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## Fetishizing Sovereignty in the Remain and Leave campaigns

### Abstract:

In this article we approach Brexit via the conceptual framing of sovereignty in the political communication of the Remain and Leave campaigns. This angle, despite its general salience in public discourse, has been analytically underutilised. We put forward a twofold argument: i) that national sovereignty has been fetishized in both campaigns, and that ii) this has important implications for the discursive construction of self and other within the neoliberal paradigm. By employing a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism, as well as Sivanandan's (2001) notion of xeno-racism, we theoretically and empirically identify the status of *homo oeconomicus* in order to analyse the fetishization of sovereignty according to precarity and ethno-racial terms. The framing of the nexus between sovereignty and immigration reveals that the other to *homo oeconomicus* is not to be found outside the neoliberal paradigm, but rather within it. The self and other *homo oeconomicus* are narrated as constantly competing with each other over scarce employment and welfare resources. The framing of both campaigns recognises and validates the anxieties of the British *homo oeconomicus* self and suggests that they should be anxious about the xeno *homo oeconomicus* not because of their respective differences but because of their sameness.

Key words: EU referendum - Brexit - sovereignty - neoliberalism - homo oeconomicus - xeno racism

## I. Introduction

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2016 the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron set the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June of the same year as the date for the referendum on the UK's membership to the European Union (henceforth EU). The British electorate was asked to cast their ballot considering the following question: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?" The two available answers for the above question were: "Remain a member of the European Union" or "Leave the European Union". The UK voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48%. Whilst the true scope and significance of this decision is yet to be seen in the decades to come, the referendum and the political campaigns leading to it have facilitated the fetishization of sovereignty due to the following reasons.

Firstly, 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). Almost alone in the EU, Britain recalls World War II (1939-1945) with more pride than fear and embarrassment. In his famous 1946 speech in Zurich, the then British prime minister Winston Churchill made the argument for a United States of Europe, which posited a Franco-German reconciliation as a starting point. However, he assigned Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of nations, as well as the USA and Soviet Russia, a slightly more marginal position as "friends and sponsors of the new Europe" (Wæver in der Dussen and Wilson (eds) 1995: 165). During the 1940s and early 1950s the main debate was around issues of political integration. On the one hand, Britain, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries wanted more restricted, intergovernmental kind of cooperation, whereas most of the continental European countries were advocating for a deeper, supranational integration (Ibid: 166, 167). Britain joined the EU in 1973 during times of financial turmoil which has arguably put a strong economic rationale for joining. Consequently, this economic opportunism has become one of the main

justifications for Britain's relationship with Europe.

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. This is particularly true for intra-EU migrations where the exercise of Treaty rights and the principle of free movement of people are *de jure* protected by EU courts, albeit *de facto* still managed by the British state and its state apparatus. Here the impact of media discourses has been substantial in merging the concept of Europe with the notion of uncontrollable immigration (Pencheva, 2016). The numerous legal opt-outs that Britain had secured as an EU member, especially within the field of home affairs and immigration, has meant that the country has had a considerable leverage in managing migration flows. This is in stark contrast with anecdotal evidence and media discourses suggesting that the EU does not simply challenge, but overturns the national approach to immigration (Geddes, 2005, Copsey and Haughton, 2014).

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). In addition, the one-off nature of a referendum implies that a convergence between party identification/ideology and support for either of the options of the ballot, is not a necessary condition because a referendum is often issue-specific (Ibid, Haenggli and Kriesi, 2010). The empirical case at hand, however, challenges such conventional wisdom because the win of the Leave vote emerged against the backdrop of all major political parties (with the

exception of UKIP) campaigning for Britain to remain a member of the EU. The UK referendum has been deeply embedded within domestic party politics and struggles for internal consolidation. On the one hand, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was able to influence the mainstream political parties; the Conservative Party in particular (Cini and Solorzano-Borragan, 2016: 2). It was also the only party explicitly campaigning for an EU exit. On the other hand, the political campaigning of the Conservatives reflected David Cameron's attempt to consolidate the party, and particularly the hardline Eurosceptic backbenchers within it, who have been increasingly rebellious since the 2010 general election (Ibid). Additionally, the deepening split within the Labour Party on questions of Europe, and since the mid-2000s, on intra-EU migration, is also worth mentioning.

