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# Foundational Moments, Representative Claims and the Ecology of Social Ignorance

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psx](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psx)**Mihaela Mihai** 

## Abstract

This article identifies a blind spot in constructivist theories of representation and their account of legitimacy in terms of the challenge posed by ecologies of social ignorance, generally and especially during foundational moments. Social ignorance is conceptualised here not merely as the absence of knowledge or true belief but as a social practice of legitimising epistemically problematic political imaginaries and the institutional systems they underpin. In dialogue with social epistemologists and phenomenologists, the article shows how representation can nurture social ignorance, despite the availability of ample opportunities for political contestation and alternative opinion formation. A permanent feature of democratic politics, this problem becomes most salient during moments of constitutional re-founding, such as regime change, post-conflict reconstruction or constitutional referenda, when representative claims can reconfigure a community's political imaginary, rendering it more or less ignorant. The representative claims made by the Vote Leave's key figures during the Brexit referendum campaign serve as illustration.

## Keywords

Keywords: constructivist theories of representation, social ignorance, Brexit, political emotions, founding moments

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## Introduction

This article aims to trace how democratic political representation can nurture practices of social ignorance, despite the existence of ample opportunities for contestation and alternative opinion formation. Contrary to colloquial usage, social ignorance does not merely involve a lack of knowledge or of true belief. Historically informed social epistemologists define it as a 'substantive epistemic practice' (Alcoff, 2007: 39) encompassing both individual and structural belief-forming practices. It is an ongoing process of producing and

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legitimising certain skewed, self-serving narratives about a community's identity and its history, occluding unsavoury episodes, historical injustices as well as their reverberations in the present. Such narratives are constituted within power constellations in the sense that the members of the community do not participate on an equal footing in forging them – certain groups' voices are overrepresented in articulating the political common sense, that is, the unquestioned 'truths' a community takes to be self-evident. When institutionalised – via the education system, official holidays and memorialisation practices, public museums and the media but also more broadly within the public culture – such 'truths' configure individuals' perceptual schemas, habits of political remembering, the scope and intensity of their affective investments as well as the contours of their political imagination in ways that affect the quality of democracy. Exclusionary, inegalitarian and romantic ideas of the 'nation' and its sanitised history will thus inform the configuration of political life in the present, often along racialised, classed and gendered lines. Because it permeates institutions, public culture, but also cognitive and affective structures, social ignorance has an ecological character: what is politically memorable, perceivable, thinkable, imaginable is informed – though not fully determined – by these 'truths', with their non-accidental erasures and blind spots, the result of a tacit 'agreement to misinterpret the world' (Mills, 1997: 18). Social ignorance is therefore 'an active accomplishment requiring an ever-vigilant understanding of what not to know' (Gross et al., 2015: 5).

This article highlights the limits of constructivist theories of representation and their account of legitimacy when confronted with entrenched social ignorance, generally and especially during foundational moments. I focus on the constructivist turn (Brito Vieira, 2017; Disch, 2011; Disch et al., 2019; Saward, 2010) for its capacity to reveal how interests are articulated and constituencies interpellated into political existence by successful representative claims. According to constructivist theorists, '[D]emocratic political representation neither simply reflects nor transmits demands; it creates them as it actively recruits constituencies' (Disch, 2011: 102). Demands are not, however, created from scratch: for their claims to be effectively taken up by the public summoned as political subject ('the people', 'the nation', 'the 99%', 'the silent majority'), representatives must tap into the hermeneutical sources of a community's common sense and articulate visions that resonate – cognitively and affectively – within their addressees' horizon of experience. On the constructivist account, the represented are not therefore passive. Provided institutional avenues for contestation and alternative opinion formation are available – that is, provided what theorists of representation call 'system reflexivity' (Disch, 2011) obtains – the interpellated can retroactively accept or reject the claim, thereby injecting accountability into the process. I suggest problems arise for democracy even under conditions of system reflexivity, if the taken-for-granted, dominant 'truths' that representative claims translate and particularise politically reflect an entrenched, exclusionary and inegalitarian social imaginary that sits uneasily with democracy's key normative commitments. In other words, I will argue that the formal prerequisites of system reflexivity cannot prevent representation from serving as a key dynamo of social ignorance, with repercussions on the type of political relationships that can be nurtured in its penumbra.

Such effects emerge regularly in the life of a polity – in ordinary public and parliamentary debates as well as during electoral campaigns. Social ignorance can be cultivated whether the representative claim addresses a specific group (defined via socio-economic, ethnic, religious, gendered or racialised markers of identity)<sup>1</sup> or the community as a whole. However, the impact of socially ignorant representative claims is potentially most important during (re)founding moments, that is, moments of fundamental political

disruption and transformation, when the community's normative-political principles are debated, (re)articulated and sanctioned constitutionally and when competing representative claims address the community as a whole – the 'people' or the 'nation'. At such junctures, the core parameters of the constitutional order, its fundamental political institutions and the political identity of the community make the object of representative claims that, when successful, will have lasting effects on its political future. And, as I demonstrate below, such moments represent crucial opportunities for representatives to orient the political imaginary and the institutions it underpins towards more or less ignorant directions – and implicitly towards more or less democratic directions – depending on what aspects of the common sense they tap into, reconfigure and deploy in outlining a vision of the collective future and the necessary constitutional transformations it requires.

