

AT HOME IN ONE'S PAST

Nostalgia as a Cultural and Political Force in Britain,
France and Germany

Sophie Gaston

and

Sacha Hilhorst

DEMOS

Executive Summary

Research Overview

An appeal to a glorious past has been a prominent feature of European politics in recent years. While there are common elements to the nostalgic discourses seen across European politics, nostalgic narratives are clearly heavily mediated and contextualised by a nation's esoteric cultural and historical background. This report sets out the findings of our qualitative and quantitative research into nostalgia in contemporary Great Britain, France and Germany – three leading European nations in which the past feels ever-present.

Methodologically, we gather in this report a large suite of academic, quantitative and qualitative research, including original surveys. In particular, we present the insights gained from an extensive suite of citizen focus groups conducted in cities and towns throughout England, France and Germany, which together provide a comprehensive illustration of the many contributing factors behind commonly held anxieties about the present, and apprehension towards the future. We contextualise these through researching the employment of nostalgia as a rhetorical device in each country's contemporary political cultures, particularly focusing on recent political campaigns, and through interviews on this subject with leading political figures, campaigners and commentators.

The research reveals three countries with profoundly different histories, political cultures and national psychologies, yet also bound together by a common affliction. In these great nations, each with, in historical terms, momentous levels of prosperity, standards of living, and global influence, a substantial minority – or even majority – of citizens are gripped by a kind of malaise, a sense that something is fundamentally rotten at the heart of their societies. Moreover, an omnipresent, menacing feeling of decline; that the very best of their culture and communities has been irreversibly lost, that the nation's best days have passed, and that the very essence of what it means to be French, or German, or British is under threat. While the political consequences of this psychological state are unique to each country, our research demonstrates that many of their antecedents are shared.

Our studies of the use of nostalgic rhetoric in the recent French and German election campaigns, and the European Referendum in Britain, demonstrate the pervasive extent to which language speaking to the security, status and simplicity of previous decades has infiltrated contemporary political cultures. The currency of the past, so to speak, is so influential that even those guardians of the status

quo are seeking to define their legitimacy in historical terms. While it is certainly the case, as our research shows, that nostalgia has long been a feature of Western politics on both the Left and the Right, there is a particular urgency around the issue at the moment due to the sheer depth of dissatisfaction in our societies, as we stand on the cusp of another era of major economic transformation.

Despite the tremendous volume of nostalgic rhetoric speaking to the restoration of a 'golden age', a particularly striking finding of the research is the extent to which the word 'nostalgia' itself is seen in a pejorative light. It is a relatively small tranche of citizens and politicians who will openly proclaim themselves to be nostalgic, or to speak in such explicit terms, and the content analysis and focus groups reinforce the extent to which the term is used as a liberal slur. For example, in our study of the Brexit Referendum, we witness the ongoing efforts of those involved with, and convinced by, the campaign to Leave the European Union to define its legacy as fundamentally future-oriented. These insights suggest that in some ways, paradoxically, the 'doctrine of progress' continues to dominate European political cultures, even as they struggle to galvanise towards the future.

Key Findings – British Survey on Social and Political Attitudes

To contextualise our research in England, we partnered with Sky Data to conduct a nationally representative survey of British adults – capturing their views on nostalgia, as well as economic transformation, British culture and values, and immigration, and the Government’s role in managing such changes. We also sought their perspectives on the legacy of the European Referendum campaign, and whether the Leave and Remain sides were considered to have been future-oriented or consumed by the past.

Nostalgia

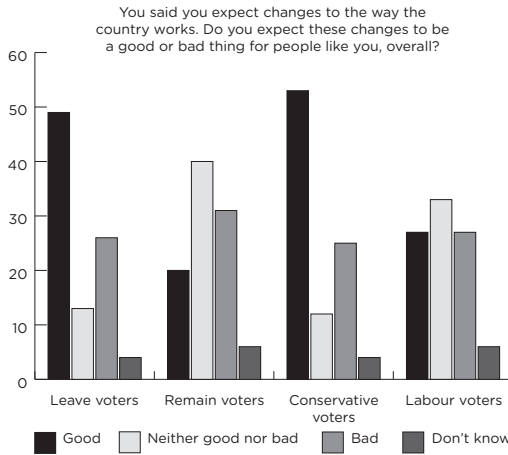
- 63 per cent of British citizens believe life was better when they were growing up, compared to 21 per cent who believe that life is better now.
- 55 per cent of citizens believe that job opportunities were more accessible and plentiful in the past, 71 per cent believe their communities have been eroded over the course of their lifetimes, and 63 per cent believe that Britain’s status on the world stage has declined.

