

Europe at a critical legitimacy juncture: which people, whose values?

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the discursive nexus of 'the people' drawing from the mediatisation and institutionalisation of Brexit. It focuses on how metadiscourses of popular sovereignty have been instrumental in the legitimization of Brexit and on how such discourses are now more widely echoed in different populist and nativist political projects across Europe that are seeking consensus through a delegitimation of the EU. The discussion draws attention to the emergence of counter discourses of the people but also to the structural conditions that prevent or limit the consolidation of robust transnational forms of European citizenry. This scenario will arguably define the next European elections as a critical juncture where the legitimacy of the European project will be contested in the name of different 'peoples' and 'values'.

Keywords: Brexit, institutionalization, mediatisation, populism, legitimacy chain, discourse analysis

The European project and *the people* at a critical legitimacy juncture

The European project stands at a critical juncture. In the last decade, there has been a gradual shift from 'permissive consensus' - whereby citizens have accepted further integration while showing low levels of political involvement - to an overt legitimization challenge of the European project (see, for example, Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Bouza and Oleart, 2018). This challenge has been largely compounded by a complex interaction between financial and social crises and has been articulated along different discursive axes, not least in the recent surge of populist and sovereignist discourses that have increasingly brought *the people* to the forefront of such legitimization struggle.

For sure, *the people* has always been a key discursive element of political processes. The term has been invoked by all democratic and populist narratives and it has often been politically mobilised for different projects. In this sense the idea of the people, albeit inevitably semantically vague, is a powerful one which, since the *volonté générale* (the will of the people) celebrated by the French Revolution, has been widely taken for granted as the basis of legitimacy in any modern democratic system. The idea of the 'will of the people' moving up the metaphorical chain of legitimacy to be exercised at the national level by citizens' representatives and through nationally organized institutions is a well established tenet of constitutional democracies (Schneider et al. 2016). However, in relation to a wider conceptualization of the EU and its member states as organized along a national/transnational hierarchy, such metaphorical chain of legitimacy has been at its weakest in enabling the transfer of power from the nation to the EU (Nulmeier and Pritzlaff, 2010). So while a European demos has, at best, only manifested in embryonic forms (Zappettini, 2017; Zappettini, 2019a) we are now increasingly seeing an overt challenge to any transnational form of legitimacy of the European project coming from bottom up. This ideological struggle is likely to consolidate and to polarize discourses of *the people* in the forthcoming election for the European Parliament in May 2019.

This paper discusses the current legitimization struggle from the ontological perspective that *the people* as a political subject does not exist a priori but it is constituted in and through discourse (Laclau, 2005). As a way of example, I will first focus on the ideological and discursive arena of Brexit to show how populist

discourses have been key in the unfolding of Brexit and how evoking *the people* has been instrumental in its mediatisation and institutionalisation (see Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019 and articles in the Special Issue ‘Brexit as a Social & Political Crisis: Discourses in Media & Politics’ in *Critical Discourse Studies* (2019:4) for an extensive discussion of these dimensions). Following this, I will briefly discuss potential wider implications of Brexit for the European project in light of populist movements and the forthcoming elections of the European Parliament.

BREXIT AS A DISCURSIVE CHAIN OF LEGITIMACY

The critical juncture of Brexit

The etiology of Brexit has been widely discussed from a variety of perspectives. In this paper, I draw from an interpretation of Brexit as the accumulation of path-dependent historical discourses and socio-political contingencies (Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019) that has been instrumental in building up and sustaining a legitimacy chain of public and institutional discourses. Taking a critical-discursive stance, Zappettini and Krzyzanowski (2019) contend that Brexit represents a ‘critical juncture in the making’ and that the Brexit referendum was the result of

“different historical and contingent discursive nexuses and trajectories ... [and] a variety of context-dependent, ideologically-driven social, political and economic imaginaries that were attached to the idea/concept of Brexit”

