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Lay discourses about Brexit and prejudice: ‘ideological creativity’ and its limits in Brexit debates

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Abstract

Much research on Brexit has studied whether the vote to leave the EU is a marker of growing prejudice. In this paper, we study instead how the relationship between support for Brexit and prejudice is constructed, negotiated and contested in lay discourse. Our analysis of focus groups (N=12) conducted prior to and following the EU referendum shows that support for Brexit was predominantly constructed as based on nationalism and anti-immigration prejudice, especially in Remain-supporting accounts. This prompted identity management strategies and counter-arguments by Leave supporters, such as providing alternative constructions of prejudice and racism; relating Brexit with ‘progressive’ values; and presenting it as rational and economically sound. In our discussion, we draw attention to the ‘ideological creativity’ that underpins these accounts and also reflect on the possibilities and constraints of developing alternative political narratives under conditions of political polarisation.

Keywords: Brexit; EU referendum; prejudice; lay discourse; racism; ideological creativity

Lay discourses about Brexit and prejudice: ‘ideological creativity’ and its limits in Brexit debates

This paper studies the construction of prejudice in lay political debates, taking the case of Brexit as its empirical focus. 2016 was arguably a year of political turbulence for Western liberal democracies. This was encapsulated in two unanticipated electoral results: the election of Trump as US President and the Brexit vote in the UK to leave the European Union. These events have been described as representing a rupture of ‘politics as usual’. Here, we focus on Brexit, but much of our analysis can be related to other contexts where the ‘liberal order’ is seen as being challenged by new political movements.

In the 2016 referendum on EU membership, 52% of those who cast their votes voted for Leave against 48% for Remain. Following this largely unexpected result (which contravened the official lines of both major political parties), much has been written about the reasons behind the Leave vote. On the one hand, analysis has focused on the extent to which Brexit support can be explained by social inequalities and the disenfranchisement of the so-called ‘left-behind’ voters. Research has shown that citizens who can be seen as being left behind in the global economy voted for Brexit (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). In that regard, Brexit can be understood as the result of a longstanding failure of the political class to represent working class communities (Koch, 2017; Mckenzie, 2017). Supporters of Brexit have argued that the vote for Leave was a protest vote and that it should be heralded as a victory of ‘the people’ against ‘the establishment’.

On the other hand, support for Brexit has also been constructed as rooted in xenophobia and racism (e.g. Khalili, 2017). The murder of Remain campaigner and Member of Parliament, Jo Cox, by a white supremacist; the stoking of anti-immigration sentiments in some Leave

campaigning; as well as the association of Brexit support with the UK far-right (particularly the UK Independence Party, UKIP), have facilitated the linkage between support for Brexit and prejudice, especially among supporters of Remain.

The question of whether Brexit, as well as other political changes of the past few years (such as the election of Trump and the growth of right-wing populism across Europe), mark a shift to more illiberal politics has been addressed by psychologists. This is not surprising given that prejudice, which is rooted in the main assumptions and dilemmas of liberal ideology, is a core social psychological concept. In the context of Brexit, the research focus has been on measuring the extent to which individual support for Brexit is associated with well-established psychological variables. Support for Brexit has been shown to be associated with prejudice in various ways: for instance, it has been found to be related to anti-immigration attitudes (Meleady, Seger & Vermue, 2017), nationalistic attitudes, authoritarianism and cognitive inflexibility (Zmigrod, Rentfrow & Robbins, 2018), and Islamophobia (Swami, Barron, Weis & Furnham, 2018).

Contrary to existing literature, instead of seeking to establish whether support for Brexit is indeed the result of prejudice, this paper argues that constructions of prejudice are complex symbolic resources which help people position themselves and others within the changing political landscape of Brexit Britain. For example, as we will show, by constructing Brexit supporters as xenophobic and Remain supporters as tolerant, Brexit can be understood as a nationalistic project that should be resisted. On the other hand, casting Remainers as elites who are themselves prejudiced against the ‘ordinary people’ who voted Brexit, constructs Brexit as a democratic project that serves the will of the majority. The way that the

relationship between Brexit and prejudice is constructed has therefore clear political implications and it is related to different visions for Britain in the Brexit era.

This paper explores how the relationship between support for Brexit and prejudice is discursively constructed in lay talk; how these constructions are grounded in a complex web of ideological traditions; and how they are negotiated and managed in the context of focus group discussions about the EU referendum. To do this, we draw mainly on critical discursive psychology. This approach is particularly useful as it enables us to examine prejudice as a social construction and a social practice, rather than a predefined entity; that is, as a concern of lay people in their encounters, instead of an exclusive interest of social and political scientists. This approach brings together macro and micro analytical perspectives (see Wetherell, 1998) by providing us with tools to explore what identity stakes are raised in this political context, how these stakes are bound to systems of ideology, and how they are manifested and managed in focus group micro-interactions. More specifically, a critical discursive psychological approach allows us to explore the ways in which lay people implicate historically specific assumptions on the nature of prejudice in their everyday interactions with others, while being oriented to advance their political arguments and to manage their moral accountability in specific rhetorical settings.

Prejudice as a social practice

As stated above, our focus is how the relationship between support for Brexit and prejudice is constructed, managed and contested in lay discourse. Existing psychology literature on prejudice operates on the basis of analysts' definitions of prejudice, and related concepts such as racism, and thus implicitly treats it as a settled matter. The focus of traditional prejudice research is also on how people may be individually prejudiced, for example, due to their

personalities or ‘faulty’ cognitive assessments (see Dixon, 2017, for a critical assessment of the field). In contrast, critically oriented social psychologists study the ways in which race and racism are socially constructed and contested as *collaborative* accomplishments (Condor et al., 2006) – i.e., the various ways in which ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are produced in interactions. Durrheim and colleagues’ notion of ‘race trouble’ is useful in this regard (Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011; Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015). These authors argue that identifying and naming race and racism are hearable as racist, so speakers refer to them indirectly in their talk (see also ‘norm against prejudice’ in next section). The concept of race trouble highlights these ideological and rhetorical difficulties in race talk. It draws attention to the intricate ways that constructions of race and racism structure talk and interactions about issues related to race and how they organise and institutionalise racialised social relations, e.g. through concrete policies and practices (Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015). The study of race trouble therefore focuses on the interaction within which racism is constructed rather than on identifying racist discourses or attitudes. The current study adopts this line of thinking and directly examines contestations with respect to the nature of prejudice, rather than providing or assuming a definition. We see definitions of prejudice as produced, negotiated and contested through meaning-making social practices (see Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016).