To render concrete my theoretical proposal, the article analyses representative claims made between January and June 2016 by the architects of the Vote Leave campaign – democratically elected MPs (Members of Parliament). I distinguish between several aspects of the process by which Leavers' representative claims contributed to a practice of social ignorance. *Conceptually*, particular claims modulated the meaning of certain concepts to constrict the scope of the public's political perceptions and imagination. Terms such as 'sovereignty', 'control' or 'colony' were deployed to summon a subjugated 'nation', imperilled by the European Union (EU), its court and the principle of free movement, unable to exercise its sovereign right to exclude. *Temporally*, a glorious horizon of political memory – contoured via synecdochal and metonymical references to the British Empire – was fixed discursively in opposition to a bleak future, which only a decision to leave the EU could avoid. The present emerged as a watershed moment, of simultaneous crisis and opportunity. As for *history's cast of characters*, alongside the subject of representation ('the people', 'the nation'), oppositional 'others' were constituted (the 'super-state', 'the rogue court', 'migrants', 'refugees', 'terrorists', 'Turkey') as threats. Thus, representative claims articulated and particularised more general ideas – historical Euroscepticism, highly mediated imperial legacies and racism – in a way that helped keep in motion cognitively, affectively and institutionally, certain social dynamics of ignorance about the nature of the European project, British history and identity and other political communities. Thus, I argue Vote Leave's victory marks an important milestone in an ongoing practice of social ignorance.

Before delving into the analysis, a few clarification points on the case-study selection.

One might worry, first, that the Brexit referendum cannot be characterised as a foundational moment but merely as part of an ongoing process of contestation over British political identity. I suspect it is both: while it can only be understood within long-term historical processes of political, demographic and cultural transformations that can be traced to the post-World War II (WWII) period<sup>2</sup> and that will certainly continue into the future, it triggered the redefinition of United Kingdom's sovereign competencies. Moreover, exiting the EU posed radical challenges to the constitutional and political infrastructure of the country, including regarding the relationship between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. The campaign and its aftermath were accompanied by high levels of political mobilisation and division regarding collective identity and the country's international outlook. Finally, Brexit was also understood and framed as a foundational moment by the actors on the ground.

Second, a critic might argue that my illustration is based on unacknowledged ideological commitments. To respond, this analysis is driven by a critical theoretical impulse. Critical theory is fundamentally concerned with democratic accountability and the

critique of power structures. Therefore, the successful Vote Leave campaign makes an appropriate object of inquiry. However, a similar analysis could be made about the Remain side. Given sufficient space, I would have shown how Remainers' representative claims participated differently in practices of social ignorance and that they also failed to reorient the British political imaginary towards more hospitable and egalitarian, that is, more democratic horizons.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I assume that a case for Brexit could have been made without contributing to the reproduction of social ignorance – but what that would have looked like specifically lies beyond the scope of this project.

Let us now turn to the theoretical infrastructure of the argument.

### *Ecologies of Social Ignorance*

Over the last decades, social epistemologists have been unpacking the complex relationship between, on one hand, socially ignorant imaginaries – imaginaries characterised by non-accidental distortions and mnemonic erasures that are usually racialised, gendered and classed – and, on the other, everyday practices of social interaction and meaning-making (Applebaum, 2015; Dotson, 2014; Kassar, 2018; Kidd et al., 2017; Maitra, 2011; Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997, 1998; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008; Ruíz, n.d.; Spivak, 2013; Tuana, 2017). They have shown how processes cementing social ignorance happen with the active participation of subjects, who are invested – cognitively, affectively and materially – in the reproduction of a certain vision of the community, its past and its boundaries. Therefore, social ignorance cannot be reduced to a lack of knowledge or of true belief. A wilful, self-interested 'need not to know' (Applebaum, 2015) or 'an aprioristic inclination to get certain kinds of things wrong' (Mills, 2015: 218) is cultivated structurally and trans-generationally – via key socialisation institutions and the public culture – replicating both received ideas and the materialities that reflect them in classed, gendered and racialised orders. Consequently, 'a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation' (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007: 1).

Social ignorance is thus never only a matter of individual cognitive failure or vice. As a 'substantive epistemic practice' (Alcoff, 2007: 39), it produces a repository of 'useful non-knowledge' (Gross et al., 2015: 5) that naturalises a social system of privilege. Subjectified within it, individuals rely on robust psychological defence mechanisms to avoid acknowledging contradictory evidence (Code, 2007) and experiencing affective discomfort. As Alcoff (2007: 48) argues, 'cognitive norms of assessment will have to be maintained that allow for this countervailing evidence to be regularly dismissed so that the dominant view can be held stable'. Dissent – discourses that challenge the political organisation of reality – is frequently pathologised as 'unreasonable', often via racial and cultural gaslighting, that is, processes of dismissing as misplaced negative reactions to silencing, exclusion or marginalisation (Davis and Ernst, 2019; Pohlhaus, 2017; Ruíz, n.d.). A set of 'denials and contorted rationalisations' (Outlaw, 2007: 200) enable politically dominant groups to live with the contradiction between their community's mythologised 'greatness' and obvious, resilient injustices in the present.

Within affluent northern societies with colonial histories, Eurocentrism, selective and uncritical political memory and material group interests tint the lens through which white dominant groups see the world and establish their perspective as hegemonic, framing what is politically visible and desirable.<sup>4</sup> At its core, social ignorance consists in a series of erasures, among which the 'racial erasure' stands out as:

. . . the retrospective whitening out, the whitewashing, of the racial past in order to construct an alternative narrative that severs the present from any legacy of racial domination. Racism as idea and ideology, racism as national and global system, racial atrocity and racial exploitation, are collectively denied or at least causally minimized (Mills, 2015: 220).

Periodisations of history that reflect hierarchical views of human nature help congeal unjust global and local systems of privilege and disadvantage. That is,

[T]ime maps are therefore intimately and necessarily tied up with amnesias, excisions, forgettings that are not arbitrary but politically required – producing pasts that are ‘usable’, utilitarian, functional for the group’s identity and trajectory in time, not pasts that are awkward, refractory, raising disturbing and untimely questions (Mills, 2020: 300).

A note of clarification is necessary here: scholars diagnosing this problem do not assume the possibility or desirability of a complete and objective history that should underpin official imaginaries – historical narratives are always imbued with ideology. Moreover, forgetting and omissions are inevitable and, some would argue, even necessary at the level of political claim-making. Yet, this does not imply that all perspectives on the past are equally true or equally conducive to democratic politics: not all forms of forgetting and not all omissions are equivalent, and it is important to identify which ones contribute to the reproduction of patterns of domination and marginalisation over time.

