

Beatrice Heuser, Brexit in History. Sovereignty or a European Union?, London (Hurst Publishers) 2019, XII-301 p., ISBN 978-1-7873-8126-1, GBP 20,00.

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Brexit, more than any other issue, has dominated the political debate in the UK over the past decade. The same question that has so deeply divided the country since the launch of the 2016 referendum had long been a contentious issue. Despite the seemingly clear victory of the leave campaign, the choices facing the country in its relations with the rest of Europe still seem no nearer to finding a definitive answer. Whatever agreement is reached over the terms of the EU-UK divorce there is little prospect of this bringing the current saga to an end. That this should be so is hardly surprising given Brexit's deep historical roots. As such the present crisis should be considered as part of a much older debate over the UK's place in, and its relations with, the rest of Europe. The uncertainty over the path to take is certainly not new.

There is, therefore, an obvious need to look for the origins of the 2016 Brexit vote in the long and often complex record of the UK's interactions with the continent. Nor is this simply a question of cross-Channel relations or of the UK being »in« or »out«, »remaining« or »leaving«. What precisely the UK is leaving, or remains part of, is in many ways an open question. Europe, as Beatrice Heuser points out, can take, and has taken, many different forms; its future direction has never been written in stone. A more pertinent question would, therefore, seem to be »what sort of Europe« rather than »Europe, yes or no«. Should the UK leave the EU these questions will still require an answer although, as Beatrice Heuser argues, its ability to influence these choices will be severely restricted post-Brexit.

Various studies have already traced the long history of Britain's uncertain and often ambiguous position in Europe. Britain's wavering attitude towards the efforts of others on the continent to move towards some form of European unity has also been the subject of numerous publications. Most of these have understandably focussed on the events of the post-1945 years during which the present EU emerged. The ups and downs of Britain's role in this process are well documented. Yet despite the considerable attention paid to these issues there is no sign of any consensus emerging or of a truer understanding of how and why the UK, and its relations with the rest of Europe, has reached the present position.

Various historians have attempted to find answers by looking to the deep-rooted cultural reasons that may underlie current



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British Euroscepticism¹. That the sources of British Euroscepticism run deep is undeniable and as even Margaret Thatcher, perhaps Britain's most famous Eurosceptic, recognised in her famous Bruges speech there is a »record of nearly two thousand years of British involvement in Europe, cooperation with Europe and contribution to Europe«.

Beatrice Heuser's »Brexit in History. Sovereignty or a European Union?« takes a similarly time scale. Its ambition is to »explain Brexit [...] in the context of centuries of struggle about the European order [...] to sketch the pedigree of the sovereignist, independentist stance embodied in the 2016 Brexit referendum vote«. This is contrasted to the rival vision of a European union in the form of a universal empire or monarchy. It is, however, a »third way« that the author views most favourably: a European system or union that brings the various European polities together and that allows them to »settle their differences peacefully, tackle common problems jointly, and to mount an effective common defence against external threats«. Quoting Winston Churchill, she argues that »jaw jaw« will always be preferable to »war war«; the EU, despite its »many flaws and shortcomings«, may be still »the worst form of government for this continent except all the others that have been tried«.

Heuser rejects any idea that Brexit will meet the needs of the UK or that it will be better off outside the EU, that its support for human rights, one of the core values it shares with its fellow Europeans, will be defended, or that its security will be enhanced. Heuser reaches much the same conclusion here as Dean Acheson almost sixty years ago: that Britain, has »lost an empire and [...] not yet found a role«. The inevitable conclusion is that it has no other viable role beyond Europe: that of a semi-detached counter weight maintaining the balance of power on the continent is no longer pertinent to today's Europe; the Commonwealth, as Heuser writes, is »ever less significant« and the »special relationship« losing much of its meaning.

