

REVIEW OF HABILITATION THESIS

Andrew Ryder

Britain and Europe at the Crossroads: The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation

The book presented is a research monograph published with the University of Bristol Press, a relatively small academic publisher based at a leading UK university that belongs to the 'Russell Group' of research-intensive British universities and which consistently ranks in the top 100 of all world university league tables. It is a substantial volume of over 180 pages in length, plus a 40-page bibliography.

The work is centrally concerned with Brexit, and since there is already a growing literature on this subject, a first question relates to what distinguishes this book from other accounts of the period. The author states in the Introduction (p. 2) that the book 'focuses on the historical, social, cultural and political factors that influenced Britain to take its decision to leave the EU but also explores what the consequences might be in the wake of that decision'. This is not so unusual an approach, but the theme is developed further and for example in the final chapter (p. 165), the author points out that 'Brexit can be perceived as a shaper of identity, a frame used to interpret the past and present'.

A major argument of the book is that Brexit is indicative of a 'paradigm shift' in British politics. Here and elsewhere, the author's interdisciplinary background, influenced by sociology as well as political science, is revealed in the writing. This is perhaps most notable in the sections of reflexivity where he is open about his views on Brexit – an approach less familiar among scholars dealing centrally with the study of government and the details of British politics. Indeed, when considering what makes the book original it is perhaps important to note that its approach to Brexit starts not with the study of British party politics but with the study of populism (campaigns against Roma and travellers in the UK and democratic backsliding in Hungary). To some extent, this is an outsider's account of Brexit, since the author was living outside the UK during the key Brexit years, and on balance this is a strength rather than a weakness since it aims to analyse events in a broader context.

Theoretically, the work is based on critical discourse analysis. It focuses on 'speech acts', and the 'securitization of speech' and highlights the *topoi* (the lines or frames of argument) pursued by both sides in the Brexit debate. The author states (p. 11) that the book 'is centred on a series of vignettes of language, highlighting important moments in the Brexit process'. The quotations (speech acts) are very well chosen and engage the reader throughout the book. Securitization is also a key concept as it was device employed by most actors debating Brexit, whether they highlighted the dangers of remaining in or exiting the EU. At the same time, the book aims to investigate the 'rationale and strategy' (p. ix) of the two sides as well as looking at 'the ideas and values behind them' (p. 62). Although in the Introduction (p. 7) the author poses questions about whether the Brexit discourse and counter-discourse resonated with the public, the work does not attempt systematically to measure public opinion. It centres on analysing the rhetoric used by advocates of both directions in the Brexit debate.

An attraction of the book is that it does not analyse Brexit in a chronological fashion, but analyses the various actors concerned. After the more theoretical Introduction, Chapter 1 looks at British history with a particular focus on European integration. It has a coherent structure, is explicit about where the book is going, and it is very clearly written even when dealing with complex subject matter. Chapter 2 is a mixed chapter that deals with the referendum campaign and Theresa May's period as prime minister, and it is less clear here what the book is doing; the author states (p. 62) that it is seeking to assess 'whether Britain is following a populist trajectory and fundamental shift from representative democracy', but this does not always appear obvious. Chapter 3 focuses on the Conservative Party and Chapter 4 on the Labour Party, while Chapter 5, entitled 'The Nationalists: Exclusionary and Civic', in essence looks at the other most relevant parties in British politics, since most are in practice national or nationalist in their identity, but strongly divided in their views on Brexit. Chapter 6 looks at 'Views from Europe' and highlights some of the key EU responses and strategies to which actors in the UK had to react. Chapter 7 investigates the framing of Brexit arguments during the Johnson governments in the final stages of the UK's EU membership. Chapter 8, 'Antidotes to Brexit', reflects on future developments, including discussion of the power of rhetoric in setting agendas.

