The Brexit referendum: how trade and immigration in the discourses of the official campaigns have legitimised a toxic (inter)national logic

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Abstract

This paper analyses the discourses produced on their websites by the two organisations that conducted the official 'leave' and 'remain' campaigns in the Brexit referendum. The analysis, which adopts the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in CDS, is aimed at illuminating the main discursive strategies, argumentative schemes and key representations of Britain in/and Europe that sustained the ideological (de)legitimation of Brexit on either side. Based on this analysis, this paper argues that the specific ideological articulation of two key discursive elements - namely trade and immigration – and the argumentative schemes deployed in the campaign engendered and legitimized a new toxic (inter)national logic of Brexit: by leaving the EU, Britain 'takes back control' to pursue mercantile policies whose benefits 'outsiders' should be excluded from.

Keywords: Brexit referendum campaign, media framing, institutional framing, critical discourse analysis, argument analysis

1. Introduction

The UK's choice to leave EU constitutes an unprecedented political event which is likely to have profound repercussions on British and European societies for years to come. Why and how it happened, as well as its current and future impact have been the concern of an extensive body of academic work and no doubt these questions will carry on being debated for some time.

This paper contributes to this general debate by approaching Brexit as the historic conjuncture of different social and discursive trajectories (see Zappettini and Krzyzanowski in this issue) and by focusing on the process of their institutional legitimisation. In particular, taking the vantage point of the referendum debate and its mediatisation, this paper analyses the discourses (re)produced and circulated on the websites of the two organisations designated by the UK Electoral Commission as the official lead campaigns for the 'leave' and 'remain' vote. These were, respectively, Vote Leave (VL) and Britain Stronger In Europe (BSE) (henceforth only referred to by their acronyms).

The reason for focusing on these organisations is that VL and BSE were key semi-institutional actors in the process of legitimisation of Brexit effectively contributing to setting the referendum agenda. Both organisations were backed up by business groups and other vested interests and had cross-party political support (as further elaborated below); becoming the lead campaign allowed them to access vital public resources[1] and to give significant exposure to their messages in the public domain whilst escalating certain political and social demands up the institutional chain of discourses (Fairclough,

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[1] Designated campaigns were entitled to public grants (up to £7m), free mailing and broadcasts http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-360386721.

2003). From this prominent standpoint, therefore, VL and BSE had the power to influence public opinion on the meaning of Brexit and to frame the context of the debate by reproducing, challenging or silencing certain discourses and ideologies which they were able to associate with the generic binaries 'leave' and 'remain'.

Trading on these premises, the aim of this paper is to investigate which messages the two leading campaigns fostered in the public domain to support the desired outcome of the referendum vote and how such messages contributed to the wider conjuncture of Brexit. In particular, this paper delves into the main discursive strategies, argumentative schemes and key representations of Britain in/and Europe that sustained the (de)legitimation of Brexit on either side to address the fundamental questions: 'why and how did Brexit occur and for whose benefit'? It is contended that, through the institutional framing of the referendum campaign in antagonistic camps, the ideological articulation of discourses of trade and immigration engendered and legitimized a new toxic (inter)national logic of Brexit: by leaving the EU, Britain 'takes back control' to pursue mercantile policies whose benefits 'outsiders' should be excluded from.

This paper adopts the general theoretical and methodological orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak et al., 2009; Krzyzanowski, 2010). Drawing on the DHA heuristic operationalization section two discusses the socio-political background, the specific institutional framing, and the genre of the Brexit referendum campaign. Section three unpacks the analytical approach applied to the data. Section four presents and discusses the most salient findings and some critical conclusions are finally drawn in Section five.

2.   The context of production of discourses

2.1   Social and political background to the Brexit referendum

Since joining the then EEC in 1973, British Governments have historically adopted an 'outsider' stance towards the European project (Daddow, 2005) regarding it primarily as a transactional affair rather than a political goal or a social endeavour. Following the expansion of the EU over the last two decades, British Euroscepticism and opposition to European integration have increasingly been appropriated by domestic politics defining the resurgence of English nationalism (Welling, 2007). Notably, in the last few years, the UK's discomfort with EU-rope have coincided with the rise of the right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP). Fuelled by UKIP's propaganda and widely echoed by strongly anti-EU tabloid press, calls for an 'independent' Britain and for a 'repatriation' of powers from Brussels became increasingly widespread discourses among Tory 'rebel' backbenchers. In response to these demands, in 2013 the then Prime Minister David Cameron pledged that the next Conservative government would ask the British people for a mandate to negotiate a new settlement with the EU. Having won the general elections in 2015 and having reached a 'deal' with his EU partners, Mr Cameron called for an in/out referendum whilst he pledged to champion the UK's continuing membership of the EU.

Significantly, the referendum took place amid a series of economic and humanitarian 'crises' and in the eighth year of austerity politics that had exacerbated social inequalities in European and British societies. As Jessop (2017) notes:

> "The crucial issue that remained largely unvoiced [in Brexit] was that real or imagined crisis symptoms were not caused by membership of the European Union as such. Rather, they were rooted in its neoliberal form, the crisis of Eurozone

crisis-management, and the long-run failure to address crucial domestic issues that undermined economic and extra-economic competitiveness" (p. 138).

