# The 2015 UK General Election and the 2016 EU Referendum

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## Towards a Democracy of the Spectacle

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Cover image: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

Printed on acid-free paper

*REM: #16 (UK) in 1991*

# Acknowledgements

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# INTRODUCTION

On 6 May 2010, no one political party won enough seats to be able to form a government in its own right. It was the first hung parliament to be elected in 36 years. Following several days of negotiation an agreement was signed between David Cameron and Nick Clegg, as leaders of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, respectively, laying the foundations for Britain's first peace-time coalition government since 1931. Between 1979 and 2010 the UK had been under the administrative authority of two very long governments. The Conservative/Lib Dem coalition that formed at the end of that time was heralded by many as a new era in British politics, one that the signatories argued was in the best interests of the country during a period of financial turmoil and uncertainty. Many in the mainstream mass media suggested it was the end of the two-party state that had come to be seen as the mainstay of the British political system since 1945. That argument was continued through to the 2015 election, with many commentators in both the national press and broadcasting predicting another coalition government would emerge in what was thought to be the new status quo in the corridors of power.

Though the prediction of a second hung parliament proved unfounded, the political landscape had certainly moved on. However, premonitions of a changing political order had been a long time coming. The rumble of discontent in the Conservative Party, particularly around Britain's membership of the EU, had made itself apparent early on in John Major's tenure as Prime Minister; even when, in 1995, he resigned from office, only to stand as a candidate, in an attempt to secure unity in a party riven by divisions over Europe. Media debate over several political

'scandals', from cash for questions to 'duck island', claims that several MPs had been abusing the parliamentary expenses system, only compounding an electorate's increasing distrust of a political elite who were often presented as working to serve their own self-interests above those of the voting public. Since the global financial crisis of 2008 we have moved into significantly new political territory. Support for populist movements on the political Right have grown substantially. In the UK, we have a resurgence of nationalist feeling that gained what might be thought its most resounding success in the referendum on the country's membership of the EU on 23 June 2016. The immediate aftermath of which has seen economic turmoil and rise in hate crimes. We seem to be living through a period of political uncertainty, with many party leaders' positions challenged and allegiances tested. Precarious times where precarity has become the norm at a personal, socio-economic and political level.

Political communication is a well-established field of social scientific inquiry, but our current epoch seems to be challenging many of its preconceptions and presuppositions. For many years, the image of politicians using a photo-opportunity to push home their political message has been a common place. Kissing babies; visiting factory floors; talking to the ordinary voting public on their own turf, rather than the 'hallowed halls' of parliament: awkwardly managed, but arranged to give the politician a chance to articulate an issue of relevance to their – or the party's – concern. To an extent, the image drew the camera, but the message carried a wider and deeper political significance. More recently, however, the photo-opportunity has morphed something into several new forms. At one end, we have a grinning Nigel Farage supping a pint in some country local as if he has known the landlord since childhood; David Cameron, his sleeves rolled up and tie-less, talking to an adoring crowd that is actually a couple of dozen people in an otherwise deserted barn; or an earnest Ed Miliband standing in front of a 2.6 metre monolith of electoral pledges in an empty car park. These are photo-ops where the story is the image. At another end, we have the Lib Dem power-cut during its manifesto launch; the child with her head on her desk as David Cameron reads her a story at a school, or Ed Miliband's bacon sandwich. Though, ostensibly, unchoreographed, these too are images that become messages. We seem to have reached a point where we have a politics by pseudo-*event*, as Daniel Boorstin might have called it; a democracy of the spectacle, where former models of political communication need re-evaluating, and, possibly, rethinking, and refreshing. This small volume is an exploration of one

trajectory through which new developments might be made. What we propose is to investigate two recent, and highly significant, political events through an alternate lens, one that combines the established field of political communication with the emerging one of critical event studies.[1] As such, our exploration will be both conceptual and empirical. In the first part of the book we reflect on what the convergence of the two research approaches might look like and, in the second, we apply that shared perspective to the two, identified, case studies.

In Chapter 1 we bring the two fields together. We begin by outlining their history and growth as areas of scholarly activity. Whilst the roots of the study of Political Communication can be traced back to ancient times, through the discussions around the value and application of rhetoric in political speech in the work of Plato and Aristotle, event studies is shown to have a lineage that dates back a little less than two decades. Although mainstream event studies has so far had very little to say about the political, we argue that the incorporation of protest into the study of events reorientates the field dramatically. An understanding that the referent of event as one that goes beyond simplistic economic and commercially driven definitions to one that construes it as disruption and contestation that relocates event studies as a central aspect of critical social science research; as such its heritage is as rich and long as that of political communication. We close this chapter by suggesting that a merger of the two fields is necessary if we are to create a stronger approach in understand our current era's discourse of political participation.

