

The #LondonIsOpen Campaign: Desecuritizing Brexit?

Written by Faye Donnelly and Jasmine K. Gani

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FAYE DONNELLY AND JASMINE K. GANI, JUN 21 2017

The 2016 referendum on whether to exit or remain in the European Union was supposed to offer a final resolution to the debate on Europe, a debate that has divided Britain's political parties for decades. However, rather than putting an end to the debate, the general election results on 8 June 2017 demonstrated that "Brexit" will continue to be a divisive and influential factor in British politics for years to come. As this word continues to be used as a shorthand to describe Britain's vote to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 and to trigger Article 50 on 29 March 2017, many have pondered over what this term actually means.

According to the speech that the Prime Minister, Theresa May, delivered at the Conservative Conference in Birmingham, the meaning of this term is simple. "Brexit means Brexit." The goal of this tagline was twofold. On the one hand, May clearly signaled her intention to take the United Kingdom out of the EU. On the other hand, her "Brexit means Brexit" message sought to stamp out any suggestions that there would be a second referendum. Fast-forwarding to the present moment it is hard to gauge whether either of these intended messages reached their target audience. All things considered uncertainty over what this word 'actually' means is still widespread. As Tim Oliver concludes:

"the confused outcome of the referendum, the multiple possibilities and technicalities of Brexit and the protracted timeframe mean that for both the UK and the EU, future relations will resemble fifty shades of grey rather than some settled, black and white division of in or out" (Oliver, 2017).

The goal of this article is not to take stock of the extensive conversations surrounding what Brexit means. Even after the 2017 general election results, this word means many things to many different people. It does not have a singular iteration. It does not have a unified voice. On the contrary, this term is evolving. Since the 2016 Referendum alone, we have heard talk of a 'hard Brexit', a 'soft Brexit', a 'harsh' Brexit, to name but a few linguistic labels frequently attached to this term. As May attempts to regain her footing after losing her overall majority in Parliament many have speculated that she lacks the authority to secure a "hard Brexit." On the contrary, many commentators expect her alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland to signal the emergence of altered and 'softer' negotiating tactics. At present it is difficult to assess the effects that the general election results will have on the UK's negotiating stance with the EU.

As the language games of Brexit continue to accumulate, it is important not lose sight of an omnipresent argument weaving them together. To prevent such an oversight this article demonstrates that the securitization of migration remains a constant linguistic anchor amidst the waves of uncertainty generated by Brexit and the fallouts of the 2017 general election. Put differently, we argue that political actors are still speaking security to frame migrants as an existential threat to the nation and legitimate the use of extraordinary measures. A second purpose of this article is to consider alternative visions of Brexit offered by competing loci of power. In particular, we highlight the desecuritizing moves undertaken by the London Mayoral office through their #LondonIsOpen campaign. Comparing how Brexit has been framed in the latter case highlights the potential for an alternative, non-securitizing approach to migrants that is often sidelined by mainstream political actors.

Exposing Securitizing Plot Lines in Brexit: Migrant 'Others' = an Existential Threat to National Borders and Sovereignty

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The 'Vote Leave, Take Back Control' slogan adopted by the so-called 'Brexiters' reflects what exactly is at stake. During the build-up to the 2016 referendum arguments in these camps maintained that Brexit would save the country enormous sums of money rather than lining the pockets of bureaucrats in Brussels or paying the blank cheque of the growing refugee crisis. Other Brexiters were quick to note that Brexit would empower Westminster to regain complete autonomy over national laws and regulations. In tandem, the 'Vote to Leave' campaign ensured voters that Brexit would empower the UK to regain complete border control and, thus, a stronger ability to regulate migration.

Needless to say these lines of argument did not appear in a vacuum. As those well versed in British politics and current affairs will be keenly aware, the securitization of migration is not a new phenomenon in the UK. Nor is it a unique feature of Brexit. Quite the contrary. The securitization groundwork had been carved out by Prime Minister David Cameron and his cabinet long before the term Brexit was even coined. Here readers may recall the political furor generated by Cameron's remarks pertaining to the "swarms of migrants." Theresa May's commentaries in her role as Home Secretary may also spring to mind. How could we forget her suggestion that, "high levels of immigration make it impossible to have a cohesive society?" Suffice it to say here that these plotlines culminated in the construction of governmental policies that deliberately targeted net migration which are still alive and well today. In retrospect it is plain that leading 'Brexiters' sang loudly and proudly from this securitized hymn sheet throughout the 2016 referendum. Recall the Nigel Farage standing alongside the anti-migrant 'breaking point' poster. This poster can be viewed as visual speech act that actively mobilized, reinforced and accelerated the preexisting plotlines that had framed migrants as an existential threat to the UK. For precisely this reason many warned that the image constituted hate speech and echoed Nazi propaganda. If taken seriously this image acts as a mirror for us to reflect on and see how 'securitized' immigration had already become long before the word Brexit came into existence.

