The European Union as depicted
in Anti-EU parties' visual metaphors

HARRIET LLOYD*

The anti-EU movement rests upon a pervasive feature of the modern political climate: the rise of nationalism. For the strongest single-issue party in Britain, UKIP, nationalism is a cornerstone. Its statement that 'UKIP believes in Britain becoming a democratic, self-governing country once again' carries connotations far wider than the issue of union with Europe. This party takes a straightforwardly right-wing stance. UKIP is 'unashamedly patriotic', advocates a small state and calls for 'self-reliance' among British people.   Its call for an end to the immigration of unskilled workers is one of its most popular policies, fuelled by the popular belief that immigrants are simultaneously both taking jobs which should be available to British workers, and are draining state resources such as the benefits system, social housing and the NHS.

But it is not only right-wing nationalists who have called for an end to membership of the European Union in Britain.   There is a long history of rejecting the idea on the Left.   The late Labour MP Tony Benn made a case for independence from the EU based on the idea that democracy rested on the ability for elected MPs to have political freedom, which was inextricably linked to economic freedom from other bodies.   Similarly, left-wing parties such as the 'No 2 EU' party base their call for leaving on what it sees as the EU's corrosion of workers' rights, the commodification of workers, and pro-privatization policies.   In this, they seek to defend not only the rights of British workers, but the working class of other countries, such as Greece, who they describe as having been unfairly hit by unfair EU demands for cuts: http://www.no2eu.com/?page_id=438.   However, they foreground the idea of national identity for all member states over that of the European Union.

My article will examine how metaphors used by parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum employ visual metaphors in their campaign material in to present the EU as a violent force operating on Britons. This means that, in both cases, British identity is privileged over European identity, and that the European Union is depicted as an opposing power.

There are many features of the postmodern condition that would be expected to render nationalism defunct: increased opportunities for travel for many people; access to technologies that allow communication across space; the involvement of many countries in international economic and political structures on unprecedented levels. But immersion in a series of global webs seems

to have had the result of increasing the desire to grab onto old understandings of the local, and 'home'.

The national unit is, of course, not nearly as old as it claims to be. It is only when we come into contact with members of other nations that we gain any awareness of our own nationality. The assumption that we all possess a national identity, as we are frequently asked to declare on forms for seemingly quite unrelated purposes, is not 'natural', nor is it a level of identity equally oriented to in different places. Yet in many ways, it is made to appear natural, normal and necessary. We should always question ideas that seem natural, normal, and necessary.

One of the ways that this naturalization is achieved is through what Michael Billig (1995) refers to as 'banal nationalism'; the unnoticed ways in which the idea of nation is suggested to us in the background of our daily lives, such as limp flags hanging from official buildings. This, Billig suggests, is what facilitates the fervent 'hot' nationalism that we are sometimes called upon to perform, in the cause of social movements. By then, the idea has been built up so unobtrusively that our defence of it seems natural. Billig laments that it is only 'hot' nationalism that tends to be the focus of academic analysis, in the same way that it is this sort of nationalism that is noticed by others. It is at these moments that the results of investment in the idea of nation are evidenced.

Nationalism is almost always tied to judgements about who should have certain responsibilities and privileges. Poole (1999) suggests that accepting the idea of national identity is a question of both benefitting from and sacrificing to this cause, as a kind of moral contract. In return for a national identity that outlives us, and offers us protection from others, we agree to attend to the needs of our fellow nationals over the sometimes more morally urgent needs of non-nationals, and to sacrifice other aspects of our identities. The most extreme example of this is giving our own lives for the sake of the national good in war with other countries.

On the other hand, nations are extant administrative units, and it is often argued that the most effective means of achieving a number of aims, such as wealth redistribution, would be to utilise these units. When nations are described as nations, we can question whether they are the most sensible means of achieving certain political objectives. But, more often than not, other terms are substituted for the nation, which carry a range of ideologically-loaded meanings, such as 'homeland'. We should pay close attention to the terms in which these debates are carried out.

One of the most telling devices in the subtle communication (both verbal and visual) of ideas it metaphors. By examining the assumptions behind metaphors, we can begin to get a picture of how the producer of a message wants us to think about an issue. Metaphors describe one thing in terms of another. Certain aspects of the phenomenon described in a metaphor will be highlighted in the metaphor, and other things ignored. Both of these things are important for

understanding what we are being asked to see as the most and least important aspects of a situation.

The UKIP party employs a particular visual metaphor in one of its campaign posters, available at http://www.ukip.org/ukip_national_billboard_campaign.

The British flag is pictured burning from the centre outwards, revealing the EU flag underneath. The caption reads: 'Who really runs this country? 75% of our laws are now made in Brussels'. On the right-hand side, a rectangle in the UKIP party colours if purple and yellow reads 'Take back control of our country. Vote UKIP 22nd May'. In this metaphor, flags are seen as representing power, or 'control'. The British flag symbolises British power, and the EU flag the power of the European Union. The fire which burns the British flag represents the loss of power for Britain. The use of fire, as opposed to some other form of decay, in this metaphor represents the loss of power as uncontrolled and fast-spreading.

But is also important to consider what is not being represented in this metaphor. The influence of Britain on the EU, for example, is absent. The depiction of the EU as a destructive force, burning away British control and identity, allows no room for considerations of the benefits of membership.

But, while 'NO2EU' employs a very different visual metaphor, they nevertheless depict the EU as a violent force, which British workers are at the mercy of. Available at http://www.no2eu.com/, in a flow of images, a male worker in a hard-hat and high visibility jacket reading 'workers' rights' is shown lying down under a huge judge's hammer with the works 'Lisbon treaty' engraved on it. In the background, part of a disproportionately large EU flag is show, one star being about half the size of the man. A large caption reads: 'Workers' rights are being eroded by the EU', with a subtext reading: The EU is turning human beings into commodities to be shunted around Europe while local workers are excluded from being able to provide for their families'.

In this metaphor, the man stands in for other workers, while the judge's hammer represents the laws enforced by the European Union. The worker's helpless position represents the relative powerlessness of British workers in the face of EU legislation. Again, Britons (or 'local workers', as they are euphemistically called here) are depicted as being at the mercy of EU power, with no recourse for regaining strength other than to leave the EU. The contractual nature of the relationship is not taken into account; Britons are depicted only as being subject to the EU, rather than as subjects in the EU.

In each of these instances, not only are negative aspects of life, such as the loss of employment, attributed to the EU, but an idea of being physically threatened is associated with it. Although, in the latter case, this is not necessarily nationalistic, such representations serve to

undermine the sense of belonging to the union, by selectively presenting it as impacting on the lives of those in its member states, and ignoring the reverse effect.

Here, as commonly in representations in the British mass media, we are being asked to perform a cost-benefit analysis of our relations with other countries.   The merits of our international alliances are judged on their current contribution to or reduction of our economic conditions.   This is particularly the case in the right-wing press, which invites us to reject ideas of global citizenship whilst enjoying the benefits of a globalised marketplace.

References:

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* PhD student, Center for Language and Communication Research, Cardiff University