To recapitulate, the constitution of political subjectivities according to sanitised views of history and identity feed into the intergenerational practice of social ignorance that underpins ongoing democratic exclusion and marginalisation. Relying on insights from the phenomenology of emotion,<sup>5</sup> I now explore how affective economies sustain such warped notions of history, with great effect on what attributes principally define the demos and who counts as part of the democratic ‘us’.

Phenomenologists of emotion explored the generative function that emotions play in the production of certain types of subjects, of temporalities and, implicitly, of social ignorance. They show how the circulation of affect often nurtures a stable, purified and superior sense of identity and enables the community to inhabit a ‘fantasyland’ (Mills, 1997: 18), where racial, classed and gendered hierarchies appear normal. Thus, Ahmed (2014: 65, 140) proposes to see emotions ‘as investments in social norms’ and argues that ‘the “truths” of this world are dependent on emotions, on how they move subjects, and stick them together’. Similarly, Szanto (2020: 18) remarks that negative emotions such as hatred have ‘the social-psychological and social-ontological power to constitute a community of fellow-feelers . . .’ On this account, emotions ‘secure collectives’ – ‘the nation’, ‘the people’, ‘our way of life’ – by turning certain bodies into objects of attachment and others into threatening or hateful targets, perceived to be endangering the taken-for-granted configuration of reality and its comfortable hierarchies. The hated, the despised or the feared are categories that can be – and have been historically – filled in by different groups who serve as a coagulating agent for the ‘we’ who supposedly stand to ‘lose everything’ because of ‘their’ perceived intrusion. People of colour, refugees, migrants but also the poor have historically been turned into interchangeable bodies upon which a variety of socially fuelled negative emotions – such as fear, disgust or hate – conveniently latched on (Ahmed, 2014).

However, not just any group would do:

[T]he transformation of this or that other into an object of hate is over-determined. It is not simply that any body is hated: particular histories of association are reopened in each encounter, such that some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than other bodies (Ahmed, 2014: 54).

Building on Fanon's work, Al-Saji (2014: 140) proposes the concept of 'affective ankylosis' to capture how, through mnemonic and affective habituation, individuals' perceptive apparatus loses 'its capacity to be affected, to be touched, by that which lies beyond or beneath its objectifying schemas'. The medical metaphor reveals how the social imaginary frames perceptions, meaning-making and affective experiences: '. . . the past is here congealed as schema and is, as such, overdetermined and fixed in its sense; this is the past as . . . myth, stereotype, distorted and isolated remnant' (Al-Saji, 2014: 141).

Due to the affective, cognitive, but also material and institutionalised weight of this ankylotic past, colonial subjects and their descendants, immigrants and refugees are privileged categories – always collectivised and typified (Szanto, 2020: 9) – for casting in the role of negative identity foil. The memories that 'stick' affectively are the result of a politically deft operation of the 'social scalpel' (Zerubavel, 2012: 96): ignorant communities invest affectively – but also materially and structurally – in mnemonic fabrications of greatness, victimhood and redemption that relegate some bodies to subordinate positions. The mnemonic, the affective and the material thus come together to produce a complex ecology<sup>6</sup> of ignorance.

Utilising the language of ecology does not invite a politics of lamentation or resignation. On the contrary, individuals are responsible for the epistemic environment they live in (Mills, 2017) and they do have some agency to remedy exclusions, individually and collectively. Moreover, responsibility for affectively anchored chronopolitics is not uniformly born across all epistemic agents within a community: there are great discrepancies in epistemic authority and credibility, and they map onto systems of power and privilege. Epistemic authority refers to the degree of authority an individual enjoys socially, in public debates, and it is a function of various types of social, economic and symbolic capital. Excess credibility is accrued by knowers who are enjoying disproportionate authority, usually as an effect of gender, class and racialised inequalities. Consequently, perhaps a heavier burden of responsibility applies to them: those who enjoy high levels of credibility and authority within the public sphere – that is, those whose voices weigh and are amplified disproportionately – should perhaps be stringently held accountable for how they conceptually carve out 'reality', for the histories they invoke, the evidence they rely on and the political visions they propose and often have the power to actualise.<sup>7</sup> However, credibility excesses have historically been accompanied by flagrant epistemic arrogance, that is, by blatant failures to confront one's cognitive limitations (Medina, 2013). Combined with active efforts not to seek or acknowledge contradictory evidence and to gaslight those who report experiences of harm, arrogant excess credibility is simultaneously a key result and driver of socially ignorant mythologies. Due to such dynamics, the erasures, privileges and affective investments discussed above – the political ecology of ignorance – are safely secured within a community's institutions, bodies and minds. This does not have to mean that the social imaginary is totalising: heretical voices always emerge, but they often fail to muster sufficient political support to destabilise the hegemonical common sense.

Having offered a theoretical cartography of ecological social ignorance, I now turn to political representation – a key functional element of democracy – to suggest that it too

can play an active role in ignorant social practices. Via an engagement with the constructivist turn in theories of political representation, I hope to illuminate how representative claims can nurture ignorant political common senses, endangering democracy's future.

### *Representative Claims as Drivers of Social Ignorance*

Over the last few years, theoretical research on representation has taken a 'constructivist turn' (Disch, 2011, 2015; Disch et al., 2019; Montanaro, 2018; Saward, 2010). Whereas the standard model formulated in Pitkin's (1967) classic *The Concept of Representation* conceived of the represented and their interests as pre-existing representation, constructivist scholars argue that 'constituencies or groups cohere as political agents only insofar as they are represented' (Disch, 2019: 2). They propose that representative claims have a constitutive effect on both the representative and the represented. On this account, a group's 'commonality is thoroughly political, existing by virtue of the array of allies and enemies that exist by the selection of one particular social cleavage over other possible lines of battle' (Disch, 2019: 10). In what follows, I reconstruct the main insights of the constructivist turn, aiming to then reveal how successful representative claims can often nurture transgenerational ecologies of ignorance.

