‘The foetal dustbin of Europe’: discursive struggles over British abortion policy

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In the UK, the 1967 Abortion Act ended the need for illegal, unregulated ‘back-street’ abortions, channelling women seeking abortions instead through the medical profession and utilising the capacities of doctors to oversee and manage pregnancy. Currently, it is possible to obtain terminations for most reasons up until 24 weeks’ gestation, but the decision requires the agreement of two doctors and substantial medical supervision. On the other hand, while the majority of other European countries allow abortions ‘on demand’, the upper time limit - 12 weeks' gestation only - is significantly less. Subsequently, the image of the UK as a ‘foetal dustbin’ has become prominent in recent legislative struggles over abortion in Britain, linking abortion to national identity and to Britain’s standing in the EU. Drawing upon analysis of legislative debates on abortion, this paper demonstrates that ‘Europeanisation’ in the case of UK abortion law goes beyond simple convergence with a European norm. The introduction of discourses of ‘Europe’ does not produce straightforward, predictable legislative outcomes. Rather, ideas about Europe and the EU are invoked as part of strategic manoeuvres on the part of actors involved in struggles over abortion legislation, demonstrating the contingency rather than necessity of the Europeanisation of gender equality policies. The paper theorises legislation as a site of struggle – over abortion and gender roles but also over the EU and national identity.

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Introduction

‘Europeanisation’ can mean more than ‘EU-isation’, encompassing even policy transfer between European states that is not always EU-driven (Featherstone 2003). It is also inadequate, however, to theorise Europeanisation as a simple process of convergence with a norm, whether this is an EU norm or simply a European one. Ladrech’s definition of Europeanisation as a ‘[re-orientation of] the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and decision-making’ (Ladrech cited in Radaelli 2003 p.30) is more helpful: it captures the way in which European norms become part of the logic of decision-making without implying that these norms determine the decisions taken or leave no room for manoeuvre. In other words, it acknowledges the influence of Europe on national politics while leaving room for the operation of agency and strategy.

This paper highlights the need to take a discursive approach to the interplay between Europeanisation and agency. How Europe is represented in a national context – in other words, images of Europe – is crucial to the process of Europeanisation, altering actors’ perceptions of policy problems and proposed solutions. National self-image in a European context – the way a nation envisages its identity and role in Europe – can make or break attempts at policy change:

Thus, for example, the success of the French communication discourse on defence policy after St Malo is related not just to the discursive interactions that produced a supportive epistemic community, but also to the ideas which spoke to the necessity of a common European policy today, while resonating with post-war goals and values which had long favoured a separate European defence policy. This contrasted with the British discourse, where the problems resulting from the failure even to attempt to build a supportive epistemic community were compounded by the fact that, however cognitively sound, the ideas flew in the face of post-war values that prized the transatlantic relationship above all else, and jealously guarded British sovereignty against European encroachments. (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004 p.201)

Woll and Jacquot argue that these discourses of Europe and national identity are not only cognitive resources informing actors’ perceptions of policy, but may also be used consciously and strategically to help political actors ‘stall or advance on their reform projects, be it through providing bargaining assets, legitimization, blame avoidance or power increases’ (2010 p.119), demonstrating the role of agency in processes of Europeanisation.

It is with this understanding of Europeanisation that I turn to an analysis of how images of Europe enter into debates over British abortion policy. This paper interrogates British parliamentary debates surrounding proposed legislation on abortion, asking how images of Europe enter the debates and how they are used to mobilise support for policy. As I argue below, policy on reproduction necessarily resonates with anxieties over nationhood and national identity, due to women’s role as biological reproducers of the nation and due to the reliance of constructions of nations upon constructions of masculinity and femininity. When images of Europe enter into debates over policy on reproduction, these anxieties meet further
anxieties over British national identity fuelled by the perceived ‘encroachment’ of the EU. In the case of British abortion policy, however, analysis of parliamentary debates reveals a significant pressure to ‘catch up’ with the way other European nations regulate abortion, in seeming contrast to wider political discourse which presents Britain as a strong leader in a Europe of sovereign nations. I argue that this subversion of hegemonic images of Britain and Europe is not accidental, conjuring a nightmare scenario in which Britain’s rightful role as a strong leader is blocked by its status as an ‘abortion capital’ and thereby mobilising support for a more restrictive abortion law.