This social constructionist approach has been particularly developed within the framework of discursive psychology (Augoustinos, 2016), which emphasises the role of language and discourse in constructing knowledge about the social world, for example, the categories we use to make sense of the world, such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘nationals’ and ‘foreigners’ etc. (see Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Discursively constructed knowledge about the world (including knowledge about which acts are deemed to be prejudiced or not) constitutes a symbolic

resource that social actors draw upon and mobilise as they navigate their social world and interact with others. In this sense, prejudice is not something that people ‘have’, but something they ‘do’. It is a social practice (Durrheim, Quayle & Dixon, 2016) which is achieved in the course of social relationships. This has been empirically studied, among others, by Condor and colleagues (e.g. 2006; Condor & Figgou, 2012), who have shown how the meanings of prejudice are actively and collectively argued about in focus group discussions, through prejudice claims (i.e. labelling an act or a person as prejudiced) and denials (i.e. denying the accusation that an act or a person is prejudiced). In one of the earlier works in this area, Wetherell and Potter (1992) studied white New Zealanders’ lay accounts of the history of exclusion of the Maori minority, with one of their key findings being how seemingly egalitarian arguments can be used to perpetuate racism (see also Augoustinos & Every, 2007).

Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) pioneering work showed that lay discourses about prejudice and race are politically consequential. As Durrheim, Quayle and Dixon (2016) put it, “the struggle for the nature of prejudice determines who can be badly treated and by whom” (p. 17). Definitions of prejudice are employed to advance specific political projects. For instance, Durrheim, Quayle and Dixon (2016) explain that constructions of prejudice can be used to mobilise hate against ‘Others’ who are deemed prejudiced. This was the case, for example, in President Bush’s call-to-arms discourse following 9/11 which was used to justify the invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Another example comes from Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos and Taulke-Johnson (2018) who argue that discursively narrowing the boundaries of discrimination in everyday talk (for example, by constructing ‘discrimination-proper’ as intentional and aggressive behaviour towards minority group members) ultimately serves to render discrimination a rare and exceptional experience, thus limiting political

incentives for reducing it. We discuss the ideological dimensions of the prejudice concept in more detail in the next section.

Prejudice and ideology

Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton and Radley (1988) have shown that the concept of prejudice is rooted in the ideology of liberalism which originates in 18th century Enlightenment, particularly the valorisation of reason against bias and irrational thinking. In this early formulation, prejudice referred to irrationality in the sense of making judgements without prior rational assessment. This meaning gradually acquired a more specific focus on intergroup relations, i.e. negative attitudes towards others on the basis of racial and ethnic categorisations (Billig et al., 1988; Billig, 2012). Because of this ideological tradition, prejudice in today's liberal democracies is strongly frowned upon. There is a widespread cultural norm against prejudice which requires that people are not prejudiced towards members of other groups, but that they think and behave in a rational and tolerant manner.

To unpack this relationship between prejudice and irrationality in common-sense, Figgou and Condor (2006) studied the ways that interviewees in Greece understood and used the constructs of 'prejudice' and 'racism' in discussions about the settlement of Albanian refugees in Greece. In their analysis, Figgou and Condor identified four repertoires through which an action or event could be framed as a matter of prejudice or racism. Prejudice or racism could refer to: an unjustifiable and irrational belief in the existence of categorical differences between groups; intolerance of intergroup difference; attributing such difference to nature instead of social factors; and negative feelings towards low-status group members by high-status group members. When interviewees, however, discussed specific hostile acts against migrants, they did not frame them as matters of prejudice. Instead, such events were

treated as matters of security. Participants constructed themselves as responding to a perceived risk of migrant criminality, rather than being prejudiced (which would need to be accounted for in line with the norm against prejudice).

Most work on the norm against prejudice has focused specifically on talk concerning race and immigration. In her early work in the field, Condor (2000) has showed that, in an interview setting, English participants treated talk about 'this country' as potentially xenophobic. Thus, they avoided making explicit mention of 'this country' and adopting an overt national footing or displaying a sense of national pride. These rhetorical strategies allowed participants to manage their self-presentations in order to appear non-prejudiced. Similar research on how moral accountability is managed in prejudice-related talk has been conducted using more naturalistic methods. Barnes, Palmary and Durrheim (2001), analysed natural conversations in South Africa and found that using humour, personal experience, and self-censorship were all strategies that allowed speakers to distance themselves from racist views and to inoculate themselves from accusations of racism when saying something that could be heard as racist. Whitehead (2018), in his analysis of radio broadcasts in the same national context, has also shown how the (in)accuracy of possible stereotypes can be employed as a resource for arguing for/against their moral acceptability. Research on such rhetorical strategies employed in talk that is potentially hearable as prejudiced (e.g. against asylum seekers, Roma, ethnic minorities) has also been conducted in online settings (e.g. Facebook discussions, Burke & Goodman, 2012; comments in online articles, Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016; Goodman & Rowe, 2013; online discussion forums, Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015).

In their review of the field, Augoustinos and Every (2007) have outlined five strategies for disclaiming a prejudiced identity in contemporary race talk: denying prejudice through the use of disclaimers (e.g. “I’m not racist but”); presenting one’s views as reasonable and rational (e.g., that limits to immigration are common-sense; Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008); presenting oneself positively and others negatively (e.g. refugees as ‘benefit scroungers’); discursively deracialising arguments (e.g., that opposition to asylum seekers is based on economic concerns or on a migrant’s’ specific psychological characteristics, rather than their group memberships; Goodman & Burke, 2011; Sapountzis & Vikka, 2015); and employing liberal arguments (e.g. equality-based) to argue against minority groups.

Discursive strategies of prejudice denial are intimately entangled with social constructions of what constitutes ‘real’ prejudice (Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos & Taulke-Johnson, 2018; Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell & Stangor, 2003). ‘Real’ prejudice is commonly constructed as rare and intentional. For example, Burford-Rice and Augoustinos (2017) have shown that, following racial slips and gaffes, speakers may argue that their visible slips do not align with their true and deeper psychological intentions, and that they should therefore be exonerated (see also van Dijk, 1992). ‘Real’ prejudice is often ‘Othered’ to distant people, times and places (Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016). It is also commonly constructed as so extreme that it becomes difficult to identify and call out (Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016; Goodman, 2010). It is therefore not just talk about race that is ‘troubling’ (c.f. Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015); racism, and prejudice more generally, are also social constructions that are consequential and accountable. As Durrheim (2017, p. 330) notes, “accusations and denials of racism rupture ordinary interaction, replacing the easy-going, friendly and polite routines with bitter acrimony”.