Britain Stronger in Europe was led by businessman Stuart Rose and was supported by the main political party leaders, including David Cameron and George Osborne for the Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn and Alan Johnson for Labour. It was also supported by Plaid Cymru in Wales, the Alliance Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland, and the Green Party. The Scottish National Party (SNP) ran its own campaign in Scotland. Vote Leave constituted a much broader church with diverse agendas. It included senior Conservatives such as Michael Gove and Boris Johnson plus some Labour MPs, including Gisela Stuart and Graham Stringer, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland. A number of groups were affiliated to it, such as Farmers for Britain, Muslims for Britain, and Out and Proud. UKIP and its leader, Nigel Farage, while campaigning to leave the EU, were not officially part of Vote Leave (Cini and Solorzano-Borragan, 2016).

Lastly, the key challenge for Remain and Leave was to produce a coherent and relatable message. This has been challenging because of the aforementioned traditional British Euroscepticism, but also because of its impact on voting. According to

Eurobarometer, over the long term (that is, 1973–2009), those who thought British membership of the EU to be a bad thing ranged from 12 to 48 per cent; those who thought it was a good thing ranged from 25 to 58 per cent; those who were neutral ranged from 18 to 37 per cent; and the “don’t knows” amounted to between 6 and 24 per cent. The key observation to note is that if the “don’t knows” and neutrals are added together they amount to between 24 and 61 per cent of voters (Copsey and Haughton, 2014: 77). Put simply, there is a substantial and potentially decisive volatility over perceptions of the EU.

Whilst there is a 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 quality relationship between those who govern and those who are governed.

## II. Empirical Material and Method

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 focus on the political rhetoric of the campaigns in their attempt to persuade the UK electorate to vote either leave or remain. Thus, the empirical data that forms the backbone of the analysis is not a result of deliberate sampling, *sensu stricto*. All three websites and their contents are freely available online, which was considered a strength as it invites the attentive public to engage with the political campaigns on their own terms. Further, it is our proposition that the multiple competing interpretations of the issue of Britain's EU membership will enhance, rather than diminish the validity of the fetishization of sovereignty as a meta-frame. The three websites were accessed in the time period May - June 2017.

The official leaflet produced by the then government, as well as the "breaking point" poster were also included as part of the empirical materials due to their salience in public discourses.

### 2.1. Fetishizing sovereignty as a meta-frame

Within the methodological framework of framing, the article will scrutinize the issue of Brexit and the effect such an issue has on political organization, sovereignty, racial and ethnic divisions. Framing as a strategic practice of communicating pertinent issues, which determines causes, morally evaluates, and offers remedies to perceived problems (Entman, 1993). By fetishization of sovereignty we refer to the mutually constitutive process in which the Leave and Remain campaigns expressed an unequivocal commitment to sovereignty and in which the latter informed the logic behind both campaigns. Here, in a descriptive sense, fetishization is employed as a rhetorical label that 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 political communication. Thus, fetishization does *not* correspond to psychoanalytical or even religious understandings of the fetish as a substitute for anxieties and unattainable desires.

As the central argument is based on the conceptual reading of the three main websites associated with the Remain and Leave campaigns, the article seeks to advance the understanding of the fetishization of sovereignty as a meta-frame. This is because it captures an intersection between theoretical concepts and empirical data, thus cutting across multiple issues related to the UK's EU membership: economic opportunities, the possibility to travel and study in other member states, but also issues of precarious employment practices, underperforming public services, concerns about border control and terrorism. Understanding the fetishization of sovereignty as a meta-frame highlights the common logic that informs both campaigns, as well as differences in terms of how facts were communicated. This is based on the premise that facts do not speak for themselves but are rather embedded within this meta-frame, which organises them and gives them salience depending on the political objectives they are expected to pursue (Gamson and Ryan 2005). The fetishization 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. It also has important implications for the discursive construction of self and other as it signals the emergence of *Xeno Homo Oeconomicus*: the other to the *British Homo Oeconomicus* within the neoliberal paradigm. Our analysis will demonstrate that their relationship is a result from political and economic interdependencies and as such it could be construed in either antagonistic (Leave campaign) or benevolent (Remain campaign) terms.

