‘EU Did It!’—blaming the EU and polarising the populace

***Abstract****: The Brexit campaign saw mass blaming of the EU and concordant portrayal of British citizens as ‘victims’ to the machinations of scheming Eurocrats. The site of actual responsibility for any given event—or factual basis for blame—appeared unimportant. This paper asks the question ‘what is the relationship between blame and self-victimisation in Eurosceptic discourse, and what are the implications for political support for the EU?’. It uses Brexit as a case study, investigating the use of blame, corresponding victim status, and the role of both in the polarisation of British populations in favour of a ‘leave’ vote, in turn addressing the wider concern of the role of blame and associated emotions in populist discourse.*

*This paper draws from research into victim-blaming in cases of assault, referencing psychology and the role of emotions in identity formation, and concerns itself with the emotional constructions associated with blame and victim identification. Intertextual content analysis of speech acts delivered by the Brexit actor ‘Leave.EU’ establishes a set of specific blame and self-victimisation tactics used. A theory of blame is advanced, which employs Foucauldian concepts of discourse and Barrett’s Theory of Constructed Emotion to better understand the relationship between blaming, victimisation, emotions, and the dynamics of power, and opens new areas of research for countering a Eurosceptic populist threat.*

*This research argues that Eurosceptic populists’ use of ‘blamees’ and ‘victims’ grants their supporters an inviolable status of ‘victimhood’, gives rise to the emotional response of ‘anger’ and associated desire to take action, while polarising audiences against the EU. It helps to explain why, after decades of EU-blaming by Eurosceptics in Britain, there was finally a rupture in the form of a ‘Leave’ vote. It contributes to an understanding of blame as a political mechanism and its role in political polarisation, including against the EU.*

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