These findings indicate that, in addition to the norm against prejudice and complementary to it, there is also a norm of not accusing others of prejudice. The two work in conjunction to 'Other' prejudice (Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016) as something extreme and rare. On the one hand, being prejudiced is considered irrational and therefore behaviours and utterances that can be construed as prejudiced are treated as accountable. On the other hand, accusing others of prejudice can also be considered inappropriate and irrational because it shuts down reasonable debate (Goodman, 2010; Goodman & Burke, 2011; Goodman & Rowe, 2013). Relatedly, and in the context of Brexit, Durrheim et al. (2018) have shown how accusations of racism against Nigel Farage's (a leading Brexit advocate) hearably racist statements were be treated by his supporters as unjustified attacks. This allowed Farage to claim victimisation (and thus, paradoxically, the moral high ground), and mobilise popular support against the liberal establishment – a strategy that US President Trump has also employed.

It follows that prejudice denial is not solely a matter of self-presentation management in local interactions. At a macro level, prejudice denial is anchored in broader ideological traditions, and functions to sustain these traditions. The research examples above show that strategies of prejudice denial may serve various ideological functions such as: enabling speakers to do hearably racist speech acts and to draw a populist distinction between 'the people' and the liberal 'elites/ establishment', while also complying with the liberal taboo against prejudice; supporting the ideology of nationalism by helping to distinguish anti-immigration arguments from xenophobia and prejudice; reinforcing the neoliberal emphasis on the economy over other aspects of immigration (Goodman & Burke, 2011; Lueck, Due & Augoustinos, 2015).

The examples outlined above show that there are complex ideological entanglements at play in prejudice discourse. An implication of this discursive complexity is that there is a degree of open-endedness in social debates about matters related to ‘prejudice’. Billig (1987) uses the idea of ‘witcraft’ to highlight the open-endedness and inventiveness of lay thinking. In his theorisation of thinking as a form of argumentation, Billig likens everyday argumentation to a form of art or skill which enables lay thinkers to employ language flexibly and creatively corresponding to the demands of the specific argumentative context at hand. Lay thinkers, according to this view, do not just reproduce readymade lines of arguing in their everyday debates, but they are able to construct new argumentative lines to support their rhetorical projects against counter-arguments. Billig’s work calls for a nuanced analysis of lay thinking that does not fall back to general laws, but which calls for being open to the possibility of unanticipated discursive findings. In this paper, we follow the same spirit and pay attention to how established argumentation patterns manifest in lay talk and also how new argumentative lines may emerge through the creative combination of ideas rooted in diverse ideological traditions. We use the term ‘ideological creativity’ to describe instances where diverse ideological threads are combined together by lay thinkers in everyday talk to produce novel positions and argumentative lines. These new lines of arguing are the product of the demands of here-and-now debate (where participants strive to make their positions more convincing than others in a specific interactional context) and, at the same time, they are embedded in specific ideational traditions. By ideological creativity we do not suggest that ideas are free-floating and ready to be attached to different arguments; ideas are invested with value and are attached to histories and identities in a way that can restrict the ideological creativity of lay political actors. Nevertheless, as we will show, even in polarised and quite entrenched political fields (as in the case of Remainer and Leaver political identities in Brexit Britain;

Curtice, 2018), there may be room for ideological cross-fertilisation and dialogical engagement across political ‘camps’.

Method

This paper draws on focus group data conducted prior and after the referendum. Discursive psychologists (Potter & Hepburn, 2012) have argued in favor of the use of naturally occurring data, instead of data generated through interviews and focus groups based on questions that reflect the researcher’s own categories and concerns. Nevertheless, focus groups have been proved particularly suitable for to the study of interaction, in general, and for the study of the construction of prejudice as an interactive process, in particular (see Condor et al., 2006 and Goodman & Burke, 2010, for other examples of focus group research on constructions of prejudice).

Nine focus groups (groups 2-10 in Table 1) and one pilot interview were conducted in June 2016 (prior to the vote) to explore representations of Europe and the EU in the context of the upcoming referendum. In the beginning of each focus group, participants were given a word association task with the word ‘European’ which was used as stimulus for the discussion. An additional three focus groups were conducted in January-February 2017 after the referendum had been held and Brexit preparations had begun (groups 11-13 in Table 1). These focus groups explored representations of Brexit in light of the referendum result. Participants in these focus groups were all men (this was because we were also interested in inter-generational differences and were concerned that analysis would be complicated by inter-generational differences in gender performativity). Participants were shown three Remain campaign posters and three Leave campaign posters, which served as prompts for the discussion (Appendix A).

All focus group participants held British citizenship, and none were of European background (excluding UK backgrounds). Our sample was politically mixed but leaning more towards Remain. Four focus groups consisted of Remain supporters, two of Leave supporters, and six of them were mixed¹. Participants belonged to different age groups and were residents of England and Wales.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Our analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we conducted a thematic analysis to map representations of Brexit and the EU across the focus groups. This initial coding revealed that prejudice was a recurrent theme. This was not surprising given the content of Brexit-related commentary and analysis surrounding the EU referendum. We coded for prejudice when it (and other related concepts, such as racism, discrimination, xenophobia, bigotry) was specifically topicalised in the talk of participants. For instance, an exchange about whether voting for Leave signified intolerance towards migrants would be coded under the theme of prejudice (e.g. Extract 2 in the analysis below). We also coded for prejudice when prejudice and related terms were not explicitly mentioned but were implicitly oriented to (Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015); this was the case in some anti-immigration and anti-asylum related talk in the focus groups.

In the second stage of our analysis, we brought all prejudice-related extracts together and conducted a more in-depth analysis, drawing on critical discursive and rhetorical psychology

¹ Not all participants stated which way they were going to/had voted; some participants in the 2016 focus groups were still undecided and participants in the 2017 focus groups were not directly asked (because both ‘Leaver’ and ‘Remainer’ identities had by the time become potentially problematic in different ways).

(Billig, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998). We explored the different argumentative lines that participants developed to construct and negotiate the relationship between prejudice and Brexit. We examined the rhetorical strategies of self-presentation in the interaction (particularly in relation to claiming unprejudiced identity credentials), and how broader ideological traditions and dilemmas served to anchor these accounts of the relationship between Brexit and prejudice. We thus sought to account for both the sequential here-and-now dynamics of each focus group discussion, employing insights from conversation analytic work, *and* to engage with the wider ideological and cultural context in order to deepen, enrich and contextualise our interpretations.

Analysis

In what follows, we first discuss argumentative lines that constructed support for Brexit as prejudiced; second, we explore argumentative lines which contested the assumed linkage between prejudice and Brexit; lastly, we explore the possibilities of what we call ‘ideological creativity’ in terms of articulating new political positions and also the difficulty of moving beyond polarised discussions of prejudice in the context of Brexit.