In many respects, the referendum stirred the public sentiment over the causes of this economic crisis and ~~be~~came to be regarded by many as a symbolic vote about economic issues, globalisation, and multiculturalism as much as it was about the UK-EU relationship. As post-referendum research into socio-demographics has shown, the UK regions that voted for Brexit were also those areas most affected by growing social, cultural, and economic inequalities (Savage and Cunningham, 2016). The Brexit vote however also played out along several other axes showing that several dividing lines and cleavages existed within the British voters based on their age, education, urban vs. rural locations and their attitudes towards open/close views of the world (Cooper, 2016).

According to a poll conducted in February 2016 (Kellner, 2016) there was a distinct divide between 'leavers' and 'remainers' in what the two sides believed the causes of the UK's economic problems were. For 'in' voters, the top three factors to blame were British banks, the Conservative-led government since 2010 and growing inequality. For 'out' voters these were: EU rules and regulations, immigrants willing to work for low wages and the last Labour government. In other words, for 'leavers' the causes of the crisis were factors outside the UK, while for 'remainers' the factors were internal to the UK. Similarly, according to another poll (Bailey, 2016) immigration topped the list of the most important issues in the EU referendum for 'leavers' but was much less important for 'remainers'. Crucially, the concern with immigration became particularly acute in the two weeks before the referendum when "[i]mmigration ha[d] now surpassed the economy becoming the most important issue for voters" (Skinner, 2016). According to the same survey, by focusing on immigration issues, the leave

campaign was getting better traction, for example with 45 per cent of the sample of voters believing that a vote for remain would be followed by Turkey gaining fast-track entry to the EU and its population effectively granted free movement into the UK. These negative perceptions were compounded (and amplified by the media, especially British tabloids) in public discourses of 'Europe in crisis' which followed the series of terrorist attacks in various European cities and the displacement of Syrian and other refugees who had attempted to reach Europe. These different representations of crisis contributed to create general negative perceptions of European freedom of movement and to frame immigration flows as a threat to Britain.

Finally, domestic political factors must also be considered as the context in which discourses of the referendum played out. Firstly, the Conservative party saw a number of cabinet members breaking ranks to join the 'leave' campaign as they were in disagreement with the PM whom they accused of having brought home from Brussels an unsatisfactory and too watered down 'deal'. Whilst the remain campaign was notably supported by the PM and the Chancellor of Exchequer, the leave campaign was championed by key figures such as Michael Gove and Boris Johnson who were instrumental in mass mediating the 'leave' message. Secondly, the Labour Party failed to commit to a convincing unified stance with its leader Jeremy Corbyn - who had previously declared himself a Eurosceptic - only showing a lukewarm support for the 'remain' choice towards the later stages of the campaign.

2.2.   *Institutional framing and actors of the Brexit campaign*

Along with the macro socio-political context, one must also consider the institutional framing of the debate as a key context in which discourse of Brexit emerged and were circulated during the campaign. As Koopmans and Olzak (2004) suggest in relation to political mobilization, the political-institutional setting in which discourses are embedded provides 'discursive opportunities' (and constraints) for the framing, diffusion, and impact of messages in the public sphere. Visibility, resonance, and public legitimacy of a discourse are acquired (or challenged) through the interaction of key actors along the discursive chain: the claim makers, the institutional gatekeepers, and the media (Fairclough, 2003)

In the case of Brexit, the call for the referendum polarised different interests and different actors around pro-Remain/Leave programmes which competed to be designated as the official lead campaigns by the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission is an independent body set up by the UK Parliament which regulates party and election finance and sets standards for well-run elections. As, in the case of referendums, its task is to choose the candidate whom "represent those campaigning for the [referendum] outcome to the greatest extent" (Electoral Commission, 2016), the Electoral Commission effectively acted as a key institutional gatekeeper of the debate framing.

On 13 April 2016 the Electoral Commission designated VL and BSE as the official campaign on each side. BSE was a Westminster-based group backed by different pro-EU campaign associations and relied on funding from different financial organisations and businesspersons. VL branched out of Business for Britain, a coalition of Eurosceptics linked to the Confederation of British Industry, and was backed by senior Conservative as well as Labour politicians. Each organisation was, in turn,

endorsed by civic and business associations[2]. Whilst BSE was the only applicant for the Remain side, the GO movement - notably supported by UKIP's Nigel Farage and funded by multi-millionaire donor Arron Banks – was the other major 'leave' contender. Despite some initial in-fights between VL and the GO movement following the Electoral Commission's decision, Nigel Farage claimed that his party "would work with anyone who wanted to leave the EU" (The Independent, 2016). Similarly, UKIP's donor Mr Banks expressed his support for VL as he saw its appointment as conveniently appealing to those Eurosceptics who regarded Mr. Farage as a too divisive figure (BBC, 2016). Whilst therefore operating from the background, UKIP would effectively run a parallel campaign in support of VL, voicing in particular the 'question of immigration' which shifted the centre of gravity away from the original VL's economic case for leaving the EU.

Crucially, the institutional endorsement of VL and BSE as the two lead campaigns (and the media amplification of their messages) contributed to define the discursive frame of the debate along the particular agendas of the two organisations, allowing them to escalate the political demands of their representatives and to project on the Leave/Remain binaries selected representations of the issues at stake.