The paper begins by fleshing out some of the connections between nation and reproduction as theorised by feminist scholars. It links these connections to the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics and how this pertains to British abortion law before outlining some of the practical implications of Europe and the EU for national policy on abortion. After this, it details the specifics of British parliamentary procedure and how to analyse parliamentary debates, introducing the concepts of intertextuality and contingency. It then sets out the key findings: firstly with respect to how images of Europe enter British political discourse more generally, then with respect to debates on abortion specifically. It argues that the discrepancy between how Europe is discussed in general and in the context of abortion can be made sense of by drawing upon the concept of fantasmatic logic. Finally, it sets out some of the broader implications of the research: the heterogeneity of images of Europe in political discourse, the way these images can intersect with national identity and the implications of this for understanding Europeanisation, and the relevance of questions of national identity to research on gender and policy.

Nation/reproduction

The nexus between reproduction and nation has been extensively documented by feminists (e.g. Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). As observed by Yuval-Davis (1997), this nexus is partially cultural: images of nationhood and national identity often rely on specific constructions of manhood and womanhood (p.1). However, it also relates to women’s role as biological reproducers of the nation: ‘often the pressures on women to have or not have children relate to them not as individuals, workers and/or wives, but as members of specific national collectivities’ (p.22) – women are, in this sense, ‘bearers of the collective’ (p.26). The increasing ability and willingness of women to reject or at least assert more control over pregnancy hence brings about a certain anxiety: if the women of a nation can no longer be understood as naturally or inevitably pregnant, this has consequences both for national growth and national self-image.

Rosalind Petchesky notes that women’s reproductive activity has consequences for states, and vice versa:

Because women are the reproducers of children, the formation of the state ... has invariably brought drastic changes in the position of women, usually in the direction of a decline in the power and status. (1968 p.68)
She argues that it is not possible to bracket the ‘private’ sphere of reproduction from the ‘public’ sphere of the state – the form and existence of the latter depend upon reproductive activity and it will therefore always try to shape it. State interventions in abortion, then, are attempts to shape the reproductive realm. Abortion legislation can hence be seen as part of the sets of practices for ‘the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ (1978 pp.138-9) Foucault termed ‘biopolitics’, denoting techniques for managing mortality, health and reproduction.

**Abortion in Britain**

Sally Sheldon (1997) has demonstrated the utility of the concept of biopolitics in assessing British abortion legislation. The 1967 Abortion Act, while often heralded as a victory for liberalism and women’s rights, did not in fact ‘legalise’ abortion in the way commonly assumed. Rather, it granted protection to doctors carrying out abortions in certain circumstances, most significantly requiring the agreement of two doctors that the pregnancy posed a risk to the life or (physical or mental) health of the pregnant woman. While in practice doctors are willing to interpret the law liberally – generally allowing abortion on the grounds that continuation of any unwanted pregnancy can endanger a woman’s mental health – this does mean that in Britain, control over abortion is very much in the hands of the medical profession rather than pregnant women. The Act did not so much represent a deregulation of abortion, rather a shift to a new form of regulation which utilises the capacity of the medical profession to oversee and manage pregnancy.

This legal situation, of course, has been subject to heavy feminist critique. Wendy Fyfe (1991) links abortion law to the development of the medical profession as a patriarchal institution, seeing the 1967 Act as part of a gradual deepening of medical control over reproduction and women’s bodies. This emphasis on the *medicalisation* rather than *liberalisation* of abortion is echoed by Sheldon (1997), who argues that medical discourses have now become hegemonic in debates over abortion law and are propped up by constructions of women seeking abortion as irrational, vulnerable or irresponsible and above all unable to make decisions about their own pregnancies without paternal medical guidance.