Given the rise of sub- and supranational actors making representational claims and the proliferation of political issues articulated by non-official, self-authorised representatives (Montanaro, 2018), constructivists argue that the constitutive, symbolic and performative functions of representation must be acknowledged lest theories of representation lose any traction on political reality. While many scholars find this account highly persuasive, others worry about its implications for normatively assessing representative claims. What happens to democratic accountability if elite-led political conflicts and debates inform the interests that are constituted via representative claims? If the very terms of the debate – which determine the shape of the interests at the centre of representation – have their sources in representative-driven political processes, isn't representation essentially manipulative?

Following into the footsteps of radical democratic theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), constructivists recognise the role power plays in the articulation of political identities, claims and positionings. While for traditional understandings of representation the normative question was one of fidelity and responsiveness (by the representative to the represented), for constructivists it is one of retroactive authorisation and system reflexivity (Disch, 2011; Saward, 2010). To put it differently, to the extent that a group and their interests come into being politically as a result of the representative act – that is, to the extent that they do not pre-date it – one cannot use these interests as a benchmark against which to measure the legitimacy of the decisions taken by the representative in the group's name. Instead, as a measure of a claim's legitimacy, constructivists propose to focus on retroactive processes of acceptance or rejection by the members of the group summoned into existence by the representative claim, within a system that allows for multiple sites of opinion formation and contestation.

Retroactive legitimisation is reliable if it takes place within what Saward (2010: 154) calls an 'open society', that is, 'a society where the freedom to support and to criticize political figures, claims, and proposals is of paramount value, and concomitantly where pluralism of ideas and values is widely accepted and practiced'. Therefore, the constituency is not merely a passive object in the hands of the representative, but a partner in a relationship wherein 'claims-making solicits a constituency to recognise itself in a claim and to support the per-



son who made it' (Saward, 2010: 146). It is the represented who must judge the appropriateness and desirability of a claim.

Since '... all representation is partial and incomplete' (Saward, 2010: 140), the represented can thus exercise judgement over the various identities proposed to them via competing representative claims, gaining a measure of control over their own political subjectification. Hayat (2019: 131) argues that sustained processes of active discussion and assessment of representative claims should be stimulated to ensure legitimacy and accountability. Similarly, via the concept of 'system reflexivity', Disch (2011: 111) explains how contestation should be institutionally supported:

First, no official or unofficial body could claim to speak for the people absolutely and definitively, so that dissent would be a norm rather than a betrayal. Second, the represented would enjoy both formal and informal means of communication and action to contest government and party initiatives, or, equally important to protest government and party inaction . . .

For a system as for an individual, however, reflexivity means more than the mere fact of contestation. Official and unofficial representatives must have regular, structured ways of taking objections into account.

These scholars offer valuable insights into how to cultivate representative legitimacy. Political freedoms (among which freedom of speech and association, as well as voting rights are paramount), tolerance of pluralism, the availability of formal and informal communication channels as well as institutional avenues where decisions can be scrutinised and assessed are proposed as the formal infrastructure of accountability on the constructivist account: 'Absent reflexivity, there is good reason for concern that context-dependent reasoning renders individuals susceptible to elite manipulation' (Disch, 2011: 113).

In response, I want to suggest that 'elite manipulation' linked to a lack of 'system reflexivity' cannot capture the danger to democracy posed by entrenched social ignorance. Given what we learnt about the workings of ignorant practices, the concept of manipulation – with its strong flavour of intentionality and purposiveness and victims' assumed passivity – does not capture the complexity of the problem. As for system reflexivity, background practices of social ignorance and patterns of excess credibility are likely to escape its control function: if a socially ignorant imaginary is already entrenched, both representative claims and their retroactive validation or contestation will happen within the hermeneutical frames that it offers for public discourses and political imagination, more broadly. Let us carefully unpack this bigger worry about representative legitimacy.

As discussed above, the constitution of political subjectivity via representative claims does not happen *ex nihilo*: on the contrary, it taps in a community's pool of hermeneutical resources and takes shape within its material infrastructure, via processes of discursive articulation and affective interpellation. The context of representation is ideational, affective and material, presenting the representative with a variety of options, some of which are more likely to 'stick' than others. The claims that 'stick' are – most frequently – those that resonate with existing, stabilised imaginaries. Racialised, classed and gendered axes of distinction work institutionally to influence the distribution of epistemic power and credibility trans-generationally, disproportionately empowering some voices and leading to the institutionalisation of a particular view of 'who we are' as a 'nation', a 'people' – or any other concept through which an artificial sense of unity is nurtured politically.

Therefore, to the extent that the common sense is structurally stabilised via a system of institutional and symbolic mechanisms in a way that discounts or gaslights freely

expressed dissent; to the extent that alternative voices fail to effectively reconfigure existing hermeneutical resources and orient the societal doxa towards less ignorant and more egalitarian futures; to the extent that the main epistemic entrepreneurs of naturalised ‘truths’ enjoy credibility excesses that command majoritarian political backing while alternative communities of judgement – though tolerated – remain ineffective politically; to the extent that representative claims effectively tap into particular histories of (unjust) association to justify exclusions in the present; and to the extent that historical patterns of violence and marginalisation get erased from public memory in ways that enable their reproduction in the present, representative claims end up participating actively in the practice of social ignorance. In mining a socially ignorant common sense for resources to successfully articulate a specific political vision, shape perceptions and orient affective energies, representatives often reinforce reified, undemocratic ideas about the community’s boundaries and history. When countervailing claims are neutered via cycles of denial and rationalisation, when what Hill Collins (2009) called ‘controlling images’ have been deployed effectively to give direction to affective investments towards various bodies – some marked for love, others for hate and resentment, according to historically ankylosed perceptual and interpretive schemata – representative claims underwrite the community’s repository of ‘useful non-knowledge’ (Gross et al., 2015: 5). To put it differently, manipulation mis-identifies a problem that system reflexivity cannot, therefore, fix. Moreover, the effect of such representative claims is not merely discursive: given the ecological nature of social ignorance, they simultaneously stabilise a specific material configuration of reality.

