

Andrew Ryder, *Britain and Europe at a Crossroads. The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation* (Bristol University Press, 2020)

Report by Isabelle Hertner (January 2021)

I greatly enjoyed reading Andrew Ryder's *Britain and Europe at a Crossroads. The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation*. In his book, Ryder focuses on what he calls 'Brexit Nationalism' ("a conception of Brexit that sees it as a national rebirth and the renewal of perceived essences of Britishness, centred on political, economic and cultural sovereignty and chauvinism"). Ryder investigates Brexit nationalism by analysing the public discourses ("speech acts") of British protagonists (mainly, key politicians, journalists, but also, party donors and campaigners) centred on Brexit. In doing so, he highlights the different topics and argumentative topoi that British protagonists invoke when speaking about Britain's relationship with the European Union. Ryder first provides a brief historical overview of Britain's complex relationship with the European Union (EU), tracing back the road to the 2016 Brexit referendum. He then analyses the discourses and policies on Brexit of Britain's main political parties (the Conservative party, the Labour party, and the smaller, nationalist parties on the right and left). In particular, he creates a typology of the different types of Eurosceptics and Europhiles that exist within the two major parties, the Conservatives and Labour. Next, Ryder analyses some of the key speech acts made by EU leaders and a number of national political leaders on Brexit, thereby juxtaposing the British and European perspectives on Brexit. He then explains the rise of Boris Johnson and analyses his (bombastic) Brexit discourses and the populist mood that has taken Brexit Britain, where parliament and the Supreme Court are pitched against 'the people'. He also cites some of his opponents from the opposition benches, thereby further highlighting the (lasting) gulf between the 'Leavers' and the 'Remainers'. In his last chapter, Ryder takes a step back from Brexit politics. He highlights again the importance of speech, and how it has been used by powerful British elites to divide people into 'us' and 'them'. Ryder then goes to formulate a number of carefully crafted future solutions to the political culture that has caused Brexit. These are:

- Greater use of deliberative innovations such as citizen's assemblies and juries, participatory budgeting and deliberative polls.

- Reform of the media (ownership and content) to re-establish a more democratic public sphere. Also, to introduce better civic education in British schools, workplaces, universities in order to have a better informed and more deliberative approach to politics.
- Making English identity more civic and inclusive by promoting civic multiculturalism.

Ryder's book is a very critical, (self-)reflective, and thought-provoking account of contemporary Britain's political, social, and identity crisis. It is beautifully written and the narrative flows almost effortlessly. It is also a holistic analysis into Brexit, which is much needed. Many of the published articles and books on Brexit are rather narrowly defined, quantitative, electoral studies that ignore historical legacies and political discourses. I am therefore finding myself in a position of a critical friend rather than an opponent. Still, I would like to ask Dr Ryder to elaborate and reflect further on some of the issues that he addresses in his book which I found particularly interesting and relevant.

For a start, I found the self-reflective nature of this book very compelling. Brexit has been very traumatic for many Britons - whether they live in the UK or abroad – and for EU citizens who have made the UK their home (like myself). In that sense, I found the self-reflection at the beginning of the book very important, as it puts this study into the personal context and highlights that Brexit goes to the core of what it means to be British today. **Here, I wondered: What, in Dr Ryder's view, is the benefit of studying Brexit Nationalism from abroad (and in his case, Hungary)?**

Next, after I finished reading the book, **I wondered: was Brexit really a “revolutionary moment in time”, as Dr Ryder has coined it? Wouldn't this book rather suggest that the problems that Brexit brought to the fore (national identity crisis, socio-economic problems caused by neoliberalism and austerity, issues of media ownership, party donations, etc) have been a long time in the making? And wasn't the UK, as the EU's ‘awkward partner’, on the trajectory to leave? In other words, can Brexit not be interpreted as continuity rather than change?**

I very much liked Dr Ryder's proposals for reforms post-Brexit. A more inclusive, deliberative, civilised democracy would indeed be necessary. At the moment, however, these proposals don't seem to materialise (yet), at least not under the premiership of Boris Johnson. I would therefore like to ask Dr Ryder: **now that the UK has (unfortunately) left the EU, how does**

he think will “Brexit Nationalism” manifest itself? Which topics and topoi will still be used by Britain’s Brexiteers, and how will the UK’s lack of sovereignty become framed (in the absence of EU membership as a thing to blame)?

On the issue of the Brexiteers’ nostalgia of Empire & World War victories: have we reached ‘peak poppies’ (a peak in the oppressive and selective World War memory culture) or will it become worse, due to Brexit & Covid-induced austerity, and the role played by the right-wing media?

I liked the notion of Brexit as the ‘Tea Partyization’ of the Conservative Party. (It could perhaps also be called the UKIPization of the Conservative Party). **Can a more sensible, centrist, one-nation party leadership re-emerge, post Brexit? The example of Starmer shows that being a ‘centrist dad’ isn’t very fashionable right now... plus, the Tory membership doesn’t seem to want centrist leaderships...**

I liked the notion of the Brexiteers’ masculinized discourse. For instance, on page 49 it reads: “Gove prefers to paint a stark and binary picture of the choice the country is being presented with and is rather masculinized, with voting Leave depicted as an act of bravery but Remain as an act of timid compliance.” Or when Johnson asked Corbyn to “man up” and agree to holding fresh elections. There is also some interesting literature by Roberta Guerrina and others on how the Brexit campaign was dominated by men and didn’t focus at all on the implications of Brexit for women, gender equality, but also, LGBTQ issues. **Question to Dr Ryder: to what extent was/is Brexit a macho project? And how can we seek to address these masculinised discourses?**