Economic Transformation

- 26 per cent of citizens believe the Government should focus on encouraging businesses to change with the times, to keep the economy competitive, compared to 16 per cent who feel they should favour protecting existing jobs and traditional ways of life. Half the population believe both should be balanced equally.
- 48 per cent of Britons believe that those who lose their jobs due to economic change (ie. globalisation, automation) should be given additional preferential support, and 35 per cent believe they should be treated with equivalence as any other person who loses their jobs.
- 55 per cent of citizens feel it is only appropriate for the Government to subsidise industries at risk of closure due to globalisation “in certain circumstances”, with 15 per cent believing the state should always step in, and 11 per cent believing they should always abstain.

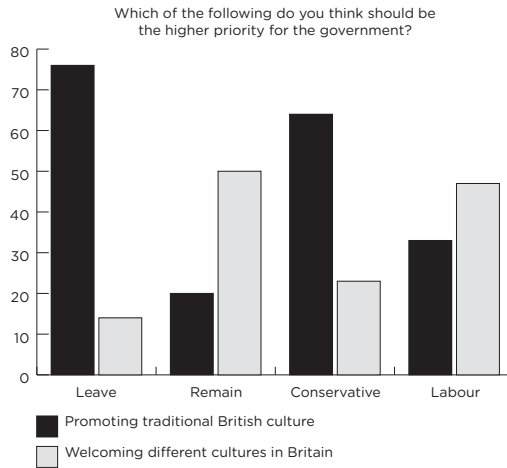
Change and the Future

- 82 per cent of Britons anticipate a “fair” or “great” level of change lies on the horizon.
- 31 per cent of citizens believe the change that lies ahead will benefit them, and 30 per cent believe they will lose out.
- 49 per cent of Leave voters, who tend to be more pessimistic on every other question, believe they will benefit from future change, compared to 20 per cent of Remain voters, suggesting that when presented as an unspecified force, ‘change’ has become intrinsically linked in citizens’ minds, for good and for bad, with Brexit.



Community and British Culture

- 46 per cent of Britons believe the Government should prioritise economic growth over stronger communities, with 34 per cent – more than a third of adults – willing to favour community over prosperity.
- 47 per cent of Britons (and 76 per cent of Leave voters) feel that protecting British values should be favoured over multiculturalism, compared to 36 per cent of citizens (and 55 per cent of Remain voters) who feel ‘welcoming different cultures’ is more important.
- 55 per cent of Britons do not believe the Government is doing enough to promote traditional British values. 66 per cent of Conservative voters believe their own Party is not succeeding in this area in power, as do 80 per cent of Leave voters, compared to 33 per cent of Remain voters.



Immigration

- 43 per cent of Britons believe immigration has been positive for Britain, and 44 per cent believe it has been a negative development.
- Most hostile to immigration are Conservative voters (55 per cent), Leave voters (63 per cent), Northerners (53 per cent) and the working classes (51 per cent).
- 71 per cent of Britons believe that immigration has made the communities where migrants have settled more divided, reaching 78 per cent in areas that report having experienced large-scale migration in recent years, and 81 per cent amongst Conservative voters.

The European Referendum Campaign

- Reflecting on the messaging of the EU Referendum, 40 per cent of citizens overall felt the Leave campaign's rhetoric was focused on restoration and the past, and 26 per cent felt it emphasised the future.
- 36 per cent of Britons felt the Remain campaign was future-oriented, and 11 per cent restorative, while a considerable proportion of citizens (41 per cent) either felt it was 'neither' or selected 'don't know'.
- 50 per cent of Leave voters felt the campaign they supported was future-focused, and 58 per cent of Remain voters believe the campaign they supported looked to the future.

Key Findings – European Referendum

Content Analysis

To interrogate the information environment in which the European Referendum took place in Britain, with a particular focus on the employment of nostalgic rhetoric amongst politicians and the media, we undertook a media content analysis of British newspapers for the three months ahead of the vote, through the use of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos' in-house big data technology.

The analysis identified that nostalgic rhetoric was contained both within the writing of columnists and comment pieces, and also, quite significantly, in the reporting of politicians' speeches and interviews throughout the campaign. Overall, we identified around 3,300 articles during the campaign and its immediate aftermath, with three publications standing out with the highest number of such articles – *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and the *Express* – although it should be noted that a substantial proportion of articles in *The Guardian* were challenging the perceived nostalgia of the Leave campaign.

