



## THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A TOTALITARIAN NIGHTMARE: DYSTOPIAN VISIONS IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE UK INDEPENDENCE PARTY (UKIP)

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*Abstract:* Based on an analysis of UKIP's discourse on the EU, particularly that of leader Nigel Farage, this paper argues that the party depicts the EU in dystopian terms; in particular it compares it to dystopian narratives such as Orwell's *1984*, totalitarian communist regimes, Nazi Germany and 'failed states' such as North Korea.

*Keywords:* UKIP, EU, discourse, dystopia, utopia

### 1. Introduction

While the term "Utopia" is normally used to refer to fictional societies possessing qualities perceived as highly desirable or perfect, states or political entities such as the European Union (EU) may be constructed as utopian in political discourse. As Nicolaidis and Howse have argued, Europe has long projected a utopian view of itself onto the outside world. This utopian vision has, over the centuries "had a long history and many labels, from enlightenment to colonialism, civic imperialism, or "civilian power" (2002:767).

In this context, it can be argued that the EU's official self-image is utopian, or *EUtopian* (Nicolaidis and Howse, 2002). In Zielonka's view for instance, the EU understands itself as a normative power which "civilises" its external environment (2013:36). However, as Nicolaidis and Howse argue, the picture which the EU presents in the international arena is idealised rather than representing what Europe actually is (2002).

The concept of the EU as a utopian vision has also been severely challenged in public opinion, reflected in the unprecedented success of Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 European Parliament elections (BBC, 2014) and the increased participation of Eurosceptic parties in government (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013). In this sense, the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) can be partly, and ironically, explained in terms of political Europeanisation, not only because the EU is the main issue on its agenda but because it can be seen as part of a Europe-wide rise of populist, Eurosceptic parties (Ford, 2013), and has been open to transnational alliances with other such parties (Gifford, 2014:522).

In this context, in contrast to the official "EUtopian" vision of the EU, an analysis of UKIP discourse reveals that it constructs the EU as a dystopian, totalitarian society resembling the Communist totalitarian states of Eastern Europe, Nazi Germany or even Orwell's *1984*.

### 2. UKIP's Eurosceptic Discourse: EU as Dystopia

#### 2.1 Euroscepticism in Britain

Despite the success of Eurosceptic parties across the EU, the rise of UKIP also has to be understood in the national context. Euroscepticism in Britain is nothing new; regarding European integration Britain has famously been a reluctant European, the “awkward partner”, from the start, often appearing “semi-detached” from Europe. As Schmidt argues, for instance, the British political elite has, from the very beginning, “defined EU identity in opposition to national identity” (2012:174).

This can, at least partly, be understood in terms of the importance of the sovereignty of the British Parliament in national discourse. In particular, there has been a persistent fear of the development of a European superstate which would threaten the sovereignty of the British Parliament, while European economic policies, it is feared, reduce flexibility thereby threatening British competitiveness (Schmidt 2006:18). Margaret Thatcher, for instance, warned in her 1988 Bruges speech of “a new superstate exercising new dominance from Brussels” (Schmidt 2012:174-175).

Such discourse is still evident among Conservative politicians today. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, argued that the Conservative Party would seek to limit what it views as future federalist damage by implementing laws to “protect Britain’s sovereignty” (Cameron 2009) which culminated in the passage of the European Union Act in 2011. More recently, under pressure from Eurosceptics in his own party and by the rise of UKIP, Cameron promised to hold an “in/out” referendum on continued EU membership in 2017 if the Conservatives were re-elected in 2015 (Fox 2014).

While the Labour Party in recent years has been more pro-European than the Conservatives, it also continues to insist on a primarily intergovernmental EU (Watts and Pilkington 2005:232-233). Gordon Brown, for instance, focused on the importance of “British values ... in persuading a global Europe that the only way forward is inter-governmental, not federal; mutual recognition, not one-size-fits-all central rules with proper political accountability ... subsidiarity, not a superstate” (Gifford 2010:39). Meanwhile, Miliband argued that Labour would also, if elected, carry out an in/out referendum in the event of a proposed treaty change which involved a significant transfer of powers from Britain to the EU (Miliband 2014).

