

Dinger, Maike. *Discourse, Voice, and the Politics of Participation in the Scottish Independence Referendum*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2026. Pp. 347. ISBN Hardback: 978-3-032-06962-7, £109.99.

Over a decade ago, on the 18 September 2014, 85% of voters in Scotland went to the polls in a referendum to decide the nation's constitutional future. The high turnout – the highest for any electoral event in modern Scottish/UK history – was and remains celebrated as a democracy in action, a meeting of elite, institutional politics and everyday activism with the potential to change (and even revolutionize) popular participation in Scottish politics. That ambition, as Maike Dinger's book argues, is yet to be realized.

Discourse, Voice and the Politics of Participation in the Scottish Referendum offers an ambitious and interdisciplinary analysis of the role of popular participation during the 2014 independence referendum. While, as Dinger points out, the referendum was repeatedly framed as a hive of participation undergirded by repetitive emphasis on participatory and deliberative democracy, she sets out to explore if this really translated beyond rhetoric. Understanding the referendum as 'a complex socio-cultural and political moment in recent Scottish history which was politically defined but largely shaped by discourse, text and cultural practice' (p330), Dinger's critical appraisal of cultural, political and media elite interventions and grassroots activism demonstrates that contrary to its billing as a highly participatory, inclusive political moment, the referendum failed to live up to these expectations. Instead, there was a disconnect between elite visions and popular political activity, giving rise to the mythologization of popular participation during the referendum debate.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I provides an authoritative account of the relationship between Scottish politics and the media. As a scene-setting chapter, Chapter 2 outlines the political context of the Scottish case-study, providing a brief history of the media in Scotland as well as its role in the campaign for the Scottish Parliament and the independence referendum. Chapter 3 begins the empirical analysis, focused on the role of the media in both representing and performing popular participation during the referendum debate. Dinger's analysis highlights the important role played by traditional media in this regard, notably in conditioning and advancing a specific vision of participatory politics, one which failed to understand alternative modes of participation beyond pre-planned events by political elites. This was much to the disadvantage of pro-independence activists whose grassroots events and creativity were predominantly framed negatively by the pro-Union media.

Part II shifts attention to the practical side of political participation and grassroots activism. Through oral history interviews and an innovatively organized "Referendum Café", Chapter 4 examines how members of the public experienced and narrated their participation in the referendum campaign. Focused on three main themes – class, gender and culture – this chapter explores the participatory activities of various organizations spawned by the referendum campaign. Yet, while numerous grassroots-oriented activities took place, from mass-canvassing to knitting events, letter writing to art-based activism, Dinger argues that these were largely influenced by political elites and institutions. The network analysis of political participation on Twitter in Chapter 5 further develops this argument. Dinger posits that while social media is often seen as a space for broadening and enhancing political participation and deliberation,

Tweet activity during the referendum campaign was dominated by existing established voices (largely limited to distributing information) and thus inhibited the potential for social media to become an alternative, inclusive and deliberative arena for political debate. As the author concludes, 'political debate and interaction online largely followed traditional forms of hierarchical communication and reproduced similar patterns of exclusion' (p226).

Part III focuses on the role of art and cultural activism more broadly, both during and after the referendum. Chapter 6 explores how literary texts represented popular participation during the referendum, specifically how this was fictionalized in poetry and fiction novels. Dinger's analysis illuminates the creative role played by artists and their outputs as campaigning tools, particularly in representing and performing notions of national identity and promoting a more progressive and predominantly pro-independence vision of Scottish politics. These texts, however, in leaning more towards national stereotypes and caricature, failed to capture the everyday lived experiences of the referendum, ultimately 'substitut[ing] political voice and agency for nationalist trope' (p327). Exploring these themes further, Chapter 7 engages with the participation of public intellectuals in the referendum debate. The analysis shows that these figures played numerous roles in the campaign, including livening the debate through their creativity, speaking truth to power and performing national identity, but their interventions largely contributed to and operated within the mythologization of popular participation in the referendum and wider myths around Scottish identity, political progressiveness and the literary vanguard.

In the decade since the referendum, a burgeoning literature has emerged examining numerous aspects of the referendum. *Discourse, Voice and the Politics of Participation in the Scottish Referendum* nonetheless make a timely and original contribution to these ongoing debates, in Scotland and beyond. Besides the interdisciplinary focus of the book – a key strength in itself – another strength is its rich empirical analysis derived from a combination of research methods: media and critical discourse analysis, oral history interviews, public engagement, social media and network analysis and textual analysis. This rich data provides illuminating insights into the opportunities and challenges of popular participation as well as the specific tensions between elite narratives championing participation and the actual experiences of activists and citizens. In a global context of seemingly increasing disengagement with politics, there are important lessons to be learned about the benefits and limitations of popular participation. The book's conclusion offers a detailed summary and highlights the importance of learning such lessons, specifically in the context of another referendum, but a clearer discussion on the practical implications emerging from its analysis would undoubtedly enhance its appeal, notably beyond academia.

Overall, this is a fascinating study that makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of popular participation in secessionist movements. It is essential reading for those interested in Scottish politics, participatory politics, nationalism, political communication and media studies.

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