BOOK REVIEW

'All that custom has divided'

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

Due to recent events on the globe such as the pandemic and US elections the issue of Brexit has faded into the shadow of diplomatic talks, despite having both short- and long-term socio-economic consequences. A daringly fresh take from the pen of Andrew Ryder is here to remind us: our lesson of social history is far from over.

The result of the Brexit referendum has been one of the defining, shocking moments in modern European history. Less graceful was the following political and social tug-of-war, and the countless extensions and transitions, which may drag on even further than this year. To provide a clear overview, and in hope of a possible remedy, Andrew Ryder provides a thrilling inquiry into the heart of Brexit and related political speech acts in his book: *Britain and Europe at a Crossroads*. His research encourages the reader to see Brexit as a long-term phenomenon rather than a single event. Most of the factors which determined the referendum results in 2016, arose in consequence of decades of politics and social developments.

Andrew Ryder is an Associate Professor at ELTE Factulty of Social Sciences in Budapest, an Anglo-Hungarian academic living in Hungary with strong ties to both countries. As a passionate enthusiast of social justice, his work is a search for an antidote to Brexit. His concept presumes the narrative of a poisonous Brexit, something malformed which needs to be corrected. His explanation regarding his involvement serves as a lead to the Foucauldian critical approach, which is also the focus and the method of his work. Contrary to the crowd of EU and IR experts who opened the gates to a flood of books and papers, pleasing a widespread general interest, his confession of bias distances Mr. Ryder's work from the 'talking heads' who supplied the mass hysteria surrounding Brexit. Consequent to this, his take feels fresh and the scientific reader is spared from the gloomy impression of 'yet another book on Brexit' while reading. The author also aims to present the social transformations by examining phenomena such as the securitization of immigration, which was weaponized by the illiberal smoke and mirror politics of right-wing media outlets. The author presumes the perversion of the Foucauldian trilateral balance (state, market, and civil society), which he aims to present with critical discourse analysis of political texts. The inquiry aims to go beyond the frame of presenting another set of empirical data, although the work is an exceptional 'social, historical, and political' (p. 14) synthesis of earlier works on the topic.

The author cleverly balanced his methodological chapter around the fundamental sociological and critical works. He picked the most influential thinkers to support his arguments, set from a wider theoretical frame (e.g.: Bourdieu, Habermas, Berkley), to a narrower perspective of political science (Brubaker). The book consists of case studies based on different aspects of the research. The first texts explore nationalism and identity mixed and embedded in history, the second chapter is the brief story of Brexit, while the third and fourth chapters describe the changes within the great political parties. A complex coding table is provided to the reader to demonstrate the variety of topoi used in the discourses. According to the book, topoi such as British exceptionalism and imperialism had key roles in formulating the present political scene in the United Kingdom. Ryder presents how playing the second fiddle to the Franco-German axis, and being a latecomer to the ECSC, and the abandoned dreams of empire locked in the feeling of resentment towards continental nations (pp. 18–21). The second half of the book mainly focuses on the two kinds of nationalism within SNP and UKIP, and also the reception and challenges of the EU. Interestingly enough the government of Theresa May and the opposition of Corbyn fit in the third and fourth chapters, unlike the character and career of Boris Johnson, who deserved a separate chapter. Finally, the last chapter offers the social-democratic remedy to 'solve' Brexit.

Based on the theory of Karl Polanyi, Ryder argues that crises set the events in motion; citizens sought social protection and alternatives from the traumatic experience of a financial crisis. Therefore, rising nationalism is presented as a public answer to the crises both in the 1930s and in the 2010s. Ryder identifies the complex factors behind political acts pressured by the crisis; failing social models, and the multicultural concept at the heart of the humiliated white voter insurgency. Throughout the book, the narrative remains coherent, but it struggles to present circumstances. Concerning the former case of voter behaviour, the book explains why immigration was such a key issue in the last decades. However, similar to other monographic works, keeping the focus is at the price of overlooking some subjects which might have deserved a more detailed explanation. The narrow scope of investigation falls short in one particular chapter, where it leads to a one-sided interpretation regarding the previously mentioned topic of displacement. As Ryder connects the case of immigration and the growing mass anxiety in Britain, he observes the role of media elites and the responsibility in fanning the fire of sensationalism, but he does this mainly by mentioning right-wing media outlets, whereas the role of media on the political left received little criticism (pp. 30–36).[1] The image of a boy on the shores of the Mediterranean, the emergence of a counter-narrative of philanthropism are just a few examples of media sensationalism. A fight for sympathy (to earn political capital) widened the gap further between the partisan divide and accelerated tribalism hence providing a larger space for identity politics. The unique critical approach, however, makes up for such smaller shortcomings where the reader has to rely on his own prior knowledge or context.

