

Deconstructing Brexit discourses: A critical logics approach to understanding the 2016 referendum result

It is now six years since Britain voted for Brexit. Drawing on a recent book, Benjamin Hawkins employs post-structuralist discourse theory to understand the form, content, and political dynamics of the Brexit referendum debates.

The Brexit referendum in 2016 has given rise to a now significant volume of scholarship attempting to explain the outcome. Much of this has focused on the characteristics of leave and remain voters – particularly age, education level and political identity – and how these [underpinned voting behaviour](#). However, attention must also be paid to the long-term and contextual factors, which provided the conditions for the leave campaign's narrow victory.

Prior to the referendum campaign, European integration had been a low salience issue for most voters. Opinion poll data had [consistently identified](#) low levels of support for European integration and low levels of knowledge about the EU as a political entity. Though UK citizens may not have been particularly focused on 'Europe' as an issue, when asked to think about the EU and to express an opinion their responses tended to be negative.

It is possible, therefore, to characterise the British (and particularly English) electorates as a population of 'latent Eurosceptics.' Similarly, in the decades preceding the Brexit vote, UK media coverage of the EU, especially in the print sector, was dominated by a deeply Eurosceptic discourse, which set the terms of debate on European integration. This framed the UK and the EU in [deeply antithetical terms](#), with the EU functioning as the hostile 'other' against which the UK was defined and which posed an existential threat to the UK's interests.

While the latent Euroscepticism of British voters, and the embedded Euroscepticism of public discourse, were key contributory factors, they do not provide a sufficient explanation for the referendum outcome. In order to create an electoral majority for leave, it was necessary to connect the issue of EU membership with higher salience issues, most notably immigration and the decline of public services, in the context of austerity.

In addition, the leave campaign had to ensure that people actually went out to vote. Studies have indicated that turnout was a key factor in deciding the referendum result with leave voting areas seeing higher levels of voter participation than remain areas. This is partly attributable to the [age profile of the core vote on each side](#), with generally older leave voters being more likely to be registered to vote, and to actually do so, than younger remainers (but abstainers). However, the relatively low turnout speaks also to a wider motivational deficit on the remain side. This was reflected in the downbeat nature of the remain campaign – dubbed 'project fear' by its critics – versus the boosterish tone of the leave campaign.

Critical logics

Through the application of [post-structuralist discourse theory](#), and the [critical logics approach](#), we are able to generate new insights about the structure and the affective appeal of the 'leave' discourses. In a [new book](#), I have analysed the interventions of leading figures in both the *Vote Leave* and *Leave.EU* campaigns in the UK media, and identified how they drew heavily on embedded Eurosceptic discourse and their key tropes of separation and threat. However, pro-Brexit discourses included important new elements, which widened their appeal to additional sectors of the electorate.

Firstly, pro-Brexit discourses were structured around an overtly populist narrative of an allegedly corrupt 'remain elite' exploiting the (ordinary, leave-voting) people. This remain elite were depicted as being in cahoots with the European political class and big business. Their interests are served by the UK's subsumption within the EU, but this runs counter to those of ordinary citizens. As Boris Johnson [argues](#):

If we vote to stay then I am afraid the whole EU caravan carries blithely on; and when I think of the champagne-guzzling orgy of backslapping in Brussels that would follow a Remain vote on Friday, I want to weep. We must not let it happen... People can sense the true motives behind Project Fear... It's a cushy elite of politicians and lobbyists and bureaucrats, circling the wagons and protecting their vested interests.

The 'leave people' are depicted as quietly, yet heroically resisting this tyranny through their stoic determination to leave the EU in the face of remainer bullying. Despite their own impeccable establishment credentials, the leaders of the leave campaigns were able to position themselves as anti-elitist, political outsiders standing up for the interests of the people against the EU machine.

The issue of immigration was frequently invoked to highlight the diametrically opposed interests of the metropolitan elites – who apparently benefit from the availability of migrant labour and affordable nannies – and ordinary people whose wages are undercut and whose access to schools, housing and hospitals is precluded by free movement of people to the UK.

Secondly, leave campaigners presented the prospect of remaining in the EU as the risky alternative. As well as unlimited migration to the UK following the apparently inevitable enlargement of the EU to include Turkey and Balkan states, they claimed that a remain vote would be followed by deepening integration, including the creation of a European army and the requirement to join the euro. Boris Johnson [captured the sentiment](#):

[I]t is an illusion to think that if we vote to Remain, we are somehow opting for the *status quo*. The *status quo* is not on offer. If we stay in, we will be engaged willy-nilly in the desperate attempt to keep the euro together, by building an economic government of Europe.

By contrast, a vote to leave the EU was presented not just as the safe option, but as a moment of national economic, political and even moral renewal. It would free the UK to rediscover its energy and begin to perform its unique mission in the world again in ways precluded by the constraints of EU membership. Again it was Boris Johnson who [articulated this point most clearly](#):

My view is that Britain is poised for a new age of confidence... The fundamental choice in this referendum is between people who believe our country is capable of running itself and people who want to outsource our future to unelected Brussels bureaucrats... The Remain camp will not get away with running Britain down by saying we can't manage our own country. I believe Britain will have the confidence to take back control and Vote Leave tomorrow.

Underlying these discourses was a sense that EU membership represented a form of humiliation for a once great country, infantilising the UK and its people. Leave campaigners such as Nigel Farage created direct parallels between the sense of indignity and powerlessness experienced by many of their target voters in their own lives and that allegedly wrought upon their country by the EU and the same elites who look down on them.

Post-structuralist discourse theory allows us to understand both the form and content of pro-Brexit discourses through the concept of social logics. Through the concept of political logics, it enables us also to understand the equivalences created between EU membership and a range of disparate, contradictory, and often false, assertions about the consequences of leaving the EU.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the concept of 'fantasmatic logics' enables us to understand the emotive appeal of these discourses to voters through the juxtaposition of the horrific scenario of remaining in the EU and the promise of a glorious future awaiting the UK once this impediment had been cast off.

In a public vote in which turnout was key and the margin of victory so small, understanding the ability of these discourses to grip their subjects is a crucial part of understanding how and why the electorate chose to take such a step into the unknown.

For more information, see the author's new book, [Deconstructing Brexit Discourses: Embedded Euroscepticism, Fantasy Objects and the United Kingdom's Vote to Leave the European Union](#) (Routledge, 2022)

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