

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

## ‘Britain – the Sicily of Europe?’ Continental Perspectives on Britain’s *Amour Propre*

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One prevalent narrative that sums up the United Kingdom’s relationship to Europe recounts the continent’s almost blind admiration for the UK as a more advanced ‘other’ in its northern seas: allegedly Europe looks up to the island’s unique political institutions, its tradition of the rule of law and its technological progress. The things Europeans supposedly venerate about the UK can easily be extended to its education system, the civilising mission behind its colonial grip on much of the world and its population’s cultural finesse. In view of the UK’s political elites, there always was a lot that made Britain, over the past centuries, the envy of the world, a proudly civilised nation among an amorphous mass of less advanced countries further east and south. It is on this basis that the UK still prides itself on its ‘British values’, without giving much consideration to the fact that democracy, civic rights or the rule of law have never described nationally exclusive concepts and that they, in fact, reflect human values. For centuries these values have been promoted in many different parts of the world, including in countries that still today struggle with the legacies of British imperialism and its slave economy. The colonies used exactly those values to free themselves from British oppression.

Europe and Britain’s global Empire are closely connected. Since the beginning of the early modern period Britain was part of an Atlantic and a wider imperial world, but it was also closely linked to continental Europe. Britain’s imperial power greatly benefited from this connection, taking advantage of Europeans’ financial, material and human input. As Stephen Conway has recently argued, European soldiers, settlers, scientists, sailors, clergymen, merchants and technical experts became ‘Britannia’s auxiliaries’. Some supporters of Brexit seem to ignore this close connection when they refer to Britain’s past greatness and imperial legacy to argue that a free nation can treat the entire world the same, where Europe and its economy are in no way different from any other trading partner anywhere in the world. This view of the world is based on countless ‘unilateralisms’, not much different from Donald Trump’s vision of the United States’s future economic relations with the world. In the case of the UK, any such view is dependent on the conviction that one’s own nation, for historical reasons, is unique and as such the source of foreign envy. The following survey will show that this idea, rather than representing historical reality, stands for a British projection onto Europe and the world. It is the expression of an almost obsessive *amour propre* – self-love depending on the imagined views of others – that has little in common with the view that Europe and the rest of the world have of Britain.

Did Europe ever share Britain’s idea of its superior uniqueness? A look into the historian’s sourcebook can shed light on mutual perceptions; Italian responses to Britain’s role in the world will serve as a particularly pertinent example of a much more differentiated view.

In 1851 the Italian philosopher and former Prime Minister of Piedmont-Sardinia Vincenzo Gioberti described Britain polemically as ‘the Sicily of Europe’: an oceanic island in the continent’s northern periphery, whose connection to Europe was on par with Sicily’s relationship to the Italian peninsula. Within this comparison, Sicily stood for the most backward part of the Italian peninsula whose inhabitants, due to natural conditions and historical fate, lived in a

different world, closer to Africa than to Europe. Gioberti's idea of placing Britain on the extreme periphery of European civilisation did not emerge in a heated debate with political adversaries in parliament. It was not slander reported by British police spies who had overheard a bunch of drunken revolutionaries in a London pub. Instead, Gioberti presented his idea of Britain's relationship to Europe in one of the most influential works of modern Italian political thought: volume one of his famous *Del Rinnovamento Civile d'Italia*, which presented its readers with a blueprint for Italy's political unification. Gioberti's description of Britain's role certainly did not correspond to the ways in which the British people, during the mid-nineteenth century, perceived their position in the world, let alone in Europe. For the Italian political thinker, the main point of his comparison was not even to make an argument about Britain. Instead, he used the comparison to point his readers to Europe's political and cultural heterogeneity and he included differences between its institutions and its constitutional developments. For Gioberti Europe did not have one core with many peripheries; he emphasised that there was more than one way of being modern. Therefore, Britain could not offer a model to anybody. He was convinced of Italy's cultural and religious legacy as a millennial civilisation of the Mediterranean and rejected the idea that his country had to be taught lessons by seemingly more developed countries elsewhere in Europe or the world.

The case of Italy seems particularly relevant when thinking about Britain's relationship to Europe. Was it not Italy that needed guidance, that had to be freed, with British help, from despotic Habsburg and Bourbon rulers? And did Britain not attract countless Italian exiles that were dissatisfied with their political situation at home?