Constructing Brexit support as prejudiced

In many accounts, support for Brexit was constructed as the end product of bigotry and prejudice and was therefore treated as in need of explanation. One often repeated explanation referred to the emotionality and irrationality of those who voted Leave. The extract below comes from a focus group with participants who intended to vote Remain:

Extract 1

1 Rob: There's no rational explanation of how they're going to be part of the
2 biggest trading bloc in the world and have total control of their borders. It isn't
3 possible, and when we leave, if they're successful, they will absolutely clamp
4 down on us. The Germans have said it, the French have said it, the European
5 Union's said it.

6 Nick: Oh yeah, there'll be trade wars.

7 Leslie: Yes, we'll be very unpopular, won't we.

8 Rob: They will put us – and Obama's said, we go to the back of the queue. It's
9 going to be a nightmare.

10 Linda: But people aren't listening to those messages.

11 Leslie: They don't care, do they?

12 Linda: The emotion has taken over their brains. [Duncan: Yeah.] Bigotry, not
13 emotion.

14 Rob: Well, somebody said to me last week, this is a terrible thing to say, but
15 somebody said to me last week, "this is not a referendum on Europe, it's an IQ
16 test". (G2: Remain, 2016)

In Extract 1, voting Leave is constructed as irrational and it is related to emotionality and bigotry. The irrationality of Brexit support is evidenced on the basis of the dire economic consequences of an exit from the European Union (l. 6-9) and reinforced with a consensus argument (c.f. Potter & Edwards, 1990) which is further emphasized through the construction of a three-part list (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986): ‘The Germans have said it, the French have said it, the European Union’s said it’. The argumentative line built through this extract is based on the distinction between reason and emotion. This distinction is anchored in the ideology of liberalism which valorises reason and condemns emotionality and prejudice as a biased form of thinking (Billig et al., 1988). Brexit support in the extract is associated with bigotry (l. 12-13), presumably against migrants (given the salience of immigration concerns in pro-Leave accounts; see Curtice, 2016), whilst rational decision making would lead people to vote Remain because of the risks that Brexit would create (especially l. 3-9). In the last turn (l. 14-16), the distinction between Remain and Leave is cast by Rob as a distinction between intelligence and lack thereof. Rob prefaces this point with a disclaimer (‘this is a terrible thing to say, but’) and, by citing someone else, he does not explicitly own the opinion that Leave voters have low IQ. This is presumably because this would violate the social taboo against making (direct) accusations of bias (as these are often dismissed for stifling debate and ‘rupturing’ everyday interactions; Goodman, 2010; Durrheim, 2017), or because it might open Rob up to the accusation that he is himself prejudiced against Leave voters. By citing someone else’s view, Rob is oriented to maintain his neutrality whilst still making the point that the IQ of those who voted Leave is questionable. Interestingly, the other accusations against Leave voters (as irrational and bigoted) in the extract are not treated as accountable. This may be because, given that this is a Remain focus group, these critical opinions are treated as

justified and/or it is possible that, by questioning Leave voters' intelligence, Rob went a 'step too far' with regards to what is 'sayable' in this context.

A second, widely repeated explanation of the Leave position referred to nostalgic nationalism and prejudice towards foreigners. The extract below comes from a focus group with participants who intended to vote Remain:

Extract 2

1 Cathy [interviewer]: Is it all about trade, the Leave?

2 Sarah: No, that's part of it. I don't know what you think about this, I always find
3 them a bunch of little Englanders, who like think, who've got this bizarre rose-
4 tinted view of Britain that we still have an empire, that we're still good old
5 Blighty and that our influence is amazing in the world. And it's not. We're only
6 strong in the world because we're part of the bigger EU.

7 Jessica: Yes, actually, I'll agree with you on that.

8 Sarah: We are known for our diplomacy and, you know, I think our embassies
9 and our ambassadors are used a lot abroad, for our diplomacy. But nothing else.
10 I mean, I often think about Farage, so we leave the EU, is he expecting to take
11 back India by 2020?

12 Jessica: Is that what he said?

13 Sarah: No, but it's what I expect him to be saying. Because like, you know
14 something, we've evolved, we've moved on.

15 Cathy [interviewer]: So, are they trying to keep this sort of national spirit alive?
16 You talk about little Englanders. You know, what is it, what is this little England
17 identity? What is it that they're harping on about?

18 Sarah: The '50s. I don't know, I wasn't born in the '50s. But this marvellous
19 cricket, warm beer and... Women had no rights, women weren't allowed to
20 divorce.

21 Cathy [interviewer]: I don't know, was it all connected to the empire as well,
22 that there was that sort of superiority still around?
23 Sarah: Yeah, probably. I think there's a lot of-
24 Jessica: I think they don't want to be told what to do by somebody that's
25 Sarah: By foreigners.
26 Jessica: By foreigners. I think they're not very good at foreigners [laughs]). It'd
27 be quite interesting to see on Thursday [the day of the referendum] where the
28 proportion of vote comes from, whether it's coming from the cities and outside
29 that, I'm going to find absolutely fascinating as to whether... Because I think, as I
30 said before, I think that the inner cities, we're extremely tolerant of foreigners.
31 Whereas out in the countryside, I don't think they are quite so much. (G5:
32 Remain, 2016)

This extract comes from a focus group where economic concerns were particularly salient. Prior to the exchange quoted in Extract 2, participants argued consistently that the UK should remain in the EU for economic reasons. Here, the interviewer turns the discussion to the arguments for Leave and facilitates a topic shift by tacitly inviting participants to provide other reasons for Brexit support (“Is it all about trade”). Interestingly, issues of identity take centre stage here while trade becomes secondary (l. 1-2). Responding to the interviewer, Sarah constructs Brexit as a backward-looking project that aspires to bring back a long-gone British empire, to which Jessica agrees (l. 1-7). In this account, people that support Leave are constructed as a “bunch of little Englanders”. Following prompting from the interviewer, Sarah explains what she means by Little England identity: it is conservative, outdated and intolerant towards women’s rights (l. 18-20). Sarah also cites what could be understood as cultural factors (“cricket and warm beer”), which she treats as convergent with conservatism and nationalism.