Abortion recently surfaced in Parliament in the context of the 2008 update to the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. Several MPs tabled amendments relating to abortion, most of which aimed to reduce the legal time limit for abortions. While none of these amendments eventually made it into the Act, members of the All-Parliamentary Pro-Life Group pledged to revisit the issue after the 2010 general election. They have kept this promise, with MPs Nadine Dorries and Frank Field tabling amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill which would further tighten the regulation of abortion (Kirkup 2011). On the other hand, pro-choice organisation BPAS, which provides the majority of NHS abortions in the UK, recently failed in an attempt to ease restrictions on the administration of pills for early-term abortion (Boseley 2011).
Abortion in Europe

The European Union is generally reluctant to engage with issues of abortion, leaving to member states the right to formulate their own abortion policies (Gerson 2004 p.754). However, Europe has relevance to analysis of abortion law in both a pragmatic and a symbolic dimension.

Pragmatically, the mere existence of liberal abortion laws in neighbouring countries can be a worry for any state attempting to restrict access to abortion. While this dimension is not of direct relevance to my analysis here, I include it for some background on the phenomenon of ‘abortion tourism’ and its liberalising effect on European abortion law, as the occurrence of abortion tourism throughout Europe features prominently in British debates on abortion. Abortion tourism – women travelling abroad in order to have abortions that are restricted in their home countries – makes it difficult for European countries to maintain illiberal abortion laws. Restrictions on access to abortion soon lose legitimacy when citizens are able to acquire abortions, even if this requires travel to neighbouring countries. This relates to a broader trend apparent in many Western countries in which legal restrictions on abortion are increasingly undermined by women’s growing determination and ability to terminate their pregnancies, resulting in a loss of the state’s ability to manage abortion along with a loss of public support for the status quo. States are often prompted to intervene in order to counter the resulting lack of legitimacy (see Petchesky 1986 p.124).

The development of abortion law in the Republic of Ireland provides a good demonstration of this. Abortion is still illegal in Ireland unless continuing the pregnancy would threaten the life of the pregnant woman. The Health (Family Planning) Act was enacted in 1979. It attempted to reduce the numbers of women travelling abroad for abortions by preventing the distribution of materials ‘which might reasonably be supposed to advocate the procurement of abortion’, under which banner was included information on abortion clinics in other countries (Cole 1994 p.116). Nevertheless, during the early 1990s legislators were required to make significant revisions to the law. This was in part due to a similar loss of legitimacy: the official ban on distribution of information on abortion procurement was neither stopping underground organisations from passing on information about English clinics nor preventing women from travelling to England for abortions. However, Ireland’s legal restrictions also prevented ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, as they came into conflict with EU protection of freedom of information and freedom to travel. Eventually, the Irish public voted in favour of ratification, ‘[forcing] the government to change its position from one that sought to protect Ireland’s restrictive abortion laws from an override by EU law to one which guarantees the right to access abortions in other Member States’ (Sterling 1997 p.396).

Hence, a trend of women defying the law in order to obtain abortions (which is also apparent outside of Europe) has been exacerbated by Europe: by the simple closeness of other countries and ease of access but also by conflict with EU norms. While this phenomenon has practical consequences for the creation of abortion legislation, it is also linked to the symbolism of Europe in abortion politics. The rest of Europe can figure as a symbolic threat to European states, whether the fear is that ‘our women will go there’ or ‘their women will
come here’. This will be discussed in greater depth in the course of my analysis and juxtaposed against the way Europe tends to figure in British politics more broadly.

The British Parliament and abortion

Norton (2005) observes that the ability of the British Parliament to influence legislation is, in general, more persuasive than coercive. This persuasive capacity ‘has become more significant in giving voice to the needs and demands of citizens’ than in creating legislation (p.12). For the most part, Parliament, like the majority of European legislatures, is policy-influencing rather than policy-making (p.62). Parliamentarians do have access to various mechanisms which may allow them to bring issues onto the political and legislative agenda, due to their proximity to ministers as well as to parliamentary procedures. Nevertheless, more time is devoted to reinforcing the case for and against issues already on the agenda (p.70). This does not mean that parliamentary debates are not of relevance to policy analysis. Parliamentary debates are easily accessible texts which reveal how issues enter into political discourse – including, as this piece will demonstrate, issues surrounding Europe and national identity.