2.3. Media entextualization of Brexit discourses

Texts produced for referendum campaigns belong to a discursive genre aimed at forming public opinion and persuading voters in favour of a particular choice by

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[2] For details of endorsers see: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/designation-of-lead-campaigners-for-the-eu-referendum

legitimizing a specific political goal or course of action as the 'right' choice (in this case leaving or remaining in the EU). As shown by a range of studies (Vreese, 2007), depending on the issue being deliberated, referendum campaigns can conform to a rational genre of deliberative argumentation (for example drawing on facts to construct arguments) as well as to a genre that mainly appeals to emotional and ideological positions (such as the sense of belonging to national or political communities). With Internet-based platforms increasingly appropriated in politics as powerful machineries in the strategic mobilisation of public opinion (Chadwick and Howard, 2010) these discursive genres have gradually moved towards digitalized productions. In the case of the Brexit referendum, the digital mediatisation of messages was instrumental to the final outcome of the referendum as a large proportion of the advertising budget of the lead campaigns was spent online and involved delivering the key messages to undecided voters via 'big data' aggregation and social media targeting (Hilder, 2017).

The process of digital entextualisation of the campaign thus opened up new 'discursive opportunities' for the key referendum actors to de/recontextualise historical and ongoing discourses of Britain and/in Europe into new semiotic realizations that would fit into or indeed drive the leave/remain narratives. Crucially, in the process of entextualisation new interdiscursive relations between arguments and other linguistic elements could potentially be created which would create new orders of discourses and enable new logics associated with them to be (re)produced (Krzyżanowski, 2016).

3.   Data and analytical approach

Data was derived from the official websites of the two organisations[3]. Websites were consulted regularly between October 2015 and the end of June 2016 as this time frame effectively represents the period of maximum activity. This preliminary survey showed that both websites presented fairly similar features including the following prominent sections which discussed 'facts' about the EU and Britain and in which the case was made for either leaving or remaining: 'Why vote leave?' and 'Facts about the European Union'(VL) and 'The basics' and 'FAQs' (BSE).

The analysis focused on the discursive realisations which were directly available on the website pages of each of the above sections or accessible via hypertextual links through these pages. This corpus of data, consisting of a total of 81 pages of texts (which also included pictures and, in the case of VL, cartoons), was analysed at discourse-pragmatic and semiotic levels using the DHA analytical operationalization (Krzyzanowski, 2010). This consists of: a) a thematic analysis mapping the key analytical categories or discourse topics and b) an in-depth or argumentation-oriented analysis involving the investigation of discursive strategies, topoi and their means and forms of realisation. Particular attention was paid to the systematic analysis of argumentative schemes and warrants (Toulmin, 1958) which supported the main claim 'the UK should remain in/leave the EU'. In the tradition of the DHA, the analysis mapped the topoi (or fallacies) which were implicitly or explicitly invoked to justify arguments as, for example, the conditional or causal logics 'if x then y' or 'y because x' (Reisigl 2014). In synergy with this standard operationalization of the DHA, the analysis also zeroed in on the use of narratives and specific representations of the world as premises for framing argumentative schemes (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012). The analysis therefore mapped representations which specifically supported the

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[3] These were: www.voteleavetakecontrol.org (VL) and www.strongerin.co.uk (BSE).

'leave/remain' claims following Fairclough and Fairclough's distinction between: i) circumstantial premises (representing the context of action and identifying the issue to be solved); ii) goal premises (geared towards the achievement of desirable states of affairs); and iii) means premises (how to achieve the set goal).

## 4.	Analysis

### *4.1.	Discursive macro-topics and interdiscursive relations*

BSE's discourses primarily hinged on representations of the EU as the Single Market and mainly focused on highlighting the benefits of the status quo and the risk of leaving the Single Market. BSE's discourses largely discussed economic topics and, in some cases, also social and political implications derived from the membership of the Single Market (e.g. workers' rights). In addition to the dominant economic framing, BSE's discursive topics included international relations and relied on representations of Britain as an actor in different systems of power. Whilst VL also engaged with topics related with the economy, its discourses were clearly framed within a neoliberal dimension and were driven in particular by representations of the constraints of the EU rules and EU laws on British businesses and on British aspirations to wider global trade. Notably, whilst early discourses of VL discussed economic topics and the question of sovereignty via legal and political arguments (discursively linked with Eurosceptic narratives), towards the final weeks of the campaign the focus of the Leave campaign increasingly shifted towards topics of immigration and free movement (paralleled by the UKIP campaign) as further discussed in the next section. By contrast, topics related to migration and sovereignty were only marginally discussed by BSE. A list of the main

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discursive topics covered by both organisations and the main interdiscursive relations is

provided in Table 1 and Table 2 while the main argumentative schemes are discussed in

detail in the next section.

