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# Taking the left way out of Europe

## Labour party's strategic, ideological and ambivalent de/legitimation of Brexit

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This paper investigates how Brexit was de/legitimised by different Labour actors in a corpus of texts published after the referendum (2016–2020). It thus contributes an *intra-party* perspective to understanding discursive dynamics of European (dis)integration by building on the notorious 'European question' historically debated inside Labour and on the polysemy of Brexit constructed by/reflected in such discourses. The analysis, conducted at lexical-semantic and discursive-pragmatic levels, points to distinct strategic, ideological and ambivalent forms of de/legitimation of Brexit in the discourses of Labour. While strategic and ambivalent de/legitimation point to the Brexit debate being mainly driven by political communication logics, ideological de/legitimation highlights a deeper struggle inside Labour over EU-rope, especially in relation to international vs. national conceptualisations of socialism. While EU-rope was de/legitimised (and Brexit legitimised) by advocates of 'socialism in one country', reverse stances tended to be adopted by supporters of 'international socialism'.

**Keywords:** Brexit, Labour, socialism, strategy, ideology, ambivalence, language, CDA

### 1. Introduction: The ideological polysemy of Brexit and its implementation

The de/legitimation of Brexit has been a highly contested discursive process that has largely revolved around the perceived social, political, and economic meanings associated with the signifier Brexit. Alongside public and media discourses – which have been investigated from many critical interdisciplinary perspectives (Bennett 2019a; Brusenbauch Meislova 2019; Koller et al. 2019; Zappettini and

Krzyżanowski 2021) – equally important, but less studied debates over the meaning(s) of Brexit have also taken place *within* British parties. This paper contributes to the special issue on European (de)legitimation and, more widely, to the extant literature on the discursive dynamics of Brexit by shedding light on different constructions associated with the signifier ‘Brexit’ that were de/legitimised by different Labour actors in a corpus of texts published on Labourlist (see Section 3). Just as the referendum on Brexit was born out of Cameron’s political move to supposedly reconcile a division inside the Conservatives between Eurosceptics (migrating to UKIP) and pro-Europeanists, it also paradoxically opened up an even wider gap in the Labour party where the long debated ‘European question’ (Nairn 1972) and historic Eurosceptic/Europositive<sup>1</sup> ideological cleavages had been revived by Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership which in many respects represented a clear departure from Blair and Brown’s ‘soft left’ towards a ‘harder’ socialist position. The struggle over the ‘meaning’ of Brexit and its implementation resulted in an official party line often publicly perceived as ‘sitting on the fence’ for, although being formally supportive of Remain in the referendum campaign, Corbyn adopted a position of ‘constructive ambiguity’ (Diamond 2019) during the institutionalisation phase of Brexit which, in many respects, facilitated the implementation of Boris Johnson’s government ‘hard’ Brexit plan.<sup>2</sup> As this paper seeks to demonstrate, *Labour’s de/legitimation of Brexit occurred through distinct strategic, ideological and ambivalent lines of discourse*. While strategic and ambivalent de/legitimation point to the Brexit debate being mainly driven by political communication logics (that is, ‘branding’ the party’s action for intended audiences), ideological de/legitimation highlights a deeper struggle inside Labour over EU-rope, especially in relation to inter/national conceptualisations of socialism. In this sense, this article contributes a British perspective to similar recent debates on the future of EU-rope in left wing parties across the continent (see for example, Serafis et al. 2022, and Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019).

This article approaches the question of de/legitimation of Brexit as one that primarily focuses on the discursive mobilisation of polysemous (or semantically differentiated) keywords. As various politics and discourse scholars (Wodak 2011; Van Dijk 1995; Freedon 2021) have noted, political language tends to use similar keywords (e.g. democracy, economy) but drawing from different (implicit) underlying principles. The same word can therefore index concepts that belong

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1. For a discussion of Euroscepticism and its performance see Caiani and Guerra 2017; Zappettini and Maccaferri 2021

2. I refer to a *pre-legitimation phase* of Brexit in which historical discursive trajectories developed (Krzyżanowski 2014) and the in/out binaries were filled with vague meanings and a subsequent *institutionalisation phase* in which meanings consolidated retroactively (Zappettini, forthcoming)

to opposed sets of ideological values and upon which different actors/events are de/legitimized. Thus, not only has the portmanteau neologism Brexit described the hitherto unprecedented event of a member state dissociating itself from the EU, but it has also encoded a conceptual metaphor of outwards movement away from the EU-ropean space which has been deployed widely in discourses on the causes, agents, and future scenarios of such process to index larger beliefs on social (inter)national affairs held by different discursive actors (Fontaine 2017; Musolff 2017; Charteris-Black 2019). In other words, discussions of if, why, and how Britain should leave the EU have constructed and reflected an ‘ideological polysemy’ (Dieckmann 1975) of the very term Brexit and crucially of its semantic relations with other discursive fields and concepts. In this article, the analysis of how Brexit was de/legitimized inside the Labour Party has therefore concerned itself more with different worldviews associated with linguistic realisations of different actors rather than whether the abstract notion of Brexit was supported or not by them. At the same time, key drivers of political communication (persuasion, mobilization, and mediatization) were equally factored into the interpretive work which was guided by the following questions: which keywords and meanings were associated with the signifier ‘Brexit’ inside the Labour Party? Which visions of the EU and the UK were de/legitimized when debating Brexit and its implementation? How do such visions relate to Labour’s historical discourses of the ‘European question’? To address these questions Section 2 will first outline the role of Corbyn’s ‘constructive ambiguity’ in the Brexit critical juncture (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2021). Subsequent Sections 3, 4, and 5 will then present and discuss the analysis of a corpus of data referring to the period subsequent the referendum, from when the British PM triggered Article 50 and negotiations began in 2017 through to when the UK officially left the EU on 31/12/2020. This period represents a highly volatile time which saw the UK going through a deep institutional crisis with the Brexit issue being prominently at the centre of one European and two national elections, the last of which resulted in the Labour party’s worst performance since 1935.