Thinking of the fetishization of sovereignty as a meta-frame represents a broad disciplinary consensus that framing serves a variety of disciplines and holds the possibility for useful cross-disciplinary approaches. Indeed, framing as an analytical tool is omnipresent across a variety of disciplines: sociology (Benford and Snow, 1986, Goffman, 1975, Gamson and



Modigliani, 1989), politics and public policy (Rose and Baumgartner, 2013, Balch and Balabanova 2014), media studies and communication (Gamson, 1992, Entman, 1993), international relations (Barnett 1999, Autesserre 2009) and animate distinct conversations in all of them. Framing has been employed as an analytical paradigm for various research agendas: from examining public opinion on nuclear energy, via social movements, political participation to cognitive linguistics. As an analytical tool it is not narrowly attached to a specific discipline, and has been used as a part of both inductive and deductive research designs, which has been considered an advantage for the purposes of this article. Its flexibility enables us to signpost the fetishization of sovereignty as both a theoretical contribution that captures the work of Foucault on neoliberalism and Sivanandan's concept of xeno racism; and a practical tool for examining the complexities of the empirical materials.

### III. On sovereignty and precarity

The Brexit debate in conjunction with the immigration and financial crises in Europe have brought sovereignty to the foreground of political and public discourses. Its increased salience is indicative of its potency to politically mobilise populations, who are increasingly implicated in the ongoing redefinitions of sovereignty. In fact, our analysis goes further in demonstrating that via fetishising sovereignty in public discourses and political communication, sovereignty is no longer exclusively articulated as an essential attribute to the state, but it is also increasingly seen as an integral part of individual identities, particularly in terms of ethnicity and economic security. This is to suggest that even though sovereignty continues to be articulated as a political fact, it gains an additional, personal layer due to an emotive appeal to 'control' and 'empowerment' in both political campaigns.

In this article we shift the focus from legislative and administrative issues to political communication and campaigning as a specific dimension of governmental practices.

Consequently, we argue that sovereignty has a specific use value and is not exclusively defined by (inter)national notions of virtue and specific legal frameworks. Political communication and in particular the Leave and Remain campaigns create a notion of sovereignty through precarisation and anxiety that is not law and policy binding but rather perceived as a useful tactic for mobilising voters. Indeed, contemporary understandings and applications of sovereignty blur the theoretical and empirical distinctions between the actions of the sovereign and of national governments. Following Judith Butler's (1997; 2004) definition of "spectral sovereignty" as an instrument of power that allows the law to be used tactically for the subsequent categorization, monitoring, regulation and detention of the population sovereignty depends on the delegation of power to specific governmental bodies. Butler (ibid.) insists that political theory needs to abandon conceptions of centralised forms of power and instead should analyse the way power transforms itself according to different states of emergency.

In the Brexit debate claims about sovereignty were frequent but rarely accompanied with any substantial explanation regarding legislative powers. Instead, the Leave campaign statements "taking control" and "taking back control" constituted the main communicative framework for the articulation of sovereignty. Sovereignty and by association control are communicated in the Leave and Remain campaigns within the socio-political context of threat and loss. In particular, property, prosperity, well-being, and national culture are consistently narrated as threatened by an interminable external threat namely the xeno homo oeconomicus. Both Leave and Remain campaigns amplified the relationship between state and citizen and consequently the statutory protection against external threats by acknowledging the precarious position of British homo oeconomicus in order to redefine sovereignty. Any idea of sovereignty implicitly or explicitly relies on a process of precarisation of citizens, which simultaneously reinforces the demand of strong (physical and

cultural) borders and exposes the vulnerability of the sovereign subject (Lorey, 2015). The anxieties experienced by the British *homo oeconomicus* and the demands for sovereignty and control as communicated by both campaigns do not necessarily challenge the process of precarisation initiated and propagated by neoliberalism but insist on a racial and ethnic order in which the sovereign subject is prioritised. It is in this order where British *homo oeconomicus* demands sovereignty and fights for its survival.

By embedding the specific articulations of sovereignty within a broader theoretical discussion of sovereignty and precarity, we seek to argue that specific empirical articulations of sovereignty are representative of a new type of governmentality via fiscal austerity. Integrated financial systems, global institutions, global 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 EU's flawed immigration and refugee policy, problematizes the notion of sovereignty and at the same time forces us to rethink its contemporary meaning and applications.

This is particularly challenging when recognizing the complex political and economic realities of interdependencies under the global reign of neoliberalism, where the practical differentiation between 'friend' and 'enemy', in principle so instrumental in making sense of international politics, becomes empirically blurred and loses its analytical merits. However, the need to draw borders remains, as it can be presumed that borders are essential for the definition and practice of sovereignty (Wallerstein, 2004). With the intensification of cultural borders and the attempts to racially and ethnically demarcate the differences and incompatibilities between the British *homo oeconomicus* and the *xeno homo oeconomicus* sovereignty itself becomes a means to govern the population.