To render these rather abstract theoretical proposals concrete and highlight their salience for current politics, the next section introduces an empirical illustration: the representative claims of the key figures of the Vote Leave campaign and their role in both perpetuating and exacerbating social ignorance.

### *Brexit and the Ecology of Ignorance*

The Brexit referendum, narrowly won by the Leavers, has been widely examined (Beaumont, 2017; Clarke et al., 2017; Curtis, 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017; Finlayson, 2018; Fuchs, 2018; Henderson et al., 2017; Iakhnis et al., 2018; Kellner, 2017; Khalili, 2017; Koller et al., 2019; Martill and Staiger, 2018; Musolff, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Schaffner, 2020; Taylor, 2017). This section focuses on the representative claims of the figureheads of the Vote Leave Campaign, MPs Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Dominic Raab, Gisela Stuart, Priti Patel and Iain Duncan Smith, who, I argue, participated actively in a practice of social ignorance regarding the European project, British history, nationhood and sovereignty. At the time, Gove was a cabinet minister; Raab and Patel were both junior ministers. This is a group of epistemically privileged individuals, who – with the potential exception of Stuart and Patel – enjoyed important excess credibility traceable to their disproportionate social, economic and political capital. Most came from wealthy backgrounds and were educated in the most affluent and influential British educational institutions, themselves key structural elements in the architecture of social ignorance (Dorling, 2019; Tomlinson, 2019).

Via conceptual stretching, carefully curated chronopolitics, the identification of ‘threats’ and ‘opportunities’ and the effective deployment of ‘controlling images’ (Hill Collins, 2009) to channel political affect, their representative claims reflected what Mills (1997: 18) called the ‘tacit agreement to misinterpret the world’. This agreement long

preceded and outlived the campaign. Given the focus on re-founding moments and the chances they offer for transforming the social imaginary, I analyse the main speeches, op-eds and interviews available on the Vote Leave campaign's site,<sup>8</sup> which I take to be their official repository of Brexit representative claims.

As already mentioned, while many lies and false promises were espoused, this is not what interests me here. Social ignorance covers structural and individual, self-serving processes of legitimising a particular, mystifying vision of the social world. This vision's anchoring in collectives' affective investments enables its success. Via a brief detour through the historical and sociological literature on United Kingdom's social imaginaries, I trace how Vote Leave's representative claims activated the affective energies of a specific 'collective of fellow-feelers' (Szanto, 2020), thus feeding into a specific ecology of ignorance.

Sociologist Sally Tomlinson (2019: 5) recently demonstrated that 'despite attempts at multicultural and anti-racism education', the British education system 'left untouched a "whitewashing" of the past and the post-imperial values of empire'. Analysing the evolution of schooling and curricula in history and geography, Tomlinson (2019: 15) shows how, up to the 1960s, 'British values and invented traditions, imbued with nationalism, militarism and racial arrogance, were filtered down from elite "public" schools to secondary and elementary schools'. Children did not learn about the brutality of empire, decolonisation and the reasons behind the arrival of Black and Asian British citizens in Britain. On the contrary, an 'ethnocentric view of imperial greatness and racial superiority' dominated (Tomlinson, 2008: 37), and 'imperial nationalism' helped congeal a broad sense of White solidarity that cut across class (Tomlinson, 2019: 44). Consequently, met with interpersonal and institutional hostility (Olusoga, 2016), British citizens of colour from the former colonies became the negative identity foil in a hyper-racialised ignorant ecology. That it had been the British Empire – and not the British 'nation' – who fought the world wars was obscured via patriotic narratives that occluded the massive deployment of colonial troops: 'usable pasts' of *national* endurance and prowess were institutionalised (Gildea, 2019; Khan, 2016). Widespread white ethnocentrism in the population did not, however, have many open champions in the post-WWII political elite: as Sobolewska and Ford (2020) show, demography is not political destiny. It was via the claims made by several political entrepreneurs such as Enoch Powell, Peter Griffiths and Margaret Thatcher that racist ethnocentrism was politically articulated and openly legitimised, securing the Tories' reputation as an anti-migration party for many years to come.

In the 1970s, geography textbooks still taught nineteenth-century racial categorisations, the National Front became a political force, while a growing parliamentary agreement that immigration from the 'new Commonwealth' had to be limited congealed (Bhambra, 2017). New, racialised citizenship laws were passed and PM Margaret Thatcher made pledged to end immigration (Burns, 1978). As the 1980s progressed, ongoing racism in curricula co-existed with racialised and classed access to schooling (Tomlinson, 2019: 109). Racism permeated not just the education system but all aspects of the British economic and political life. Nationalist feeling was strongly emboldened by the Falkland war propaganda, politically represented as a moment of recovered imperial greatness (Gildea, 2019: 138). Simultaneously, Thatcher's Euroscepticism emboldened and shaped broader processes of social ignorance about the European project and its subsequent instantiations. In the 1990s, the semi-privatisation of schooling coincided with strong pressures to pedagogically promote traditional 'national' British values – a vision of the 'nation' that Black, Asian and other minority children could not identify

with, especially against the background of rising Islamophobia. A ‘cult of beneficent imperialism and the Second World War’ was deemed incompatible with multiculturalism (Gildea, 2019: 181). However, it is beginning in the 1990s that the massive expansion of university education led to the rise of a demographic group who would later on make the bulk of the Remain camp – a camp whose representatives failed, however, to articulate a persuasive political vision that could have successfully dented the hegemonic ethnocentrism so formative to those whose political socialisation was shaped by the brief history outlined above.

