The Impotent Man: How Constructed UK/EU Gender Identities Legitimised Brexit

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On 23rd June 2016, the UK public voted in favour of becoming the first member-state to withdraw its membership from the European Union. Employing a feminist post-structuralist standpoint, this paper will concern itself not with the 'why' but rather the 'how-possible' (Doty, 1993: 298), exploring how the UK's departure from the European Union was constructed as common sense by the official Vote Leave Twitter campaign.

Drawing upon the work of Judith Butler (1993; 2006) and David Campbell (1998), this paper will first explore the theory of gender performativity and its application to the construction of subject identities in world politics. This will lead to a consideration of particularly *gendered* identities and the way in which their construction can work to legitimise certain foreign policy objectives.

This paper will then conceptualise Twitter as a site of intersection between popular culture and world politics due to its rapidly expanding role in diplomacy and international relations (Duncombe, 2016: 546). It will be explored how the nature of Twitter as a site for discursive contestation and self-representation (Zappavinga, 2017: 216) makes it an apt tool to analyse the linguistic construction of subject identities in world politics. Applying this conceptual framework to the Vote Leave campaign, the following research question will be addressed:

How, through the use of gendered constructions of the UK and the EU in its Twitter campaign, did 'Vote Leave' legitimise the UK's withdrawal from the European Union?

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Vote Leave Twitter feed will reveal that gendered constructions of the UK and the EU – in which the UK was situated as the 'impotent man' (Weeks, 1985: 190) and the EU as the increasingly powerful, yet feminine, Other – were used to legitimise the act of Brexit. Drawing upon Queer Theory and Judith Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' (2006: 208) it will be explored how the abnormal discursive positioning of gendered subjects within the Vote Leave Twitter campaign was utilised in the creation of threat. It will consequently be concluded that the legitimisation of Brexit resulted from its framing as a reclamation of masculinity for the UK and a restoration of the heteronormative social order.

Theoretical Standpoint

Performativity

Grounded in post-structuralist ontology, this paper will take as its starting point the understanding of language as a tool in the production of discourses (Hansen, 2006: 15); through which meaning, identities and positionalities are ascribed to subjects, and structures of power are 'enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted' (Van Dijk, 2015: 466). Accordingly, gender will be conceptualised not as an empirical term, but rather a discursive system of power relations, in which the construction of hierarchical masculine/feminine binaries informs what is interpreted as appropriate gendered behaviour (Cocks, 2012: 128; Sjoberg, 2010: 3; Squires and Weldes, 2007: 186).

Drawing upon the theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1993; 2006), this paper understands subjects as having no

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fixed essence, but rather assuming meaning through the 'performance' of an identity as a 'stylised repetition of acts' (Butler, 2006: 191). Through a process of symbolic self-representation subjects both continuously re-produce and are an effect of the discourses within which they are situated (Butler, 1993: 2). Applying this theory to the international realm refutes the naturalised state-as-person discourse and removes any pre-given notion of subject identity within world politics (Kantola, 2007: 274; Pettman, 1996: 4; Wadley, 2010: 38). Instead, the identities of international actors can be understood as constituted through a series of competing discourses which serve to produce knowledge about their reality and positioning within the international system (Campbell, 1998: 9-10; Doty, 1993: 303; Towns, 2010: 42; Wadley, 2010: 46).

Discussing the linkage between state identity and foreign policy, David Campbell (1998) examines how both concepts are mutually constituted. He notes that the act of foreign policy both *constructs* state identity as a 'boundary-producing political performance' (1998: 62) and is in turn *constructed by* state identity through the demarcation of possibility. As such the identity and subsequent positionality of an actor is both reproduced through the performance of foreign policy, while also informing what is deemed appropriate and thus legitimate action (Doty, 1993: 298; Hansen, 2006: 19; Weldes, 1999: 198).