## **2. Corbyn’s constructive ambiguity during the Brexit institutionalisation phase**

Corbyn is historically a Eurosceptic having supported Britain leaving the EEC in the 1975 Referendum, strongly opposed the Maastricht Treaty and voted against the Lisbon Treaty. Like other prominent figures associated with the Socialist Workers Party he has held the Bennite view of the EU as a capitalist club that stymies the achievement of a true socialist Britain (Worth 2017; Bolton and Pitts

2018). Advocating a position that became known during the Brexit debate as Lexit, 'Lexiteers' would see UK's sovereignty restored through Brexit not only by the country severing its association with a perceived undemocratic system but also as the necessary foundation for the implementation of Keynesian policies at national level (in particular around renationalization of key industries and state subsidies) which, ostensibly, are otherwise deemed not possible under the current EU's rules. Despite his personal convictions, however, since he became the Labour leader and throughout the Brexit debate, Corbyn voiced Labour's position on Brexit and the EU as one of 'cautious Europragmatism' or 'constructive ambiguity' (Diamond 2019) for several different reasons. In contrast to Lexiteers, two thirds of Labour supporters (especially in big cities) have been generally supportive of the EU and pro-Remain (Shaw 2021). Yet, due to the peculiar first-past-the post British electoral system, almost the reverse ratio applies to Labour constituencies which were, in fact, majority Leave (and primarily concentrated in the Northern 'redwall' and rural England) (Hanretty 2017). Even more problematically, the referendum vote had made Labour the majority party in both some of the top Remain and Leave voting constituencies (Shaw 2021). This split therefore posed a dilemma for the party's official Brexit communication as the leadership had to reconcile the support of Remain-voting, liberal urban areas with smaller towns across northern England resentful of immigration levels and feeling that Labour no longer represented their interests (Rayson 2020). Finally, although Labour was initially consulted by EU negotiators as the opposition party, it was the consecutive Conservative governments of May and Johnson who drove the agenda on Brexit and Labour was limited to the watchdog opposition role. Further rifts emerged among Labour supporters which polarised opinions on Corbyn's leadership beyond Brexit. Some regarded Corbynism as a re-empowerment of those left alienated by Blair's policies and praised his opening up democratic participation to grassroots activism (Maignushca and Dean 2019). In some other cases support for Corbyn was often seen as a 'personality cult' concerned with protecting the leadership from any intra-party opposition by referring to such critical views as an anti-Corbyn 'conspiracy' (Watts and Bale 2019; Bolton and Pitts 2018). Notably a debate became prominent around antisemitic views which some members believed were now endemic and normalized within the party due to Corbyn's inability to condemn them effectively (Hirsh 2017; Rich 2018). Other members viewed such claims as largely exaggerated and part of an orchestrated media campaign (Philo et al. 2019).

Against this background, Corbyn's communication was a difficult balancing act between many camps. In relation to the 'European question', it relied on a mix of nationalist rhetoric, making a tepid case for Europe and voicing the institutional opposition to Government's Brexit plans. Although during the Brexit

referendum Labour officially supported Remain, Corbyn's campaign was hardly passionate. Upon the Brexit referendum outcome, he immediately called for triggering Article 50 and instructed Labour MPs to vote with the whip (although 52 of them voted against). At the 2019 annual party conference in Brighton a motion forcing the leadership to back Remain in a second referendum was voted down; instead, delegates backed Corbyn's plans for a Labour government to negotiate a new deal with the EU while the leadership would stay neutral. Labour's 'alternative' vision however was just as fuzzy as the Conservatives' Chequers proposal that was voted down three times by Parliament. From then on, Labour effectively trailed behind the 'hard Brexit' agenda set by their political opponent and relied on the same Conservatives' rhetoric of Britain 'having its cake and eating it too' (Musolff 2019). In this vein, Corbyn's leadership was also characterised by left populist rhetoric, for example in how the party pitched itself as an anti-establishment insurgency of the 'many versus the few' pitting 'the people' (especially those of an imagined 'heartland') against the Westminster elites (Demata 2019). Although Corbyn's populism did not invoke Britishness in the same xenophobic terms as some right-wing discourses emerged throughout Brexit (Zappettini 2019a), it nevertheless did mobilise Blue Labour's<sup>3</sup> anti-EU sentiment over the key issues of freedom of movement and job competition, a discourse that was also vocally shored up by the Europhobic tabloid press (Zappettini 2021a).

The (inter)national dimension of Brexit became thus an ideological crux upon which Corbyn's "visions of the state, and specifically the nation-state [was] predicated on a turn away from left traditions of transnational solidarity" (Bolton and Pitts 2018, 23) to a stance on Europe at the intersection of anti-austerity populism and nationalism. For example, while the 2017 manifesto contained overt reference to Labour internationalist roots, it also stated the party's commitment to end free movement and that "a Labour government will put the national interest first". Similarly, while the 2019 manifesto discussed 'a new internationalism' it was almost exclusively focused on domestic policy issues and did not mention Brexit or the EU (Shaw 2021). As Brexit became an increasingly relevant issue for public opinion through the three elections held between 2016 and 2019, Labour's strategic ambivalence did not pay off as it alienated both liberal Remainers and traditional Labour 'red wall' strongholds (Menon and Wager 2019). The latter switched to Conservatives promising to 'get Brexit done' causing Labour's vote share fell to the lowest since 1935 and thus effectively paving the way for the implementation of hard Brexit.