Table 1. BSE's main discursive topics and main interdiscursive relations
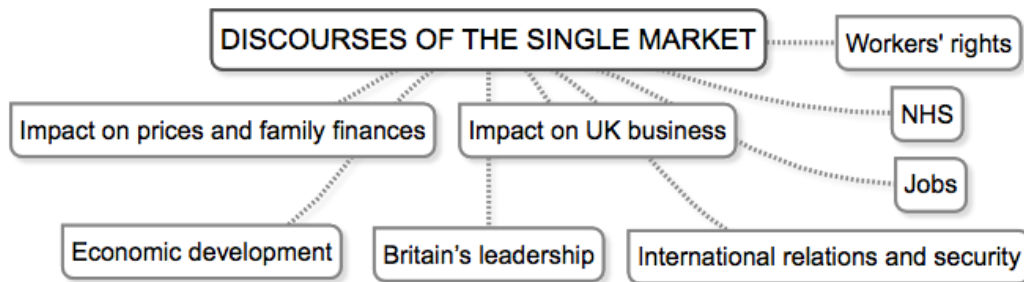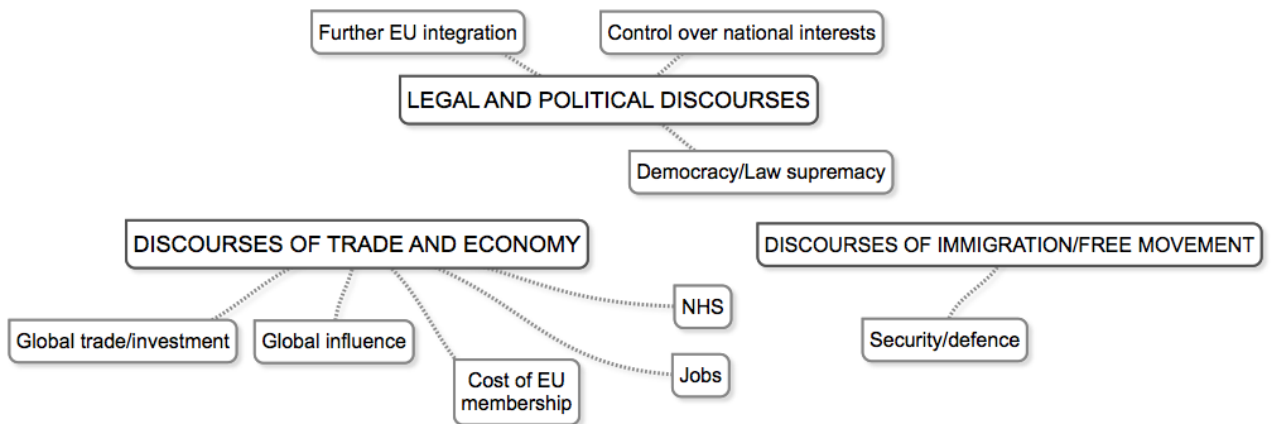

Table 2. VL's main discursive topics and main interdiscursive relations

4.2.   *In-depth analysis*

Main argumentative schemes of the 'Remain' campaign

Discursive strategies of BSE were aimed, on the one hand, at highlighting the current

benefits of the EU membership whilst, on the other, at emphasizing the negative impact

of Brexit on jobs, economic and social prosperity (as summarised in Figure 1 and Table 3 below). Whilst the former strategy was achieved through positive topoi such as the *topos of benefit*, the latter strategy tended to project a negative scenario for the UK outside the EU (which the leave campaign dubbed 'project fear') and was driven by different *topoi of risk*. Both strategies were characterised by the overt nominalisation of 'you and your family' as the addressee of the benefits and the negative consequences and potential risk. Moreover, another conspicuous pattern in BSE discourses was the frequent reference to some authoritative source (*argumentum ad verecundiam*) to back up the credibility of the warrant and the conclusions as illustrated below:

> Extract 1
> Over 3 million UK jobs are linked to our trade with the EU: one in every ten jobs in this country (Source: HM Treasury) […] If we leave the EU experts predict that the economic hit would mean up to 950,000 UK jobs could be lost (Source: Confederation of British Industry), meaning less security for you and your family.

Another prominent set of discourses emerging in the Remain campaign related to international relations and security through which BSE represented 'Britain's place in the world'. In this case, BSE made the case for remaining by emphasizing Britain's leadership on the international stage through the *topos of (inter)national influence*:

> Extract 3
> Being a leading member of the EU, as well as in NATO and the UN, ensures that Britain can stand tall in the world and promote our own interests.

In this case, whilst the *topos of (inter)national influence* validates the argument for remaining, it also represents the EU as union of states which must safeguard their own interests rather than an entity with supranational aims. In this sense the argument project an ideal clout that Britain would carry by being in an international "members' club"

(along with the UN and Nato) and the national benefits deriving from such memberships.

Notably, BSE did not engage substantively with discourses of immigration. Its discussion of this topic was limited to marginal representations of British citizens benefitting from visa-free opportunities to study, travel and retire anywhere across the EU and to representations of British businesses being able to benefit from the free movement of labour.

