Kostas Maronitis (Leeds Trinity University)
K.Maronitis@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Denny Pencheva (Bristol University)
denny.pencheva@bristol.ac.uk

Fetishising Sovereignty in the Remain and Leave Campaigns

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Introduction

The UK voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48%. Whilst the true scope and significance of this decision is to be seen in the decades to come, the referendum and the political campaigns leading to it, are important for the following reasonsFirstly, the general lack of European identity in Britain. The British involvement in European politics has been marked by Euroscepticism, exceptionalism and, often, glorified isolationism (Geddes 2005, Cini and Solorzano-Borragan 2016).Secondly, being an 'awkward partner' (George 1998), unwilling to be a team player. Britain has advocated for wider, rather than deeper Europe, although it appears that the strategic widening had come at the cost of (some) deepening, which is often presented in public discourse as an existential threat, i.e. perceived loss of state sovereignty to Brussels. One of the key areas where sovereignty has been consistently narrated in political and public discourses as inherently fragile, is migration. Here the impact of media discourses has been substantial in merging the concept of Europe with the notion of uncontrollable immigration (Pencheva 2016).Thirdly, the political background of the referendum. In principle, referenda differ in nature from general elections in the sense that they are not 'competitions amongst political parties to come into power but essentially consultations of the electorate on a divisive issue that goes beyond the lifespan of individual governments (Dekavalla 2016: 793).Lastly, the key challenge for Remain and Leave was to produce a coherent and relatable message. This has been challenging because of traditional British Euroscepticism, but also because of its impact on voting.

Whilst there is growing body of research which convincingly argues that intra-EU migration was the key factor behind the political decision to call a referendum and a main driving force for the Leave campaign, there is very little on why and how it links to sovereignty. After all, the Remain campaign was carefully avoiding the question of

immigration throughout the campaign. We argue that the conceptual framing of sovereignty trumps the existing argument that the EU is traditionally blamed for domestic political failures (Cini and Solorzano-Borragan 2016). This is not to suggest this argument is wrong, but rather that it is too state-actor centric and neglects the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. Thus, we seek to argue that the specific framing of state sovereignty in the Remain and Leave campaigns redefines its subject, homo oeconomicus, by evoking its precarious existence and seeking political legitimacy on this basis. By fetishisation of sovereignty we refer to the process in which both Leave and Remain campaigns expressed a commitment and an unwarranted respect to sovereignty. The way we understand this process does not necessarily correspond to psychoanalytical or even religious understandings of the fetish as a substitute for anxieties and unattainable desires. Here, in a descriptive sense, the fetish designates sovereignty as a property that embodies a wide range of ideas and social relations between the sovereign subject and its Other and at the same time has the capacity to mediate these ideas and values through rhetoric and political communication.

Empirical Material and Methodology

The empirical material of the article derives from the political communicative practices of the Remain and Leave campaigns including material from the affiliated yet unofficial campaign Leave.EU. The article will deploy framing as a method to analyse the empirical material.

We understand framing as a strategic practice of communicating pertinent issues, which determines causes, morally evaluates, and offers remedies to perceived problems (Entman 1993). The fetishisation of sovereignty could thus be seen as a fluid type of frame (Ragin 1994) insofar as it means to capture an intersection between theoretical concepts and empirical data, allowing for a level of abstraction in the analysis.

Neoliberalism and Homoeoconomicus

Any discussion about neoliberalism as a system of political and economic organisation needs to consider the ambiguous position the state finds itself in. Despite its dominance as a political and economic order neoliberalism is hard to define.

However, there exist two permanent features in neoliberalism in all its manifestations. First, neoliberalism aspires to expand the mechanisms of competitive markets to all aspects of social and political life. Second, neoliberalism has a problematic and occasionally hostile relationship with the state. If the state prohibits the expansion of the market and by association individual freedom then its powers need to either minimized or adjusted to new economic and political realities.

However, the analysis of neoliberalism cannot and should not be limited to its destructive qualities regarding institutions, and ultimately the role of the state in

national and global economies. Neoliberalism produces new social relations and structures in which new subjectivities emerge. The ways these subjectivities conduct themselves in competitive environments and at the same time are evaluated by rules and standards of competition reveal the social character of neoliberalism.