Among such discursive trajectories one must consider historical forms of Euroscepticism - in some cases rooted in British imperialism, see Maccaferri (2019) - as well as contingent forms of political opportunism whereby the Prime Minister David Cameron aimed to solve the ongoing ‘question’ of Europe inside the Conservative Party by calling a referendum in 2016 on whether the United Kingdom should leave or remain in the European Union. As Zappettini and Krzyzanowski (2019) argue, different ‘imaginaries’ were associated with the signifier Brexit in the simplistic antagonism of the in/out referendum binaries. In a sense, the institutionalisation of the ‘European question’ into the referendum options framed the Leave/Remain binary choices as floating signifiers that the two opposed camps could fill with specific ideological signifieds/meanings (Zappettini, 2019b). For example, Brexit was represented by the Leave campaign as an ‘escape route’ for Britain *“from an ‘unavoidable’ supranational path inside the EU back to a ‘safer’ (inter)national system of relations”* (Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019). At the same time, however, *“the Leave campaign ‘take back control’ slogan often represented a floating signifier that instrumentally legitimised both a logic of global deceleration rejecting neoliberalism and austerity [...] and a logic of global acceleration advocating further liberalisation and international free trade”* (Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019: see also Zappettini, 2019b for further arguments of trade and mercantile logics as well as the moral panic over immigration).

Significantly, discourses that had circulated on the fringe of politics (and consolidated primarily within the UKIP party) were allowed to become semi-institutionalised through the referendum set up and subsequently taken up in the public sphere and at an institutional level. Since the referendum result, we have seen for example how certain discourses related to free trade escalated and were rapidly seized upon by the Government to construct the rhetoric of ‘Global Britain’. As I have discussed elsewhere (Zappettini, 2019c) the trope of ‘Global Britain’ has become a catalyst around which different legitimising narratives of Brexit as *rupture and continuity* with the ‘continent’ (or, contradictorily both) have been articulated as the ‘bottom logics’ of Britain leaving the EU.

Krzyżanowski and Zappettini (2019) also point to the unfolding of political crises (both external and internal to the UK - see also Bennet, 2019 and Krzyżanowski, 2019) – and different populist and nationalist ideologies (see also Tolson, 2019; Ruzza and Pejovic, 2019) as a powerful discursive drivers through which the critical juncture of Brexit has been constructed. I will discuss these dynamics in the following section with specific reference to their discursive normalisation and the role of the media.

The politicization and mediatization of Brexit and the people¹

The discursive node of *the people* has been a key tool in the legitimacy chain of Brexit. For example, as the early Brexit referendum polls were announced on the morning of 24th June 2016 UKIP's leader Nigel Farage claimed the Leave victory with the follow statement "*this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people*" (The Independent, 24/6/2016). Similarly, the British Government has discursively appropriated the result of an advisory referendum where 37% of all potential voters chose to Leave the EU as a mandate to implement Brexit (however unclear its form still is) by legitimizing it as the 'will of the people' (and through the tautology of 'Brexit means Brexit').

Through this typical *argumentum ad populum* different meanings of Brexit have been retrofitted to an imagined *volonté générale* expressed by what effectively was a minority of citizens, but which, nevertheless has been discursively constructed as a homogeneous monolith. As the discursive articulation of the will of the people has gone up the institutional chain it has sustained and legitimized harder forms of Brexit for example through the argument that 'the British people have spoken' and the Government must deliver for them (Patel, 2016 reported in Freedon, 2017) and amidst warnings that any legal scrutiny over the process is "an attempt to frustrate the will of the British people" (Javid, 2016 reported in Freedon, 2017) and that Brexit could be 'stolen from the people' by its very own MPs (The Guardian, 5/12/18).