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3. BL is a Labour pressure group formed in 2010 that advocates a radical socialist agenda informed by socially and culturally conservative values <https://www.bluelabour.org/about-us>

### 3. Methodological approach and toolbox

A corpus of 199 articles (177,727 words) covering the longest timeframe available (27/3/17 to 19/1/21) was compiled by scraping data from the Labourlist website under the Brexit section (<https://labourlist.org/category/brexit/>); see Appendix 1 for details. News and videos were excluded to retain opinion pieces labelled as ‘comments’. LabourList is a platform for news and debates about the Labour Party which defines itself as “supportive of the Labour Party, but independent of it” with pieces submitted by contributors who “come from across the labour movement and range from MPs and peers to grassroots activists” (<https://labourlist.org/about/>). Although articles are clearly subject to editorial filtering they are meant to represent as wide a range of views as possible and thus to provide an interesting window into a site of intra-party discursive production and negotiation. While most texts are original opinion pieces, some were also published in other outlets. Moreover, a number of texts listed under the comments section were in fact transcripts of Corbyn’s official speeches. In this case, as they were presented as authored by the leader, these texts were retained for analytical consistency although they are treated at analytical level as a somewhat different genre following different rhetorical conventions. The reconstruction of how the term Brexit was debated in the texts followed an analytical orientation informed by political and linguistic theory. This approach initially took into account Freedén’s (2003) view that different political concepts are conferred specific meanings as they are discursively assembled according to an ‘ideological morphology’. According to Freedén, this is reflected in discursive productions that involve “legitimizing one meaning of each concept and delegitimizing the others” (Freedén 2003, 53) so to de-contest or close their semantics. The analysis operationalised these concepts at a linguistic level through interrelated lexical-semantic and argumentative-pragmatic analysis (Krzyżanowski 2010; Zappettini 2019c). The former focused on mapping out the *semantic topicalization* (van Dijk 1995) of the term Brexit in the corpus. This was done by identifying prominent keywords and their propositional concatenation via frequency, keyness, and collocation queries run with Sketchengine (see Appendix 2). An initial count of the most frequent lexical items in the corpus was carried out. Grammatical items such as *the, of, in* were excluded to retain nouns and adjectives. This count was then adjusted by keyness, that is any higher frequency than expected in the corpus benchmarked against a standard English corpus (Web 2020, ententen20, as provided by Sketchengine).<sup>4</sup> For

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4. I am grateful to Malgorzata Fabiszak for pointing out that “[i]n sketchengine, keyness is calculated with a statistic measure proposed by Kilgariff (2009) called “simple maths” while collo-

each item thus filtered, the most frequent collocates were then identified, that is those words which most frequently occurred immediately to the left or right of key terms (excluding grammatical items). This search was done via the Concordance function (lemma) in Sketchengine. In some cases, key items such as *election(s)* could function either as a noun – and be qualified by *general, European, etc.* – or be qualifiers on their own when collocated before *result, defeat, campaign, etc.* For each pair of qualifier/noun collocates the most frequent verbs were also identified. That helped mapping the key semantic orientation of minimum syntactic units constituted by: pair of collocates=subject + verb (S+V) or subject + verb+ object=pair of collocates (S+V+O). For example, the syntactic reconstruction of key term *election(s)* resulted in the identification of S+V+O syntactic units such as ‘the election result in our heartlands delivered a clear message’ and ‘next election will empower Labour to negotiate a better deal’. In turn, these units were ascribed to distinct semantic fields (*people/democracy* and *negotiation* respectively). Attention was also paid to how concepts were defined by their semantic relationships with related sister-concepts and counter-concepts (Bennett 2019b). Further analytical reconstruction was carried out at the argumentative-pragmatic level. In this case the analysis was concerned with identifying the mobilization of different semantic fields for/against specific courses of action and the most frequent de/legitimising propositions related to Brexit. For this purpose, propositions were interpreted in context identifying: a) any evaluative language (Martin and White 2005) about events or actors (e.g. ‘a Trump-style Brexit would be catastrophic’) and b) any normative/deliberative oriented arguments (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012) aimed at justifying or preventing any action as the right (moral/rational) thing to do. A summary of this systematic analysis is presented in Table 1 with key discursive orientations (see below); semantic (sub)field mobilized; key de/legitimation arguments; and typical linguistic realisations.

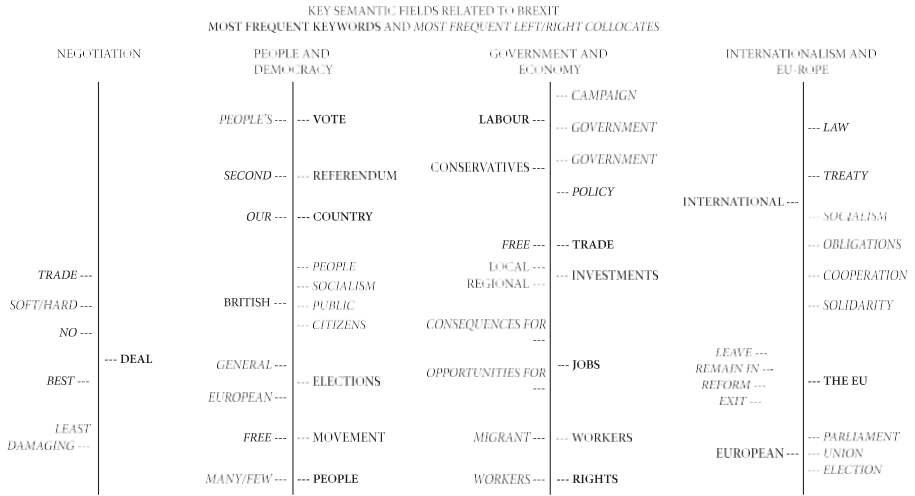
#### 4. Analysis and discussion

Results of the lexical-semantic analysis are summarised in Figure 1. The figure shows the key semantic topics associated with Brexit in the dataset and, for each field, keywords, prevalent collocates, and clusters. Table 1 summarises the findings of the pragmatic discursive analysis which identified the key de/legitimisation binaries discussed in the corpus and their relation to key semantic fields and discursive orientations. Findings are discussed next in three distinct sections