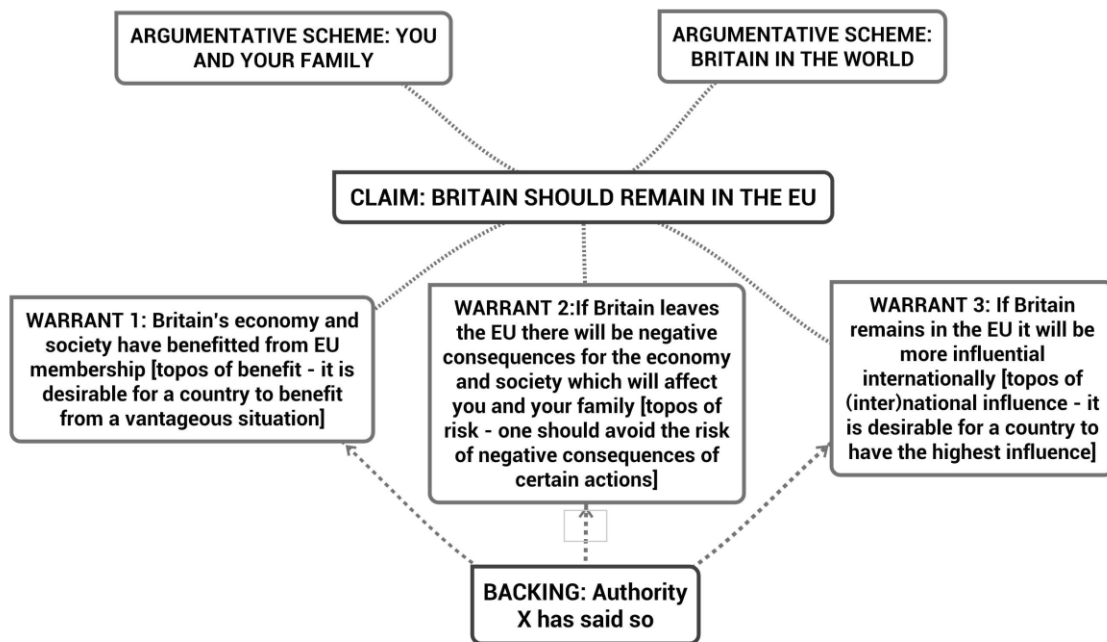Figure 1. Main argumentative schemes of the Remain campaign

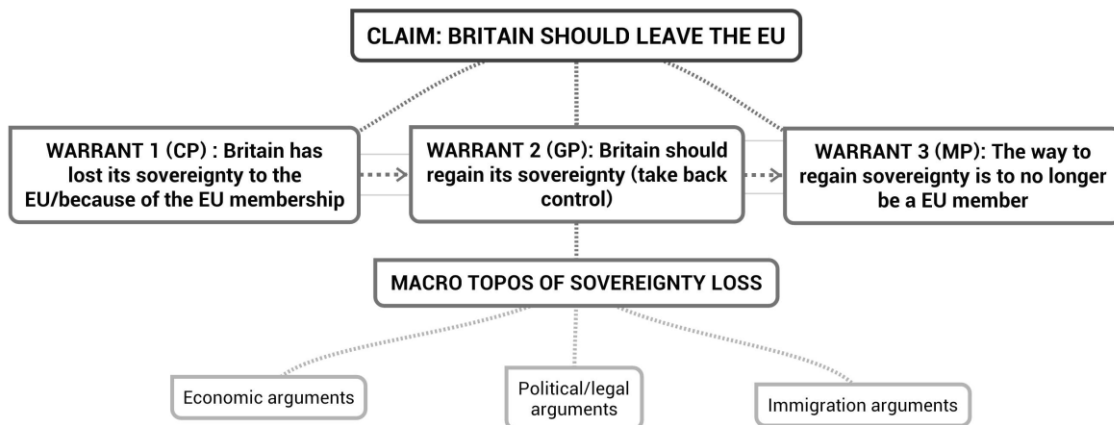Table 3. Summary of BSE main discursive strategies, topoi, and representations

Main Strategies	Main Topoi/Fallacies	Key Representations

Emphasizing the benefits of EU membership	topos of benefit topos of risk avoidance	Individuals and families as part of an economic system
Emphasizing how Brexit would affect individuals and households	topos of authority topos of (inter)national influence	The EU as the Single Market
Representing Britain's 'place in the world'.		The world as an international system of powers

Main argumentative schemes of the 'Leave' campaign

The main discursive thrust of the Leave side was the representation of 'independence' from the EU as an essential condition for the UK to be in control of its domestic affairs and to pursue an agenda of (inter)national (neo)liberalism. This macro argumentative scheme (as represented in Figure 2) was supported by the *topos of sovereignty loss* which can be broken down as follows: Britain has lost its sovereignty to the EU (circumstantial premise) which it should regain (goal premise) by no longer being a EU member (means premise). This overarching scheme was reproduced in more specific arguments in three distinct areas: economy, political/legal integration, and immigration which are discussed below and are summarised in Table 4 in relation to main discursive strategies, topoi, and representations.

Figure 2. Main argumentative scheme of the Leave campaign

CLAIM: BRITAIN SHOULD LEAVE THE EU

WARRANT 1 (CP): Britain has lost its sovereignty to the EU/because of the EU membership

WARRANT 2 (GP): Britain should regain its sovereignty (take back control)

WARRANT 3 (MP): The way to regain sovereignty is to no longer be a EU member

MACRO TOPOS OF SOVEREIGNTY LOSS

Economic arguments

Political/legal arguments

Immigration arguments

Main Strategies	Main Topoi/Fallacies	Key Representations
Delegitimising the EU	topos of sovereignty loss over trade topos of burden for businesses topos/fallacy of (inter)national influence	Britain 'constrained' 'tied down' or 'dominated' by the EU Independent Free trade deals as the solution to globalization Britain as a 'proud trading nation'
Prioritizing economic resources	topos of pro bono nobis	National vs. transnational solidarity
Rejecting or resisting political integration	topos of risk avoidance topos of EU law supremacy	The UK ostracized by other EU countries and dragged into a closer Union The ECJ meddling with British affairs
Constructing moral panic around immigration	topos of sovereignty loss (over border control) topos/fallacy of numbers fallacy of risk avoidance	Britain at risk of invasion by millions of migrants Conflation of EU freedom of