Heuser's critique is also made at the conceptual level with a head-on attack on what many in the pro-Brexit camp hold dearest: sovereignty and the »illusory concept of the ›nation state««. She argues that these terms, alongside »state«, »liberalism«, »democracy« and »liberty«, are all too often misinterpreted, used in ways that mislead, sometimes deliberately, confuse and obstruct rather than help our understanding. Such attempts to consider these essential terms more carefully have been all too few and far between with most analyses preferring to hold onto the more comfortable existing terminology, labels and identities. Such misuses of language, and its oversimplifications, have, as Heuser writes, often led to »false claims about supposedly unvarying patterns of inter-polity relations [...] mak[ing] us blind to solutions that require us to overcome 19th century ideas of state and nation«. Bringing these to the forefront of the debate is to be



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¹ Menno Spiering, *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism*, Basingstoke 2015 (Palgrave Pivot); or Brendan Simms, *Britain's Europe. A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation*, London 2016 (Penguin History).

welcomed, although we may doubt how far this will be accepted in the present political climate.

In all of this there is nothing in this book that is likely to find favour with the present UK government or with those who continue to defend Brexit on precisely those grounds that Beatrice Heuser condemns. Arguing that the sovereign nation state can no longer provide answers to the problems facing the UK and Europe is likely to have only the slightest impact on opinion. The focus on security interests, above all the maintenance of peace in Europe through some form of international cooperation, or at the very least some forum for international discussion, brings us back to one of the key ambitions of those who have, over the centuries, promoted some form of European union. Such concerns seem, however, to have disappeared from the debate in the UK. Heuser's book is a timely reminder that these concerns should not be forgotten.

As well as taking the Brexit debate into the past Beatrice Heuser also takes a far more theoretical approach than is the case with most analyses. The origins of British Euroscepticism are seen here through the lens of international relations, how they have evolved and been practised. In this she is looking at Brexit at a level far beyond and above the current debate. Indeed, it is this analysis of the history of international relations that forms the essential part of this book. As such its title is somewhat misleading in that its focus is less on »Brexit in history« than on how Europe has developed and on the various projects promoting some form of European organisation or union. Beatrice Heuser's book is, therefore, far more than an account of the origins of Brexit.

Over the course of these chapters Heuser considers the various methods and approaches that have been put forward as means of establishing some form of European order, especially as a means of maintaining peace. Various models are presented here from a balance of power between rival states to a »universal monarchy« along the lines of the *Pax Romana* or the Holy Roman Empire, these two approaches confronting one another. Later models based on some form of great power regulation of international affairs, such as the Congress system or the more recent attempts to set up a voluntary confederation of all European states, are presented in the following chapters. As Heuser shows, all these projects constantly drew on ideas and examples from the past as far back as Plato, Aristotle and Thucydides. There is no doubt that later thinkers all drew extensively on their precursors.

For Heuser the tensions between the attempts to establish some form of supra-national authority, or less ambitiously a simpler regulation of international affairs, and the sovereign rights of individual states have always been at the heart of the European question. These oppositions certainly resonate with contemporary debates. The same may be said of the efforts made by certain states, including Britain, to maintain a balance of power, part of what Heuser sees as »the fight against supposed aspirations to universal ›monarchy« and how this has often been presented as a defence of liberty. Recent comments by Boris Johnson about the ambitions of present-day Germany suggest that this vision of Europe continues to weigh heavily on British attitudes. Similar



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British doubts about France's hegemonic tendencies, from Louis XIV to Napoleon and de Gaulle, can also still be heard today.

Despite the strength of British Euroscepticism, past and present, Heuser nevertheless points out that British thinkers were among those Europeans who, from the 16th century, were promoting ideas of European collaboration, even of European union, with William Penn and Jeremy Bentham placed alongside Erasmus, Crucé, Sully, the Abbé Saint-Pierre and Kant. At the same time Heuser details the conflicting viewpoints in Britain between those who were tempted by a form of isolation from the continent and those who recognised that Britain could never cut itself off from its European neighbours. Again this clearly resonates with the similar debates today. However, it was, as Heuser points out, Britain's fight against different continental attempts to establish »hegemonic European integration« that left the deepest mark on British thinking and it was the comparatively short period during which Britain did manage to stand largely apart from continental conflicts between 1864 and 1914 that »marked the British collective memory most strongly« in that it »forged a mythical self-perception [...] of Britain as detached from the affairs of Europe«. No matter how frequently this posture was shown by later events to be both unsustainable and undesirable this idea has come down to us today. As Heuser argues, the outbreak of war in 1939 meant that Neville Chamberlain »finally realised that British security could not be separated from that of other parts of Europe«. But she is also right that this is »a lesson that seems to have been forgotten by 2016«.

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