

'Have your cake and eat it': Myth, Brexit and the Stickiness of Strategic Narrative

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This paper examines the role of myth in the stickiness of strategic narratives. It expands on my previous research on strategic narratives from the perspective of 'ordinary' British citizens. From the outset, strategic narrative theorists emphasised that narratives persuade by 'resonating' with existing understandings of target audiences. The fast-growing body of research on disinformation puts forward confirmation bias as the key to persuasion: reinforcing ideas people already hold. Yet what individual stories strategic narratives 'reinforce' or 'resonate with' would benefit from greater attention.

Brexit is the area of focus. Much has been written on the causes of the Brexit vote to leave the EU. Causes vary from long term societal inequalities to the effectiveness of the Leave campaign's short-term political communication. Myth is a key element. Leave campaigners repeatedly invoke World War Two analogies, imagining Britain standing proudly and stoically alone while Europe faltered against Germany. They invoke the 'Blitz spirit' in claiming that imposing Brexit's probable hardship on the population would somehow unite a fractured country. This paper steps further back, revealing a less prominent myth that shaped debates – the myth of British diplomatic exceptionalism: that Britain possesses unique understanding of other cultures derived from its imperial past. This was thought to enable it to out-negotiate Europe and enrich itself through the Brexit process.

The paper will show that these ideas were highly prominent in ordinary British citizens' narratives of Britain's historical role in the world long before the Brexit referendum. Analysis moves upwards from citizens' narratives about British diplomatic exceptionalism to show how these ideas were expressed in elite discourse on Brexit. This draws the link between myths narrated at the individual level and the scripts politicians use to explain how the future will play out. This adds a further piece to the puzzles of why some strategic narratives are stickier than others. It adds a new empirical case to research studying strategic narratives from the ground up. It explains why a significant proportion of Britain's population believed it would be able to 'have its cake and eat it' in Brexit negotiations.