Support for Brexit in the extract is personified in the image of Nigel Farage (l. 10-11), a lead Brexit campaigner. Farage is presented in Sarah’s talk as an imperialist who holds an unrealistic and outdated view of Britain (“is he expecting to take back India by 2020?”; l. 10-14). In response to this, Jessica asks if Farage indeed said this, rather than treating it as a hyperbolic or ironic. Farage is thus positioned as occupying a marginal ideological position, such that he could plausibly have said something like this. Sarah appears to agree with this positioning of Farage (“No, but it’s what I expect him to be saying”). This is therefore a collaborative construction of a leading Leave advocate as marginal or unreasonable. Building on this construction, Leave supporters are constructed as nationalist and imperialist because they, like Nigel Farage, feel that they are like the emperors the past. This attitude is presented as xenophobic and irrational because it is based on an outdated imperialistic perspective that

does not correspond to contemporary Britain (“we’ve evolved, we’ve moved on”). Further, while sovereignty was a key argument for the Leave campaign, here it is related to national arrogance and superiority (“they don’t want to be told what to do”) towards “foreigners”. The prejudice of Brexit supporters therefore has a power dimension (Figgou & Condor, 2006), as it seen as rooted in imperial relations of dominance between colonizers and colonies.

In the last turn (l. 26-31), Jessica elaborates further on the relationship between support for Leave and intolerance by suggesting that the Leave vote share is likely to be larger in the countryside where people are not “quite so much” tolerant of foreigners compared to the inner cities where people like herself are “extremely tolerant of foreigners”. Jessica’s understatement (“they’re not very good at foreigners”) and the laughter that accompanies it allows Jessica to claim her rationality vis-à-vis other people and at the same time to avoid openly criticize others of an extreme prejudiced attitude. Prejudice is on the whole ‘Othered’ (Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016) in this extract: it is attributed to other places (countryside), times (‘50s) and, most importantly, other people (those that support Leave and Farage). This allows the participants to differentiate themselves and establish a liberal and tolerant identity position against the ‘irrational prejudice’ of Leave supporters. Ideologically, this argumentative line draws on the ideal of a liberal and anti-imperialistic tolerance which is presented as suited for the contemporary cosmopolitan world (Andreouli & Howarth, 2019) contrary to little Englanders’ backwardness.

Contesting constructions of Brexit support as prejudiced

The previous section showed some examples of the ways in which support for Brexit was constructed as an indication of prejudice by our participants. More widely, it can be argued that the connection between Brexit support and prejudice has become a symbolic resource

that is commonly mobilized in debates about Brexit, even if only to be contested. In this context, participants who intended to or had voted Leave, were often put in a position of having to account for their vote. The extract below from a mixed focus group provides an example of this.

Extract 3

- 1 Harry: What frustrated me about Brexit was [that] our whole campaign to leave
2 was based on immigration, as far as I'm concerned. Well, that's how I saw it. I
3 felt people who voted to leave have now been let down because the two who
4 were leading the campaign, Gove and Boris [Johnson], have upped sticks and
5 gone, there's nothing left for them in their point of view. And it was all down
6 basically to "oh, the NHS is going to get so many hundreds of thousands a week"
- 7 Oliver: I don't know. I think it was a large proportion of people like me that
8 voted on an economic basis. [...]
- 9 Greg: Why do people not vote Remain? If it wasn't because of that? Given that,
10 you know, [they] were quite well off in Wales because Europe made money.
- 11 Oliver: Yeah.
- 12 Greg: Then what was it that made them vote leave?
- 13 Oliver: I don't know.
- 14 Greg: Well we've got an idea (laughing). It's this kind of stuff [pointing to Leave
15 posters; Appendix A, Figures 4-6].
- 16 Oliver: Well, ask them.
- 17 Greg: Racism.
- 18 Oliver: But, but but but, for people to be branded racists, as a blanket term for
19 everybody that votes Leave.
- 20 Connor: Yep yeah.
- 21 Oliver: Is absolute bollocks.
- 22 Connor: Yeah, there is economics as well. (G12: Mixed, 2017)

In the beginning of the extract, Harry voices his disappointment with the Leave campaign that, in his view, stoked fears of immigration. Harry's use of the pronoun 'our' to refer to the Leave campaign (l. 1) suggests that he was Leave voter, but we cannot confirm this (as Harry did not explicitly state which way he voted). In Harry's account, there is a distinction between the Leave campaign and the people that voted Leave: it is the former that is anti-immigration (l. 1-2), while the latter are presented as being let down by Brexit-supporting politicians who have broken their campaign promises (l. 3-6). Oliver, who voted Leave, challenges the implication that those who voted Leave have been misinformed. He argues that he (like other voters of Leave) voted on the basis of economic considerations (l. 7-8), suggesting that this was not a case of misinformation but of sound decision making. This argument orients to and discounts the type of argument seen in Extract 1 (i.e., that Leave voters are irrational). Oliver's point, however, does not go uncontested: Greg, who voted Remain, voices a challenge to Oliver's point by questioning why people in Wales, despite having benefited from EU funds, voted Leave (l. 9-12), thus effectively reinstating the argument of the irrationality of Brexit. Oliver provides a non-preferred (non-answer) response ("I don't know") (Clayman, 2002) (l. 13), leaving room for Greg to directly accuse Leave voters of racism (l. 17). However, making accusations of racism is itself accountable because it can be seen as stifling reasonable debate and therefore as so grave that it can only be uttered in extreme cases. As soon as Greg explicitly mentions racism, Oliver, with the support of Connor, challenges the overgeneralization of people that voted Leave as racists (l. 18-21). It is the accusation of racism that is presented here as irrational (because it relies on categorical thinking and over-generalization, rather than rational analysis; see Figgou & Condor, 2006). The establishment of Brexit support as a non-racist political position allows Connor to reinstate the point about the role of economics in Leave voting (l. 22), despite Greg just having challenged this very argument in response to Oliver. These references to

economics can be understood as instances of discursive deracialisation (Augoustinos & Every, 2007), that is, attributing actions that can be construed as racist (such as voting Leave) to elements that are not race-implicative (i.e. economics). They can also be seen as indicative of a neoliberal rationality which valorizes the economy (Brown, 2015) as the sphere of neutral, rational decision making, contrary to the emotionality of politics (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018).