## **2.2 UKIP Discourse on the EU: EU Dystopia versus British Utopia**

In recent years, UKIP has recently seen its popularity rise to the extent where it captured 27.5% of the vote and 24 seats in the 2014 European Parliament elections, more than either the Labour or Conservative parties (BBC 2014). While this success was not reflected in the 2015 General Elections, this can be partly explained by the first-past-the-post electoral system.

While operating within the party system, UKIP has generally exploited its outsider status, appealing to voters disillusioned with the mainstream parties (Gifford, 2014: 521) on questions such as immigration and the economy as well as European integration (Ford 2013).

Euroscepticism was, however, originally UKIP’s only *raison d’etre*. It was founded in 1993, having emerged from the Anti-Federalist League which had been set up in 1991 with the aim to oppose the Maastricht Treaty, which, it argued, transferred significant powers to the EU without consulting the British people via referendum (Pârau 2014: 2). On this basis, UKIP declared that its aim was to campaign for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU “because it is undemocratic, expensive, bossy – and we still haven’t been asked whether we want to be in it” (UKIP 1993). Regarding the EU, UKIP discourse, like that of the Eurosceptic media, constructs a radical difference between Britain and the EU, which it sees as an elitist project undermining the national interest (Hawkins 2014:3). In this sense, it is represented as a fantasy object which poses a direct threat to Britain; here, the nation state is seen as an organic

form of political community while the EU is seen as an artificial invention, as running counter to the natural order (Hawkins 2014:8).

In particular, the EU is described as a (potential) superstate, and thus a threat to the sovereignty of the British Parliament which, for UKIP leader Nigel Farage, has been “reduced to the level of a large council” (2013). As noted above, such a depiction of the EU is not limited to UKIP; in fact it has been widespread in mainstream British political discourse (Schmidt 2012: 174-175) (Gifford 2010:39).

As Stavrakakis notes, however, Eurosceptic discourses exhibit “obscene” components which are not expressed in official or government discourses, however critical the latter may be of European integration (2005). In this sense, UKIP discourse has much in common with Eurosceptic discourse in the British media, which presents the EU as an “imperial” power which aims to undermine the UK’s independence and to turn it into a mere province of a trans-European state, under centralised control from Brussels. British Eurosceptic discourse can, thus, be understood as the “horrific” dimension of the fantasmatic narrative, which is structured around ideas of repression and victimhood (Hawkins 2014: 11).

In particular, UKIP discourse depicts the EU as a *dystopian* state. A dystopia, which derives from the Greek for “bad place”, such as those depicted in Orwell’s *1984* or Huxley’s *Brave New World* can be described as a society which is in some way undesirable or even frightening. However, a dystopia is not simply the opposite of a utopia; rather it is a utopian society with at least one fatal flaw; a utopia that has gone wrong, or functions for only a part of society (Gordin 2010:1-2). In this sense, according to Frye’s theory of archetypal meaning, the dystopia may be characterised by demonic imagery, which is “the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion” (1990:147). For Frye, the demonic human world is “a society held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group or the leader which diminishes the individual, or, at best, contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honour” (Frye 1990: 147).

A dystopia is also based on lived experience; indeed, as Gordin *et al* argue, many people perceive their lived environment as dystopian (2010:1-2). In this sense, a dystopian narrative can be read as a *warning* on the part of the author who “depicts a dark future building on the systematic amplification of current trends and features” (Claisse and Delvenne 2015: 155). In particular, dystopian narratives depict an oppressive society characterised by a lack of individual freedom due to excessive social control. This control may be exerted using a variety of measures, which may include propaganda, constant surveillance, terror, restriction of information, the discouragement of independent thought and the worship of a figurehead or concept. While control may be wielded by a totalitarian government it may also be exerted, for instance, by a mindless bureaucracy or by large corporations (Purkar 2013: 1-4).

Many of these features can be found in UKIP discourse on the EU. According to UKIP, then, in contrast to the “EUtopian” ideal of democracy, human rights, peace and prosperity, the EU is not merely a superstate but a dystopian society characterised by totalitarianism and a lack of freedom and individuality. Moreover, for UKIP, this system is backed up by a mindless bureaucracy, and is characterised by increased impoverishment as a result of misguided, quasi-Socialist economic dictatorship.