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cations are calculated with logDice score, which has an advantage over other measures in that it disregards corpus size and can therefore be used for comparing corpora of various sizes.”

that reflect macro patterns of de/legitimation identified by the analysis, namely *strategic*, *ideological* and *ambivalent de/legitimation*. Rather than treating this taxonomy as water-tight the analysis has suggested that different discursive orientations existed at the same time within a number of texts. Strategic de/legitimation describes a deliberate discursive orientation aimed at persuading the audience that the moves proposed are consistent with the organisation's goals or mission and beneficial to members. Following this logic, Labour's strategic de/legitimation (as discussed in Section 4.1) appeared primarily driven by emphasizing how the party's actions were different from their political opponents and was articulated along *prognostic* and *diagnostic* discursive dimensions. Ideological de/legitimation (discussed in Section 4.2) unpacks the systems of belief into which de/legitimation of Brexit and the EU grounded itself (even when Brexit was discussed from a strategic perspective). The analysis has suggested that de/legitimation of Brexit related to distinct visions of EU-incompatible social democracy in Britain and EU-compatible international socialism respectively. Ambivalent de/legitimation (outlined in 4.3) describes a discursive orientation that rather than articulating de/legitimation around antithetical binaries, it simultaneously (de)constructs the valence of seemingly opposed concepts (e.g. Brexit is neither bad nor good; Labour stands for local and international values). This discursive orientation, which mainly emerged from texts attributed to Corbyn, was characterised by a propositional content aimed at a careful balance between polarised view of Brexit and the EU.



**Figure 1.** A chart of key semantic fields, keywords and collocates associated with Brexit in the dataset



**Table 1.** Key discursive orientations, semantic (sub)fields mobilised, de/legitimising binaries discussed in the corpus and their relation to key arguments and typical linguistic realisations

		<u>Key binaries</u>			
Discursive orientation	Semantic field>subfield mobilised	Legitimised	Delegitimised	Key arguments supporting de/legitimation	Typical linguistic realisations
	STRATEGIC	NEGOTIATION>DEAL DEMOCRACY > ELECTIONS ECONOMY>JOBS	Labour's deal  Brexit as part of Labour's policies/ manifesto	Tories' deal  Brexit as part of Conservatives' policies/ manifesto	<i>Diagnostic/ Prognostic de/legitimation</i>  Labour will manage better than the Government any consequences/ opportunities brought about by Brexit
	DEMOCRACY > REFERENDUM DEMOCRACY>PEOPLE	Reversing Brexit	Referendum result	<i>Retrospective de/legitimation</i>  Lies were told in the campaign  Brexit is a Tory/ billionaire con	Temporal representations (past/now) Stop Brexit  Spatial representations (local/region/country)  Putting it back to the people



**Table 1.** (continued)

		Key binaries			
Discursive orientation	Semantic field>subfield mobilised	Legitimised	Delegitimised	Key arguments supporting de/legitimation	Typical linguistic realisations
	STRATEGIC/IDE		Second referendum (People's vote)	Government's Brexit deal No deal Corbyn's approach	<i>Retrospective de/legitimation de/legitimation through proxy</i>
<b>PEOPLE&gt;COUNTRY PEOPLE&gt; NORTH/SOUTH SOCIALISM&gt;(IN)EQUALITY</b>		<b>'Blue Labour' interests</b>	<b>'Metropolitan elite' interests</b>	<b>Sharing of resources is unbalanced</b>  <b>Labour is too distant from working people</b>  <i>de/legitimation through proxy</i>  <i>relegitimation of 'core' Labour</i>	<b>Heartlands</b> <b>Many vs few</b>
<b>SOCIALISM (IN BRITAIN) DEMOCRACY&gt;INEQUALITIES</b>		Socialist change	Neoliberal system  Status quo	(Hard) Brexit will be instrumental in changing the UK towards a more just society	Heartland voters  Working class  Many vs few
IDEOLOGICAL		Lexit/Hard Brexit	Neoliberalism Tories' Brexit  Closest relationship/affiliation with EU  Custom Union  Normative convergence	Lexit cannot happen while the UK is closely tied to the EU  Brexit will dismantle Fortress Europe	British socialism

Table 1. (continued)

		Key binaries			
Discursive orientation	Semantic field>subfield mobilised	Legitimised	Delegitimised	Key arguments supporting de/legitimation	Typical linguistic realisations
	AMBIVALENT	SOCIALISM (IN THE EU) INTERNATIONALISM	International socialism Membership benefits Workers' rights	No deal Hard Brexit Neoliberalism Tories' Brexit	Brexit will diminish Labour's clout/leadership in EU Brexit rejects socialist principles of international solidarity
MOST FIELDS		Europhile/Euro sceptic views Consequences/opportunities of Brexit Local Britain/Global Britain		Showing neutrality on EU/Brexit Both/Neither good and/or bad evaluation Emphasizing Labour's domestic policies	Empowering local people Creating local/regional opportunities Social justice Stop tax dodgers International obligations/cooperation

#### 4.1 Strategic de/legitimation

A large proportion of discursive instances of de/legitimation in the corpus revolved around the topic of *negotiation* and discussed Brexit in terms of the political *strategy* both Labour and the Government should adopt in pursuing a specific arrangement on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. In this respect, the EU was generally represented as a transactional partner with whom the UK should agree the 'best' *deal*. The prevalence of this semantic topicalization conceivably reflects the predominant public discourses and the political agenda set by the Conservatives that Labour was dialogically engaging with and responding to. Stances adopted by authors of the texts analysed therefore appeared to

primarily serve one of the key meta-functions of political discourse – that is to legitimise speaker’s views and delegitimise their opponent’s (van Dijk 1995). In this sense strategic de/legitimation was fundamentally driven by projecting *difference*, that is emphasizing Labour’s negotiation vision/policies vis-à-vis those discussed by the Conservatives.