It is worth pausing to consider the consequences of these securitized plotlines and images we have briefly discussed. A skeptic may ask, why we should care if migrants were securitized throughout David Cameron's premiership? Why should we recall Farage and his anti-immigration poster? A year on after the EU referendum, is it not time to accept the 'anti-immigration' consensus in the UK, and should we not be more concerned with how to fight the tough EU negotiators awaiting the UK?

Although it is tempting to brush these questions aside as being inconsequential, this article argues that the discourse on immigration that prevailed so heavily during the EU referendum still requires scrutiny for two reasons. First, foregrounding this securitizing plotlines sown before the Brexit vote helps to explain why Theresa May is willing to take the UK out of the EU even if that means taking the UK out of the single market, and even if it risks undermining the union. Analysing the key speech acts she has uttered since becoming Prime Minister it is plain that May has placed national sovereignty atop of any other consideration. To date she has refrained from categorically denying that there is any need for Britain to retain access to the single market and financial passports. Comments to this effect would certainly be political and commercial suicide. Hence a collective sigh of relief may be had here. Perhaps there is an alternative ending after all? Perhaps the securitization of migration can be unmade to prevent such extreme eventualities? Now that the "Brexiters" have achieved their goal, might we see a softening of their anti-immigration stance?

We argue that these scenarios are unlikely to be the case. The lack of clarity over the rights and status of EU citizens serves as an important reminder that May has shown no signs of toning down the securitization of migration plotlines at play during the negotiations penciled for 22-23 June 2017. Conversely, May has made it clear she plans to close Britain's doors to the freedom of movement principle at the heart of the EU project. From this standpoint the likelihood of a 'hard' Brexit materialising in the near future seems to grow rather than diminish. Although the results of the snap election that May called have thrown a chaotic light on the Brexit negotiations it is unwise to expect her to renege on her pledge to take the UK out of the single market. It is also not obvious that the EU has any intention of rethinking their bargaining standpoint on this point. Writing in the *Financial Times* Wolfgang Munchau correctly notes that, "from a European perspective, it does not matter whether the UK has a minority government." Depending on how these negotiations unfold, and which strategic cards are placed on the negotiating table, it is possible that the securitization plotline will resurface with vengeance rather than fading away.

Exploring Alternative Plotlines: #LondonIsOpen and the City's Desecuritizing Moves

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The second reason why we invite readers to (re)consider the questions outlined above is that there are alternative storylines to consider as we travel the road to Brexit. Taking a step back from the securitizing plotlines coming out of Westminster, and political posturing enveloping the 2017 general election, reveals an often unspoken question. What is the alternative to Brexit? Tellingly this question was visibly missing from the campaign trail. As we took a step back to find an adequate answer it was refreshing to find that there are already desecuritizing moves in play. London's response to Brexit with the #LondonIsOpen campaign, spearheaded by the London Mayor Sadiq Khan, reflects a deliberate contrast to the framing outlined above. The messages of inwardness, nationalism and anti-immigration from Westminster, and endorsed by over fifty per cent of the county at the ballot box, were intentionally and very publicly refuted by a new campaign in the capital under the banner "London is Open". The campaign was launched on the 16 July 2016, less than a month after the Brexit referendum results, in a bid to show that "London is united and open for business, and to the world, following the EU referendum." The short video produced by the Mayoral office went viral within days of its launch, while posters reinforcing the message went up across the London Underground and transport network.

The campaign defends not only London's relationship with Europe and EU nationals, but champions the City's global diversity with a reassurance that it would continue to be welcomed and celebrated in London. The campaign's emphasis on global, as opposed to merely European, inclusion confirms the notion that Brexit is not simply about better business or taking back control from the EU, but has been about immigration, identity, race and history. City Hall's speedy response to the EU referendum result was clearly a *desecuritising* move. And it is interesting to note that with the Prime Minister's subsequent pursuit of a 'hard Brexit' prior to the 2017 general election, the London campaign gathered even more momentum. Noticeably the message was deliberately boosted in the run up to 08 June 2017 with central London streets flanked by #LondonIsOpen banners. Thus London is presenting a clear obstruction to the national government's attempt to produce a clear and unified securitizing narrative.

So just as UK Prime Minister Theresa May has interpreted the national vote in favour of Brexit as a pre-endorsement for a 'hard Brexit', and a justification for deeper securitization of the EU and immigration, City Hall has used the capital's overall *opposition* to Brexit in the referendum as a pre-endorsement for its desecuritising move. Both the Prime Minister and the London Mayor have used an assumption of audience receptivity to embark on polar-opposite messages regarding immigration and 'foreigners'. But, in the first months at least, they were speaking to different audiences. The UK government was targeting England, Wales and the EU; City Hall, on the other hand, started off targeting Londoners but also a global audience, as the Mayor's early statement at the campaign launch showed: "We now need to make sure that people across London, and the globe, hear that #LondonIsOpen."