Notably, Farage has made several direct comparisons between the EU and Orwell’s *1984*. In the context of EU plans to attach a “remote stopping” device to cars which would enable police to disable vehicles, Farage, referring to *1984*, commented that; “It is appalling they are even thinking of it. People must protest against this attack on their liberty and vote against an EU Big Brother state during the Euro election in May” (Waterfield and Day 2014). In another allusion to Orwell’s dystopia, Farage compared EU plans to set up media councils to “Orwell’s *1984*” adding that “This is a flagrant attack on press freedom. To hear that unelected bureaucrats in Brussels want the power to fine and suspend journalists is just

outrageous” (Waterfield 2013). Similarly, regarding the EPP’s plan to introduce EU education in schools, Farage, again alluding to 1984, argued that “After destroying national economies and losing the political argument the EU Thought Police now want to brainwash your children... Propaganda should have no place in the classroom” (UKIP MEPs 2014).

The European Commission, in particular, has been described as the undemocratic, big-business dominated heart of the totalitarian EU government in the following speech by Farage to Commission President Juncker;

The means by which the European Commission makes law and holds law is actually the very enemy of the concept of democracy itself, because it means in any member state there is nothing the electorate can do to change a single piece of European law (UKIP 2014) .

Regarding Juncker’s appointment, Farage argued that “Not only will the ballot be conducted entirely in secret, but there is also only one candidate for the job. It’s the sort of process that would not be out of place in North Korea” (Farage 2014) . In fact, Farage has frequently compared the EU to a totalitarian communist system. He argued, for instance, that “the EU resurrected the evil system that the people of Eastern Europe had lived under before” (Farage 2010), and, in a later speech, that “This European Union is the new communism. It is power without limits. It is creating a tide of human misery and the sooner it is swept away the better” (Farage 2013).

UKIP thus suggests that Britain has become a “puppet state” of a multinational totalitarian monster which stifles British initiative and originality by the endless imposition of mindless directives from Brussels;

When we signed up to government from the Continent, most Britons didn’t know what they were letting themselves in for. Our laws have come from Brussels – and what laws. What directives. What a list of instructions. How this shall be done. How that shall be regulated. Process and compliance and inspection and regulation are taking over from production and leadership and enterprise ... Parliament is reduced to the level of a large council. No one knows for sure exactly how much of our law comes from Brussels. Could be 70 or 80 per cent (Farage 2013).

The economic situation of the EU, in the context of the global crisis of 2008/9 and the ensuing Eurozone crisis, has also been described in dystopian terms. As Farage argued in 2012, for instance;

The EU tank has now hit the iceberg. It is a European Union of economic failure, of mass unemployment ... We face the prospect of mass civil unrest, possibly even revolution in some countries that are being pushed into total and utter desperation (Farage 2012).

In particular, the EU has been described as dictatorial in the context of the crisis; in this sense, the crisis-hit countries of the Eurozone periphery, Greece in particular, have been described as becoming “protectorates” of the EU and losing their status as free, democratic countries completely. Farage, for instance, remarked to former Commission President Barroso during a European Parliament debate on the eurozone crisis that;

You have killed democracy in Greece. You have three part-time overseas dictators that now tell the Greek people what they can and cannot do. It is totally unacceptable. Is it any wonder the Greek people are now burning flags and drawing swastikas across them? Frankly, unless Greece is allowed out of this economic and political prison you may well spark a revolution in that country (Farage 2011a).

Similarly, Farage argued that the EU had replaced Papandreou and Berlusconi in Greece and Italy with puppet governments more willing to adhere to the austerity measures imposed by the EU;

None of you has been elected. None of you has any democratic legitimacy. When Mr. Papandreou used the word 'referendum,' you and your friends got together like a pack of hyenas, [surrounded] Papandreou, then had him removed and replaced by a puppet government. Not satisfied with that, you decided that Berlusconi had to go. So, he was removed and replaced by Mr Monti, a former EU commissioner, a fellow architect of this Euro-disaster, and a man who wasn't even a Parliament member (Farage 2011b).

In this context, the EU's economic policies are seen as German-dominated, thus encouraging allusions to the Nazis. Farage, for instance, argued that "We are now living in a German-dominated Europe, something that the European project was actually supposed to stop" (Keating 2011). Thus, in Farage's view, this is bound to end in disaster; "If you rob people of their democracy, if you rob them of their identity then all that is left is violence" (Farage 2011b).