The conceptualisation of identity as a relational concept (Hansen, 2006), whereby actors establish the boundaries of their existence through a process of differentiation from the Other (Campbell, 1998: 9; Neumann, 1996: 166; Towns, 2010: 43; Weldes, 1999: 221), is particularly appropriate when considering the role of *gendered* identities in world politics. Identity constructed through difference discursively positions actors in hierarchical relation to one another (Doty, 1993: 299; Laffey, 2000: 433), establishing what is considered their realm of possible action (Towns, 2010: 43). The aforementioned hierarchical masculine/feminine dichotomy within hegemonic gender discourses can thus be utilised in the performance of identity by international actors; functioning to inform positionality, articulate difference and legitimise policy options articulated as gender-appropriate behaviour (Tickner, 2001: 53). This can be seen in the privileging of hyper-masculine language within foreign policy associated with strategic security (Tickner, 2001: 52-3) and the feminisation of the Other in the construction of difference and threat (Said, 1985: 103).

Twitter

This paper conceptualises Twitter as a site of intersection between popular culture and world politics due to its ever-expanding role in changing the way in which foreign policy is conducted (Duncombe, 2017). Termed 'Selfie Diplomacy' (Manor and Segev, 2015: 1), Twitter has fundamentally altered the way in which international actors are able to perform their identity through symbolic representations of the self in real-time. This is encouraged through the format of tweeting in 280 characters, which allows for the continuous reproduction of representations of self through the frequent repetition of linguistic imagery (Duncombe, 2017: 551). The digital infrastructure of Twitter, including the development of the hashtag function, has facilitated the creation of 'virtual imagined communities' (Franklin, 2010: 74), in which users are able to construct collective identities through the use of shared language and expressions of belonging (Zappavinga, 2017: 214-6). As such, the act of diffusing self-representations can no longer be understood as simply a top-down process, but one which involves greater interaction between policy-makers and publics through the interpellation of audiences into shared communities of identity (Duncombe, 2017: 550; Manor and Segev, 2015: 6; Zappavinga, 2017: 201). As a site in which the 'struggle for recognition' (Duncombe, 2017: 562) increasingly occurs in the international realm, Twitter was decided as the best platform through which to analyse the gendered construction of UK/EU identities by the Vote Leave campaign.

Method

This paper will employ a Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the inscription of gendered identities onto representations of the UK and EU by the official Vote Leave Twitter campaign. As a method of analysis that aims to expose the way in which 'micro' linguistic and discursive practices are linked to the 'macro' elements of social control and structural power (Van Dijk, 2015: 468), a Critical Discourse Analysis will prove an appropriate tool to examine the prevalence of hegemonic gender norms within the 280-character linguistic constructions of Vote Leave tweets. An investigation into the articulation of gender identities will anticipate the construction of hierarchical masculine/feminine binaries, the use of gendered intertextual references and the repeated utterance of gender-coded

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language.

Employing an interpretivist epistemology, there is a recognition that my positionality as the researcher may affect the reading of tweets and therefore a self-reflexive approach was maintained (Creswell, 2007: 21). In a further attempt to counter such partiality, MAXQDA 2020 software was used to thematically code common linguistic devices and structures found within tweets and thus remove potential for personal bias.

Due to the spatial and temporal limits of this research paper, the investigation was focused on the 1,238 tweets posted by Vote Leave in the period 1st – 23rd June, allowing for greater depth of analysis. While analytical focus was placed specifically upon the Vote Leave Twitter feed, this was situated within the wider context of the referendum Twitter campaigns to ensure sufficient depth of enquiry. As the official Stronger In page was no longer accessible on Twitter, the feed of BritInfluence, a substantial campaigner for remaining in the EU, was considered.

Analysis

The findings from the Critical Discourse Analysis reveal consistent gendered constructions of the UK and the EU by the Vote Leave campaign, a technique that was not found to be employed by BritInfluence. The following section will first summarise the literature surrounding the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 2006: 208) and heteronormative social order, before examining the ways in which Vote Leave constructed non-conforming UK/EU gendered identities; utilising these in the articulation of threat. Throughout the campaign, the UK was repeatedly ascribed the identity of 'the impotent man' (Weeks, 1985: 190) while the EU was portrayed as the more powerful, yet feminised, Other. This was presented as a dangerous aberration of the gendered social order by the Vote Leave campaign. It will then be demonstrated how the act of Brexit was consequently legitimised through its framing as a reclamation of masculinity and a restoration of the heteronormative social order.