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	fallacy of public safety	movement and illegal migration

'Open border' Europe and 'border vulnerability' – Conflation of immigrant and criminals/terrorists |

Economic arguments

VL's early discourses focused on strategies of delegitimation of the EU and were predicated on economic arguments which represented Britain's economic potential as 'constrained', 'tie down' or 'dominated' by the EU. A number of arguments which characterised the leave choice as 'freeing' Britain from unresponsive and costly EU were based on *topoi of burden* for British businesses and were realised via the expression 'red tape', a euphemism for employment rights and social and environmental protection. Moreover, VL advocated the 'leave' choice through discourses of free trade[4] in which the EU was delegitimised as unresponsive and preventing the UK from seizing worldwide economic opportunities. Representations of 'free trade deals' were often discursively embraced as powerful - albeit simplistic - solutions to the constraints of the EU membership and the issue of reduced or lost sovereignty:

> Extract 4
> Technological and economic forces are changing the world fast. EU institutions cannot cope. We have lost control of vital policies. This is damaging. We need a new relationship. […] We negotiate a new UK-EU deal based on free trade and friendly cooperation. We end the supremacy of EU law. We regain control.

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[4] For a discussion of free trade and its association with neo liberal ideologies in the context of Brexit see Author, 2019.

Extract 5

We regain the power to make our own trade deals with countries around the world. We regain an independent voice in world trade negotiations with independent voting rights at the World Trade Organisation. We regain seats on other international rule-setting bodies that we've given away to the EU. We use our stronger international influence to work for closer international cooperation.

In Extract 4 the argument for leaving is constructed along a simplistic logic of 'cause and solution'. It rests on distinct circumstantial premises that represent globalization as driven by external and non-agent specific forces and on the representation of the EU as an unfit actor vis-à-vis such forces. The legitimation of voting leave as 'taking control' is achieved via a series of functional moves (implicitly connected albeit missing explicit causative connectives) towards the negotiation of a free trade UK-EU deal which is presented to the reader as the solution to the problem of globalization. Similarly, the argument put forward in Extract 5 hinges on a representation of the UK 'regaining' the power lost to the EU at the WTO table and it rests on a set of goal premises which legitimise Brexit as a means to a mercantile goal. In this case, the means premise is predicated on the *topos of (inter)national influence* that the UK would be able to fully deploy better than the EU inside the WTO and on the international stage were it an actor of its own rather than being represented by the EU. In this sense, rather than a rationally warranted premise, the *topos of (inter)national influence* appears to be used as a fallacious rhetorical device which appeals to a nostalgic vision of Britain's leadership as a 'proud trading nation' and which leverages on the British aspirations to be recognised again as a great power in its own right.

Another set of economic arguments legitimising the leave choice relied on strategies of prioritizing *us* over *them* (often metonymically associated with Brussels) in the sharing of economic resources and were typically realised through the *topos of pro bono nobis* (for our own benefit). One of the most prominent arguments in this sense

was about the 'wasted' money that Britain pays into the EU budget which, VL claimed, should benefit nationals rather than 'outsiders':

> Extract 6
> We send about £350 million to Brussels every week. […] If we vote to 'remain', it is a vote for the permanent payment to Brussels of all this money. […] All this money could be better spent on the NHS, schools, and fundamental science research. […] If we vote to leave, we can change the agenda. If we regain the power to control our own affairs, we can sort out our own problems

This argument (which captured the public imagination also in virtue of a red bus campaign associated with the slogan "We send the EU £ 350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead") was predicated on a figure which was at best arbitrary as admitted by the leave campaign director [5]. More significantly, the legitimacy of 'taking control' tapped into the symbolic national appeal of education and health systems (both are outside the remit of EU policies; the NHS is the UK's biggest employer and has always represented a sensitive topic in political campaigns).

Political and legal arguments

Arguments which represented voting leave as 'freeing' the UK from increasing political and legal integration with other European countries were also frequent. These arguments largely reproduced the macro argumentative schemes underpinned by the *topos of sovereignty loss* (as discussed earlier) to reject Europe as a political project. In

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5 The figure was highly contested since it does not take into account a substantial rebate granted to the UK https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/01/dominic-cummings-brexit-referendum-won/. The pledge to spend £ 350 m on the NHS was dismissed by Leavers soon after the referendum result (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-nhs-350m-a-week-eu-change-britain-gisela-stuart-referendum-bus-a7236706.html).

some cases, the leave arguments were also realised through *topoi of risk avoidance* for example in relation to the Euro crisis:

> Extract 7
> It is not unreasonable to assume that a 'Yes' vote will be taken as a mandate for the UK to one day join the Euro – and effectively sail towards disaster. A 'No' vote at the upcoming referendum on EU membership is the only way to prevent an inevitable slide towards further economic and political integration before it's too late.

In a few other instances, political arguments were mostly driven by the *topos of (inter)national influence* which represented the EU as an arena of national interests to be defended and Britain's political power inside it dwindling. In these cases, the argument for leaving the EU relied on representations of the UK as a minor actor ostracized by a more powerful and hostile European alliance:

> Extract 8
> If we vote to remain in the EU it will mean staying in a European Union where the UK can be automatically outvoted, where we can't veto unwanted regulations and where unelected judges can overturn more and more UK laws. That's why the safer option is to Vote Leave and take back control.