Although neoliberalism is generally perceived as an economic system, Foucault (2008) perceives it as an all-encompassing political system. In particular, neoliberalism for Foucault (*ibid.*) is a political rationality that aspires to produce a permanent consensus amongst all those who operate within it such as industrialists, bankers, private and public sector employees, and law enforcement. This consensus requires and at the same time manifests itself with the existence of a collective subject capable of directing itself under changing political and economic conditions. This subject is predominantly defined by the dominance of the market and historically has been named *homo oeconomicus.* From Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, von Mises, to Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Freedman *homo oeconomicus* has been the defining subject of both liberalism and neoliberalism.

For Foucault (*ibid.*) there is a noticeable change in the understanding and actions of *homo oeconomicus*. In liberalism *homo oeconomicus* was understood as "the partner of exchange and the theory of utility based on a problematic of needs" (Foucault, 2008: 225). According to this conception, the market serves as a social space where participants offer what they have in exchange of what they need. In neoliberalism, the market as a place of exchange is transformed into a place of competition where the participants are not necessarily interested in exchange but instead in "investing" in themselves as both produces and consumers (Foucault, 2008: 226).

The struggle for self interest and against regulatory forces characterize the Foucauldian homo oeconomicus. However, homo oeconomicus needs to be considered across the multiple manifestations of neoliberalism and the relationship the latter establishes with other social and political spheres.

Neoliberalism demands from its participants to trade off their social and civil rights for access and participation in the market. In addition to the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism identified by Foucault (2008), Brown (2015) identifies a new transition in the history of neoliberal subjectivity. Homo Oeconomicus is transformed from a subject attached to power to a subject existing in precarity: job insecurity and labour flexibility; national and private debt; fiscal consolidation and austerity.

For Brown (ibid.) the contemporary homo oeconimicus does not perceive interest as its raison d'être but survival and sacrifice in a political and economic order, which disregards notions of well-being and of the collective good. Put differently, neoliberalism produces the subject it requires for the establishment of competitive markets by the same means of governing the same subject. As a result, the subject must accept full responsibility if it fails to compete successfully in the neoliberal order. However, such accounts seldom refer to race and ethnicity as vital components

for the constitution of an Other to neoliberalism. How could we understand homo oeconomicus through the prism of race and ethnicity?

the Leave campaign focused not only on the threat of asylum seekers and other groups of irregular non-European migrants, but also put strong emphasis on the assorted dangers posed by EU migrants. We therefore chose to ground our analysis by Sivanandan's (2001: 1) notion of xeno-racism. Its main premise that racism is 'conditioned by economic imperatives, but negotiated through cultural agency' with the key mediating role of various types of media, combined with the political economy of Homo oeconomicus (Foucault), provide a fruitful analytical framework

Remain or Leave? Communicating precarious subjectivities

The public vote for Brexit was not simply driven by sheer hostility towards immigration, but also sought to convene a general desire to regain control over a salient issue in British politics. Therefore, the overwhelming, politically unified logic is that the desire to regain control is a function of its perception as lost.

We argue that by the specific framing of the nexus between sovereignty and immigration, a complex relationship between self and other emerges. However, the other to the Homo Oeconomicus is not to be found outside the neoliberal paradigm, but rather within it. The self and other Homo Oeconomicus are split across ethnic lines and narrated as constantly competing with each other over scarce employment and welfare resources. By operationalising anxiety and textually recognising and validating the precarious status of the subject, the framing of both campaigns suggest that the British Homo Oeconomicus Self should be anxious about the non-British Homo Oeconomicus Other not because of the differences between them, but because of their sameness. For they both represent the anxious, individualist survival that stems from the broken relationship between the state and its people. They are both creators and creations of neo-liberalism.

The Leave and Remain campaigns brought to the foreground the issue of race and ethnicity as vital components for the understanding and subsequent establishment of a prosperous and cohesive society.

Leave

Political campaigns and their accompanying rhetoric constitute the political and communicative predecessor of Vote Leave's focus on immigration.

It is not racist to impose limits on immigration
In the UK illegally? GO HOME OR FACE ARREST.

Two key elements of the Leave campaign highlight its relationship with immigrants as constant figures of suspicion and with xenophobic rhetoric. First, the anti-immigration rhetoric was and still is focused on poor and volatile countries and second, the association of the religion of Islam with growing anti-refugee sentiments.