The Heterosexual Matrix

Theorised throughout Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, the 'heterosexual matrix' can be thought of as a discursive system in which gender identities come to be understood as 'oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler, 2006: 208). The resulting heteronormative social order assumes the alignment of the sex/gender/sexuality of subjects, so that the male is defined both by his masculine gender and sexual attraction to the female and vice versa (Rubin, 1975). Such a naturalisation of heterosexuality, in which the 'dominant' male/masculine is paired with the 'submissive' female/feminine (Marinucci, 2010: 75-6), sustains a system of social hierarchy which is reproduced through the linguistic and physical performance of appropriate gendered behaviour (Bhattacharyya, 2002: 18; Butler, 2006: 24; Valverde, 1991: 48). In his exploration of the Victorian disciplining of sexuality, Foucault exposes the origins of the heteronormative discourse as a form of social control (1998: 3-4; 1988: 115) which serves to delegitimise any non-conforming sexual or gendered behaviour. It is this aspect of the discourse that particularly interests the investigations of this analysis.

Heteronormativity, understood as a regulatory discourse, rejects any deviations from the sex/gender/sexuality system as 'defective' (Marinucci, 2010: 76) and 'developmental failures or logical impossibilities' (Butler, 2006: 24), as the binary construction of sex/gender language does not allow for their existence. As such, the discourse has traditionally served to marginalise anomalous and irregular constructions within the heterosexual matrix such as homosexuality, bisexuality and hermaphroditism; countering them with 'efforts to silence, change, or destroy the differences' (Gutterman, 2001: 62). Such regulation normalises the hierarchical masculine/feminine binary in the performance of gender identity, treating as 'appropriate' positionalities of masculine dominance and feminine submission. While the gendered UK/EU constructions articulated by the Vote Leave campaign were structured according to the male/female binary, they were repeatedly presented as performing abnormal gendered behaviour and as such met with efforts to 'change or destroy'. This was articulated as Brexit.

Vote Leave's Positioning of Gendered Subjects

Throughout the Vote Leave campaign, the UK was articulated as the universal male subject (Butler, 2006 : 15-16),

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while the EU was consistently positioned as its antithesis; constructed as the feminine Other through a series of binary oppositions. This process of identity construction through differentiation established that which the UK *was,* the EU *was not.* The democratic/undemocratic binary was one of the most utilised throughout the campaign, with appeals to democracy as an integral aspect of "British values and culture" (vote_leave, 2016), made 84 times in the 23 day period of analysis. Identities of Self and Other were repeatedly inscribed through a process of 'positive lexicalisation' (Tekin, 2010: 159), in which Vote Leave favourably represented the UK as the birthplace of 'modern' liberal politics, with democracy as "one of the great gifts we gave to the world" (vote_leave, 2016a). The EU, meanwhile, was consistently articulated as "unaccountable" (vote_leave, 2016b), "cumbersome and undemocratic" (vote_leave, 2016c), a direct contrast to the political identity of the UK as constructed by Vote Leave. Moreover, just as the UK was repeatedly situated as an actor with global potential (vote_leave, 2016d), a traditionally masculine-coded positionality in international politics (Hooper, 2001: 88), the EU was signified as feminine through its constructed preference for interdependence, a trait culturally associated with femininity (Ferber and Nelson, 1993: 10; Tickner, 1992: 64).

The signification of the EU as Other was further exemplified by the utterance "eurocrats we can't name" (vote_leave, 2016e), which appeared 25 times from the 1st-23rd June. EU officials were rarely named in Vote Leave tweets; simply referred to as "bureaucrats" (vote_leave, 2016f) and "eurocrats" (vote_leave, 2016e), while UK politicians from both sides of the referendum campaign were frequently named. As such, the EU was repeatedly marked as the unnamed Other.