Participants who intended to/had voted Leave deployed additional arguments to dissociate concerns about immigration (which were very salient in the Leave campaign) from prejudice. The extract below comes from a mixed focus group:

Extract 4

- 1 Mandy: I'm not against immigration actually. I know a lot of Leave people are. I
- 2 just think it needs to be controlled. I think that migrants have become the blame
- 3 for it all and I actually feel sorry for them, because they're only trying to give
- 4 themselves a better life. It's because-
- 5 Jim: Some of them.
- 6 Mandy: Some of them, but I actually think that if - I'm probably going to say
- 7 something really - I think our Government is to blame, because if they hadn't
- 8 made it so easy to come in and to be able to take advantage of our system,
- 9 which any human being, if they come from a poor country and they see that
- 10 people are living what they deem as a wonderful life in this country - they don't
- 11 all come over and live a wonderful life, some of them live in appalling conditions,
- 12 but it's still better than what they come from - then they're going to do it. That's
- 13 human nature. (G10: Mixed, 2017)

The extract above starts with Mandy, who voted Leave, saying that she is not against immigration compared to other voters of Leave (l. 1). Employing a disclaimer similar to the well-researched “I’m not racist but” (van Dijk, 1992), she voices an argument in favour of controlling immigration (l. 1-2) (presumably in contrast to stopping immigration altogether, which is potentially hearable as an anti-immigration view and could open Mandy up to accusations of prejudice). Mandy’s accountability concerns are indicative of the widespread assumption that Leave support is an anti-immigration position. Mandy indeed concedes that “a lot of Leave people” are anti-immigration and, by implication, prejudiced. At the same time, she works to discount possible counter-arguments (Billig, 1987) and to position herself as both a Leave voter and not prejudiced. Mandy achieves this by making a distinction between being in favour of controlling immigration and being against migrants. She argues that high levels of immigration are the government’s fault for not having enforced sufficient controls (l. 7-8), expresses regret for migrants who bear the brunt of people’s frustration over immigration levels (l. 2-4), and positions them into the shared superordinary category of being human with a ‘natural’ desire to seek a better life in the UK (l. 9-13). By humanizing migrants whilst blaming ‘soft’ immigration policy, Mandy positions herself simultaneously as anti-immigration and pro-migrants. Mandy draws on a discourse of humanitarianism which allows her to present herself as liberal towards those in need and also as rational, moderate and pragmatic (Every, 2008), because she supports ‘controlling’, not stopping, immigration.

As we saw in Extract 3, accusations of prejudice directed to those who voted Leave could be constructed as an unjustified and irrational overgeneralization (Figgou & Condor, 2006). This line of argument reverses the association of Remain/tolerance and Leave/prejudice (towards migrants), so that it is supporters of Remain that are presented as prejudiced (towards Leave

voters). In the extract below from a mixed focus group, we identify a similar line of argument that works to challenge the reasonableness of Remain supporters and to differentiate voting Leave from extreme prejudice.

Extract 5

1 Emily [interviewer]: Well I've got some more, different posters [showing Remain
2 posters; Figures 1-3 in Appendix A] if you want something else to have a look at.
3 What do you have to say in response to these ones?

4 James: I mean. This looks like Adolf Hitler's face!

5 Paul: Yes, yes.

6 James: Well that is disgusting. I would not, I'd tear that up.

7 Emily: Why?

8 James: Because if you think of a man like Hitler, who was the [most] terrible man
9 who ever lived on this earth apart from Napoleon, Genghis Khan and all the rest
10 of it. But, you can't compare that with what we're trying to do. I mean Hitler was
11 an awful man, and I was a war baby.

12 Andrew: It's the same sort of thing as the last ones, it's the exception. You know,
13 I mean, I don't like Murdoch, Farage, Galloway, don't know who Nick Griffin is,
14 Marine Le Pen, I don't like any of them. And I wouldn't want to associate with
15 them. But more than 50% of the population voted to leave. And it's not because
16 of what Nigel Farage said. (G13: Mixed, 2017)

In this extract, the interviewer introduces material from the Remain campaign (see Appendix A). Participants initially discuss a Remain campaign poster, showing Nigel Farage's face, with the shadow of the microphone giving him the appearance of a 'Hitler-esque' moustache (Figure 1 in Appendix A). Throughout the extract, James and Andrew, who both voted Leave, position themselves as offended at the suggestion that the politics of Hitler have parallels with support for Leave. James strongly argues against drawing such links and appears upset (l. 6, 8-11). Similar to Extract 3, James questions the reasonableness of accusing supporters of Leave of extreme prejudice because there is no legitimate basis for this comparison to Hitler (l. 10-11). He draws on both an anti-imperialistic ideological frame (which condemns historical figures like Napoleon and Genghis Khan) and on a liberal tolerance frame which condemns prejudice. In the next turn, Andrew does not question that these extreme political views can be found among advocates of Leave, but he argues that they would be the exception (l. 12) – this echoes Extract 4, in which Mandy concedes the existence of prejudice among Leave voters while distancing herself from such prejudice. Referring to another Remain poster (Figure 2 in Appendix A), Andrew differentiates between Leave voters, on the one hand, and Brexit-supporting politicians and other stakeholders, on the other (l. 13-16). The former are presented as ordinary and many (“over 50% of the population”), while the latter are singled out as extreme particular cases (c.f. Billig, 1987). By distinguishing between these high-profile Brexiters, who are presented here as discrediting the Leave vote, and ordinary people who voted Leave, Andrew’s argument can be read as an attempt to normalize the Leave vote as the voice of the majority, and, by implication, as common-sense and reasonable.

The practice of EU governance (and the Remain project as a whole) was itself constructed as racist in some focus groups. The extract below comes from a mixed focus group:

Extract 6

1 Emily [interviewer]: So, if you wanted to leave, would that not give you a bad
2 self-image? Would you not get judged for wanting to leave?

3 Aaron: Well, you don't have to justify your vote to anyone. No one sees you
4 vote.

5 Peter: Leaving the EU kind of helps people that are refugees and- or like non-EU
6 citizens more in terms of migration, I suppose? Because it means that people
7 who are from Europe aren't in front of the queue. It will be equal for everyone
8 now, that's why it's less racist. (G11: Mixed, 2017)

Preceding the extract above was a discussion of the ways that the Leave campaign manipulated people's fears over immigration. In this context, the interviewer asks directly about the implications of this for the self-image of Leave voters, thus bringing the issue of self-presentation into the discussion (l. 1-2). Aaron refers to the principle that citizens have the right to vote and are not obliged to justify their vote. This formulation allows for the possibility of being embarrassed about how he has voted while avoiding being held accountable by virtue of being able to keep it a secret (indeed, by nodding to the democratic principle of free voting through secret ballot, Aaron establishes strong grounds on which to justify not revealing one's vote). Peter, a Leave voter who seems to have construed the interviewer's question as associating Brexit support with anti-immigration prejudice, does not accept the question's premise. His account is based on a critique of Eurocentrism: while remaining in the EU would maintain a hierarchy between EU citizens and non-EU citizens in terms of their rights of movement, leaving would create a level playing field for all migrants (l. 5-7). This makes Brexit "equal for everyone" and "less racist" (l. 7-8). In this extract, as in Extract 2, we see again the assumption that prejudice involves a power dimension whereby some categories of people are treated unequally relative to others. In Peter's account, because Brexit would equalize the discrepancy between EU and non-EU migrants, it follows that support for Leave cannot, by definition, be based on racism. Peter employs the discursive strategy of 'reversal' (van Dijk, 1992) whereby accusations of racism levelled against Leave voters are reversed. He suggests that Leavers are anti-racist and Remain voters are (more) racist.

