

BOOK REVIEW

The Rhetoric of Brexit Humour. Comedy, Populism and the EU Referendum

Simon Weaver: New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 188

Simon Weaver's book is an elaborate examination of multifarious ways in which humour and comedy played a role in the Brexit discourse. Focused predominantly on Brexit populism, this publication aims to elucidate how comedy became an effective tool in perpetuating populist narratives as well as in countering them.

The core argument promoted by the author is that both humour and populism share certain similarities, the most essential of them being that both enable slippages of meaning. Therefore, a significant portion of topics discussed in this book revolve around notions of ambiguity, ambivalence and incongruity, all of which are considered as rhetorical devices that enable the elusiveness of language, so vital for the domain of Brexit populism. Following this line of argument, the author asserts that Brexit humour is essential component of Brexit populism, not simply its accompanying element, and so the publication abounds with specific instances of comedic discourse to justify this claim.

Among the characteristics that define populism, the author identifies a lack of core values, hostility to representative politics, a notion of idealized heartland and a reaction to a sense of crisis. In his view, all these features can be easily traced in the Brexit discourse and so they are discussed in more detail in ensuing chapters. To perform his examination of Brexit populism, the author opted for rhetorical discourse analysis as the primary method. This methodological approach accrues practices of discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, semiotics and linguistics that are subsequently applied to specific instances of Brexit-related comedy and humour. Adhering to Aristotle's theory of the rhetorical triangle, the author stresses the audience's role in the formation of a content. In other words, the message is "subjected to polysemy" which becomes fertile ground for the dissemination of populist rhetoric. Even though Brexit populism has been the subject of numerous academic publications since the announcement of the Referendum, this book skilfully offers an examination from a rather unexplored perspective that fuses populism with comedy, humour, and theories of rhetoric.

Structurally, the book consists of seven chapters, each developing the themes of populism and humour from various points of view. The first chapter identifies Brexit populism and Brexit discourse as a source of incongruities entirely dependent on rhetoric. As rhetorical tools, humour and comedy may function as a catalyst boosting populism further, yet the author also draws attention to their potential to achieve the opposite effect, in other words, to function as an undermining force. By addressing specific examples of comedic narrative, his intention is to identify the ways in which incongruity is constructed in Brexit populism. A part of the chapter is dedicated to the issue of ambivalence, one of populism's most defining features. Under more scrutiny, however, is the notion of *othering*. The author recognizes othering as an endemic feature of populism that serves primarily exclusionary purposes. The chapter culminates with the enumeration of key themes that define Brexit discourse, which are sovereignty, economy, immigration, establishment, fear, and dishonesty.

The following chapter introduces the topic of irony. Drawing on Umberto Eco's and Roland Barthes's definitions of irony, the author emphasizes its capability to conceal the gap between a political and a populist discourse. Expanding the theme further, the focus is drawn towards cynicism and in particular, cynical irony. In the author's view, this notion may account for the recent surge of comedians-turned-politicians. He ascribes this trend to the fact that the dominance of cynical irony in the political sphere does not favour serious political statements. Furthermore, the comedians are particularly equipped with rhetorical skills that allow slippage of meaning that are essential for a populist politician. The chapter also opens the topic of globalization and neoliberalism in order to examine their role in Brexit's populist narratives of *the people vs. the elite*. The chapter ends with the analysis of the synthesis of racism and irony in the Brexit discourse, and it presents comedic responses to prevalent narrative of Brexit racism from both, *Leave* and *Remain* perspectives.

The third chapter explores the notion of a trickster, which in mythology is understood as a disruptor, as someone who brings changes to established social order. The author detects the presence of a trickster solely on the *Leave* side. Citing as an example Michael Gove's mockery of experts, or Nigel Farage's *Breaking Point* poster, the author subsequently dissects their modus operandi that aim to create new discursive taboos in order to suppress the voice of their opponents. As the chapter later shows, counter-narratives to such populism significantly benefit from comedy and humour. Specifically, they become a vehicle that enables to "speak the truth to power." The rhetoric of Nigel Farage has become the source of yet another theme the author develops in this chapter, and that is racism. Nonetheless, his focus is on a racism expressed in a nuanced manner, or as he labels it, "liquid racism," which is a racism of "ambiguous cultural signs." Such conception also overlaps with irony's preconditions for elusiveness of meaning in a discourse.

