

The mediatization of Brexit: Actors, Agendas and Allegories

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Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake, Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2019; xiv+337 pp.: £22.99 (pbk). ISBN: 978-3-030-28767-2

Francis Rawlinson

How Press Propaganda Paved the Way to Brexit. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2020; xiv+364 pp., £24.99 (pbk). ISBN: 978-3-030-27764-2

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Communicating Brexit: what have we learnt?

Reflecting the magnitude of the UK's decision to leave the EU, academic investigation on Brexit has been abundant in virtually all fields including that of Communication Studies where a wealth of work has analysed Brexit from different linguistic, political, social and media perspectives (see for example, Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019). The volumes by Charteris-Black and Rawlinson contribute to such body of work that aims to critically show how imaginaries associated with the signifier 'Brexit' were constructed and widely reverberated in the public sphere by the media. While both Charteris-Black and Rawlinson point to how the mediatisation of Brexit was instrumental in shaping and swaying public opinion, they do so from different theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches. Charteris-Black's work is grounded in cognitive linguistics which explains the power of figurative language by focusing on the relationships between semiotic, rhetorical and psycho-emotional aspects of communication. By contrast, Rawlinson engages with a critique of the British right-wing press from the perspective of journalism studies arguing that the Brexit coverage was biased and deliberately misinformative as it was aimed at influencing and manipulating public opinion, in other words a form of political propaganda.

An established scholar of Critical Linguistics, Charteris-Black's view of figurative language (such as metaphorical expressions) is that it operates at a much deeper level than its literal meanings. How citizens talk about a particular concept (such as Brexit) has significant cognitive implications for how one conceives of and relates to the topic. Following from Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work - which explains metaphors as mapping a familiar experience onto an abstract field (such as representing nations as 'families') - Charteris-Black's work is premised on the notion that metaphorical language will activate specific frames and that the conventional use of metaphors contributes to naturalise certain views of the social world. Critical Linguists have been keen to show how, in political communication, certain metaphors can be 'weaponised' to set the tone of a public debate. Charteris-Black's book therefore aims to explain 'how, why, and with what effect, metaphor was employed by the two sides in the Brexit debate' (p.12). It is noteworthy that the author's analytical toolbox is not limited to metaphors. In addition to metaphorical language, established notions such as frames, scenarios, allegories and embodiment are explained and made use of to explore not only how language was deployed to construct and reflect different worldviews and ideological stances related to Brexit but also how such representations would conceivably have impacted on voters' intentions. For example, representing the UK as 'hostage' of Brussels' rules is likely to trigger an embodied simulation of entrapment from which one will want to escape by voting out.

One of the key points put across by Charteris-Black and, in my view, the major contribution of this publication is that the well-elaborated concept of 'moral intuition' provides the reader with what is an otherwise often missed link between language and political action. Drawing from Haidt's (2001) social intuition model, Charteris-Black suggests that moral reasoning (that is an informed decision about the 'right' thing to do) only follows in support of some choice precedingly made on moral intuition (that is a 'gut feeling' evaluation about the situation). Applying such model to the Brexit context, Charteris-Black argues that figurative language provided voters with the cognitive framework for forming 'morally intuitive' in/out binary choices and that, significantly, Leave were more persuasive in constructing frames that implicitly or explicitly drew from a wider spectrum of 'morally intuitive' frames and assumptions than the Remain camp. For example, Chapter 3 explores two prevalent frames for Brexit, namely 'Patriotism and the Nation' and 'Distrust and Betrayal' to argue that it was the Leave side which made the most of structuring their arguments around the moral intuition of 'loyalty', which voters would have inferred from the activation of those frames (and also partly because Leave-endorsing politicians such as Jacob Rees-Mogg had developed them in the first place). Similar analytical accounts (and discussions of relevant implications for moral intuition/reasoning) are given in relation to the 'War and Invasion' frame in Chapter 4, the 'Family and Relationships' frame in Chapter 7 and the connected 'Marriage and Divorce' frame in Chapter 8, which by evoking the embodied simulation of 'family experience' harks back to moral intuitions based on binaries such

as fairness/cheating and loyalty/betrayal. Metaphors and frames drawing from the animal kingdom are discussed in Chapter 9. To complete his analysis, Charteris-Black delves into figurative language deployed by Boris Johnson (Chapter 6) and discusses how Leave used language more creatively than Remain by introducing neologisms such as ‘beleaver’ and ‘remoaner’ clearly designed to morally frame specific views (Chapter 2).