Distinct discursive patterns of strategic de/legitimation emerged along temporal and spatial dimensions and around the keywords *economy/jobs* and *democracy/people*. The temporal dimension reflected in distinct forms of *prognostic*, *diagnostic* and *retrospective* de/legitimation. *Prognostic de/legitimation* was predicated upon evaluating future scenarios and often premised on a *diagnostic (pre) de/legitimation* – that is an assessment of the Brexit process status quo. *Retrospective de/legitimation* was predicated upon a retrospective reading of events and realities. This section offers examples of prognostic de/legitimation in relation to *economy/jobs* and of retrospective de/legitimation in relation to *democracy* and *the people* as they emerged as the most frequent linguistic realisations, respectively.

*Prognostic de/legitimation* placed particular emphasis on the *best/least damaging deal* the UK should strike with the EU (if any) and made explicit evaluations of *soft/hard/no deal* options *in opposition* to equivalent Conservative Party policies. Emphasis on strategic choices that would differentiate ‘Labour Brexit’ from ‘Conservative Brexit’ was particularly evident in texts discussing the 2017 and 2019 electoral campaign strategies. For example, a piece authored by director of Campaign Central and Labour for a European Future Mike Buckley represents Labour’s deal as ‘less damaging’ than the Conservatives’. Such discursive strategy allows him to position Labour’s socialistic electoral manifesto between Conservative ideology and an explicit support for Remain:

- (1) Under their [Tories] deal, there will be less money for public services and the NHS, as well as hundreds of thousands of job losses [...] In contrast, Labour’s Brexit policy puts protecting jobs, wages and public services front and centre. Our new deal, which will go up against Remain in a referendum, will be a ‘least worst’ Brexit (text 13 in Appendix)

In the above extract the positive evaluation of keywords associated with Labour’s ideology (protecting *jobs, wages and public services*) is discussed along temporal and spatial axes. The spatial axis positively represents these values as being at the *front* and the *centre* of Labour’s policy. The temporal axis highlights the future status of such keywords by juxtaposing the potential consequences of Labour’s Brexit deal vis-à-vis the Conservative Brexit deal. Legitimation is thus achieved through *differentiation*, with such difference being expressed via a ‘positive’ negative (‘least worst’).

Texts strategically de/legitimising Brexit around the keywords *jobs* and the *economy* also frequently referred to a spatial dimension of the Brexit deal albeit in a more geographical than metaphorical sense. In some cases, de/legitimation appealed to national differentiation, as exemplified by the following extract in which a ‘no deal’ is delegitimised by portraying the UK’s uniqueness vis-à-vis other EU partners:

- (2) I want better for our region and our country. ....[Nigel Farage] said [a deal] would be easy to do. We could be like Norway or Switzerland, he told us. Well, I don’t want to be like Norway or Switzerland. I want to be like the UK, and the UK doesn’t accept second best or withdraw from the rest of the world – and that’s what a no deal Brexit means (text 168 in Appendix)

It was however through representations of local/regional/national consequences and opportunities deriving from the deal – and typically voiced in the name of represented constituency’s interests – that Brexit was often de/legitimised in spatial terms as exemplified by the following extract:

- (3) Brexit is a national issue, but as with everything national, it will be at a local level that its worst effects are felt. And in boroughs like Wandsworth, home to 26,000 EU27 citizens, where around 25% of the workforce comes from EU27 countries (30% in the hospitality sector), residents tell me that they fear that impact will be shattering. As Labour councillors, we should be standing with them to oppose [Brexit] (text 24 in Appendix)

De/legitimation of Brexit occurred along temporal and spatial dimensions also through the mobilisation of keywords semantically related to *democracy* and *people*. In this context *retrospective de/legitimation* was conspicuously used by commentators to de/legitimise choices over the second referendum or the best Brexit deal and were backed up by reference to ‘what people (had) voted for’. This trope was for example invoked by local party campaign organiser Eden Bailey to legitimize a confirmatory referendum and to delegitimise Conservatives’ ‘no deal’:

- (4) as the real prospect of a ‘no deal’ exit edges closer, it is becoming clearer that the Brexit the Conservatives will give us looks nothing like the various visions of Brexit people voted for. That is why it is time for Jeremy Corbyn to back another vote (text 147 in Appendix)

By contrast, MP for Bassetlaw John Mann voiced the concerns of Blue Labour over the dominance of ‘metropolitan elite’ by opposing a second referendum since, in his view, this would tantamount to reversing a pledge made by the party to the British people in its manifesto. By appealing to both key concepts of *people* and *democracy* and along a spatial dimension that represents a North/South split of interests and cultures, through a retrospective interpretation of their motives at

the time of the referendum the speaker legitimises Brexit as meaning the specific choice of traditional Labour voters while, at the same time, he delegitimises the ‘detached’, London-based party’s elite:

- (5) When will there be serious engagement with people living in the North and in the Midlands who vote Labour but also voted for Brexit? For far too long, traditional Labour voters have been ignored by the party. My voters are fed up with being patronised by a London-dominated, metropolitan elite within the Labour Party who seem to think they know best for what they want and why they voted to leave the EU (text 122 in Appendix)