In addition to and arguably in synergy with the institutional legitimisation of Brexit in the name of the people, one must also consider the role played by the media, in framing the debate in the run up to the referendum and afterwards. One can hardly overstate the media's ability to instigate public debates by setting the news agenda along populist logics. While this can be a force for good when the 'fourth estate' performs its function of democratic guardian in a pluralised public sphere, the media's power can equally serve commercial logics and a newspaper's own political and ideological agendas. News is not simply circulated in/by the media but that it can also be actively framed through a newspaper's ideological lens. Few examples of the instrumental role of the press in constructing public perceptions could be more relevant than how the British tabloids have historically covered the EU-UK relationship and, more recently, Brexit. The British tabloid press has a long tradition of Eurosceptic to Europhobic editorial stances, including the promotion of various 'crusades' around different Euro-myths and infamous headlines such as the Sun's 'Up yours Delors'. Overall, tabloids have been responsible for the trivialisation (some would call it 'tabloidization') of European politics, a process that most certainly has contributed to the British written press being considered as the least trusted in Europe (Press Gazette, 2017). For years, titles such as The Daily Mail, the Sun and The Daily Express have been particularly active in portraying the UK as a victim of a Brussels 'cosmopolitical' conspiracy plot that, according to some headlines, would result for example in the British Parliament being forced to adopt bans on traditional British kettles and light bulbs to comply with EU rules (see the EU Commission's myth-debunking website for a full list).

¹ Parts of this section have been reproduced in the following blogs:

Zappettini, F. (2019). From Euroscepticism to outright populism: the evolution of British tabloids. London School of Economics Blog on Brexit. Available from: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/01/04/from-euroscepticism-to-outright-populism-the-evolution-of-british-tabloids/>

Zappettini, F. (2019). How Tabloids Were Able To Frame The Debate Over Brexit. European Journalism Observatory. Available from: <https://en.ejo.ch/media-politics/how-tabloids-were-able-to-frame-the-debate-over-brexit>

As most tabloids entered coverage of the Brexit referendum campaign as prominent advocates of the Leave side (with the exception of labour-friendly Daily Mirror, the Mail on Sunday, which took an opposite stance to its daily sister publication, and the politically disengaged Daily Star) they could therefore bank on an established priming of their audiences through which they had already been able to effectively pre-legitimise Brexit even before the referendum was called. What we saw during the referendum campaign was a de facto consolidation of such populist discourses (Zappettini, 2018). Here, I use the term populist (an otherwise much debated proposition between academics) in its basic meaning i.e. referring to the people (see for example Laclau, 2005; Canovan, 2005). Of course, in most political discourses the term 'people' tends to be invariably invoked in semantically vague and rhetorical ways. But what makes a populist discourse different from a democratic one is that the former portrays the people in opposition to its imagined enemies and typically in exclusionary rather than inclusionary terms. As an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2016) the British nation had to reify its 'imagined enemies' both externally - in the EU as a dominant power - and internally as the 'corrupt' elites, etc. supporting the European project.

A linguistic analysis of how the term '(the) people' was used in a corpus of tabloids during the referendum campaign, suggests that the language of tabloids has been consistent with such populist views of the world in binary terms (Zappettini, 2018). Throughout the campaign, tabloids typically tended to portray the 'British people' (sometimes also qualified as 'ordinary' or 'hard-working' people) as a distinct group who were antagonised by other groups of 'people' who, in turn, were often characterised as either (EU) migrants and 'free to move' to the UK or as 'detached' elites. The tabloid press further identified the latter as international (e.g. EU, Brussels, Eurocrats, the IMF, President Obama) or domestic (e.g. Westminster, 'experts' and Remainers) enemies of the 'British people'. These characterisations played a pivotal role in how tabloids were able to frame the debate over the Brexit referendum around typical populist dynamics. Notably, the coverage tapped into the politics of loss and resentment over migration through arguments of social pressure and resources sharing, but also through arguments of risk and security which, in some cases, straddled into explicit xenophobic moral panic. For example, The Daily Express on 6th June 2016 reported Nigel Farage's comment that mass sex attacks like those that had happened in Cologne would occur in the UK unless the country voted to leave. Similarly, in relation to the pitting of the 'ordinary British people' against the elites, the dominant dynamic in the corpus analysed was one of reaffirming a sense of national pride akin to the defiant sovereignty that has characterised recent Euroscepticism across many democracies. Standing up to the 'bullying' of the IMF, of Remainers David Cameron and George Osborne, or the EU 'corrupt' bureaucrats was common currency in many Daily Mail articles, for example.