The undeniably unique feature of the book is that Ryder presents what has been *implied* by politicians and manifested in speech acts. Structural, pre-existing factors prior to the referendum campaigns have been analysed in other works (Clarke et al., 2017) the meaningful explanation concerning Brexit is exactly the unveiling of implied notions and speech acts which affected and connected the structural issues. Therefore, the critical approach is a

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[1] Although it must be noted that the book mentions one particular case of the *Guardian*'s outrage on page 44.

key device of the book and serves as a tool to lead the reader to a more thorough understanding. Ryder masterfully grasped the essence of certain events and presented the connection of party politics to other concepts. For instance, the issue of nationalism and populism is presented in one of the chapters where Ryder highlights the concept of a 'tripolar stratagem' of Nigel Farage's politics. In short, it is a tactic where the demagogue plays the victim card by appearing as the champion of the people and proposing controversy, then met by the condemnation of the liberal elite (the outgroup of the Manichean dichotomy), the politician can pose as the victim of 'liberal oppression'. In the subsequent chapter, the strategy of the mentioned method of vote gaining is clear. The further the Conservatives play the similar cards of the immigration issue, the more support they got. Pointing out these connections, Ryder presents the conflicted premiership of Theresa May, and how the Conservative Party set on a path of ultra-libertarianism, then steered even more to the right.

Another intriguing part is Ryder's assessment of the changes which Labour went through, while different parties contested for the leadership within. Blairites and Lexiteers certainly made it difficult for Jeremy Corbyn to have an unambiguous stance as the former group owned the Europhile and neoliberal argument, while the latter group tried to hijack a potential remain or reformist campaign. The fight for Labour might have benefitted one group or the other in the short-term, but it turned out to be a 'deadly cocktail' and completely discredited the opposition before the elections (p. 96). Ryder used these cases to support the argument highlighting the crisis of representative democracy, which is most salient in his quotation of David Lammy when Europhile Labour representatives stood against their own constituents.[2]

The chapter on the political speech acts of EU politicians somewhat counters the narrative of a much needed radical turn in Labour, and rather highlights the changes in the EU since the referendum. The leaders and negotiators of the EU took a hard stance on Brexit, countering the efforts of hard Brexiteers. Mr. Ryder highlights the speech acts of politicians like Michel Barnier and Guy Verhofstadt. The clever narrative of Britain's cherry-picking, the clear language, and the unanimous support of the member states – even the reluctant Visegrad members (pp. 140–141) – gave way to 'Bregreters' and a rise in pro-European public opinion. The internal changes combined with resistance may have come as too little too late to answer the challenges. Nevertheless, the author assumes that the European project's shift to a more socially engaged future has the potential to cause some difficulties for the masterminds of Brexit.

Such a mind is Boris Johnson. According to Ryder's research, Johnson heavily favoured nationalist, populist topoi, political showmanship, and the populist mixture of emergency measures, which veiled the conflict of globalist policies and nationalist desires apparent in his rhetoric. The conflict resulted in Johnson using the smokescreen of a scapegoat (liberal elite) and the issue of representative democracy to portray himself as the victim who embodies the hero of the people, while the parliamentary elite obstructed the people's will. Throughout the chapter, Ryder provides a chronicle of how Johnson put British democracy in limbo by undermining the rule of law and using emasculative-nationalist speech techniques.

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[2] 'We have a duty to tell our constituents the truth, even when they passionately disagree. We owe them not only our industry but our judgment. We are trusted representatives, not unthinking delegates, so why do many in the House continue to support Brexit when they know that it will wreck jobs, the NHS and our standing in the world?' (p. 100).

The 2020 general election campaign was a display of this terrifying strategy. To demonstrate the former, Ryder provides a set of evidence of authoritarian practices and notorious ad nauseam falsehoods used by Conservatives. He also applied a set of game theories, but these theories were commonly reflected by political commentators in the media. The theory of *madman* – to maximize the amount of bluffs and lies – however, stands out from the rest as it gives a rational explanation to Johnson's unusual success in politics and why he faced a backlash from libertarian and other conservatives.

In the manifesto-like final chapter, 'Antidotes to Brexit', Ryder mainly calls for action in the areas of the public sphere, identity, and for a renewal of democracy in both the UK and Europe. I have to highlight the idea of the latter two, deliberative democracy and the concept of a more social Europe (pp. 165–176). Deliberative democracy seems like a bold and idealistic concept, in an age of constant technological revolution, when partisanship, and activism are only a 'touchscreen away' and – as Ryder observes – people are emotionally engaged to the extremes. We may as well advocate for self-control (instead of a nanny state) to limit our wishes and to gate populism. This would be somewhat joined to the issue of voter representation on the broader scale of the EU, where the democratic deficit is already present and produced the topoi of a sluggish machine steered by technocrats who make disconnected decisions based only on economic rationale. Throughout the book, Ryder mostly explained Brexit as a set of social phenomena, however, the economy is a less reflected topic of his book. Although, there is an economic argument against ordoliberalism, it is meant for the advocacy of a more inclusive and social Europe, and not to change the minds of those, who merely see the social backlash of Brexit as a result of the EU's monetary, fiscal, and federal policy. The proposed changes on both the economic and social side of the argument are therefore co-dependent. In the end, Ryder's vision on the 'return and reform' approach seems to be a more viable and inviting alternative to illiberal nationalism or 'one country socialism' (p. 177).

In the shadow of recent events in the world, the book certainly provides an argument for a remedy against populist politicians miring in fiction. Giving a coherent 'centrist' or social vision would possibly end rampant tribalism and social mending could take place. After the pandemic shook illiberal regimes and some countries are on the path to vote out leaders from power who are incapable of handling a real crisis, the writings are on the wall (see the US elections). If one of the roadmaps on how to overcome illiberal regimes succeeds, it might be followed worldwide, even in the resident country of Mr. Ryder.

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References

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