The Impotent Man

While Vote Leave discursively positioned the UK as the universal male subject, it was repeatedly articulated that the UK was unable to perform its 'appropriate' masculine identity, thus constituting what Jeffrey Weeks terms 'the impotent man' (1985: 190). The Vote Leave campaign consistently utilised the narrative that the masculine identity of the UK was under threat due to its inability to exercise traits of control and autonomy; characteristics traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity both within international politics (Campbell, 1998: 66; Tickner, 1992: 38) and discourses surrounding managerialism (Kerfoot, 2001) or militarism (Barrett, 2001).

Control

Sir James Dyson: "We have absolutely no control of what goes on in the EU & it's starting to affect what we do here." #TakeBackControl

(vote_leave, 2016g)

The association between masculinity and control is well-documented in the literature surrounding managerialism and militarism, with the exercise of 'total control' (Barrett, 2001: 91) recognised as the performance of an idealised masculine identity (Kerfoot, 2001: 239). Vote Leave consistently articulated the UK as having *lost* its ability to control the regulation of public services, placing particular emphasis on the traditionally masculine-coded sectors of "our money, our economy, our borders, our security & our taxes" (vote_leave, 2016h). Indeed, references to a lack of control were repeated 84 times by Vote Leave regarding the state of the UK's immigration policy and the legislative positioning of the UK within the EU structure. Repeated utterances of being "outvoted" (vote_leave, 2016i) in EU negotiations and references to "60% of our laws made by Brussels" (vote_leave, 2016j) were used to articulate a lack of legislative control within UK borders and thus signalled an absence of masculine-coded sovereignty. As such, the UK was constructed as unable to perform its 'gender-appropriate' role as masculine protector of the domestic polity, an integral feature of the discourse surrounding hegemonic masculinity within international politics (Campbell, 1998: 61; Di Stefano, 1983: 636; Tickner, 1992: 11). The Vote Leave campaign frequently utilised passive language associated with subjugation in order to further articulate a lack of control resulting from the UK's positioning in relation to the EU. Such language included, but was not limited to:

- "forced to pay" (vote_leave, 2016k)
- "handing over more and more power" (vote_leave, 2016l)

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- "given up our right to veto" (vote_leave, 2016m)
- "we will have to accept" (vote_leave, 2016n)
- "bow down to Brussels" (vote_leave, 2016o)

These continued utterances by Vote Leave served to discursively situate the UK (coded male) in a position of unwilling servitude to the EU (coded female), constituting an aberration of the heteronormative social order. Such a reversal of positionalities was utilised by Vote Leave in the construction of threat and subsequent legitimisation of Brexit.

Autonomy

Tony Parsons: We need to set ourselves free from the rotten and bureaucratic European Union #bbcdebate

(vote_leave, 2016p)

A further way in which Vote Leave constructed the UK as impotent man was through repeated references to a lack of autonomy; a characteristic traditionally associated with masculinity in Western political culture (Ferber and Nelson, 1993: 10; Pettman, 1996: 8). The language of Vote Leave consistently referenced the UK's inability to perform as an autonomous (masculine) actor due to its 'problematic' relationship with the EU; to which it was described as "shackled" (vote_leave, 2016q), "trapped in" (vote_leave, 2016r) and "locked in" (vote_leave, 2016s). The choice to use such linguistic constructions, loaded with cultural associations surrounding slavery, imprisonment and unequal power relations, added a further layer of meaning to the representation of the UK–EU relationship. Indeed, the relationship was signified as one in which the EU was positioned as 'master' and the UK as unwilling 'subject', informed by wider cultural discourses surrounding servitude. This positioning was represented as abnormal by Vote Leave through frequent references to 'righting the social order'. It was repeatedly articulated that the UK needed to free itself from the EU and assume it's 'rightful' position as a "fully independent Britain" (vote_leave, 2016t) and a subject "in control of its own destiny" (vote_leave, 2016u), thus righting the imbalance in gendered power relations. Through continuous references to enslavement and a lack of masculine autonomy, Vote Leave reproduced the representation of the UK as the impotent male subject under threat from the dominant Other.