We conclude that nostalgic rhetoric clearly played a significant role in the Referendum campaign, in particular, emphasising particular tropes around the Second World War, Empire and the 're-installation' of British sovereignty. The content analysis reveals that nostalgia was not contained solely within the pro-Brexit side; rather, the Remain campaign also sought to match and even 'out-play' its competitors' nostalgic discourses to demonstrate that membership of the EU reflected a continuity of national history.

More broadly, this study also reveals the discipline of the Leave campaign's messaging which, while often simplistic, was faultlessly deployed by a diverse range of actors. By contrast, the Remain campaign's language is considerably less consistent and heavily shaped by its messengers, hampering its ability to create a resilient, cohesive narrative. Interviews with leading figures in both the Leave and Remain campaigns conducted as part of this project reveal the ongoing debates regarding the legacy of their strategic approaches.

Key Findings – Focus Groups in England, France, and Germany

The extensive suites of focus groups conducted throughout England, France and Germany revealed that these three countries are experiencing many consistent trends in terms of social, economic and political insecurity. However, they also highlight the unique role that national history, character and identity play in shaping the manifestations of these anxieties, how they impact citizens' behaviour, and the efforts of politicians to address them.

In Britain, despite significant numbers of participants expressing a desire to return to a bygone era or a resistance to further change, 'nostalgia' remains a pejorative word, and a taboo. Moreover, despite the widespread critiques of contemporary British society, and anxieties about the future, many citizens remain both resilient and begrudgingly optimistic – a point that sets them apart from participants in our French and German focus groups. In France, discussions were uniquely framed by an enduring consciousness of the 'nation in decline' – an abstract sense of decay and squandered global status. There were also extensive discussions regarding the 'quality' of public life, considering the country's intellectual trajectory, culture of ideas and civil liberties as fundamental cornerstones of France's overall health. Finally, in Germany, the contested narratives between the East and the West about the country's present state, necessarily gave rise to the contested narratives of the past, and highlighted the tremendous variances of personal and collective experience held by citizens.

These distinct characteristics captured in the focus groups underscore the fact that political and social trends that can feel they are 'sweeping' Europe are also a very national story.

The Economy and Political Agency

- The processes of de-industrialisation have had extremely long-term consequences for communities and their residents, even casting a shadow across the optimism and ambitions of generations born long since the last mines or factories closed their doors.
- Even more discombobulating than the loss of a city or town's central industry is the perception that Government 'turned a blind eye' or 'chose to forget us' – a feeling that can fester over time to manifest in

social disengagement, and feed conspiracy thinking about endemic corruption in political institutions.

- The turbulence of de-industrialisation has also coincided with the decline of many of the institutions that have traditionally given representation and voice to the working classes – including social democratic parties. Many of these parties’ former voters feel alienated by the staunch cosmopolitanism and intellectualism of their contemporary representatives, and are naturally attracted to smaller parties offering to defend the values and former ways of life that once defined their personal and vocational identities.
- The ongoing effects of the global financial crisis, which accelerated labour market shifts towards short-term, insecure contracts, has expanded economic precariousness to the middle classes.

Social and Cultural Change

- However, the feeling of dislocation consuming citizens is not confined to economic, or even material, losses. In France, Britain and Germany, citizens feel they are witnessing the fragmentation of communities, as we enter an age of isolationism; the erosion of respect, as societies emphasise rights over responsibilities; and the collapse of public safety, as crime and opportunism menace the streets.
- Moreover, citizens believe the forces that once held us together – our shared cultures, traditions and values – are being displaced by an emphasis on pluralism, perceiving governments are failing to actively defend and promote their nation’s heritage.
- Immigration plays an important role in the salience of nostalgic rhetoric, beyond a desire to return to a ‘Whiter’ nation. Firstly, through the ‘exhaustion’ of the responsibilities to adapt and accommodate cultural diversity, which citizens feel are inflicted upon them as the dominant culture. Secondly, through a framework of social competition; with the state’s resources seen as a zero-sum game, the environment in which citizens consider immigration is underpinned with an acute level of anxiety that their own meagre access and power will be compromised.
- The hesitancy, and even active resistance, of political leaders to create space for open, constructive debate about issues of migrant crime, in

particular, has fostered a cottage industry of conspiracy thinking, and reduced citizens' propensity for tolerance and understanding of cultural difference.

- There is a clear compound effect of these social, cultural and economic anxieties, which manifest together to create an overall impression of the nation's health and the country's global standing.

