

Utopian fantasies: the myths peddled by referendum campaigners

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The referendum question does not offer a clear choice despite the two seemingly simple alternatives. As a result, both sides of the divide try to fill the uncertainty with their own utopias and wild speculation. [Mareike Kleine](#) writes that these utopian visions of a post-Brexit Britain offer an interesting glimpse into what appears to be a deeply torn society in search of a common identity.



In 1516, statesman and poet Thomas More published *Utopia*, a description of an ideal island nation. Today, five hundred years later, utopias such as More's are once again in fashion. The referendum has prompted both the Eurosceptics and the Europhiles to paint the wildest images of what the UK might look like outside of the EU.

Whether – and under what conditions – referendums are an effective democratic instrument is highly contentious among political scientists and democratic theorists. There seems to be consensus, however, that a choice between two clearly defined alternatives is a prerequisite for an informed decision preceded by an informative and inclusive debate.

Despite the apparently simple phrasing, the Brexit referendum does not offer such a clear choice. The question “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” requires citizens to choose between the status quo on the one hand, and a big unknown, on the other hand, for which there is no precedent and that itself depends on numerous contingent factors. Who is going to govern? How will the EU react? What will the US and other third countries do? How will the financial markets react?



Both sides are now trying to fill this gaping uncertainty with their own utopias and wild speculation. The Remain camp sees an opportunity to play on people's fear of radical change and paint a frightening picture of the fallout from a Brexit. The Leave camp, on the other hand, imagine a fairytale world in which, freed from European shackles, the UK can resume an enlightened and coherent policy as it was last seen in the good old days of the empire.

These different utopias turn out to be less about the EU and more about what Britons want their country to be. They offer an interesting glimpse into what appears to be a deeply torn society in search of a common identity. To some, the UK is a liberal democracy that belongs firmly to the European liberal project that the EU represents. To others, the UK has always been at its best when it acted in isolation from Europe. Some believe that the membership threatens to destroy Britain's social fabric by sucking it deeper into a globalisation maelstrom, while others believe that the EU has curbed Britain's true potential in the global economy.

Despite contradicting claims even within the opposing camps, there is one thing that unites the Leave campaign in particular: it is the idealisation of the own nation (read: England) and a negative stereotyping of all that is not British (or English). This might be implicit or unintentional in some cases. It is open and rabid on the right wing and increasingly so among the Conservatives. This author, echoing the sentiments of many Europeans, was not amused by Boris Johnson's Nazi comments, though they do not even come close to the agitation against citizens from Central and Eastern Europe. In this atmosphere, attempts of their compatriots to counter falsehoods with facts and thus question the Eurosceptic utopia are quickly dismissed as unpatriotic. Britons are called upon to "BeLeave" in Britain.

Ultimately, the Brexit debate has evolved more into a cacophony of utopias than an informed and participatory debate. It offers a glimpse into the state of the British society, and the picture that emerges is not pretty. The Brexit referendum, especially in this specific form, is clearly not an example to emulate.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.

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