The Powerful, yet feminine, Other

Boris: Vote Remain if you want the EU to carry on "unchastened, unbound, unaccountable, undemocratic & profoundly unreformed"

(vote_leave, 2016v)

Constructed in opposition to the UK as impotent man, the EU (marked as feminine Other) was consistently portrayed as growing in power and signalled as a threat by Vote Leave. This was articulated through repeated references to the expanding geographic, political and economic influence of the EU; with the accession of new countries such as Turkey, Serbia and Macedonia referred to 229 times. Such expansion was articulated as incompatible with the performance of UK masculine identity through utterances such as "as the eurozone integrates, we will have even less influence in the EU" (vote_leave, 2016w), suggesting that the 'impotence' of the UK was a direct result of the growth in EU power. Adjectives such as "unchastened" and "unbound" (vote_leave, 2016v), situated within gendered discourses surrounding moral and emotional restraint, served to further signify the expanding EU as a dangerous 'female' subject, through linguistic references to hysteria as 'the female malady' (Showalter, 1987: 3). Furthering representations of threat, the increasing authority of the EU was signalled as an insidious process through language associated with secrecy. References to EU expansion were frequently made in the format of "leaked docs" (vote_leave, 2016x), with the accession of new member states having been "secretly discussed" (vote_leave, 2016y) by unnamed diplomats. This solidified the representation that the increasingly dominant positioning of the EU in relation to the UK was an unnatural aberration of the social order and one that directly threatened the masculinity of the UK.

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Brexit as a Reclamation of Masculinity

Brexit was consequently made common sense through its framing as a reclamation of masculinity and a return to the hegemonic gendered social order. The language through which Vote Leave articulated the act of Brexit had a consistently aggressive and combative tone; a linguistic form associated with assertions of masculinity and rejections of femininity (Cheung and Sung, 2012: 286-7). The enactment of Brexit was framed through active and violent verbs such as "kick them out" (vote_leave, 2016z) and "you're fired" (vote_leave, 2016aa); positioning Brexit in direct linguistic contrast to the aforementioned passivity of the UK as impotent man. Through intertextual referencing the repeated utterance "you're fired!" acquired new meaning as the embodiment of hyper-masculinity in reference to the UK TV show The Apprentice, in which it is repeatedly articulated by Lord Alan Sugar who sits as the personification of hyper-masculinity (D'arcy-Reed, 2018: 3). The Vote Leave audience were repeatedly interpellated as the masculinised subjects enacting Brexit through the creation of an interpretive community surrounding #TakeBackControl; an utterance that articulated the reclamation of masculinity in both an imperative and instructive form. As such, the audience were themselves hailed as 'the impotent man', whose role it was to vote leave in order to reclaim their masculine identity from encroaching EU expansion. Brexit, articulated as an act embodying hypermasculine traits of aggression and control, was therefore legitimised by Vote Leave as a reassertion of UK masculine dominance and a re-instillation of the 'appropriate' heteronormative social order.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the gendered construction of subject identity in world politics, examining the ways in which this can inform the hierarchical positioning of actors in the international realm and thus legitimise certain foreign policy objectives. A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Vote Leave Twitter campaign has revealed that the construction of non-conforming gendered subjects, namely the UK as impotent man and the EU as the powerful, yet feminine, Other legitimised the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. The 'abnormal' positioning of the UK (inferior male) and EU (dominant female) in the heteronormative social order was repeatedly articulated as a threat by Vote Leave. Brexit was therefore legitimised through its framing as a reclamation of masculinity for the UK and a restoration of the gendered social order. The wider implications of this study are vast, both in terms of the expanding role of Twitter in foreign policy, and the use of gendered constructions in political campaigning. While the Vote Leave campaign may be consigned to the past, its gendered rhetoric certainly is not. Looking forward, it is therefore crucial to recognise the utilisation of gender as a discipling discourse in the legitimation of policy.

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