The book uses a very wide range of literature and is a substantial work of scholarship. Much is secondary rather than primary literature, but the author does not aspire to produce new revelations about the events of the Brexit period; and the events, inside stories and accounts of falsehood during that time have been adequately covered elsewhere. The book is very accessibly written, particularly given the emphasis on discourse analysis, and shows an exceptionally sound and detailed knowledge of British politics underlying the selection of the 'key moment' arguments and vignettes presented. I located three instances of what I considered small factual slips - on p. 20 (minority government), p. 45 (Smith) and p. 157 (election date), but all are on the level of proof-reading error. Occasionally I disagreed with interpretation, largely when discussing the referendum and its aftermath in Chapter 2. On p. 66, it is pointed out that 'May appeared unwilling to appease the 48 per cent who had voted to remain with substantive compromises', but I wondered what such compromises might, realistically, have looked like? Given the marked polarisation of society, it is questionable who might have been satisfied with compromise. On p. 68, it states that 'May chose to interpret the result in a way that would lead to a hard form of Brexit with Britain leaving the customs union and single market', but I wondered what the alternative really was? Arguably, May's dilemma was that the promises made by the pro-Brexit camp during the referendum were internally contradictory. The book intrinsically recognises these points, both by presenting the Brexit discourse as two opposing sides of an argument with no middle ground; and by following shifts in discourse as it was developed to deal with both the reality of leaving the EU (as opposed to the rather different arguments adopted in the referendum campaign) and the need, in anti-Brexit groups, to respond to a dynamic agenda.

Although I have a high opinion of this book, there are a few areas where I have some questions and would welcome further clarification:

1. The book, particularly in the Introduction, but also throughout the text, talks a lot about speech acts and highlights *topoi*, yet sometimes there seems little empirical analysis of this. The concluding chapter is on 'Antidotes to Brexit', but seems to lack conclusions

about what critical discourse analysis tells us. Back in the introduction on p. 11, Table I.1 classifies 'Argumentative topoi', but does later discussion build on this? Similarly, on p. 177, the author states that what is different about the book is 'the use of critical discourse analysis to understand the competing processes of securitization and desecuritization around Brexit and the charting of the impact of the populist turn on British politics and society'. But this does not seem to be reflected fully in the book's conclusion.

2. Analysis of the EU's stance in the Brexit period is subject to less scrutiny than that of actors within the UK. In the preface (p.xi) the author states that 'Central to this analysis is the securitization of speech', but could this theme not also be applied to EU reactions to Brexit? For example, could it not be claimed that immediately after the referendum, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker securitized Brexit by presenting it as an existential threat to the Union which necessitated the unity of all member states, thereby effectively closing down debate or argument between member states about the interests that should be pursued in negotiating the Withdrawal Agreement?
3. Who is the target audience of the book? I found the book extremely interesting to read and the direct quotations relevant and significant, and I particularly like the fact that it was structured around the discourse of individual actors rather than pursuing a chronological approach. However, how accessible would the discussion be to those less familiar with the facts surrounding Brexit? And for those with specialist knowledge of the field, what are the most important new insights that the work provides?
4. Why is the author confident that the UK will rejoin the EU p. 181? Could it be argued that the UK was always different from 'continental Europe' in terms of political culture, for example the relationship between citizen and state?
5. Could the author talk more about the concept of 'counter-public fear' introduced in the final chapter?

In conclusion, I believe that the work presented is a substantial achievement and clearly fulfils the criteria required for the award of the title of 'docent' since it both represents a substantial research effort and evidences sound ability to understand and apply theoretical principles of political sciences.

Na základe posúdenia predloženej vedeckej monografie/habilitačnej práce Dr. Andrew Ryder 'Britain and Europe at the Crossroads: The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation' konštatujem, že spĺňa všetky požiadavky kladené na prácu predloženú k habilitačnému konaniu a preto jednoznačne **odporúčam** predloženú prácu na obhajobné konanie v rámci habilitačného konania a po jeho úspešnom priebehu navrhujem udelenie vedecko-pedagogického titulu docent v odbore Politológia.

Dr. Karen Henderson