Book review: "Shadows of Empire. The Anglosphere in British Politics"

Christian Lequesne

Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, Shadows of Empire. The Anglosphere in British Politics

(Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018), pp. 224 ISBN 978-1-5095-1661-2

Reviewed by Christian Lequesne
Sciences Po-CERI, Paris

The idea of an alliance between the UK and the old Commonwealth colonies has made a comeback in the context of Brexit. Some media have reported that one of the prominent partisans of Brexit in Theresa May's Cabinet, Liam Fox, referred to Brexit as 'Empire 2.0' in a meeting of Commonwealth ministers. Has Brexit created in the UK the opportunity for the resurrection of forms of national nostalgia which have been present but marginal in British politics since the 1950s?

Kenny and Pearce trace the historical origins and legacy of what they call the idea of Anglosphere in British politics. They do it in a very concise and detailed way, which makes this book useful to scholars, students, but also to every reader who wants to reflect not only on the short term but also long term effects of British history on Brexit. The book is built around seven chronological chapters with started in the 19th century to finish in the very contemporary period. For the two authors, the idea of Anglosphere found its roots in the Victorian period. It has then been present inside the Conservative Party with more or less relevance according to the periods. For instance, notions of the Anglosphere were reactivated by Winston Churchill during the Second World War, although Kenny and Pearce insist that scholars must be cautious when they analyse Churchill's conception of the Anglosphere. Churchill, who published in 1956 a book called *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, never referred to the Commonwealth as an alternative to Europe. In many ways, like De Gaulle, Churchill had a more sophisticated view of Europe than that described in many writings by contemporary observers, such as the former UK Foreign ministry Boris Johnson. For Kenny and Pearce, Churchill probably saw the UK's place in the world between Europe and Anglosphere, but never presented it as a zero-sum game.

Kenny and Pearce show how, inside the Conservative Party, a limited group of right-wing politicians, in a contrast to Churchill's ideas, never stopped supporting the case of the Anglosphere as a counter to Europe. Debates around the UK's membership of the EU in 1973 reactivated this argument among a small group of Tories, led by the prominent but also marginalised Enoch Powell. Margaret Thatcher, along with the majority of the Conservative Party at the time of the UK's accession, supported Edward Heath's strategy to become a member of the EU. When she became Prime Minister at the end of the 1970s, while she regularly insisted on the special relationship between the UK and US, this was for reasons which had to more

do with the neoliberal economy and the Cold War rather than solidarity with English-speaking peoples.

It is after 2010 that some members of the Conservative Party revived the contemporary idea of the Anglosphere as an alternative to Europe, professing that the EU had always been too small a space for the UK, but also believing that language creates forms of shared identity. On this language issue, a comparison can be made with the most ardent French supporters of the 'francophonie', who firmly believe that language is a vehicle of political identity.

With Brexit, the Anglosphere has once again become a slogan for English national-conservatism which finds its ideological foundations in imperial nostalgia. It is not clear enough in Kenny and Pearce's book how supporters of the Anglosphere distinguish the US from the Commonwealth in their political ideology. Thanks to UK law, Commonwealth citizens having permanent residence in the UK were able to vote in the Brexit referendum, while EU citizens (except the Irish) were not. Some commentators on British politics, basing their analyses on exit polls, stated that a majority of Commonwealth voters supported Brexit because of the 'unfair' labor rights conferred on EU citizens. In fact, this has never been proved by academic research. This issue of Commonwealth voters' behaviour during the Brexit Referendum is also neglected by Kenny and Pearce, while they make clear that several Prime ministers of Commonwealth States, but also US President Obama, refused to consider the Anglosphere and Special Relationships as credible alternatives to EU membership. The Anglosphere, as Kenny and Pearce analyse it in their book, has to do with this ideology of 'Englishness' of a group inside the Conservative Party, the same group who has been always resistant to (further) European integration, devolution and the creation of self-government in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Kenny and Pearce remind their readers that understanding Brexit does not require to understand only UK politics since David Cameron pronounced in 2013 his fatidic Bloomberg Speech. It is even not enough to understand Brexit just in putting the focus on the forty-five years of UK membership to the EC/EU. Brexit has to do with long term history of UK politics, confirming that political science, to be convincing, can rarely escape what Max Weber called 'historicity' of the processes.