A key point worth making here is that tabloids did not simply act as communicative platforms by amplifying (or silencing) the main actors and arguments of the referendum campaign but, rather, that they effectively (de)legitimised Brexit along a populist logic as well as according to their own ideological agenda. Furthermore, one should not see this populist thrust limited to the contingency of the Brexit referendum campaign. As I have argued above, a large section of the British press has had a historical role in producing anti-EU propaganda based on spurious news and anti-foreign sentiment. Plenty of evidence suggests that this historical path has not stopped with the referendum result but, in fact, that the populist thrust has steadily driven the post-referendum coverage of Brexit. Appeals to the 'people's will' (and delegitimation of supporters of softer or no Brexit as 'enemies of the people') have been key drivers of public and institutional discourses. The longer-term coverage of Euronews in the tabloid press and the populist discursive articulation of Brexit have been instrumental in creating the chain of legitimation that has institutionalised extreme Eurosceptic discourses that originally emerged on the fringe of the British political spectrum and now seem to be at the core of the implementation of Brexit. Right-wing tabloids have been key in close down any dissent to softer forms of Brexit, for example through the characterization of any opposition as 'betrayal of the people' and of such opponents as 'enemies of the people' (see for example The Daily Mail). Of course, the term 'people' has equally been appropriated by other actors to construct counter-discourses for example around the 'peoples' vote' referendum. At the moment, this seems to be the extremely volatile nodal point where the struggle over the Brexit debate is taking place as we come up to the expected Brexit date (29th March 2019).

Wider implications of Brexit and the articulation of the people for the European project