From 2007 onwards, the Black History Month reminded pupils of certain aspects of British imperial history, while up to the present, the empire, the commonwealth but also the EU and its system of institutions and human rights regimes remain minimally covered (Dorling, 2019). When, as late as 2010, Michael Gove – then Secretary of State for Education – dismissed the authority of professional historians who had problematised British imperial history and aimed (unsuccessfully) to impose a ‘history as celebration’ curriculum, that is, one that assumed a progressive linear history moved forward by great British ‘heroes’ and British institutions – the best in the world – he was merely reflecting a four-decades old Conservative Party’s education policy, as well as the ideological work of Conservative think tanks, politicians and newspapers (Watson, 2020). Meanwhile, tabloids kept dealing in racist tropes and ‘Euromyths’, and public television dedicated documentaries and series to Britain’s historical international beneficence (Richardson, 2004; Saeed, 2007; Smith and Deacon, 2018; van Dijk, 2015).

Given all this, it is no surprise that:

Eurosceptical attitudes proceed directly from a distinct *dearth of scepticism* about the events taken to be central to an understanding of Britain’s past, where national imperial and martial history continue to dominate the public consciousness. European affairs in general and the EU in particular tend to be viewed through those lenses rather than being taken as subjects for debate and discussion on their own terms (Daddow, 2006).

Consequently, the system reflexivity constructivists put their hopes in functioned within the parameters of an ecology of ignorance in the period preceding the Brexit referendum. Nobody can deny that the United Kingdom is committed to political freedoms, that formal and informal communication channels between representatives and the represented are available and that institutional avenues where decisions can be scrutinised abound. These formal prerequisites could not, however, perform the accountability function constructivists advocate for because they worked against the background of an institutionalised, ignorant social imaginary with strong political entrepreneurs, which limited the kind of claims that could – and were likely to – be successfully articulated authoritatively, heard and supported broadly. Thus, widespread ignorant ‘habits of mind’ and ‘structures of feeling’ (Ward and Rasch, 2019) constituted a key resource into which Leavers’ representative claims could tap into so as to summon a winning majority. These claims relied on a deft (mis)use of political temporality, a selective cast of characters, conceptual contraction and powerful affective work. Let us analyse these aspects in turn.

Temporally, one could sum up the main constitutive claim of Vote Leave as follows: Britain is a *great nation* with a *great* past whose *greatness* has been stifled at the hands of an unaccountable, oppressive European superstate and its rogue institutions – therefore, the United Kingdom has become a ‘colony’ to the EU, itself a retrograde entity. A present of supposed servitude appals Leavers like Priti Patel who speaks of the ‘shackles of the

EU' (Wheeler, 2016), while Iain Duncan Smith stipulates that 'We have gone from wanting to lead in Europe to being on the end of a lead in Europe' (Newton Dunn, 2016). This desperate situation is not irreversible, since Brexit offers 'a *once-in-a-lifetime* chance . . . to show that we care about self-rule' (Johnson, 2016a: emphasis added) and stop being 'hostages' to the EU (Gove in Stewart, 2016). Staying in the EU would involve a further relinquishing of 'control' (Grayling, 2016b), while leaving it would actualise a fantasy of fulfilment (Browning, 2019): according to Smith, 'a *great dawn* of Britain's *independence and the chance to be a power in the world again*' (Ross, 2016: emphasis added) awaits Britain<sup>9</sup> or, as Patel suggests, Brexit would be 'a leap into the light' (Wooding, 2016), free from 'every *diktat* from Brussels' (Patel, 2016: emphasis added).

When it comes to the 'great past' and the 'great future it can underpin', '[I]t is in the casual disregard of Empire . . . rather than its conscious or systematic evocation, that forms the key to "post-imperial" in much Brexit rhetoric' (Thackeray and Toye, 2019: 17). While many commentators hastened to diagnose imperial nostalgia or retrotopia (Beaumont, 2017; Finlayson, 2018), a more complex, mediated process was at play (Schwarz, 2019): invocations of past greatness during the campaign focused on commercial power, the triumphs of free trade, obscuring the economic and political imbrication of capitalism with empire. Several key statements by the Vote Leave promoted a vision of a prosperous future of entrepreneurship, which could restore some of the lost greatness, whether in the shape of a historically unfounded idea of capitalist munificence:

We can forge trade deals and partnerships with nations across the globe, *helping developing countries to grow* and benefiting from faster and better access to new markets (Gove, 2016c: emphasis added).

Our country *cares about the developing world*.

Our country wants to trade with the world.

Our country wants *to see prosperity not just for its own people but for all people* (Cleverly, 2016: emphasis added).

via references to former colonies, represented as keen business partners:

It is absurd that Britain – *historically a great free-trading nation* – has been unable for 42 years to do a free trade deal with *Australia, New Zealand, China, India and America* (Johnson, 2016b).

There is no European country more global in outlook than Britain . . . And millions of our citizens *have family ties* beyond Europe, whether with the *Indian subcontinent, Australia, New Zealand or Africa* (Raab, 2016: emphasis added).

The EU has failed to agree trade deals with the most important economies in the world. We have much *stronger historic links with countries like America and India* than any other EU member does (Gove et al., 2016a).

or via positive images of the British Empire, whose already heavily curated history really starts only at its very end:

Whether it was suppressing the slave trade, or supporting liberal nationalist movements against static autocratic European empires, in the first half of the nineteenth century or seeking to defend

the rights of small nations and the principle of self-determination in the twentieth century, the United Kingdom has been clear about its values (Gove, 2016a).

Of the many gifts which our country has given the world the gift of democracy, of democratic self-government, is the greatest (Howard, 2016).

Some explicit references to empire do, however, emerge, and it is Boris Johnson whose representative claims tap most unequivocally into a positive imperial imaginary, purged of its violence and exploitation and deployed to reactivate positive affective investments:

We used to run *the biggest empire the world has ever seen*, and with a much smaller domestic population and a relatively tiny Civil Service. Are we really unable to do trade deals? (Johnson, 2016a: emphasis added)

However, the majority of the representative claims about temporality refer only indirectly to the empire: metonymically substituting free trade for empire or synecdochally invoking the names of distinct former colonies or the ‘benefits’ Britain provided the world with. Reconnecting to white settler colonies is a constant theme, the racial undertones of this preference masked by the language of ‘shared values’, ‘shared language’, ‘shared institutions’ (Bell and Vucetic, 2019; Kenny and Pearce, 2019). As Thackeray and Toye (2019: 22) showed, ‘the rhetorical skill of Brexiteers during the referendum lay in their ability to conjure up an imagined future drawing on an equally brilliant imagined past, in which formal Empire was largely absent but British power and prestige was enormous’. Such representative claims, I argue, constitute further contributions to the existing structural production of social ignorance.