Notably, one of the most frequent argumentative schemes supporting the leave choice as an ideological resistance to a dominant 'ever closer Union' was supported by negative representations of the supremacy of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) 'meddling' with British affairs and with the British legal system. The goal premise of 'freeing Britain from the ECJ rule' derived from this representation spanned interdiscursively to warrant arguments of economic independence and of control over immigration. For example, the proposition that by leaving the EU Britain would avoid obeying the economic and financial rules imposed by the ECJ was predicated on discourses of the 'burden of red tape' and limitations to 'free trade' (cf. extract 8 above). Similarly,

negative representations of the ECJ ruling over the British government in relation to the attribution or removal of citizenship rights were frequently invoked in the leave campaign and acted as circumstantial premises along the macro argumentative scheme of 'loss of sovereignty' to legitimize the leave vote as in the following example:

> Extract 9
> If we vote to stay, EU judges will decide who gets British citizenship. The ECJ […] has used EU citizenship to take more and more powers from the UK, including over whether criminals and illegal immigrants can stay, requiring social security to be paid to EU migrants, undermining the UK's border controls and expanding prisoner voting rights.

In most cases however, the argument about typical functions of the state (citizenship rights and border control) allegedly being taking over by the EU is a particularised discourse which conflates the remit of ECJ and European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)[6] but which nevertheless appealed to popular imagination in discourses of 'border vulnerability'. This and other related arguments on the 'issue' of immigration are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Immigration-related arguments

Since VL was nominated as the official candidate for the leave side, its campaign increasingly focused on themes of immigration. Whilst still pushing an agenda for free trade and sovereignty, the imperative to 'take control' became discursively mobilised in favour of arguments that initially problematized immigration - albeit through a rather neutral stance - through the *topos of numbers* as in the extracts below:

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[6] The ECHR was established prior to and independently of the EU in 1953 with the UK being one of its key promoters of its introduction. It has been adopted by a number of countries (including Turkey and Russia) which are not necessarily EU members states.

Extract 9
More than a quarter of a million people came to the UK from the EU in the 12 months to September 2015 – the equivalent of a city the size of Plymouth or Newcastle in a year. If this rate continues for a decade, there will be more than two million extra people. Many immigrants contribute to our society. They also affect public services. Experts disagree on the overall effect.

Later in the campaign, negative representations of immigration became increasingly prevalent and contributed to construct an overarching discursive scenario of 'moral panic' (Stanley, 1973) about immigrants. Against this scenario the leave choice was legitimised through *fallacies of risk avoidance* and *public safety*. Figure 3 below exemplifies a typical argument circulated on the VL website (and widely echoed in the press) between late April and the referendum date, namely that the EU was secretly planning to give millions of Turks visa-free access to Europe[7]. The diagram clearly suggests the 'risky' option of staying in the EU by depicting Britain 'targeted' by over 80 millions of migrants from candidate EU countries, an argument that rests on the fallacious assumption of mass migration from those countries.

7 See for example https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1271200/more-than-100000-turks-a-year-will-flock-to-britain-after-it-joins-the-eu-pushing-net-migration-to-a-staggering-420000/

In some cases, VL's escalation of moral panic about migrants relied on conflating

distinct representations of free movement of people within the EU and representations

of illegal immigration, a strategy that had similarly being deployed by UKIP and which

was epitomized by the infamous 'Breaking point' poster released a week before the

referendum[8]. Figure 4 exemplifies a semiotic realisation of how this conflation of

discourses occurred within the argumentative scheme 'if Britain remains in the EU, this

will happen/continue'. The written text on the left recontextualises the argument in

Extract 9 above on the numbers of EU migrants. In this case, however, the argument is

reinforced via a visual association which clearly misrepresents freedom of movement

exercised by EU citizens as what one would perceive as people illegally trespassing a

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[8] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-
    poster-queue-of-migrants

border, an image which capitalises on irrational fear of immigration and which

recontextualises wider discourses of Europe's reaction to the refugee crisis.

The moral panic about immigrants was also constructed through discursive scenarios

focusing on the threat of terrorist attacks and border vulnerability with the thrust of the

discourse provided by *topoi of security and public safety* which legitimised the leave

choice as the ability to stop criminals entering Britain. In some cases, these arguments

were realised through negative representations of the ECJ disempowering Britain (see

Extracts 8 and 9 above) and on the goal premise of regaining control over immigration

relying on a distorted logic that conflates immigrants with criminals and terrorists as in

the following extracts:

Extract 10
Our border controls are under constant attack from the European Court of Justice
(ECJ). Last year, the ECJ said that our Government cannot require migrants from
other EU states to have a permit issued by UK authorities, even though permits
from other EU countries are systematically forged, some EU countries sell their

passports, and we have no control over the way other EU countries issue their passports. This makes it easier for terrorists and criminals to get into Britain.

Extract 11

Being in the EU makes it easier for terrorists to come to Britain - EU law forbids countries in the Schengen area from carrying out systematic checks on anyone with an EU passport from entering. This makes it much easier for terrorists fighting abroad to return to Britain, who need not pass through a single border control between arriving on the shores of Greece and reaching the English Channel. With terrorist groups launching attacks on Europe, more and more EU states are finding that they have to defy the EU and reintroduce border controls to keep people safe.