While one might take the view that by coming to Britain these exiles 'voted with their feet', their assessment of British political institutions was extremely varied; they showed little of the blind admiration Britain so much liked to project onto its foreign visitors. Italy's most famous exile in London, Giuseppe Mazzini, was quite open in his rejection of British political institutions and the materialism that informed the country's cultural values. In an 1847 essay he insisted that Britain's 'representative government' had nothing to do with 'representative democracy', which he saw as the future of his own country. The two concepts 'have nothing but the word in common'. Moreover, despite the fact that many Italians counted on British support in unifying their country, they were suspicious of its imperial ambitions extending into the Mediterranean. The Tuscan lawyer Giuseppe Montanelli, another protagonist of the revolutions of 1848, went so far as to rank Palmerston just below Metternich in his list of evil European statesmen, holding him responsible for an imperialism that contradicted any true concept of liberalism. In Montanelli's view the aristocratic foundations of British liberalism constituted a stark contrast to the democratic principles that had informed the European revolutions of 1848. This critical attitude towards Britain increasingly overshadowed Italian interest in the British tradition of rule of law. Another Italian exile based in London, Giuseppe Angeloni, pointed to the English economic mentality and the extent to which structures of power were still determined by land ownership. His assessment of the structural inequalities of British society mirrors that of the French philosopher Benjamin Constant, who described British society as 'a permanent conspiracy of the rich ruling class against the poor working class'. Even the philosopher Gaetano Filangieri, who frequently praised the English constitution, noticed the deep-rooted materialism of the British and wrote of their educational system that 'no other country in Europe makes the acquisition of knowledge so expensive; in no other country you need to be so rich to become learned'. Many of these points raised by the UK's European neighbours during the mid-nineteenth century still seem to inform Europeans' critical assessment of the British way of life.

To return to the issue of British imperialism: many Italians were aware of the fact that Britain's policies in the Mediterranean were by no means based on altruistic motives. Ugo Foscolo was a native of the Ionian island of Zante/Zakynthos, then part of the Venetian Republic,

and had moved to London at the end of the Napoleonic period, where he used his *Lettere scritte dall'Inghilterra* to express his appreciation of English polite society. But his views of Britain soon changed. Although the Congress of Vienna had recognised his homeland as 'the United States of the Ionian Islands', it soon became part of Britain's informal empire in the Mediterranean. The local population experienced the British political regime as even more despotic than its previous 'foreign' governments.

When in 1817 the UK returned the city of Parga to the Ottoman Empire, it caused a dramatic European refugee crisis, with thousands of locals trying to join the island of Corfu. Italian intellectuals were at the forefront of international protests against these ruthless policies, frequently comparing their situation to Britain's attitudes towards its American colonies a few decades earlier. Italians were quick to identify historical parallels and similar patterns of British attitudes towards the rest of the world. The Sicilian patriot Gioacchino Ventura condemned English rule over the Irish in the harshest terms, putting it on equal terms with Bourbon rule over Sicily: 'it never was and will never be advisable, fair or generous. . . . This unhappy people asks for bread and they reply with guns.' Public outrage at Britain's imperial appetite was frequently combined with critical debate on the social cost of Britain's industrialisation. There was in fact little Italians were prepared to admire about Britain's industrial advances. Carlo Pisacane opined that Britain's 'appearance of grandeur only hides the cancerous sores of that society'. Even a close ally of Count Cavour like the future Italian Prime Minister Marco Minghetti expressed his astonishment over 'these most unhappy people' of the British working class, and the 'ignorance' and 'immorality' which reigns in Britain's factories.

These few examples shed serious doubts on the British idea that Europe perceived its northern neighbour predominantly as a more civilised 'other', a country that could teach them a better future. From a modern historiographical point of view, any such model, in which one part of the world has to implement the lessons learned from another, seems to aim at reconciling anti-thetically defined norms of development, explaining the past in terms of a predefined philosophy of history, exemplified in this case by Britain's role in the world. Europe always drew on a broad range of cultural legacies and civic traditions which were revealed according to specific historic conditions and formed in complex sets of relationships with each other, and in which 'foreign' experiences were constantly translated and assimilated into local vocabularies. It is this complex process of intellectual and cultural exchanges that defined the continent's relationship to Britain, based on a close engagement with political institutions and cultural norms from across the channel, without feeling a need to emulate them all. In its long history as a part of Europe, Britain has frequently benefitted from doing exactly the same.

Rather than reflecting European attitudes, the idea of Britain representing the envy of Europe has always been, and still is, a British fantasy projected onto the continent, a kind of wishful thinking of a country that tries to overcome its own identity problems by inventing a foreign image of its self-perception. Just as contemporary European discourse on the UK frequently refers to a failing health system, a class-based education system and the country's decrepit infrastructure, the supposedly 'less advanced' nations of nineteenth-century Europe too were fully aware of the limitations of Britain's contribution to civilisation. But within this polemic that points to ontological differences between Europe's own assessment of its relationship to Britain and British projections onto Europe, it has to be acknowledged that Europeans did learn from Britain. It served as one of many models and was always met with critical reflection, frequently informed by a good deal of pride in continental political and cultural legacies. Brexit is rooted in a long history of distorted views of British hegemony, views that were rarely based on hard economic or political facts, but rather rested on a discursive relationship fuelled by *amour propre* that, from a historical perspective, is easily dismantled. Only if the UK frees itself of this obsession will it be able to discover that it has always been part of a larger European whole. It will

then see that much of what makes Britain's historical uniqueness is indeed the fruit of its exchanges with Europe and the wider world.