As Hawkins notes, in Eurosceptic discourse, "the claim is made repeatedly that the UK could prosper if it were able to cast off the shackles of EU membership, freeing it from burdensome regulation" (2014:11). However, in common with the dominant discourses exemplified by Labour and the Conservatives, the UKIP also recognises that it is unrealistic to "go it alone" in economic terms in an increasingly competitive, globalising world. However, the UKIP argues that this problem can be overcome with the creation of a Commonwealth Free Trade Area, which would, in the UKIP's view, be a much more culturally compatible and economically and demographically dynamic group than the EU, and without the political constraints of the latter. According to its 2010 Manifesto, then,

UKIP will seek to establish a Commonwealth Free Trade Area (CFTA) with the 53 other Commonwealth countries ... Commonwealth nations share a common language, legal and democratic systems, account for a third of the world's population and a quarter of its trade, with the average age of a citizen just 25 years. India, for example, will soon become the second largest world economy and Britain should not be tied to the dead political weight of the European Union, but retain its own friendly trading and cultural links (UKIP 2010)

While, in dystopian narratives, the citizens of the dystopia generally live in a dehumanised state, the dystopian hero often questions and rebels against the existing society; feeling trapped he/she struggles to escape from the confines of the stifling regime. In this sense, it can be argued that leaders of British hard Eurosceptic parties depict themselves and their parties as dystopian heroes, willing to rebel against the "totalitarian" EU and thus to lead Britain to a future of freedom and prosperity.

Farage, for instance, suggests that UKIP can provide an almost "Utopian" future for the UK by freeing it from the EU. This can be understood as the "beatific" dimension of the fantasmatic narrative which promises a mythical "fullness to come" if the obstacle of EU membership is overcome (Hawkins, 2014: 11). In Farage's view, the British people can only regain their freedom, rights and prosperity through a UKIP-led exit from the EU;

UKIP is dedicated to liberty, opportunity, equality under the law and the aspirations of the British people. We will always act in the interests of Britain. Especially on immigration, employment, energy supply and fisheries. We know that only by leaving the union can we regain control of our borders, our parliament, democracy and our ability to trade freely with the fastest-growing economies in the world (Farage 2013).

Similarly, UKIP's 2010 manifesto argues that UKIP will deliver Britain from a stifling, autocratic EU towards a brighter, freer future;

We will no longer be governed by an undemocratic and autocratic European Union or ruled by its unelected bureaucrats, commissioners, multiple presidents and judges. UKIP will give power back to

Westminster and to the people through binding national and local referenda and more effective, locally elected representatives. Britain will be free to choose a new positive vision away from the EU straitjacket (UKIP 2010).

In UKIP discourse, then, the view of a utopian future for Britain outside the EU is contextualised in an English past also described in utopian terms as a haven of freedom, democracy and human rights, in contrast to a Europe characterised by a history of tyranny, despotism and oppression. As Farage argues;

The roots go back seven, eight, nine hundred years with the Common Law. Civil rights. Habeas corpus. The presumption of innocence. The right to a trial by jury ... The idea of free speech was a reality in England when Europe was run by princes with tyrannical powers. Throughout Europe, England was known as the land of liberty. Here you had the possibility of dissent. Of free thinking, independent minds and actions. That's us. UKIP belongs in the mainstream of British political life throughout the centuries (Farage 2013).

### 3. Conclusion

While the rise of UKIP can be partly understood in terms of a rise in Eurosceptic and/or populist parties across the EU since the onset of the recent economic crisis, it can also be argued that such discourse has its roots in traditional British Eurosceptic distrust of a supposed EU “superstate”, which is frequently portrayed, on both left and right, as a potential threat to the sovereignty of the British Parliament.

However, UKIP's discourse, like that of much of the Eurosceptic British media, uses a notably more extreme language than that of the mainstream parties. As this paper has aimed to show, UKIP discourse, particularly that of leader Nigel Farage, tends to frame the EU in dystopian terms as an undemocratic, authoritarian, totalitarian regime comparable, for instance, to Orwell's *1984*, Nazi Germany, the Cold-War era Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe or contemporary “failed states” such as North Korea. In contrast, UKIP depicts itself as the dystopian hero, a rebel against the system, ready to “deliver” the British people to a better, almost utopian, future outside the EU.

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