#### IV. Neo-liberalism and its subject *Homo Oeconomicus*

Any discussion about neoliberalism as a system of political and economic organization 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. As Jessop (2012) notes neoliberalism is much more used by critics of contemporary capitalist systems than by the very proponents of these systems. In fact, Jessop (*ibid.*) refers to the impossibility of talking about neoliberalism as a singular and coherent term and the need to acknowledge multiple forms and manifestations of neoliberalism. 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 Friedman, *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 producers and consumers (Foucault, 2008: 226). Following the theoretical elaborations of Michel Wieviorka (2012; see also Alain Touraine, 2000; 2010) we can argue that *homo oeconomicus* is an achievement and a constant struggle against institutions which seek to regulate the market and personal interest. 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) highlights 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 oeconomicus* 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. So far, the predominant view has been that the Other to *homo oeconomicus* is to be found in the periphery of the neoliberal order, a subject who lacks motivation, incentivization, and stimulation to make a success of her/his life through the structures imposed and reproduced by a dominant enterprise culture (Dardot and Laval, 2015). The new spirit of capitalism perfectly illustrated in managerial culture constructs the inflexible subject - the subject that is either unwilling or incapable to perform multiple tasks, to retrain, and embrace new methods of employment and assessment as an Other to the interest driven, flexible *homo oeconomicus* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). However, such accounts seldom refer to race and ethnicity as vital components for the constitution of an Other to neoliberalism.

In order to understand *homo oeconomicus* through the prism of race and ethnicity, we are employing xeno racism as an auxiliary theoretical lens. Our justification is as much theoretical as it is empirical. On the one hand, there is an epistemological compatibility between a Foucauldian interpretation of neoliberalism and Sivanandan's (2001) notion of xeno racism as a way of understanding the multifaceted exclusion which accompanies the global expansion of neoliberalism. Its main premise is 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), it provide us with a fruitful analytical framework to critically assess the encompassing anti-foreigners Leave campaign. Sivanandan argues that in the endless pursuit of profits, today's capitalism seeks to maintain the physical and discursive displacement of all those it deemed "others" on the grounds that they are scroungers, social raiders always eager to prey on the wealth of the West, to harm its identity and standard of living (Ibid: 2). In

order to achieve this goal, xeno-racism denies its colour-coding, i.e. it can be “meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white” (Ibid: 2). Xeno-racism is a feature of the Manichaeic world of global capitalism, where there are only the rich and the poor - and poverty is the new Black (Ibid: 2). On the other hand, as it will be empirically demonstrated by the analysis section below, the Leave campaign focused not only on the threat of asylum seekers and other groups of non-European migrants, but also put strong emphasis on the assorted dangers posed by phenotypically white EU migrants.

#### V. Communicating precarious subjectivities

As it was already established, the fetishization of sovereignty informed the logic behind both campaigns, which was in turn communicated to the voters and the attentive public in different ways, according to the driving political ideologies of the key political parties. As Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) have noted, 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 this salient issue in British politics. Therefore, the overarching political logic is that the desire to regain control is a function of its perception as lost.

The specific framing of the nexus between sovereignty and immigration creates a complex relationship between self and other. However, the other to the *homo oeconomicus* is not to be found outside the neoliberal paradigm, but rather within it; this other we call *Xeno homo oeconomicus*. 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. The framing of both campaigns textually validates the precarious status of the subject and suggests that the British *homo oeconomicus* Self should be anxious about the *Xeno 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 neoliberalism.

The Leave campaign brought to the foreground the issue of race and ethnicity as a vital component for the understanding and subsequent establishment of a prosperous and cohesive society. However, there existed a strong political background with respect to the importance of these components in public debate. A Conservative general election campaign poster from 2005 saying “it’s not racist to impose limits on immigration” attempted on one hand to communicate the urgency of controlling immigration and on the other hand to rearrange the terms of public debate and attitudes on immigration. The poster made clear that national citizens should not feel restrained by accusations of racism when demanding control and homogeneity. Discussing her immigration policy in an interview with *The Telegraph* in 2012 the Home Secretary Theresa May explained that her aim is to “create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal immigration.” The conception of this environment became a reality in July 2013 when the Home Office deployed vans in six London boroughs asking “In the UK illegally”, if so “GO HOME OR FACE ARREST”. The Home Office also made sure to communicate the efficiency of its campaign by indicating to Londoners the number of arrests on a weekly basis in their area.