While the above extract shows the mobilisation of the keyword *people* in populist terms (see also Zappettini 2021a for Mann’s similar populist realisations as amplified by the tabloid press) it represents an instance of *de/legitimation through proxy* in that the speaker enacts the MP role of spokesperson for the citizens he represents as it is conventional in democratic systems. However, in several cases, *de/legitimation through proxy* was constructed around the MP’s moral struggle between following through the referendum outcome as a blank mandate versus his/her own personal beliefs on what would be best for their constituencies. As discussed in Section 2, this was a particularly sensitive topic for Labour as the party had a higher number of ‘mismatched’ constituencies (that is, where local MP’s and voters’s stances on Brexit diverged) than Conservatives’ and ‘putting it back to the people’ was adopted as the party’s official policy. For example, MP for Sedgefield Phil Wilson – who personally supported Remain but whose constituency backed Leave – wrote:

- (6) I accept the country voted narrowly to leave the EU, but they didn’t vote on how to leave [...] People have the right to compare the Brexit facts with the promises made during the referendum three years ago and confirm whether they still want to go ahead with Brexit when faced with its reality. This is not to appease people – it is showing them respect, and that’s what I call democracy (text 168 in Appendix)

While the speaker here legitimises Brexit as ‘leaving the EU’, he mitigates that choice with the contrastive predicate ‘they didn’t vote on how to leave’ which, as in previous extracts, speculates retrospectively on voter’s intentions. The speaker thus delegitimises ‘hard’ Brexit and legitimises a second referendum along a temporal dimension (*three years ago/go ahead*) and through the representation of people’s interests.

## 4.2 Ideological de/legitimation

Most comments in the dataset analysed represented Brexit as a major social and economic change affecting the (British) *people*, the latter differently characterised as the *nation/country* or *ordinary workers*. While de/legitimation of Brexit policies—predicated on different *consequences and opportunities* envisaged for different deal scenarios – was primarily related to topics of economic policy (as discussed above), Brexit was also de/legitimised in relation to *distinct meanings of socialism*. While in all comments the ideological orientation of evaluating risks and opportunities of the Brexit deal was typically anchored in a socialist view advocating the protection of worker’s rights (e.g. avoiding the ‘race to the bottom’), divergent conceptualizations of the EU emerged too, especially on the salience of *international socialism* versus *socialism in Britain* in relation to Brexit. For example, from a Lexit ideological position, Brexit was seen as an opportunity for establishing a socialist government in Britain, a vision that was represented as mutually incompatible with any continuous or future affiliation with the EU ‘capitalist club’. This argument is clearly laid out in the following passage:

- (7) The capitalist world order is in crisis [...] The European Union is fundamentally an organ of this world order [...] Here in the UK, successive neoliberal governments have pursued this economic war on the working class in tandem with the EU [...] the working class has demonstrated a desire for change, which is reflected both by the Corbyn movement and the vote to leave the EU in 2016. As socialists, it is our job to lead the way for a truly transformative programme, overcoming neoliberalism and working towards a radical, democratic, environmentalist and socialist agenda [...] In the pursuit of these aims, we must refuse to align ourselves with a so-called “progressive alliance” [...]. Instead, we must unshakeably lead on leaving the EU and building a mass movement for a radical alternative. The success of our programme [...] requires a break from the economic and constitutional infrastructure of the EU – a break from the ‘four freedoms’, a break from the preservation of economic competition over economic justice, and a break from the undemocratic authorities that impose these restrictions on member states

(text 107 in Appendix)

The argument, which builds on explicit premises depicting the global capitalist system crisis, overall delegitimises the EU as a key actor sustaining the neoliberal system and legitimises Brexit as the people’s demand to change the status quo. The enactment of the speaker’s ideological stance is signalled by the qualifier ‘as socialist’ and realised via the metaphorical scenario of dominance, captivity and enchainment (see Zappettini 2021b for similar realisations). As well as recontextualising the Marxist view of socialism as ‘nothing to lose but one’s chains’,



‘breaking free’ from the economic and legal ‘chains’ of the EU reiterates the main Leave argument that views the EU set up as a constraint to Britain’s ambitions (Zappettini 2019a). However, here such obstacle is seen from a Lexit perspective, thus referring to the viability of socialism in Britain rather than the mercantile/neoliberal project of ‘global Britain’ as the instrumental aim of Brexit (Zappettini 2019b). In this respect the EU’s ‘chains’ referred to by the authors here are those that would, rather paradoxically, keep Britain tied to freedom. In contrast to the above extract, a large proportion of texts referring to internationalism recognised the EU as a compatible (or indeed desirable or necessary) component of British socialism. This ideological orientation was for example found in MEP Wajid Khan’s argument that delegitimised Brexit as a loss of clout for the Labour Party on the international stage:

- (8) If we stay in the EU, the Labour Party would be the leader of European socialism [...] We would be able to set the tone. We could make our European group more progressive. We could lead the fight against neoliberalism at home and abroad (text 151 in Appendix)

The proposition in (8) which legitimises ‘stopping’ or reversing Brexit relies on a topicalization of the debate around political (and economic) spheres of influence that the party would be able to exercise inside rather than outside the EU. It recontextualises similar arguments put forward by the official Remain campaign (Zappettini 2019a) and it is prognostically articulated via the conditional ‘if/then’. Marked differences are noticeable in the conceptualisation of socialism in Extracts (7) and (8). While both extracts evaluate neoliberalism negatively and socialism as a movement capable of counteracting it, the two diverge in whether this could happen and would be more effective while the UK is a EU member. A similar ideological divergence is conspicuous in the use of the keyword ‘progressive’. While both extracts connote support for the EU as progressive, (7) delegitimises it by signalling distance from the term (via critical quotes and the qualifier ‘so called’) whereas (8) makes a positive evaluation of it.