Overall, Parliament influences policy rather than creating it. However, some opportunity to initiate legislation is afforded by Private Members’ Bills (PMBs). As these bills are often unsuccessful and have very little chance of becoming legislation if they are opposed by the executive, the PMB process has been subject to calls for reform (see Brazier and Fox 2010). Despite this, PMBs represent a unique chance not only to initiate legislation, but also to pressure the government to change policy or simply to open up an idea to public scrutiny and debate (Brazier and Fox 2010 pp.205-206), and should not be neglected as an object of political analysis.

Most abortion legislation has been initiated in PMBs rather than in government policy, giving it relative independence from the executive. Moreover, as abortion is considered a ‘moral issue’, party whips are removed and MPs are generally allowed a free vote on abortion bills (Cowley and Stuart 2010). Nonetheless, the government does sometimes get involved – for example, allowing David Steel’s Abortion Bill to go to a Standing Committee normally reserved for government bills, and devoting extra time to the later stages of the Bill (Marsh and Chambers 1981 p.20).

Abortion, then, is not an issue in which the executive directly intervenes, much less the European Union. However, processes of Europeanisation are still pertinent to research into abortion policy. Europe and EU norms are relevant as discursive tools for actors in policy debates, being drawn upon as part of strategies to mobilise support for changes to the law: as this paper will demonstrate, constructions of Britain’s role in Europe have a role to play in arguments for and against changes to abortion legislation. The potential of images of Europe being used in this way has relevance for those researching Europeanisation, demonstrating that something more complex is occurring than simple convergence with an EU norm.
Intertextuality and contingency

Two concepts often used in discourse analysis are crucial to my approach: intertextuality and contingency. Van Dijk (2000) stresses the importance of ‘context models’ (p.47) in making sense of parliamentary debates (and indeed, in doing discourse analysis more generally). These models relate to the ways in which actors form personal understandings which connect discourses and social situations (pp.47-48). ‘Context’ comes in a number of forms, for example institution, setting and topic. Crucially, though, van Dijk points out that ‘speeches in parliament have aims or purposes’ (p.51). They are therefore tied to broader political discourses and agendas, but must also take into account what the audience knows or how they might interpret elements of a speech.

The concept of intertextuality – designating the links between various texts – is related to the importance of context. Parliamentary debates do not stand alone, but are ‘part of complex social and political debates, in which various sources, competing or alternative discourses, and other forms of text or talk are explicitly or implicitly referred to’ (p.66). This is highly relevant to the way images of Europe enter abortion debates. Participants in the debates and their audiences – Members of Parliament – are familiar with debates over EU policy and with tensions over Britain’s role in Europe. Therefore, I suggest that discourses of Europe in British abortion debates cannot be understood without taking intertextuality into account by cross-referencing these broader political discourses on Europe. For this reason, parliamentary debates on Europe have considered alongside debates on abortion, as has broader political discourse on Europe.

The second concept, contingency, relates to the need to approach debates as sites of struggle without predetermined outcomes. Such an approach has been hinted at in some of the feminist literature on abortion legislation – indeed, I take the term ‘sites of struggle’ from Wendy Fyfe (1991 p.160) – but existing accounts are still highly linear, depicting debates over abortion legislation as wholly dominated and determined by the hegemonic medical discourse. The introduction of the concept of contingency is an attempt to acknowledge that struggles over abortion legislation can go either way. Hegemonic discourses inform but do not completely determine the course of debates. So, just as the hegemonic medical discourse is fragmented and cannot completely determine abortion politics, it must be acknowledged that images of ‘Europe’ in the debates are heterogeneous, and their mere presence does not produce straightforward, predictable legislative outcomes. As I will reveal below, this heterogeneity is demonstrated through comparison of abortion debates to wider discourse on Europe.