As Charteris-Black points out, the fact that Leave supporters were more successful in communicating their arguments does not necessarily imply that they were right. It shows however that the most effective language of Brexit ultimately relied on invoking and mobilising basic feelings relating to the human condition. Although Charteris-Black is less forthcoming than Rawlinson about his own stance on Brexit, his approach in line with a critical discursive orientation is overall concerned with showing the contestation between ideologies represented by different allegorical and metaphorical scenarios and their links with the moral intuition/reasoning behind Brexit. In this sense, although Charteris-Black surveys a wide set of data, including social media, Twitter accounts, political speeches and press coverage - of which he acknowledges the increasing communicative relevance in our society – his argument that the way the media constructed Brexit would have prompted many to assess the situation and vote accordingly is short of explicitly suggesting any media manipulation.

By contrast, Rawlinson takes an overtly critical stance towards the role of media in Brexit, drawing particular attention to the instrumental role of the British Eurosceptic press not only during the Brexit debate but well before the referendum. Rawlinson’s work thus contributes to the long-debated issues of media’s vested interests agenda and media influence, which were only made more acute by the Brexit crisis. Although Rawlinson’s analytical work is not explicitly grounded in any particular methodological approach, the author makes an overall convincing case for the right-wing British press (especially the Telegraph, Mail, Sun and Express) running their Brexit coverage unprofessionally and deceptively as propaganda rather than aiming for the expected standards of journalism. While media and propaganda theory is not directly referred to, Rawlinson’s work is nevertheless robust in that it provides the reader with a historical contextualisation of the building up to Brexit in terms of the British right-wing press’s negative coverage of Euronews over the two decades leading up to the 2016 EU referendum. Rawlinson thus crucially stresses the long-term character of anti-EU propaganda based on spurious Euro-Myths and distorted representations of the EU-UK relationships which was instrumental in influencing public opinion towards the Leave message, because the readership was effectively primed to such negative perceptions and Brexit was pre-legitimised even before the referendum was called (Zappettini, 2021). Notwithstanding the debated question of direction of causality between readership’s attitudes and media representations -which Rawlinson acknowledges – Rawlinson successfully argues that the British press is more Eurosceptic than that of continental countries and that some titles became the ‘soundbox’ for the Leave message to suit their own commercial agenda and political affiliation.

Despite the ‘remoaning’ that one might expect from a British former EU official (and precisely because he is an EU insider), Rawlinson’s argument on the bias of the right-wing press is sharp and robustly supported by an accurate deconstruction work in which the author juxtaposes propaganda extracts from the media coverage with well-reasoned and logical counter arguments. For example, Rawlinson draws from his vast academic and professional experience to guide us through the nitty gritty of different legislative processes and to show that British institutions were never constrained by Brussels in their decision making to the extent that was often claimed by the press. Similarly, Rawlinson competently backs up some of his analysis with the British Government’s own ‘Review of the Balance of Competences between the UK and the EU’. At a wider level, Rawlinson’s zealous work of digging for hard facts to debunk the anti-EU propaganda goes beyond the mere purpose of setting the records straight. The book’s critique of the press carrying out a deliberate campaign of misinformation on the EU at the expense of a standards of fairness in fact raises the key question of the media ideal role of promoting balanced and informed debates as well as their gatekeeping power and the importance of a free press for democracy.

