged security due to migration either ignored or actively encouraged by Brussels is a key element to his anti-EU discourse: “By reifying migrants

as threats to national, cultural, economic and internal security of Hungary and the EU, Orbán's government has taken a Eurosceptic stance" (Önder). However, when addressing the EU directly, Orbán reorients to family metaphors as a way to indicate Europeanness while also excluding immigrants and downplaying rule of law violations.

Baudet's Rhetoric in the Netherlands

In many ways, newcomer to the Dutch political scene Thierry Baudet is the Netherlands's iteration of Orbán. This goes beyond their Eurosceptical, revisionist approach to the EU and capitalization on xenophobic trends but rather as to how they both employ similar rhetorical devices to build up the EU as a symbol of these misgivings. One of the most immediate examples is the metaphor of a collapsing European civilization that is frequently employed when talking about not only the EU governance but also national politics. Instead of congratulating his campaign staff during his 2019 electoral victory speech, Baudet instead launched into a tirade against the establishment in the Netherlands and Europe as a whole: "We stand on the ruins of what was once the greatest and most beautiful civilization the world has ever known, a civilization that spanned all corners of the world." He continued to highlight the historic legacy of European art, "traditional urban architecture", heroes, and festivals (referencing to Dutch holiday traditions that have become criticized for their use of blackface in costumes) in wake of immigration that is introducing "completely different cultures" and further diluting a heterogeneous, Christian Europe. Baudet also frequently employs the phrase "Boreal World" to describe the cultural values under attack, "a term popularized on the French far-right as an alternative to the discredited 'Aryan' [that is] imagining a white cultural and political space" (Kleinpaste). This framing of a Europe

under threat is then followed by a description of the EU as an entity “trying to play boss over us” and descriptions of politicians who adhere to pro-EU values as belonging to a “masochistic heresy” that “place Euros on the altar to that god” (‘that god’ being a reference to the EU’s environmental policy).

Like Orbán, Baudet employs a series of metaphors that create a scenario of a security crisis exacerbated by a reckless, illegitimate authority in Brussels leading to a situation where “our country is being destroyed by the very people who were supposed to protect us.” This is not only a physical threat from incoming migrants under the refugee quota and other humanitarian policies, but also a diluting of the “Boreal” culture that is intrinsic to European civilization. In the same speech, Baudet takes a similar stance to Orbán in describing the Netherland’s relation to the rest of the EU by saying “Our country is a part of that family of civilizations” that implies a specific historical community rooted in Christianity that is incompatible with immigrants and EU overreach in a corruption of the “Europe as a family” trope. Baudet’s formerly fringe ideas, like those posed by Brexit campaigners, have been given an elevated platform by media outlets that allow them to reach increasingly larger audiences. One recent study conducted by Maurits Meijers and Christian Rauh examined media coverage of far right groups during the European Parliament (EP) elections between 2009 and 2014 and found “a clearly heightened visibility of radical right mobilization efforts on European issues” (Meijers and Rauh 92). Baudet has learned to embrace and take advantage of this increased media receptivity by creating a doubt-free, almost comical persona to garner more attention. Part of this strategy is media stunts designed to become sharable memes: “last summer, he a posted photo on Instagram of himself lying naked

on the edge of a pool in a sunny location. That photo, too, went viral”. This has been a successful strategy and has allowed Baudet to “become an avatar for the online alt-right, and the Dutch media bear much of the blame” (Kleinpaste). This has allowed the normalization of his formerly marginalized radical talking points and contributed to a Eurosceptical attitude that is steadily gaining traction in even the Netherlands.

Conclusion

These cases are indicators of a much broader growth in Eurosceptical, anti-immigrant and populist sympathies that are spurred on by common rhetorical tactics to guide the public’s emotions against the symbol of the EU. This framing conveys a security crisis due to immigration and relies on metaphors of a collapsing European civilization, threatened family values, and an incompatibility of the EU and its values with individual member states. In the UK this was evident in the media’s reliance on the heart of Europe metaphor that became associated with illness originating from Brussels that stifled contrary facts and emphasized the separateness between Britain and mainland Europe. While not going as far as insisting upon a full withdrawal from the EU, both Orbán and Baudet promote a similar message of incompatibility with their definition of traditional European cultural values and the governance and policies put forth by the EU. This is further embodied by repeated references to a collapsing family or civilization amidst a social and physical security threat. The creation of the EU into a condensation symbol of this magnitude has enabled right-wing movements to overtly influence the discourse on integration and immigration to the extent that it has become normalized in the media. Until the framing of the discussion is shifted, arguments

highlighting the intricacies and facts of EU-member state relations or immigration policies will be held at a disadvantage to Eurosceptical platforms.

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