While previous chapters were directed at the populist discourse, the fourth chapter observes its antithesis - anti-populism. Anti-populism is primarily the domain of the *Remain* discourse, yet, as the author points out, not exclusively. As the name itself indicates, the notion is primarily defined by what it stands against, however, its true nature is more intricate. Notably, while populism tends to abound with emotional responses, anti-populism is not devoid of emotion either. More importantly though, the author identifies hostility towards representative politics as a crucial feature shared by both of them. Such anti-populist hostility is manifested in questioning the intelligence and cognitive abilities of the *Leave* voters. This stance is interpreted as another form of othering, which leads to the conclusion that the anti-populists seem unable to evade the very thing they (rightfully) criticize. The chapter also addresses the use of a caricature as a means to oppose the proponents of Brexit populism, for instance by describing Boris Johnson as "scruffy" or by referring to Nigel Farage as "a toad, or a frog". The author however accentuates the limitations of such rhetorical devices. He maintains that the relationship between populism and anti-populism is defined by their co-dependency.

The next chapter tries to elucidate the relationship between Brexit, populism and social class. The idea that the Brexit vote is a revolt of working classes against the elite is rather simplistic, yet it entered the public consciousness, and it has become one of the dominating Brexit narratives. Therefore, the author addresses this widely held opinion by rightfully pointing out that statistical facts do not corroborate this narrative. Instead, he views Brexit as an example of "pan-class populism", i.e., the populism which transcends class boundaries. Yet despite

easily verifiable facts, social inequality still permeates the discussions about Brexit, and it is one of the building blocks of Brexit populism. What also deserves to be mentioned in this context is that the acceptance of this view is observable among the supporters of both sides, *Leave* and *Remain*. The author offers several examples of comedic responses to this view, justifying his claims that populists and anti-populists actively nourish this narrative for their own advantage.

Chapter six moves further into the domain of language in an effort to substantiate the author's statement that Brexit discourse is severely affected by the language of humour. By developing his theory of shared characteristics between humour and populism further, the author maintains that the understanding of the rhetoric of comedy is necessary for the understanding of Brexit itself. The chapter explains humour's metalinguistic function that is manifested in its ability to divert literal meaning. In other words, the meaning in humorous rhetoric evades being exactly defined, creating space for ambiguity that can be also found in a populist discourse. Subsequently, the chapter provides examples of the use of several rhetorical instruments detected in the Brexit discourse. For instance, allegory in author's view includes meaning that can be conceived of in moral terms. Metonym may serve the purpose of othering. In Brexit discourse a part becomes the whole in a populist understanding of the people. Brexit has also become a source of numerous neologisms, such as 'Brexit hole' (as a reference to rabbit hole), 'Remoaners' or 'Bregret,' to mention a few. Tautology is also represented in the (in)famous motto "Brexit means Brexit," which as the author explains, is rather vague, possibly even meaningless.

In the last chapter the author takes a look at the years that followed 'Brexit Day' and the manners in which Brexit has become embedded in humoristic discourse. The author here also addresses strategies that for Remain-supporters provide a coping mechanism. The last chapter also gives more space to the examination of a political satire. In his extensive analysis of the movie *Brexit: The Uncivil War* released in 2019, Mr. Weaver recognizes the representation of political figures as satirical, and among the notions characteristic for populism he detects cynical irony, nostalgia for the past, and cultural decline. The analysis is centred around the role of Dominic Cummings in the Brexit campaign as portrayed in the film, but the chapter subsequently delves further in post-Brexit fascination with Mr. Cummings by pointing out plentiful instances of depictions of him that have been a vital source of mockery in political satire. At the very end, the chapter examines how the omnipresence of Brexit in the public discourse that had lasted for several years was suddenly erased by the outbreak of Covid-19.

The publication offers reflections about this major political issue from an angle that allows us to see the nuances often overshadowed in the public discourse. Mr. Weaver has presented a range of tools that can help us to navigate the often-intense discussions concerning not only Brexit, but in a broader sense also populism and nationalism. One objection that could be made is the fact that the instances of *Leave*-related comedy are much less represented, and in order to elucidate the humoristic responses politically leaning towards the *Leave* stance, the author relies only on a handful of comedians holding such views. It needs to be said, on the other hand, that it is generally believed that comedians and artists tend to be more left-leaning and Brexit has certainly proved to be a right-wing cause. The rather limited representation of pro-Brexit comedy might be therefore ascribed to this fact. Overall, Mr. Weaver's approach that lies in serious and detached study of comedy has produced valuable results, particularly by

disclosing unexpected similarities between populism and humour. It may be concluded that amid countless analyses of Brexit, this publication stands out due to its unique perspective that contributes to better understanding of this recent political phenomenon.

Lucia Rusinková
Department of British and American Studies
Faculty of Arts
P. J. Šafárik University in Košice
Slovakia
e-mail: lucia.rusinkova@student.upjs.sk

In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2022, vol. 4, no. 1 [cit. 2022-06-30]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS06/07.pdf>. ISSN 2644-5506.