As historian Bill Schwarz (2019: 50–51) writes, in ‘not caring to remember’, Leave campaign leaders’ positions ‘signal an escalation in the trivialisation of the past; degrees of temporal dissociation have turned into a qualitative transformation of significance’. This transformation of significance – one that over-visibility certain processes and invisibilises others – mines the existing racialised imaginary and reconfigures it by articulating specific claims about the historical identity of ‘the nation’, its past of glorious free trade and the threats it faces in the present. Thus, Gove (2016c) makes a historically untenable analogy between United Kingdom’s position in the EU and that of the American colonies in the British Empire, establishing an undue equivalence between regional institutions such as the EU and imperial entities. Johnson’s claim that the United Kingdom is legally colonised in ‘just about every area of policy’ (Gove, 2016a) occludes the actual distribution of prerogatives between the EU and its members, as well as Britain’s EU opt-outs and the political reasons behind them. The repeated invocations of the British ‘nation’ or ‘island nation’ – the latter a reference to Churchill and WWII (Cap, 2017) – conceal the fact that, since 1707, Britain has been imbricated in multinational political entities (Bhambra, 2015, 2017) and that it enjoyed neither splendid isolation nor ethnic homogeneity (Donington, 2019). References to Commonwealth members as enthusiastic trading partners mis-represent these states’ current economic policy agenda and the obstacle that geographical distance poses (Dickson, 2018). Emblematically, the evident indifference to the thorny Irish question reveals its marginality in the Leavers’ political and moral circle of reference and who they understand to belong to the ‘nation’.

In the Leavers’ representative claims, the key obstacle to recovering greatness is the hijacking of national sovereignty by the EU and its court – and this is where the key

conceptual reconfiguration takes place.<sup>10</sup> Reinforcing a racist and nationalist common sense, they define sovereignty almost exclusively negatively, as the capacity to freely deport ‘undesirable’ people and to avoid recognising and implementing international human rights laws, that is, with the capacity to strip individuals of internationally recognised rights. Thus, Chris Grayling argues that Brexit would help eliminate ‘the *rogue* European Court of Justice’s control over *national security*’ and help ‘end the situation where an international court can tell us *who we can and cannot deport*’ (Grayling, 2016a: emphasis added). He is particularly aggravated by EU’s intention to impose supranational protection over a set of social rights, including minimum pay, access to lifelong learning and skills and basic social services, including healthcare (Grayling, 2016b). EU’s freedom of movement principle and its ‘wayward’ court’s adjudication in international asylum and refugee law are blamed for an upcoming apocalyptic future in an overcrowded country:

*Where do they intend to build the houses? How will the health service cope?* (Johnson, 2016d: emphasis added)

In contrast, leaving would guarantee the ‘ability to regain control of our borders, including *far stronger powers over who we can deport*, and proper preventive checks at the border’ (Raab, 2016: emphasis added). Only thus can ‘we’ ensure that ‘. . . we will be able *to remove* those who *abuse our hospitality*’ (Gove et al., 2016c: emphasis added).

Conceptual as well as ethical brinkmanship is thus at play in the main Leave players’ representative claims, aiming to give a particular object of affective investment to a summoned racist, Islamophobic public. Interestingly, while white Eastern European migration was also constituted as an object of righteous resentment and outrage, it is the spectre of EU enlargement to countries with predominantly Muslim populations – 77 million Turks and 1.8 million Kosovars, all of whom are expected to relocate to the United Kingdom<sup>11</sup> – and images of Middle Eastern refugees crossing barbed wire fences<sup>12</sup> that are at the centre of the Leave’s effort to identify the kind of bodies that could – as objects of hate and fear – secure a winning constituency. Further enlargement would open up ‘a border-free zone from Iraq, Iran and Syria to the English Channel’, claims Gove (2016a). Deployed alongside key terms such as ‘security’ and ‘terrorism’, the names of these countries resonate cognitively and affectively by picturing a frightening future against which a public of Leavers could coagulate, thereby perpetuating ignorance about these countries’ politics and religion, as well as British involvement in their area.

Most attacks on migration are prefaced by disclaimers about its value and United Kingdom’s international outlook, which project an image of a welcoming, hospitable country, ‘. . . a global champion for freedom’ (Gove, 2016a) whose goodwill, however, has often been abused:

The British public support immigration but they want it controlled by those who they elect. *They are generous but feel their generosity has been abused. They are right* (Johnson, 2016c: emphasis added).

These qualifying statements perpetuate a whitewashed vision of the country’s history, impossible to redeem given the systemic violence, exclusions and marginalisations that characterise Britain’s past and present treatment of its own citizens. This vision was deeply shaken only a couple of years later by the Windrush scandal and the revelations of systemic abuses committed within the ‘hostile environment’ approach of the Home Office

from 2012 onwards. A positive image of a welcoming Britain is nonetheless projected as a counterweight to the threats posed by the EU, its supposedly aggressive court and Soviet-like bureaucracy (Gove, 2016b) – another analogy meant to fuel Eurosceptic sentiment. In contrast, Britain gave the world parliamentary democracy (Johnson, 2016a) and is ‘a uniquely inventive country’ (Gove, 2016d) who ‘showed the world what a free people could achieve if they were allowed to govern themselves’ (Gove, 2016c).