In these two examples the argument for leaving is supported by the main warrant that "being in the EU makes it easier for terrorists to come to Britain". This circumstantial premise is, in turn, articulated through different ambiguous premises (in extract 10 the supposed corruption of other EU countries) or more explicit fallacies (Extract 11), the most obvious one being that the UK is not in the Schengen area and it has always retained the power to control its borders over movement of people from Schengen countries. The need to control borders which is invoked here to legitimise the leave choice seems to apply to a general openness of Europe (stretching 'from the shores of Greece to the English Channel') and a perceived threat that such lack of borders would pose to Britain. However the representation of domestic security supposedly guaranteed by a system of international borders appears further contradicted by the representation of 'terrorists who return to Britain' if one assumes that such terrorists were British citizens in the first place and further highlight the contradiction of Britain wanting to be in control of its borders whilst expecting other countries to patrol them.

5.   Conclusion: A toxic (inter)national logic of Brexit

This paper has illuminated the discursive legitimization of Brexit in the messages of the official Leave/Remain campaigns, two key actors in the institutional framing of the referendum debate. It has highlighted how the institutional framing of the campaign allowed for two opposed camps to emerge and for specific discourses and interests to polarize around the 'in' and 'out' choices. The analysis has provided evidence of how trade and immigration acted as the two key discursive elements which drove the (de)legitimisation of Brexit appealing to both rational and emotional argumentative schemes. The analysis has also shown that BSE mainly engaged with economic topics focusing on discursive strategies which, on the one hand, highlighted the positive impact of Britain's membership of the EU on trade and jobs while, on the other, emphasized the risk of leaving the EU by projecting a series of negative consequences for citizens and households. Similarly to BSE, early discourses of the Leave campaign engaged with economic arguments. However, in contrast to BSE, VL's strategies were primarily aimed at delegitimizing the EU as 'dominating' and 'constraining' the UK in its trading potential and 'meddling' with its national sovereignty. Becoming independent from the EU's antagonistic power provided thus the main legitimacy thrust to VL's discourses, which were typically realized via the 'take (back) control' slogan. Notably, as the campaign progressed, immigration increasingly gained currency in VL's discourses by becoming a central topic of the campaign. In this respect, VL's discursive strategies contributed significantly to the construction of the 'moral panic' of mass migration and, against this scenario, the legitimation of Brexit occurred through fallacies of numbers and public safety and through misrepresentations of the EU's freedom of movement.

The analysis has provided a body of evidence for a critical reading of Brexit showing that the choice over the UK/Europe relationship encapsulated in the vague binaries 'leave' and 'remain' acted as a powerful catalyst for the (de)legitimation of certain ideologies, the imagination of certain world orders, the reproduction of certain narratives of Britain and Europe.

Firstly, albeit from opposite grounds, the two campaigns largely framed the Brexit debate within representations of Europe as a zero-sum trading exercise. Whilst BSE relied on representations of the Single Market to legitimize the status quo as desirable for the UK, VL's campaign reproduced a neoliberal intergovernmental agenda advocating for a looser global trading system in which the UK could be a freer and much better-off actor taking advantage of global opportunities without the existing regulations of the Single Market. This vision, encapsulated in the *topos of sovereignty loss*, legitimized the leave choice as a matter of national interests to be safeguarded and pursued as much as an act of independence from the EU.

Secondly, by taking a nation-centric stance (i.e. speaking to and for the nation), the messages of the two campaigns largely reproduced historical conceptualizations of Britishness vis-à-vis a European 'other'. Whereas BSE accommodated the European (economic) narrative into that of the 'imagined' British nation, VL voiced a resurgent form of English nationalism by recontextualising discourses of a distinct British political and cultural exceptionalism which is not compatible with the European project. These representations were particularly prevalent in arguments supported by the *topos of national influence* which indexes different nation-centric views. Whilst, by and large, BSE represented national influence viable within a EU-ropean space and achievable through intra-national cooperation, VL used the same topos to argue for national independence and for forms of intergovernmentalism alternative to EU membership

appealing to the narrative of Britain's glorious past and its economic and political global role.

Thirdly, VL recontextualized UKIP's anti-immigration agenda ideologically rooted in a divisive and populist reading of immigration as a problem of 'us and them' that governments must solve (Richardson, 2008) and reproducing a politics of identity which largely projects a sense of solidarity strictly within national rather than transnational boundaries. In this sense, representations of Europe in its cultural, civic, and social democratic dimensions were notably absent. Similarly, both referendum campaigns silenced the question of Scotland and Ireland reproducing a dominant English-centered vision of the internal cohesion of Britain. This discursive hegemony largely reflects the specific vested interests represented by the two organizations examined bringing into the public arena selected representations of Britain and/in Europe which contributed to the normalization of (symbolic) borders and the relegitimation of national identities in the public opinion.

Crucially, the specific discursive articulation of trade and immigration emerged in the Brexit referendum campaign engendered and legitimized a new toxic (inter)national logic: by leaving the EU, Britain 'takes back control' to pursue mercantile policies whose benefits 'outsiders' should be excluded from. At a time of another major European crisis driven by populist and nationalist discourses, the Brexit referendum campaigns conspicuously failed to represent Europe in its social and supranational dimensions and to make the case for Europe as a transnational project of solidarity and social justice.

Of course, as the analysis has focused on the discourses of these two semi-institutional organisations, it would benefit from complimentary further investigation of how such discourses were received and consumed by other actors in other sites.

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