Having established the value to be derived from the convergence of political communication and critical event studies our second chapter turns its attention to the diversity of theories of democracy in order to establish what a discourse that reflects a lively and vibrant democracy might look like. Beginning with the foundation of European democracy in Ancient Greece this chapter then considers the emergence of democracy in the UK. We present a short overview of what has been understood as democratic participation from the signing of Magna Carta Liberatum to the present before moving on to a consideration of four primary theories of democracy: Representational Liberal Democracy (Of both classical and Schumpeterian varieties); Participatory Liberal Democracy; Deliberative models of democracy and Constructivist models. Whilst it is acknowledged that these do not represent all theories of democracy they are recognised as dominant models in which other theories sit. Each of these theories is outlined and discussed, with the various strengths and

weaknesses of them reviewed and discussed. Before closing the chapter, we offer some thoughts on key characteristics that suggest a healthy public sphere, where a lively and vibrant democracy works with the intention of improving the lives of those participating within it. Finally, we introduce our two case studies and indicate why the combination of political communication and critical event studies can provide us with a useful barometer for reflecting on the discourse of democratic participation in our current era.

In Chapter 3 we will initially consider how the political elite traditional have traditionally engaged with the media and how they have worked in disseminating their electoral communication. We will then reflect on the path taken to the broadcasting of leaders' debates and how there is now an assumption made by the media that the debates are a staple part of the parliamentary campaign. There will also be some key reflections on the five main national parties (Conservative, Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP) and how they circulated messages around their manifesto launches. Both the language and aesthetics of those events will be considered. Aside from this, we will give some consideration to unconventional methods of campaign message production and circulation; drawing on Boorstin's idea of the pseudo-event. This will lead onto a consideration of how the political elite are, and have been, using elements of spectacle to articulate their campaigning in electoral events. In light Jeremy Corbyn's emergence as the leader of the Labour Party, as a result of an unprecedented bottom-up activist vote, we wonder if this indicates a shift in political discourse towards alternate forms of political engagement, and ask; should the mainstream media re-evaluate their stance on political communication?

We will begin our second case example with a brief consideration of the history of referenda in the UK and their increased presence, particularly in modern British politics. We will then provide an outline of the route, from the election manifestos of the previous year, to the start of the remain and leave campaigns on 16 May 2016. There will then be a review of how the remain and leave campaigns articulated their political communication in mainstream press and broadcast media, and to what extent there was significant political debate, if any, taking place. We will then examine the role of misinformation by the political elite, and consider the political bias of broadcast and press media through the reframing of narratives of financial collapse and immigration. We go on to suggest that spectacle has become a central, if not *the* central, characteristic of the articulation of

democracy by the press and broadcast media. In conjunction with the above chapter, we ask; was the referendum another example of the media's articulation of democracy as a spectacle, without any real political engagement with substantive issues? This leads to raised concerns about the consequences of the leave campaign's success on a discourse of democratic participation and, ultimately, what happens when democracy is found to be more concerned with style than substance?

In Chapter 5 we draw together the themes that have emerged from the two parts of the book. This chapter focuses on what it means to be a citizen and participant in a democracy of the spectacle. Why should such a situation be of any concern and not be considered a normal and benign form that democracy takes within a world fragmented by technology and a post-modern, post-truth, cultural political economy. If a democracy of the spectacle does form the foundation for a discourse of current democratic practice in the UK, and if such a development is, as we will contend, troublesome; what might counter its colonisation of mainstream mass media. In this final chapter, we reflect on the potential of grassroots activism, a politics from the bottom-up, that supports and is supported by a diversity of networks with strong links in the virtual as well as real worlds.

We initially proposed this book following funding given by Leeds Beckett University for an Early Career Fellowship into the eventization of the 2015 General Election televised leaders' debate. Prior to its formal acceptance as a Palgrave Pivot the UK went through the turmoil of the 2016 referendum on its membership of the EU. Our initial thoughts around the mainstream mass media's articulation of democracy as some form of reality game show spectacle seemed only to be confirmed. Just as the imprint's title suggests, we appeared to be at a pivotal point in the representation of an imaginary of democracy in the UK. We are, however, very conscious that this is not merely a British phenomenon. As an annex to the book, therefore, we offer a short reflection drawn from our experience of democracies outside the UK. Increasingly we find that the move towards spectacle has taken hold both within the developed democracies of Europe, the USA and South America. We draw on our knowledge of current political events in these states, and our own experience, to suggest we need to work with others to counter this colonisation of democratic participation by the growth of spectacle, subverting it and using some of its techniques against itself – thereby enabling a renewed and revitalised form of democratic participation to emerge.

## Note

1. Please note: Throughout our text we, naturally, use the word 'event' a lot. To distinguish the uses of 'event' the following principles have been adopted. Where we are referring to the word 'event', we will put it in single quotation marks: 'event'; where we are mainly using event in a conceptual sense (though not exclusively in that sense) we shall put it in italics: *event*. Where the word is mainly being used in its more common event management sense, in keeping with the construal of it offered in event management texts (Though we would still contend that there are still resonances with our more philosophical orientation towards *event*) we will use the word without italics: event.