These political campaigns and their accompanying rhetoric constitute the political and communicative predecessor of Vote Leave’s focus on immigration. 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. Boris Johnson claimed that since 2004 1.25 million people have been added to the overall population due to immigration from EU countries. “That is bigger than the city of Birmingham”. Furthermore, Michael Gove suggested that Turkey’s potential accession to the EU would put Britain at higher risk of crime. 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 biopolitical 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”. The poster made explicit references to a Nazi propaganda video depicting a similar flow of Jewish refugees with the following description: “who flooded Europe’s cities after the last war - parasites, undermining their host countries”. Challenged about the message of the poster and its resemblance to Nazi propaganda the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Leave. EU campaign replied:

“this is a photograph - an accurate undoctored photograph taken in October last year following Angela Merkel’s call in the summer and frankly, if you believe, as I have always believed, that we should open our hearts to genuine refugees, that is one thing. But, frankly, as you can see from this picture most of the people

coming are young males and, yes they may be coming from countries that are not in a very happy state, they may be coming from places poorer than us, but the EU has made a fundamental error that risks the security of everybody”.

Control was the central demand and focal point of Vote Leave. The campaign emphasised the need to control the country’s borders and immigration flows and such a need was presented as a response to the volatility of global politics: *“in a world with so many threats it’s safer to control our own borders and decide ourselves who can come into this country, not overruled by EU judges”*. According to the Vote Leave campaign the EU is at once the cause and the symptom of insecurity and volatility. Special references were made to EU’s ambitions to expand and incorporate states with either significant problems or polities and constitutions incompatible with the UK’s: *“the EU is expanding: Turkey with a population of 76 million is one FIVE new countries joining the EU. The other countries according to Vote Leave are Albania (2.8 million); Macedonia (2.1) million; Montenegro (0.6 million); and Serbia (7.2 million). Vote Leave claimed that the possible accession of these countries to the EU will further contribute to uncontrollable flows of immigration”*; *“immigration will continue to be out of control. Nearly 2 million people came to the UK from the EU over the last ten years. Imagine what it will be like in future decades when new poorer countries join”*. The Leave campaign attempted to dominate the space of popular and national imagination by projecting a dystopia of poor public services and of a torn social fabric. A Vote Leave TV broadcast about the NHS depicted two parallel scenarios: In the first scenario, where Britain remains a member of the EU, an elderly female patient is made to wait because of the uncontrolled flow of immigrants who are treated ahead of her. In the second scenario, where Britain has already left the EU, the reception room looks almost empty and the elderly woman is treated fast and effectively by smiling and attentive staff. The alleged cultural and

political expansion of the religion of Islam due to mass immigration and inconsiderate liberal European political leaders was another strong theme in the Leave campaign. Leave. EU produced a “deliberately provocative” (Banks, 2016) social media poster criticizing Germany’s *Willkommenskultur* to Syrian refugees by depicting an Islamic takeover of Germany. The poster shows a TV half sunk into a snow hill and with white bold, capital letters reads: “Germany’s Christmas Message to be Subtitled”. The subtitle in bright yellow letters is in Arabic.

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. The campaign referred to research by the Bank of England for communicating as effectively as possible the “economic shock”, “putting our jobs at risk”, and “family budget under pressure” in a post EU political and economic arrangement. Continuity and stability were presented as quintessential ingredients for the country’s prosperity. Stronger In referred to prospect of endless negotiations for new trade deals and access to new research, security, farming and infrastructure programmes. The Conservative Government aligned itself with the Stronger In campaign and produced a leaflet (HM Government, 2016) that was sent by post to all UK addresses. In the first instance, the leaflet did not challenge the anti-immigration stance and xenophobic assertions of the Leave campaign but instead focused on the economic and security risks the UK will be facing in the advent of Brexit. Uncertainty is mentioned three times and risk twice in the leaflet. On a similar tone with the campaign literature of Stronger In, the Government’s leaflet made references to the UK’s strong trading relationship with the EU by arguing that “EU countries buy 44% of everything we sell abroad, from cars to insurance”; “the single market makes it

easier and cheaper for UK companies to sell their products outside the UK, creating jobs as a result”; being inside the EU also makes it more attractive for companies to invest in the UK meaning more jobs”. The British government presented foreign leaders such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Emmanuel Macron, and international institutions such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the IMF as its natural political allies concerning the communication of the long-term problems Brexit will cause to the British economy. In particular, the former US President Barack Obama emphasised the possible demotion of the UK in the global economic and political order by saying that “Britain would be at the back of the queue” during negotiations for new trade deals, and the current French president Emmanuel Macron warned that the UK would be “killed” economically if it chose to leave.