In a few number of texts, positive ideological references to international socialism were also made from non-British-centric stances, as exemplified by the comment of Labour MP Seb Dance who adopts the metaphor THE EU IS A JIGSAW (BIGGER THAN ITS PARTS) to represent meanings associated with the EU membership and the UK relationship with the Union. His evaluative stance of Brexit is markedly negative (‘tragedy’) and he vividly personifies ideological defeat (‘body blow’) to delegitimise Brexit as antithetic to international socialism:

- (9) Brexit is a tragedy for the UK. It removes us from a key western alliance and the world’s largest trading bloc. It restricts the rights and life chances of millions of British citizens. It makes our country poorer. It massively increases the

chances of a break-up of the UK. And it is a powerful rejection of solidarity, peace and internationalism. These are all major tenets of our party and movement. [...] we must remake the case for internationalism, a bedrock of the labour movement. EU membership is just one part of a much bigger jigsaw. We have lost an important piece of that puzzle, but by building the rest of the picture it will make the missing piece far more obvious. I joined the Labour Party for many reasons, but high among them was its commitment to internationalism. Losing the EU referendum in 2016 was a body blow to the ideas I hold dear

(text 187 in Appendix)

Despite a few transnational or even cosmopolitan views of socialism, most comments de/legitimised Brexit from local/national perspectives with socialism historically and geographically reclaimed as 'British'. In these instances, the case for British socialism tended to leverage more on a *re-legitimation* of the British 'neglected mass' than an overt delegitimation of the EU, although to different degrees Brexit was interpreted retrospectively as a 'protest vote' and the EU seen as responsible (or complicit with the government) for the underlying reasons of Leave voters. For example, an article authored by trade union liaison officer Theo Freedman makes the case for a socialist Britain under Corbyn and achieved through Brexit by delegitimising a confirmatory referendum as an obstacle to this aim. Such argument is founded on the representation of Labour 'heartland' constituencies (where the majority voted Leave) as the historical roots of British Labour and now perceived as 'betrayed' by metropolitan, 'deterritorialised' Labour (see Extract (5) for a similar representation).

- (10) the three years since the 2016 referendum have exemplified the same sense of abandonment of working-class communities up and down the land that was catalysed and reinforced by successive Tory and New Labour governments since 1979. A broad historical comprehension of British neoliberalism and its disastrous effects on Northern economies is important groundwork in explaining today's working-class disdain for Labour. [...] The Labour Party's *raison d'être* is the parliamentary wing of the organised labour movement, and beyond that, to directly take on the ruling class and fight for a fair share of the wealth that we create. In the largest expression of democratic participation in a generation, some of the leading figures in the party are attempting to undo an entire historical tradition whilst subverting democracy and siding with the interests of the 1%. It is grimly predictable that workers in their swathes are being turned off by our message. We have only just restored the party with a leader deeply wedded to trade unionism, social justice and equality, yet we risk throwing away the possibility of a socialist government every time an MP, MEP candidate or high-profile activist calls for a second referendum

(text 174 in Appendix)

The argument here is aimed at delegitimising a second referendum on the basis that it would prevent socialism in Britain via the implicature that Brexit (thus legitimised as the largest expression of democracy and any attempt to stop it delegitimised as ‘sabotage’) will be instrumental in achieving such goal. In addition to democracy and economy related keywords the argument mobilises the ‘many vs few’ representation (in the specific instantiation of ‘wealth creators’ against the ‘wealth extractors’) as well as representations of an intra-party cleavage between the leadership and those against it. Although the EU is not explicitly invoked as for example in (7), the article makes the case for Corbyn’s socialist vision capable of dismantling ‘establishment politics’. As discussed further in the article, part of the pro-European Labour establishment is criticised for no longer protecting its heartland working-class voters (the ‘wealth creators’) against the ‘wealth extractors’ to which the EU is implicitly associated.

### 4.3 Ambivalent de/legitimation

Another set of discursive patterns found in the data was Corbyn’s *ambivalent de/legitimation* of Brexit and the EU. This was particularly conspicuous in texts which effectively are transcripts of official speeches given by the party leader. It could be argued that in many respects these constitute a form of *strategic de/legitimation* as the rhetoric of these texts is conceivably driven by the multiple Labour audiences (Lexit and Remain supporters alike) Corbyn was simultaneously addressing and the Government’s watchdog role he was performing. However, what characterises these texts is the fact that while in them Brexit is given discursive front stage to differentiate Labour’s Brexit plan vis-à-vis the Conservative party (see extracts above) and the EU is mainly portrayed as the UK’s negotiating counterpart, any ideological evaluation of Brexit and the EU is typically backgrounded, downplayed and ambiguously ‘hedged’. For example, in the following excerpt, Corbyn avoids making a specific one-sided evaluation of the EU as he delegitimises both Europositive and Euronegative views via the light metaphor (‘enlightenment’ and ‘gloom’, the latter suggested by its conventional association with ‘doom’). Similarly, by hyperbolizing the two sides of the Brexit scenarios (disaster vs. land of milk and honey) he takes an in-between stance which is consistent with the official ‘neutral’ line he adopted after the party committed to hold a second referendum on the deal it would have negotiated:

- (11) The European Union is not the root of all our problems and leaving it will not solve all our problems. Likewise, the EU is not the source of all enlightenment and leaving it does not inevitably spell doom for our country. There will be some who will tell you that Brexit is a disaster for this country and some who

will tell you that Brexit will create a land of milk and honey. The truth is more down to earth and it's in our hands (text 2 in Appendix)

While this extract shows Corbyn's neutral evaluation of the EU as neither the cause nor the solution of the Brexit crisis, the discursive focus of his speech is in fact on the lengthy premises that enable him to formulate such final statement (and which is not possible to reproduce in the space of this article). Throughout the speech Corbyn engages in a strategic delegitimation of Conservatives' handling of the negotiation and a strategic legitimization of Labour's alternative Brexit deal. He also delegitimises the Conservative Government on ideological grounds as the main political actor effectively responsible for Britain's problems (identified as austerity cuts, tax inequalities, bad management of the economy) which are then referred to in Extract (11). In this sense, not only is Corbyn's ambivalent position inferable from him invoking and taking equal stances on both sides of the European argument, but it also derives from underspecifying the exact nature of the relationship between the EU and Britain's problems (if any). Arguably, avoiding the 'complicity in the world order' argument (see Extract (7)) and emphasizing the national rather than international dimension of Brexit (via the possessive 'our' problems and 'our' country) were aimed at aligning Labour's official stance with as wide an audience as possible. The same speech offers further examples of how Corbyn represented the local/international nexus of Brexit through similar rhetorical and ambivalent formulations:

- (12) Labour believes that powers over devolved policy areas currently exercised by the EU should go directly to the relevant devolved body after Brexit, so that power is closer to the people [...] our priorities for Brexit negotiations are [...] to create a country that works for the many not the few. We respect the result of the referendum. [...] Labour will give the NHS the resources it needs, because we will raise tax on the top 5% and big business, those with the broadest shoulders to pay. [...] And we will use funds returned from Brussels after Brexit to invest in our public services and the jobs of the future, not tax cuts for the richest. [...] We are leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe [...] We are internationalists. (text 2 in Appendix)

While Corbyn overall legitimises the referendum outcome, he depicts ambivalent local and international scenarios associated with Brexit. On the one hand he highlights the local benefits of Brexit through the spatial representation of 'power closer to the people' while on the other hand he claims internationalist credentials for the party along the 'global Britain' narrative (albeit from a socialist rather than neoliberal ideological perspective that would limit rather than empower 'big business'). Intertextual references are thus frequent not only to Labour's slogans (such as 'many vs few', 'cutting down on tax loopholes', 'save the NHS') but

notably also to key 'Leavers' ('spending money on our priorities') and Conservatives' soundbites such as 'leaving the EU but not Europe' (see Zappettini 2019b for a discussion of similar discursive realisations by Theresa May). Like his political opponents Corbyn's legitimisation of Brexit plans as a win-win situation thus relies on the ambivalent representation of Britain 'remaining' in Europe while 'leaving' the EU. Of course, the power of such ambivalence depends on the degree to which one interprets 'Europe' and the EU as overlapping concepts. While it is logical that Britain will not physically separate from the continental landmass following Brexit, and arguably that any historical memory of cultural ties between the UK and the 'continent' (including the background of international socialism) will hardly vanish, any future 'European' activity carried out by the UK will likely be affected by the political and economic relationship agreed with the EU institutions.

## 5. Conclusions

Through a corpus of texts on Labourlist, this article has analysed the debate over Brexit and its implementation that took place inside the Labour Party following the 2016 referendum outcome. The analysis has shown that *Labour's de/legitimation of Brexit occurred through distinct strategic, ideological and ambivalent lines of discourse*. Significant tensions and rifts inside the party were reflected by both *strategic* and *ideological* orientations which the leadership attempted to reconcile through an *ambivalent* de/legitimising stance. Strategic and ambivalent de/legitimation point to the Brexit debate being mainly driven by political communication logics such as projecting difference between Labour's negotiation strategy and the Government's and a generic rhetorical appeal to intended audiences. In this respect, the EU was generally represented as a transactional partner with whom the UK should agree the 'best' *deal*. These discourses were characterized by *diagnostic/prognostic forms of de/legitimation* and primarily focused on highlighting negative consequences/opportunities of Brexit for the country. The keywords 'economy'/'jobs' and 'democracy'/'people' were thus mobilised to de/legitimise the 2016 Brexit referendum and any subsequent forms of confirmatory referendum. Such discursive instances were characterized by *retrospective forms of de/legitimation* (e.g. 'what people voted for') and representations of geographical or cultural cleavages (e.g. North/South, rural/metropolitan Britain). By contrast, ideological de/legitimation has highlighted a deeper struggle inside Labour over EU-rope, especially in relation to inter/national conceptualisations of socialism and its (in)compatibility with the European project. The analysis has shown how the debate over Brexit and its implementation inside Labour was in fact hark-

ing back to the struggle over the long debated ‘European question’ and to historical Eurosceptic/Europositive intra-party cleavages. It was in particular around *distinct meanings of socialism* that the discursive nexus of Brexit and its implementation was mostly ideologically divergent indexing opposing stances of *international socialism* versus *socialism in Britain*. While the former camp claimed or implied that socialism is compatible (and indeed better) with(in) the EU, the latter rejected the European project as detrimental to any socialist progress. Supporters of socialism in Britain also tended to re-legitimise heartland voters as closer to traditional Labour values than urban/liberal supporters. While the ‘European question’ had been revived by Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership on the back of a major party realignment with the radical left ideology, Corbyn’s stance on Brexit and the EU was ironically one of ambiguity. The analysis has shown how, unlike most other commentators who passionately de/legitimised Brexit and the EU on specific ideological/pragmatic grounds, most texts featured Corbyn’s *ambivalent de/legitimation* of Brexit and the EU performed through ‘constructively ambiguous’ language (‘neither bad nor good’) and rhetorical soundbites. Corbyn’s stance conceivably reflects his very hard political task of trying to reconcile Remain-supporting voters with ‘redwall’ working class constituencies that no longer felt represented by the party. Brexit has thus brought to the fore the struggle of the British left not only to reconcile a divided membership but also to address what Marquand (1991) called a progressive dilemma, i.e. whether change should be promoted through reforms or by more revolutionary means. Labour’s predicament is, in many respects, also representative of a general European impasse faced by many left-wing parties which have had to manage a traditional working-class base increasingly drifting away from them towards right wing and populist alternatives although the cases of Denmark and Portugal also suggest that political compromise is indeed possible between support for European solidarity and rejection of neoliberalism and nationalism. However, the Brexit case tells us that inside the left the re- imagination of Europe has been just as contested and that its de/legitimation has relied on specific historical conditions and the political mobilization of gains and identities as in any other camp.

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