The slogan "take back control on immigration" was crucial for the public appeal of the Leave campaign. This involved the creation of a moral panic over the number of immigrants living in and coming to the UK.
Overall, the Leave campaign (Vote Leave; Leave.EU; Grassroots Out) has been dominated or even led by political figures who gained their political voice as soon as citizens from Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia joined the EU. Vote Leave perceived Britain's membership to the EU and the subsequent arrival of EU citizens as a bio-political threat.

On a different yet similar note, the alleged threat that immigration poses to security and public life was captured by one of Leave. EU's most controversial political posters during the course of the Brexit debate. The poster used a photograph of asylum seekers from the Middle East crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015. The slogan emblazoned with big red fonts across the poster reads: "Breaking Point" and with smaller white fonts "The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders".

Vote Leave NHS advertisement.

Remain

Contrasting this, Stronger In attempted to make a case about the economic benefits of the UK's access to the single market and the customs union as well of free mobility of labour, services and ideas. In order to counteract visions of an Imperial Britain freed from the ideological and bureaucratic constraints of the EU, propagated by the Leave campaign, Stronger In emphasised the risks of leaving.

In opposition to the Leave campaign, the leaflet stresses the UK's independence from the Treaty of Schengen and its ability to control national borders: "we control our borders which gives us the right to check everyone, including EU nationals, arriving from continental Europe". The issue of entitlement and access to welfare is also raised in the leaflet. Once more, the government indicates its political and administrative distance from EU policy by arguing that under new rules the UK will be a less attractive destination for EU citizens.

> "The Government has negotiated a deal that will make our benefits system less of a draw for EU citizens. In future, new EU migrants will not have full access to certain benefits until they have worked here for up to four years. The Government will have greater powers to take action where there is abuse of our immigration system" (HM Government, 2016).

Sovereignty and Precarity

The Brexit debate in conjunction with the immigration and financial crises in Europe have brought sovereignty to foreground of political and public discourses. In political communication and public discourse sovereignty can be an ungraspable concept. In the Brexit debate claims about sovereignty were frequent bur rarely accompanied with any substantial explanation regarding any actual legislative powers. Instead, the Leave campaign's statements "taking control" and "taking back control" constituted the main communicative framework for the articulation of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is usually understood as the authority of the state to govern its own designated and internationally recognised jurisdiction. Wallerstein (2004: 42) places sovereignty in "the modern world system" and subsequent claims to authority and control do not only exist within the state but also in relation to other states. First and foremost, sovereignty, Wallerstein (*ibid.*) points out, is an authoritative demand for fixed boundaries within which a given state is sovereign and no other state has the right either to challenge these boundaries or interfere in the interior of the sovereign state. The stronger the state the more efficient its bureaucratic structures are for imposing inclusion and exclusion criteria concerning the inflow of goods, services and people. Integrated financial systems, global institutions, uncontrolled migratory flows, and the EU as an aspiring intranational polity are at odds with the state's ability to define and govern its own territory. The emphasis on control, risk, danger and uncertainty and most importantly on the "breaking point" caused by the integrationist aspiration of the EU and its flawed immigration and refugee policies problematises the notions of control and sovereignty.

Giorgio Agamben's (1998) formulation of sovereignty entangled with the state of exception explicitly addresses this problematisation and at the same time points out the power of the sovereign subject. Agamben's (*ibid.*) theorisation consists of the paradoxical position of the sovereign inside and outside the juridical order. There lies a great significance for the understanding of sovereignty: the sovereign has the power to suspend the law because it exists outside the confines of the law. As a result, state sovereignty is defined by Agamben (1998; 2005) not as the monopoly to rule over an internationally recognised territory but as the monopoly to decide where and when to implement the law. Exception from the law is far more important than normal implementation of the law. The rule of contemporary liberal polities relies on a permanent state of emergency and subsequently a permanent state of exception. For Agamben (2005) the permanent state of exception perfectly illustrates the propagation of securitarian regimes as a standarised technique of government.

Yet, the Leave and Remain campaigns are unique in their attempt to accept the necessity of the state of exception and at the same time to present it as a popular demand. The Brexit debate adds another meaning to sovereignty by taking into account the precarious position of *homo oeconomicus*. For Lorey (2015) it is a great irony, albeit a painful one, that any idea of sovereignty implies a particular process where the state of precariousness has become an integral aspect of government.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to argue that national sovereignty had been fetishised in both Remain and Leave campaigns. What connects both campaigns is the central position of the figure of the immigrant as the ultimate other. The campaigns leading up to the referendum revived the importance of the questions of race in the socio-political rationality of neoliberalism.

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