The notion of prejudice is 'stretched' (c.f. Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, 2019) in Extract 6 to mean the exact opposite of what it commonly refers to, particularly in Remain-supporting accounts: from being associated with Eurosceptic and anti-immigration attitudes, prejudice is

here associated with Eurocentrism. This line of reasoning has been common among some Brexit supporters and can be seen in a broader narrative of ‘cosmopolitan Brexit’ and ‘global Britain’ (Andreouli, 2019) which gained prominence following the referendum. As has also been shown in analyses of skills-based arguments on immigration (that migrants should be assessed on the basis of their skills, not their nationality), the notion of meritocracy works to discursively individualize migration and deracialize the exclusion of migrants (Gibson & Booth, 2018). Drawing on this discourse of meritocratic equality, speakers argue for stricter immigration controls whilst presenting themselves as reasonable and tolerant. This is similar to Mandy’s account in Extract 4, where a ‘controlled’ approach to immigration is presented as moderate and reasonable.

Beyond prejudice in Brexit debates?

Our analysis shows that the connection between support for Leave and prejudice, particularly around discussions of immigration and border controls, was a widely shared frame of reference, but also one that was highly contested. This framing of the debate posed a dilemma for left-wing participants who were critical of the EU but not on the basis of immigration and border control concerns. The extract below comes from a focus group with a group of left-leaning young participants in London, all of whom intended to vote Remain and positioned themselves categorically in favour of immigration (see also Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, 2019):

Extract 7

- 1 Amanda: I'm quite surprised, because I feel like everyone's focusing on the far-
- 2 right, UKIP, kind of exiters, but there's definitely, there's got to be a side that's
- 3 coming from the left, you know? [...] and it's like Jeremy Corbyn, until recently,
- 4 he was - I don't know if he was undecided, he just wasn't committing himself,

5 because there is the idea that you'd like to - not decentralise, but to be more
6 local [...] So I get that, but it seems to me like people who are on the left who
7 want to leave, like almost can't speak out, like they've lost a voice, because they
8 just are scared of looking like they're far-right and xenophobic. [...]

9 Antony: I think there's a lot of anger about how Greece got treated, as well, the
10 banking crisis, and how Germany is very dominant in Europe. There's a lot of
11 people have deep issues with that, I think.

12 Cathy [interviewer]: So, do you think there's slight anti-Germany stuff, might be
13 resurfacing just a tad?

14 Antony: Yes, and I think that feeling of getting one against big business and big
15 banking and the financial sector. But it makes me feel a little uneasy about the
16 whole thing, because you are essentially voting for status quo, and it does feel
17 like most big business, and certainly the banking sector, want to stay in. (G3:
18 Remain, 2016)

In this focus group, there was a strong pro-Remain consensus. In this specific stretch of talk, however, participants engaged in a critical discussion of the European Union. Three critiques of the EU are expressed in this extract: that the EU does not allow for political decentralisation (l. 5-6), that power is unequally distributed within the block with harmful consequences such as the mishandling of the Greek sovereign debt crisis (l. 9-11), and that the EU supports the financial establishment (l. 14-17). All these are presented as left arguments and are associated with Jeremy Corbyn, the leftist leader of the UK Labour Party (l. 3; l. 6-7). This critique of the EU can be understood in terms of ‘Lexit’ (‘Left Exit’), that is, support of Brexit from a left political perspective on the basis of an anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation ideological position. For Amanda, given these critiques of the EU, it is surprising that there is not more discussion about a left Brexit, suggesting the left would normally be expected to support Leave. Antony appears to agree with Amanda. He argues that, while a vote for Remain is a vote for the status quo that privileges big business and the banking sector (l. 14-17), support for Leave challenges the status quo, which works for the powerful (like Germany) but mistreats the powerless (e.g. Greece). There is an assumption here, as in Extract 5, that actions that are oriented towards the protection of the powerless cannot be markers of prejudice (Figgou & Condor, 2006; Inman, Huerta & Oh, 1998; O’Brien, Kinias & Major, 2008). Hence, supporting Leave to challenge the power asymmetries of the status quo (and not to exclude migrants) can be constructed as a progressive political position that is aligned with the left (a similar argument was made in Extract 6, where it was the concern over the imbalance between EU/non-EU citizens that made support for Brexit non-racist).

However, and while support for Remain may feel “uneasy” (l.15), supporting Leave is more troubling (c.f. Wetherell, 1998). From the perspective of these leftist participants, Brexiter is a tainted political identity that is associated with far-right and xenophobic views (l. 8), and which makes a Lexit perspective untenable and silenced. As Amanda puts it, “people who are on the left who want to leave” feel that they “can’t speak out, like they’ve lost a voice” (l. 6-7). Overall, given the widely assumed link between support for Brexit and prejudice, particularly among supporters of Remain, participants found it difficult to support a ‘Lexit’ perspective as it would jeopardise their leftist identity credentials (see also Andreouli, Kaposi & Stenner, 2019).

Discussion

In this paper, our aim has been to examine how the links between Brexit support and prejudice are constructed and contested in lay discourse, their ideological foundations, and the political implications of these constructions. Our study challenges analyses of Brexit that seek to develop single causality frameworks (Clarke & Newman, 2019) about what led to Brexit and, in effect, about what makes citizens Remainers or Brexiter, Eurosceptics or Europhiles, nationalists or cosmopolitans and so on. Our work also challenges traditional psychological research which seeks to establish correlations between relatively stable psychological characteristics and political positions, such as pro/anti-EU or pro/anti-immigration. Instead, we draw attention to the way that lay political reasoning about Brexit is situated and contingent on interactional dynamics (e.g., self-presentation concerns in the presence of those who voice opposing and/or similar perspectives). Relatedly, we showed that prejudice is collaboratively constructed in interaction (Condor et al., 2006; Durrheim, Greener & Whitehead, 2015) and also that these constructions of prejudice occupy a central role in structuring, justifying, or delegitimizing positions toward Brexit.