#LondonIsOpen and Counter-Securitization

While London, and big cities more broadly, have always addressed their local populations separately from the national population, this particular breach in their security narratives is significant because so much is at stake. In other cases, cities will address alternative issues and adopt different messages because local issues are unlikely to have as much relevance or be of as much interest to the wider population. In this case, however, the alternative message offered by London is of utmost relevance to the rest of the country, concerning an issue that affects the rest of the population. The #LondonIsOpen campaign, though targeting its own audience, is also indirectly modeling an alternative response to Brexit. This type of response will be watched with interest by businesses across the country as well as the UK's larger cities, particularly those with diverse populations and seeking to develop an international identity. Manchester has already followed in London's footsteps in appointing its first city-wide Mayor; like London, a high profile, former cabinet minister has been elected to the role. Indeed, in the wake of the recent terror attacks in Manchester, the Mayor Andy Burnham played a key role in amplifying the local population's message of unity and celebration of diversity despite the traumatic circumstances. This resistance to greater securitization was in stark contrast to the Prime Minister's statement in which she announced that national threat levels had been raised to "severe". Manchester's narrative of openness and 'business as normal' was echoed a couple of weeks later by Sadiq Khan after the London terror attacks. Internationally, his approach invited heavy criticism from US President Donald Trump. Domestically, Khan's response to the London attacks was countered by Theresa May's subsequent speech that ratcheted up levels of securitization by promising that new and extraordinary counter-terrorism measures would be implemented.

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At first glance, the contrasting approaches of the Prime Minister and the two mayors may reflect an effective distribution of roles between central and city administrations, with the former addressing security needs while the latter focuses on cohesion. However, on closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that the #LondonIsOpen campaign is distinct from the usual central-local government wranglings: it does *not* reflect a division of labour between Westminster and City Hall to soften the impact of 'hard Brexit' at the local level. The campaign is an attempt to offer an *alternative* to the intent and potential consequences of a hard Brexit – the outcome of which is supposed to encompass all of the UK but which the Capital, the hub of the nation's economy, appears to be opting out of. Thus far, Westminster has not (ostensibly) sought to curtail London's distancing from Brexit. To some extent London is being treated as the anomaly that it so often is. But the Mayor's actions and words suggest London will ensure it has a greater say in negotiations, and other cities in the UK may follow suit. In March this year, in the same week that the UK government officially triggered article 50, Sadiq Khan visited European leaders and capitals to emphasise London's close economic and social ties with Europe and made a series of demands to the negotiators to ensure London's interests were protected. In his statement he said:

"I will continue to make the case for what Londoners need from the Brexit negotiations – and I'll stand up for Britain's business community and their ability to create jobs and prosperity. I'll work closely with the Government whenever possible – but I won't be afraid to speak out when I believe their approach is putting our economy at risk – Londoners would expect nothing less."

Here we find a noticeable change from the earlier narrative immediately after the EU referendum. City Hall is no longer just targeting London and its global community, it has widened its audience to include the rest of Britain. And it is no longer simply seeking to desecuritize Westminster's narrative against immigrants and the EU to produce a London-centric alternative. It is now subtly producing a *counter-securitizing* move, in which Westminster, and not the EU, is portrayed as the threat; and not just a threat to London's interests but to the whole country's interests.

The counter-securitization has been facilitated by the divergence in party-affiliation between Westminster and the London Mayor, the former being Conservative and the latter being Labour. How things proceed now depends to some degree on the fallout of the 2017 general election. At the time of writing May has managed to hold on to power. Her cabinet selection and decision to form a coalition with the stridently right-wing DUP suggest that the government will continue to push a securitizing agenda in the pursuit of a 'hard Brexit'. In this context, London's counter-securitization targeting the government is likely to gain momentum, and the disagreements between City Hall and Westminster are likely to become more pronounced and significant at a national level. However, with such a fragile and contested alliance between the Tories and the DUP, and with such a slim majority, the government's hold on power is uncertain. That leaves open the possibility that a new government could still be formed by Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour party, who are waiting in the wings after their significant gains in the general election, and have launched a counter-bid for power in alliance with other progressive parties in the UK. The relationship between Westminster and City Hall might then look very different. Like the London Mayor, Corbyn has sought to desecuritize the Brexit narrative towards immigrants. While Corbyn is famously apathetic towards the EU, he is also a London MP and has strong support and ties in the Capital, which would prevent him from openly undermining Londoners' opposition to Brexit. If we do see tension between City Hall and a Labour government, it is more likely to be over their policies towards big businesses and the financial district, rather than over Brexit.

It is a forlorn hope to assume that Britain's exit from the EU will deliver a clear cut ending. As the discursive landscape of Brexit continues to emerge and alter, however, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of the securitized plotlines that have already been sown. Suggestions that the 2017 election will create a radical revision in Britain's negotiation stance sounds somewhat mythical given the ticking Brexit clock and the willingness of the remaining 27 EU nations to reach a compromise sooner rather than later. Reversing Brexit at this stage would be a monumental task and highly unlikely. However, what the 2017 general election has demonstrated is that securitizing, desecuritizing and counter-securitizing moves by political elites are still dependent on, and subject, to rejection or acceptance from the public. The nature of Brexit, therefore, is not a foregone conclusion; it will have to be negotiated not just with EU leaders but also according to what the British public are willing to accept. Moreover, as this article has sought to demonstrate, there is not only one viable model of Brexit. Alternative approaches exist and are being forged even now, as the #LondonIsOpen campaign already shows us.

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