Europe and British national identity

Marcussen et al. (1999) chart the different ways in which the discourses of French, German and British political elites make sense of national identity with respect to Europe and the EU. They observe that while France and Germany have both undergone a significant Europeanisation of national identity since the second world war, British attitudes regarding
Britain’s identity and role in the EU have changed little, with both main parties envisioning Europe as an ‘alliance of independent nations’ from which the UK remains ‘semi-detached’ – ‘of rather than in’ Europe (p.625). Indeed, UK exceptionalism forms a core part of the identity of Britain as a nation-state, and British politicians are far more likely to identify with national rather than European symbols, history and institutions (p.626).

Philippa Sherrington (2006) find this attitude maintained into the 2000s, even as political parties develop new mechanisms for confronting Europe. In her view, the New Labour government was able to justify even ‘Europhilic’ policy positions in terms of the UK’s role as a strong leader and sovereign nation, and the UK’s bargaining position in the EU became symbolic of UK strength on a European and global stage. New Labour was able to frame EU expansion in terms of UK strength, as ‘[enhancing] the EU’s and thus the UK’s credibility on the world stage’, while Foreign Secretary Jack Straw claimed in a speech that the UK’s ‘position as a leading power in Europe makes the UK stronger and more influential in the world’ (p.72). Indeed this rhetorical manoeuvre – framing engagement with the EU in terms of British national interest and global leadership – is still reflected in the Labour Party manifesto, under the heading ‘A strong Britain in a reformed Europe’:

We are proud that Britain is once again a leading player in Europe. Our belief is that Britain is stronger in the world when the European Union is strong, and that Britain succeeds when it leads in Europe and sets the agenda for change. Sullen resistance and disengagement achieve nothing. (Labour Party 2010 10:4)

Non-abortion-related parliamentary debates also reflect this understanding of Britain’s identity and role in Europe. Baroness Symons, Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, opens a 2004 debate over the EU Constitutional Treaty with a textbook example of how the New Labour government framed its EU-related policies:

The Government believe that the treaty, successfully negotiated, is, indeed, good news for Britain. It gives us a choice about whether to be strong players in Europe, or limping along on its sidelines. (Hansard 2004 c.175)

The Conservative response from Lord Howell operates in the same frame even as the content is different. Implicitly, Howell concurs with Symons that the strength of the British nation is what is at stake here, although he disputes whether the government position is the best way to maintain it:

What outdated and unmitigated rubbish is the notion about being pushed to the sidelines, let alone chucked out. In no other country, in no other EU member state, are people being fed by their Government with that threatening nonsense about being sidelined if they turn down this constitutional document (Hansard 2004 c.178)

A certain figuring of Britain’s role and identity in the EU persists, then, and is shared by British Europhiles and Eurosceptics alike. This construction is somewhat subverted, however, when it comes to abortion politics.
Europe in British abortion debates

In the debates, Europe is generally mentioned either in the context of abortion tourism or in terms of ‘how things are done’ on the continent, and often as both: many participants compare the UK’s 28-week (before the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act) or 24-week (after the HFE Act) upper time limit for legal abortion to the much lower limit adopted in other European nations, invoking the image of European women coming to the UK in ‘dروves’ to have late abortions. This image leads some of the participants to describe the UK as the ‘abortion capital’ or ‘foetal dustbin’ of Europe.