Anticipating what the long term ramifications of Brexit will be for member states and EU politics is just as difficult as predicting any further development of Brexit in British domestic politics. However, in relation to the former, two opposite discursive trends seem to have been playing out on the European political stage. On the one hand, the immediate ‘domino effect’ that some had envisaged happening in the immediate aftermath of Brexit has not materialized. Indeed, for governments and other political actors in many EU member states, rather than representing a political model, Brexit seems to have acted as a warning on the consequences of playing into sovereignist discourses and it is arguably deterring the many anticipated ‘exits’ (e.g. Frexit, Swexit, etc.). For example, the Swedish Left Party is dropping its long-standing quest to leave the EU and Italian Five-Star Movement has been increasingly shying away from its early day’s flagship policy of calling for a referendum on Italy exiting the Euro which helped paving its way into the Government coalition with Lega. On the other hand, however, the question of *the people* and their values remains highly mobilised across Europe. Undoubtedly, public and political discourses that invoke *the people* have increasingly become common currency and are seized upon by different far-right political projects whether it be Sweden’s Democrats, Italian Lega, French Front National, Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid, German Alternative für Deutschland, Finland’s True Finns, Spain’s Vox, etc. These discourses are likely to escalate in the run up to the European Elections in May 2019 since votes for the Euro Parliament tend to be instrumentally used as protest platforms as exemplified by the case of UKIP topping the last EP election in 2013. Here, again, we are seeing another critical juncture in the making as, if predictions have it right, both the two major political families in the Strasbourg (the European People's Party and the European Socialist Party) are expected to lose some of their current seats and, for the first time, this election will see neither of them having a clear majority (Schaart, 2019). This will mean that new alliances and balances within and across groups will have to be sought at a time when sovereignist parties are expected to increase their seats. It is also unclear whether such sovereignist will consolidate into a homogenous alternative coalition capable of undermining the Europeanist front. There has been much speculation over what might be shaping up as the ‘peoples of Europe’ umbrella, a coalition supported by Trump’s former chief strategist, Steve Bannon’s new foundation (“The Movement”) whose explicit aim is to dismantle the EU and restore ‘traditional’ values (Cerulus, 2018). This could lead to the paradoxical situation where parties which found their legitimacy on discourses of national sovereignty will Trojan-horse supranational institutions in order to delegitimise them. Even if the alleged umbrella of sovereignist parties does not consolidate as predicted, some impact from sovereignist parties is expected on the European balance of power as, for example, a shift could occur in the presidency of the European Parliament and the Commission towards figures more ideologically sympathetic to populist moods. In this scenario, according to Soros (2019) “the cleavage that matters most today is no longer between capital and labour but between pro- and anti-European forces”. Meanwhile, however, a transnational conceptualization of the people that could counteract sovereignist discourses is struggling to emerge due to a series of weak structural conditions and the self-reinforcing nature of national discourses. So what are the opportunities and the limitations for a non-national conceptualization of the people? Of course Europe cannot be defined in culturally and ethnically homogenous terms and the European people can only be conceived of as a transnational demos, that is a civic community beyond national remits. But, so far the European demos has been weak (some would say hardly existent) for a number of reasons. For example, a truly transnational European Public Sphere is still underdeveloped as European elections campaigns are still framed around nationally domesticated themes and participation is weak as elections for the European Parliament are seen as ‘second order’ elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1997). The nation is still a key actor in the EU system; for example formal EU citizenship relies on national citizenship in the first place and the Council, which is still a key player in decisions making, will prioritise national interests ‘by default’. Moreover, we see national discourses and national structures mutually reinforcing each other. For example a strong discursive naturalisation exists that equates popular sovereignty with national sovereignty. These discourses are constantly being reproduced. For example, the 73 British EP seats that will be no longer available following the UK’s expected departure from the EU will be redistributed nationally to other countries as the proposal to use these seats to create transnational lists was voted down (Barbière, 2018). Whilst this could have been an opportunity for transnationalising and deterritorialising EP voting system by allowing EU citizens to vote beyond their national constituencies, one could argue that the ‘British people’ have symbolically been renationalised under different country labels.

A true reconfiguration of the concepts of the people and their sovereignty is a nodal point that should really be addressed by an agenda of European reforms. As Habermas (quoted in von Bogdandy, 2013) has argued “we cannot just project the familiar national design of liberal institutions onto the supranational level. The same principles, if they ever can be implemented on a global scale, will assume a different institutional format”. If we think of popular sovereignty as separate from national sovereignty (the latter being a much more modern concept) maybe we can conceive of popular sovereignty at the European level. But how could such European popular sovereignty be achieved and legitimised? Answering these questions is clearly beyond the scope of this paper but some suggestions that have been put forward both at top-down and bottom-up levels are worth exploring and pursuing. At an institutional level, for example, we can think of greater role for European Parliament as the legitimate sovereign body. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron (reported in Banks and Levy-Abegnoli, 2018) floated these ideas by stating: “The European Parliament should elect and control a European government. Every European Commissioner has to convince people by running for the European parliamentary elections.”

In public discourse, transnational and deterritorialised ideas of people (Zappettini, 2017; 2019) can be promoted as well as representations of *citizens over peoples*. This could lead to a transnationalised and deterritorialised understanding of the European demos and arguably promote a voting system whereby EU citizens were allowed to vote beyond their national constituencies based on European programmes rather than specific national agendas. In addition, from a bottom up perspective, we can encourage active citizenship (‘imagining’ and ‘doing’ Europe) where European identities would emerge within a networked community and through engagement, participation and investment with Europe as a democratic project (McIntee-Atalianis and Zappettini, 2014).

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