This image conceals the historical and ongoing racial exclusions that characterise Britain’s citizenship record and makes it possible to embrace a ‘respectable’ form of racism – different from Leave.EU campaign’s more overt version, yet equally impermeable to contrary evidence and opinion. The 2014 University College London report on the positive economic impact of immigration from the EU (Dustmann and Frattini, 2014) did not dent the excess credibility of the Leave campaign’s key figures. On the contrary, met with epistemic laziness – itself fuelled by Gove’s anti-intellectualist representative claim that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’ (Mance, 2016)<sup>13</sup> – it failed to disrupt the mantra of migrants’ overwhelming the National Health Service and the local school system (Gove et al., 2016b, 2016c; Raab, 2016; Smith, 2016), or the more outlandish claims about migrants’ particular destructive effect on the environment and even the availability of green spaces (Fox, 2016). These representative claims cultivated social ignorance about the systemic effects of United Kingdom’s economic policies implemented after the 2008 financial crisis and their effect on public services (Atkinson et al., 2012; Edmiston, 2018). They constituted a public for whom the nation had indeed been ‘displaced’ (Patel in Wooding, 2016), victimised and colonised by ‘an obscurantist and universalist system of government’ (Johnson, 2016b), prey to ‘millions of unskilled people’ (Johnson, 2016c) who were ‘worsening overcrowding in our land limited country’ (Fox, 2016). Against the background of a historically exclusionary, racialised and Eurosceptic imaginary and aided by the media’s relentless stoking of fear and hate towards migrants (Cap, 2017), they carried the day, without manipulation and under robust conditions of system reflexivity.

## Conclusion

While the paper used the Brexit referendum as an example, the theoretical arguments applied here could potentially illuminate a broader variety of ignorant ecologies. In Britain itself, the recent protests triggered by the Windrush scandal, the Grenfell fire and the racialised effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as intensifying calls to decolonise the curricula and the public space highlight the ecological nature of social ignorance, but also the rise of an alternative community of judgement, seeking to articulate different visions of the people and of democracy itself.<sup>14</sup> For democratic accountability to obtain, the debates that happen within a reflexive system need to rely on a plural space of meaning, not one colonised by a skewed narrative about the nation, its glorious past and luminous future. To put it differently, the formal freedoms and opportunities to form alternative options, to articulate dissent and to contest representative claims retroactively – the formal characteristics of reflexive systems – rely on public imaginaries and the hermeneutical resources available in a community, themselves the seldom-acknowledged result of complex histories and entrenched inequalities of political, symbolic and epistemic power. These imaginaries and the interpretive frameworks they provide will therefore influence what kinds of claims are thinkable, sayable, credible and authoritative within the system, however reflexive it might be: this is this article’s key worry about the blind spots of the constructivist account of legitimacy.



Given the ecological nature of social ignorance – its misrecognition and interstitial embeddedness in institutions, materiality, relationships, bodies and psyches – it is impossible to outline a clear path out of it. Dissenting voices that articulate inclusive, anti-racist visions of identity and that illuminate self-serving mnemonic and political erasures may have a galvanising power, summoning into being counterpublics and performatively kickstarting processes of redrawing the contours of the common sense. Historically speaking, however, successful counterclaims have ridden on broad political mobilisation by emerging social movements, which helped them echo more broadly and destabilise the status quo. The critical theorist’s task is therefore to trace social ignorance’s symbolic and material effects within the social fabric, not only to identify and amplify incipient sources of alternative political visions but also – perhaps most crucially – to critically and lucidly accompany political efforts aiming to translate these visions democratically.

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### Notes

1. For example, representative claims that conjure false histories of victimisation in relation to specific privileged groups – as is the case of ‘white grievance’ claims in the United States – or that propose reductive policies as quick fixes for complex group-specific issues, thus contributing to their misrecognition – such as advocating penal or carceral approaches that individualise responsibility in response to structural social problems, such as chronic deprivation or sexual violence.
2. For a recent analysis of the changes in both demographic and political elite discourses that culminated in Brexit, see Sobolewska and Ford (2020).
3. This would not have involved, as Kaufmann (2019) argues, offering anti-migration Brexiteers a ‘reassuring narrative’ of migrant ‘assimilation’. Had Remainers followed his suggestions, they would have confirmed social ignorance about British nationhood, legitimising a racialised vision thereof.
4. A rich literature analyses the political malleability of memory. Social epistemologists (Origgi, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012) and scholars in feminist (Alcoff, 2000; Lugones, 1987), critical race (Hill Collins, 2009; Mills, 1998) and post- and decolonial theory (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 2013) – all warn about the reproduction of marginalisation through the selective erasure of certain voices and accounts from the vision of ‘History’ that gets cultivated trans-generationally.
5. For an alternative, political scientific approach to the emotional dimensions of Brexit, see Moss et al. (2020).
6. This concept captures the systemic – structural and intersubjective – nature of the phenomenon.
7. For example, Satia (2020) recently offered an excellent analysis of prominent British historians’ role as ‘abettors’ of imperial elites.

8. See [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/key\\_speeches\\_interviews\\_and\\_op\\_ed.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/key_speeches_interviews_and_op_ed.html).
9. See this claim's visual representation here: <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nah546mal>.
10. For an excellent analysis of this fits in broader foreign policy claims by the campaign, see Martill and Rogstad (2019).
11. Michael Gove invites us to wonder whether 'the public would continue to enjoy the same high-quality healthcare they enjoy if another 88million people had access to the NHS'. Gove cited in Dominiczak (2016). For visual representation, see <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:fip763sox> and <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:sar372pon>.
12. See images on the Vote Leave main site: [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why\\_vote\\_leave.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html).
13. For a sophisticated analysis of the anti-expertise position, see Hay (2020). Writing on the resilience of social ignorance, Alcoff (2007: 56) writes that 'no political reflexivity or sociological analysis is thought to be required'.
14. The expansion of university education in the United Kingdom from the 1990s onwards has led to increased public support for liberal, anti-racist values among university-educated citizens, a trend that, according to Sobolewska and Ford (2020), is likely to radically transform British party and electoral politics in the long run.

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