Change and the Future

- While contemporary life in Britain, Germany and France brings unprecedented standards of living, health and convenience, for some citizens, the trade-offs between these gains are not sufficiently off-set by the tangible losses they observe in terms of security, community and cohesion.
- Even more significant in size and, perhaps, in political terms, is the large majority of citizens we identified those whose nostalgia does not compel them to return to the past, but simply to reject further change.
- In considering that governance in a globalised age at its most simplistic form is essentially a process of managing change, this inclination represents an equally challenging phenomenon to the effective functioning of our political systems.
- It is evident that citizens are not only dissatisfied with the present, but fearful of the future – with an immense level of anxiety regarding technological change and the influence of automation on our economies and human existence. The change ahead is anticipated to be cataclysmic in nature, with the economic, social and political world order all considered vulnerable to upheaval.

Conclusions

Reflecting on what this research reveals regarding the role of nostalgia as a cultural and political force, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

- Britain, France and Germany are experiencing profound level of social, economic and cultural transformation, and the breadth and depth of this change has been alienating for many citizens to the extent that

many feel unwilling or even incapable of looking to the future.

- Each country holds a varied and complex history of nostalgic narratives, some of which have gained renewed salience in a period in which citizens no longer accept a doctrine of progress.
- These narratives are being skilfully harnessed by insurgent politicians of varied ideological inclinations to galvanise a force of protest against the status quo, rejecting a vision for the future that positions citizens as passive in the process of change.
- Those who benefit from citizens' anxieties about change are those peddling the promise of 'control', not just over immigration, or laws, or even whether the national flag is displayed with gusto, but over time itself. Time is presented as a wild and unruly force, which can be secured, regained, and tamed.
- The cost of mainstream politicians failing to respond to these developments may well be our societies becoming more exclusionary and less communal, underpinned by a more desperate, dangerous form of social competition – in short, the imperilling of our liberal democracies.

It is true that if we accept that nostalgia reflects the complex compounding of citizens' experiences and observations about their present condition, we cannot dismiss nostalgia itself as irrational, hyperbolic or feeble. Nor should we undermine the value of evidence that can be harnessed from the past, to demonstrate the gains that can be wrought, over time, in democratic societies. Moreover, we should not ignore the opportunity to face up to urgent questions about the processes of decline, and how governments and societies can work together to prevent them from happening again.

Responding to Nostalgia

Our research underscores that governments continue to be seen as responsible for both the conceptualisation and preservation of national identity, for harnessing economic opportunity and shielding citizens from the consequences of economic transformation, and for upholding the standards and responsibilities of civic life. The discontent evident within French, British and French societies will necessitate significant political responses, which may include:

- Transformative efforts from Government and business to promote local economic growth, rendering the ‘forgotten communities’ more attractive places to live, work and invest;
- Considering how greater security could be achieved within the labour market in an age of precarious employment, while also ensuring economies remain dynamic and competitive;
- Extensive preparation to redesign skills, education and welfare systems to face the significant changes that lie ahead in the age of the fourth industrial revolution, and addressing the dichotomised visions of technology as offering either a utopian or dystopic future;
- Greater proactive investment to promote integration on social and also cultural levels, recognising that this is a fundamental responsibility of the state in exchange for the economic benefits immigration can bring;
- A stronger emphasis on international engagement within the education curriculum, moving beyond the histories of empire and conflict to demonstrate the ongoing, contemporary value of international leadership and collaboration; and
- Courage from political leaders to engage with contentious issues, to defend freedom of expression, and create greater space within politics and society for more robust, constructive and open debate.

There remains huge capacity to influence not only the material health and prosperity of citizens, but also their sense of the nation’s trajectory and sense of purpose. Due to its importance in the formation of national narratives, mythologies and identity, this process will, somewhat paradoxically, necessarily involve some interrogation and harnessing of the past – reconciling the forces of cosmopolitanism, globalisation and pluralism with citizens’ clear desire for a greater emphasis on national patriotism, values and community. These are by no means mutually exclusive; while diversity necessarily renders unity more

difficult, it is by no means a *fait accompli* that politicians have surrendered the capacity to build common ground and consensus within European societies.

In conclusion, there are two imminent challenges for politicians at stake, both of which necessitate the full power of Government both as a vessel for policy action and for national leadership. First, to address citizens' concerns about the present through frank and open debate and robust policy responses, and second, to securitise them with a compelling, pragmatic vision, which helps them to feel confident that the social, economic and political settlement that lies ahead warrants looking to the future with hope, not fear.