Two themes emerge in the way Europe is depicted in the debates. Firstly, in the context of ‘how things are done’ in other European countries, Europe is associated with progress and compared favourably to Britain, which is held to be somehow lagging behind. Take Bernard Braine in 1990:

We must also recognise that we compare somewhat unfavourably in that regard, even if the Bill is enacted with the provisions that my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Health has said that he is in favour of—namely, 24 weeks—with a good many countries in Europe. We are still way behind them and the details are available for hon. Members. (Hansard 1990 c.215)

In 2008, Edward Leigh argues that public opinion is shifting in favour of a time limit more in line with the rest of Europe, again implying that Britain is somehow ‘behind’ in how it regulates abortion:

Given what is happening in the rest of Europe, it is not surprising that public opinion is changing. A recent ComRes poll showed that 58 per cent. of the people, including three out of four women, think that abortion should be limited to 20 weeks or less, and 41 per cent. of women think that the abortion limit should be lowered to 12 weeks or less, so ours is not an extreme view. I know that opinion polls are not conclusive and one can throw doubt on a particular poll, but I am sure everybody will accept that there is a genuine change in public opinion and we should reflect that in this House. (Hansard 2008 c.227)

The second theme relates to Britain’s role in Europe, raising questions of national identity. The charge that Britain has become a ‘foetal dustbin’ is brought in 1988 by Cyril Smith and Elizabeth Peacock respectively:

As nearly 50 per cent. of abortions that take place after 18 weeks are carried out on women who are shipped to Britain by air and sea because they cannot obtain abortions in their own countries, Britain has become the country of back-street abortions for the rest of Europe. In 1986, of the 8,276 abortions after 18 weeks, 3,688 were carried out on women who came to Britain from abroad. (Hansard 1988 c.1257)

Britain's current limit of 28 weeks is the single reason, as we have heard repeatedly, why so many women from foreign countries come here for abortions. Some 43 per cent. of those

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1 The 24-week limit does not necessarily indicate that the UK is any more ‘permissive’ on abortion than the rest of Europe: many countries adopt a policy of ‘abortion on demand’ up to 12 or 14 weeks’ gestation, without requiring the agreement of two doctors that the pregnancy poses a risk to the pregnant woman’s health.
seeking abortion in recent years have come from other countries. In short, we are becoming the foetal dustbin of Europe. The House should not let that continue. (Hansard 1988 cc.1291-2)

The charge is still present in 2008:

Surely everyone in the Chamber feels depressed about what is going on in Europe. It presents a bleak picture of our country that we have one of the highest abortion rates in Europe—200,000 a year. In modern Britain, the most dangerous place to be is in one’s mother’s womb, which should be a place of sanctity. (Leigh in Hansard 2008 c.226)

Even oppositional voices – those in favour of maintaining the status quo or of easing restrictions on abortion – accept that being ‘behind’ or otherwise different to Europe is a bad thing, even as they dispute the argument that Britain is somehow different. Take David Steel’s (architect of the 1967 Act) defence:

Let us set the British figures in the context of the legal abortion rate of other European countries. In this country, we are not carrying out an excessive number of abortions, judging by international standards. It is a slur on the practice of medicine in this country to go on repeating and conveying the impression that there is an outrageous level of abortion in Britain (Hansard 1990 c.202)

Steel engages proponents of this argument on their own terms, accepting that it is appropriate to envisage abortion in terms of British national identity.

**Fantasmatic logic**

Comparison of abortion debates to wider political discourse on Europe highlights a seeming contradiction. In political discussions of Europe, the UK is generally identified as a strong, sovereign nation in a ‘Europe of nation states’, with UK leadership qualities stressed. In abortion debates, however, something completely different is the case: the UK is seen as weak, lagging behind the rest of Europe if not the ‘dustbin’ of the rest of Europe, and something to be ashamed of – while Europe represents progress and everything that the UK should aspire to be. How to make sense of this? We might expect abortion debates to follow the pattern of other debates in which Europe is mentioned – but instead, the hegemonic British identity is subverted. This subversion demonstrates the heterogeneity of images of Europe and national identity in different contexts, a heterogeneity which indicates that the introduction of such discourses does not have predictable discursive or legislative outcomes. However, heterogeneity in itself does not explain the discrepancy between most political discourses on Europe and the way images of Europe enter into abortion debates.

