

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe  
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann  
Podcast Contribution, Author: Isabelle Wirth-Möckel  
Topic: Us vs. Them – The Legacy of Winston Churchill

## Us vs. Them – The Legacy of Winston Churchill

**Quote Churchill 1: “Finest Hour” June 18, 1940 0’40**

*“Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”*

<https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour/>

### **Author:**

In times of Brexit, the British are turning to the Second World War for guidance and to the man, who most embodies British heroism and leadership in difficult times: Winston Churchill. Shortly after he was elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom for the first time in 1940, Churchill gave three pivotal speeches that shape the notion of “us vs. them” until today:

**Quote Churchill: “Blood, toil, tears and sweat” May 13, 1940 0’50**

*"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us (...) You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised: no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for (...). At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, "come then, let us go forward together with our united strength."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TlKdN-dcDck>

### **Author:**

Churchill tapped into the tradition of romanticising heroic battles, of “good versus evil” that seems to be an integral part of British culture since the Battle of Agincourt in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. In recent debates about identity related to Brexit, the “us vs them” mindset has been extremely conspicuous. Brexiteers see ‘Brussels’ as “them”, the enemy that needs to be defeated, the EU run by “them”, by Germany and France.

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It is therefore characteristic for Brexiteers to cast Britain in the role of the lone hero standing up against the rest of the world (including the “Remain Camp”) – just like Churchill once taught the British to do. Brexit discourses are thus based on a self-image embracing heroism, which can be seen reflected in popular culture that suddenly celebrates a historic figure again.

In 2017, audiences had a choice between two major British films about the war hero Churchill: *Darkest Hour*, directed by Joe Wright and starring Gary Oldman, which shows Churchill taking the lead in the early days of the war, and *Churchill*, directed by Jonathan Teplitzky and starring Brian Cox, which focusses on Churchill’s misgivings about the planned Normandy landings towards the end of the war.

*Churchill* shows an exhausted Prime Minister dreading the 1944 Normandy landings, also known as D-Day. He is haunted by memories of the beach landing and battle in Gallipoli during WWI, which was a very black day in his career as First Lord of the Admiralty. In this movie, Churchill is portrayed as standing alone against U.S. General “Ike” Eisenhower and the British Army, trying to keep Operation Overlord and the death of thousands of young soldiers from happening. He is a man who does not shy away from speaking uncomfortable truths and will stand up for what he believes in.

It is interesting, however, that *Darkest Hour*, released about three months later, which shows a Churchill clearly taking the lead, was the much more successful film, both with critics and at the box office. While Brian Cox’s performance in the earlier film is uniformly praised, Churchill’s self-doubt, exhaustion and scepticism about D-Day appear to make people uneasy. Audiences seem more comfortable with a defiant and determined Churchill who sweeps away the appeasement politicians and successfully commands the Dunkirk evacuation. It is as if Britain, facing another ‘dark hour’, found itself in need of a determined and towering leader figure.

Unsurprisingly, Churchill’s authority also extends to Britain’s attitude towards Continental Europe. The Remain camp tried to enlist his support, quoting his call for a formation of a “United States of Europe”, made in a famous speech given in Zurich in 1946:

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**Quote Churchill:                      United States of Europe, Zurich 1946                      0'25**

*“In all this urgent work France and Germany must take the lead together. Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America and I trust Soviet Russia – for then indeed all would be well – must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live and shine. Therefore, I say to you: Let Europe arise!”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ln4SRnt4VE0>

**Author:**

Reverting to the theme of “us versus them”, however, Brexiteers insisted on the limitations of this vision. In this sense, Great Britain was not meant to be an equal part of a united Europe, but to stay on the margins of it as a supervisor and leading power. This exceptionalism remains central to British identity until today, and Churchill the war hero embodies it, glorified as an icon. The problem is that this is a backward-looking stance, whereas in the current Brexit process, there are no heroes in sight, and the way remains unclear.