However, in order to reconcile anxieties about immigration with membership to the EU, the government made references to the special relationship the UK has developed with the EU regarding border security and safety. 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).

The Government and Stronger In wished to distanced themselves from the political conviction that the free market is inseparable from the free mobility of people. Indeed, the Remain campaign succumbed to the widespread notion that immigrants are a burden on the welfare state and a destabilising force concerning social and cultural cohesion.

VI. By way of concluding: is it racist to be anxious?

In this paper we have put forward a twofold argument: i) that British national sovereignty has been fetishized in both Remain and Leave campaigns, and that ii) this has important implications for the discursive construction of self and other within the neoliberal paradigm. By employing a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism, as well as Sivanandan's (2001) notion of xeno-racism, we have argued that the fetishization of sovereignty functions as a distinct meta-frame, which is informed by a specific understanding of sovereignty and which delineates two political subjectivities within the neoliberal paradigm: *the British homo oeconomicus* and *the Xeno homo oeconomicus*. In other words, our analysis entails the transition from abstract theoretical models such as neoliberalism and its subject homo oeconomicus to increasingly complex, yet concrete political issues, such as the contemporary articulation of sovereignty by the Leave and Remain campaigns. Our conceptual-driven approach to such a pertinent political issue allowed us to conduct a critical, in-depth analysis which contributes to a more profound understanding of the complex nexus between

sovereignty and precarity.

Firstly, both Remain and Leave campaigns demonstrably fetishized sovereignty, which is indicative of the global dominance of neoliberalism as an economic paradigm, as well as a tool for political governance. In the Remain case, the emphasis was put on the political and economic realities of increased interconnectedness and the assorted interdependencies and vulnerabilities that are generated as a result. In this regard, the main message of the Remain camp was incoherent and served mainly as an implicit, powerless recognition of the multifaceted vulnerabilities and anxieties, experienced by the voters. The Leave campaign produced a more coherent, relatable message with a strong emotive appeal. On the one hand it was recognizing and normalizing the political, economic, and cultural anxieties and vulnerabilities that most people experience on the daily basis. On the other hand, it morally validated them and empowered the voters by its motto *Take back control*. The emotive appeal to anxiety normalized xenophobia in public discourses and demanded political legitimacy on that basis.

Secondly, it is of crucial importance to emphasize that whilst neither of the political campaigns substantially challenged the reign of the neoliberal order, the Leave campaign was the one to mobilize various precarious subjectivities and to articulate the British self, whose hospitality has been unjustly abused, and the xeno other, who is always ready to attack the vulnerable unsuspecting British self, raiding and damaging all that is valuable to the latter. Therefore we have argued that self and other are both to be found within the neoliberal paradigm and that this dichotomy is a product of the mobilization of ethnic and racial bias. The importance and prominence of this aspect in the Leave campaign is exemplified by its absence in the Remain campaign. Both Leave and Remain campaigns highlighted insecurity and inequality without challenging neoliberalism and more specifically austerity politics,

insecure employment and privatization of public assets. In fact, the solutions to the problems identified in the Brexit debate can only be found within the renewed rationality of neoliberalism. Reforms for a competitive state through border security, strict immigration policies and limited access to welfare appear as a desperate attempt to constitute an idea of sovereignty around precarity and xenophobia.

Lastly, the political communication data we used lends support to the conventional wisdom that right of exclusion is usually considered an attribute of sovereignty and territoriality and is defended as an inherent power necessary for the self-preservation of the state. In other words, if a sovereign “could not exclude aliens it would be to that extent subject to the control of another power” (Nafziger, 1983: 804). In this regard, the narrative reflects anti-immigration sentiments as much as a significant yet fragile relationship between self-identity and sovereignty (Ibid.). Thus, political communication dictates that it is in the British *Homo Oeconomicus*’ best interest to fight for the preservation of sovereignty, for without it the British self would perish.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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