One way of making sense of this subversion of British identity is in terms of fantasmatic logic. Jason Glynos (2008) presents fantasmatic logic as a way to account for ‘the way subjects are gripped by a practice’ (p.278). Logics of fantasy follow a narrative structure referencing some sort of fullness-to-come (the beatific element of fantasy), blocked by some obstacle or nightmare scenario (the horrific element of fantasy) (p.283). Such fantasies can
work to sustain practices, such as workplace exploitation, that might otherwise be deemed
ethically or normatively suspect. I suggest that in the case of abortion debates, however,
fantasmatic logic is employed in order to mobilise against a certain obstacle.

In order to understand the role of fantasmatic logic in abortion debates, it is crucial to see
these debates as operating in the context of the hegemonic construction of Britain as a strong
leader. This backdrop is surely inescapable for actors in the British Parliament, who will
generally be well-versed in arguments about Europe. Hence, the debates necessarily have an
intertextual dimension – mentions of Europe implicitly draw upon wider depictions of a
strong Britain in a Europe of sovereign nations. This means that when the ‘role of Britain in
Europe’ trope is subverted, it necessarily resonates with the broader context. Abortion
debates also resonate with anxieties over the nation-reproduction nexus outlined earlier:
abortion represents a woman’s ability to reject reproduction or control when to reproduce,
hence disturbing the image of women as the biological reproducers of the nation.

These contexts together make up the conditions of possibility for fantasmatic logic to operate.
The UK-as-foetal-dustbin scenario makes up the horrific aspect of this fantasy, clashing with
an idealised (beatific) vision of Britain’s role in Europe, familiar to participants in the debate,
in which Britain is presented as a strong leader on the European and world stage. The ‘foetal
dustbin’ scenario actively blocks this ideal, causing feelings of shame over national identity
rather than pride. In this way, the fantasy is manipulative, mobilising support for more
restrictive abortion legislation. Crucially, there is nothing ‘necessary’ about the way this logic
operates. Europe could, in theory, enter the debates in a way that reinforced rather than
subverted the strong-Britain identity yet still supported restrictive abortion law – for example,
by depicting Britain’s tighter medical regulation of abortion as a strength and a way of
‘leading’ an overly ‘permissive’ Europe. However, this formulation would not have the same
capacity to mobilise support for change to the law by presenting a nightmare scenario to be
struggled against.

Conclusion

As noted above, these findings demonstrate that images of Europe, along with those of
national identity, are heterogeneous and cannot be taken for granted. Even where there is a
dominant way of framing Europe, this frame may be subverted, with important consequences
for how a policy issue is understood and political support mobilised. However, the analysis
also has implications for understanding Europeanisation and for analysing gender equality
policies.

Firstly, it demonstrates the need for a more complex account of Europeanisation than simple
convergence with European or EU norms. Processes of Europeanisation can depend upon
how images of Europe enter into national political discourses – images which, as previously
noted, are heterogeneous. Moreover, images of Europe do not straightforwardly exert a
normalising pressure, but rather intersect with issues of national identity to produce
interesting, possibly even unexpected, results. In the case of much British political discourse,
Europe is presented as something that can either threaten or bolster a strong Britain, but is always something apart from or ‘other’ than Britain. In the case of the abortion debates, the prospect of this ‘strong Britain’ being subverted functions in a way, interestingly, that does exert a normalising pressure, prompting Britain to ‘catch up’ to the rest of Europe. However, as I have suggested, there is nothing necessary about this subversion – rather it functions as the horrific element of a fantasy made possible by anxieties over nationhood and reproduction.

Secondly, my analysis demonstrates the relevance of questions of nationhood and national identity when researching the making of gender equality policies. Discourses of national identity can be drawn upon in order to mobilise support for policies concerning reproduction, as they are drawn upon here to mobilise support for tighter regulation of abortion. Due to the aforementioned anxieties concerning the nation-reproduction nexus we might anticipate a similar phenomenon occurring while other policies on gender or reproduction are being formulated: a hegemonic national identity being subverted – or at least threatened with the prospect of subversion – in order to emphasise the threatening implications of women’s autonomy.

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