Structurally, Rawlinson’s volume comprises of two parts. The first half of the book (chapters 1-3) sets the scene by contextualising the Brexit referendum (Chapter 1) and by providing a historical account of the UK-EU relationships (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 is possibly the most insightful as it surveys the British media landscape (in particular the British press) and compares it with its Continental counterpart to conclude that the latter has done a better job of ‘communicating’ Europe to their readers. Rawlinson persuasively points to the instrumental mobilisation of Britishness and British exceptionalism and how representations of Britain at loggerheads with and bullied by Brussels have served the political agenda of a large section of the British media which was always against the UK’s membership of the EU. From this historical account of the British media’s anti-EU stance, Chapter 3 zeros in onto the key discursive topics embraced by the Leave camp, namely sovereignty, economy and immigration (reflected in the Leave campaign’s slogan of ‘taking back control of our laws, our money and our borders’) that the author then aims to dismantle in the second half of the book (chapters 4–7). In particular, Chapters 4 and 5 are both focused on the sovereignty issue: the former engages with the supposedly undemocratic character of the EU institutions, the latter with the extent to which the UK law is actually derived from anything imposed on the British Parliament by the EU. The question of the cost of EU for British citizens and other financial implications of Brexit are dealt with in Chapter 6 whereas the issue of immigration is discussed in Chapter 7. In Chapters 4-7 Rawlinson does an excellent job of breaking down the macro themes of the campaign (sovereignty, economy and immigration) and offering counterfactual rebuttals to each specific myth and claim that the author sees as deliberate

misinformation put out by the press to manipulate public opinion. In concluding Chapter 8 Rawlinson advocates changes in education to improve politics and journalism standards towards their ideal roles of promoting informed civic debate and democracy.

Final remarks and recommendations

Both publications are well worth readings for any academic or lay person keen to understand communicative dynamics around Brexit in the public sphere. As I have discussed, these books are informed by different disciplinary approaches, apply their analysis to different foci and have different aims. Charteris-Black's work deals with persuasion and emotions and is conducted from the perspective of figurative language. It suggests that the Leave arguments were framed with specific metaphorical and allegorical narratives that leveraged on deep emotional and morally laden responses rather than logical thinking based on facts. In this sense Charteris-Black highlights the instrumental use of figurative language in constructing Brexit as an instinctive reaction against Brussels. Rawlinson's contribution is focused on the media, it underlines issues of power and manipulation achieved through coverage as propaganda; it is aimed at rectifying misinformation but above all at raising awareness about the role of a free press. By taking a diachronic approach, it provides good evidence of the cumulative effect that could explain why Brexit had been written large in many voters' minds even before the term was coined. Despite these differences the two publications synergically complement and speak to each other pointing to the role of communication in influencing the referendum outcome, especially how, why and by whom certain messages were circulated. Attention is drawn by both publications to the recurrent themes of sovereign/invaded nation and the antagonistic representations of us and them that have become taken for granted rhetorical tools in a new politics of identity and de/legitimation of Europe (Zappettini, forthcoming; Zappettini and Bennett, 2022). What I see as the best way these two books complement each other is in fact where they diverge most in their focal view of language. Rawlinson is concerned with the rational and propositional aspects of language which he sees as an expression of what should be logical thinking and that he thus aims to rectify on a counterfactual basis. As a linguist Charteris-Black is more focused on the relationships between form and cognitive/pragmatic implications of communication, thus delving into the emotive and affective dimensions of Brexit that have nevertheless been underlying and driving public moral reasoning on the issue. Of course, these two views are mutually compatible and indeed part and parcel of our everyday discursive practices.

Like with any publications, the two volumes have some limitations due to the usual trade-offs between focus and what cannot be covered within the constraints of a book. For example, Charteris-Black's treatment of social media as platforms somewhat downplays their corporate power while Rawlinson's focus on the right-wing/Leave camp leaves us with no comparative analysis of the Remain camp propaganda (if any). Still, I found these readings balanced and well-argued and would definitely recommend them to any academic or citizens who is not too 'Brexhausted'.

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