In our focus groups, Brexit-supporting views were routinely treated as equivalent to anti-immigration views and, as such, they were often tainted as prejudiced, particularly among participants who supported Remain. From the perspectives of participants who supported Leave, this raised accountability concerns and led to attempts to present Brexit as aligned with norms of reason and tolerance. Towards this end, several rhetorical strategies were used in Brexit-supporting talk in our focus groups. First, presenting Brexit as economically beneficial (Extract 3) was one such strategy that enabled speakers to dissociate Brexit from immigration whilst at the same time constructing it as economically sound for the UK, thus countering the idea that Brexit support is based on irrational prejudice. A second strategy for disassociating Leave support from hostility towards migrants was making a ‘two kinds’ argument (Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos & Taulke-Johnson, 2018). This was achieved by distinguishing between concerns over ‘soft-touch’ immigration management, which were constructed as reasonable, and prejudice towards migrants as people, which was seen as not acceptable (Extract 4). A third strategy was to ‘Other’ Brexit prejudice (c.f. Andreouli, Greenland & Howarth, 2016) to extreme cases such as the far-right, whilst maintaining the ordinariness of the average Brexit supporter (Extract 5). There was, more generally, a recurrent practice of constructing the ‘reasonable/rational Leave voter’ against the widespread view that Leavers are irrational and prejudiced (Extracts 4 and 5). Another strategy for claiming positive Leaver identities was linking Brexit support with values that are understood as progressive, such as humanitarian compassion (Extract 4), equality and anti-racism (Extract 6).

The different constructions of the relationship between Brexit support and prejudice are not only consequential at the local interactional level. Importantly, they are also politically

consequential: they advance different political projects (for/against Brexit and for/against different kinds of Brexit), and they work to silence some perspectives (those which are constructed as irrational and bigoted) whilst giving voice to others (those constructed as reasonable and liberal) (see also, Durrheim et al., 2018; Durrheim, Quayle, & Dixon, 2016). More specifically, Remain-supporting accounts constructed Brexit as a prejudiced political position, and therefore attempted to delegitimise Brexit by casting it as irrational and bigoted. On the other hand, the idea that Brexit support is associated with prejudice was contested in accounts that put forward different visions of Brexit (e.g. Brexit as a cosmopolitan project). This was the case some in Leave-supporting accounts. But the notion that support for Brexit is the outcome of prejudice was also challenged in some Remain accounts: in Extract 7, the relationship between Brexit support and prejudice was challenged on the basis that Brexit can potentially challenge intra-EU power asymmetries.

This analysis illustrates the complexity of lay political accounts around Brexit that resist neat dichotomies such as tolerant Remain/prejudiced Leave, left/right, pro/anti-immigration and so on. The nuance of lay accounts is evident in the ideological complexity of participants' accounts. Talk about the EU referendum and Brexit in the focus groups was anchored in diverse but entangled ideological foundations such as: the liberal distinction between reason and bias (Extracts 1 and 5), the neoliberal valorization of economic issues over other political matters (Extract 3), post-imperial tolerance (Extract 2) and anti-imperial expansionism (Extract 5), humanitarianism (Extract 4), colour-blind equality (Extract 6), and anti-capitalism (Extract 7). This ideological complexity allowed for variability in participants' accounts and for movement between different positions (supporting Billig's, 1987, idea of people as argumentative thinkers). Participants drew on diverse ideological themes to construct complex accounts towards Brexit. We describe this as 'ideological creativity'; that

is, the entanglement of various, sometimes seemingly opposing, ideological themes to construct nuanced and novel political arguments that correspond to the demands of specific rhetorical projects in lay political debate. Participants may for example combine ideas that are commonly seen as left (e.g. anti-racism and meritocracy) and ideas seen as right-wing (e.g. Euroscepticism and immigration control) to produce complex accounts about the merits and dangers of Brexit. This was evident, for instance, in Extracts 6 and 7 where the norm against prejudice was used to argue in opposing directions: in the first case Brexit was presented as a cosmopolitan and meritocratic project, thus conforming to the norm against prejudice, while in the latter extract (albeit with caveats) it was presented as a nationalistic project that violates this norm. New ideological constellations can thus start to emerge from the ideological creativity that develops in the exchanges of lay political debate. For example, we saw an argument of ‘cosmopolitan anti-Europeanism’ in Extract 6 and an account in favour of a ‘pro-diversity anti-globalization’ in Extract 7. We suggest that scholars researching discursive constructions of prejudice pay more attention to this ideological complexity and, more importantly, to the creativity that lay actors may exhibit in their interactions. Our research shows that there is no single or predetermined argumentative route for achieving rhetorical ends; for example, prejudice denial may work to argue in very different directions and to support very different political projects.

On the other hand, our analysis also shows that ideological creativity can be restricted and resisted by established patterns of thinking which may be too invested or too entrenched to be open to change. This was the case in our research where the ideological exchange between the Remain and Leave ‘camps’ was hindered by the polarity of Brexit politics. This was particularly shown in Extract 7 which shows that supporting Brexit from a leftist perspective can be a ‘troubling’ (c.f. Wetherell, 1998) identity position (see also Andreouli, Kaposi &

Stenner, 2019). This is because support for Brexit has been predominantly constructed as a political position that is prejudiced, illiberal and broadly incommensurable with the left, while, conversely, pro-EU positions are treated as open-minded, tolerant and liberal. In this discursive frame, the critique of the EU and of current political arrangements is seen as only feasible within an anti-immigration and national protectionist narrative, making it very difficult to criticise the status quo of economic globalisation without also taking a stab at cosmopolitan values (see Gilbert, 2017). Although not directly demonstrated in Extract 6, we can speculate that the position of ‘cosmopolitan anti-Europeanism’ is equally difficult to sustain given the very strong association of Brexit with nationalism in popular discourse. We see here that constructions of prejudice provide the ideological scaffold for the polarisation between Remain and Leave by hardening the identity stakes of the political actors involved in this debate. Three years on (at the time of writing, in 2019), this polarity remains entrenched (Curtice, 2018; Hobolt & Tiley, 2019). We therefore suggest that despite the variety and complexity of lay accounts as exemplified in our data, the dominant political narratives seem to have been unable to provide a space for more nuanced perspectives, thus polarising the debate into a pro/anti EU schema and leaving little room for the creation of new ideas.

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Table 1. Research participants

Focus group	No of participants	Gender	Age	Location	Voting intention (G2-G10)/ Vote (G11-G13)
Pilot interview	1	1M	20	London	Leave
G2	4	2F, 2M	50-60	Cumbria	Remain
G3	4	2F, 2M	30-40	London	Remain
G4	6	3F, 3M	30-45	Kent	Mixed
G5	2	2F	40-60	London	Remain
G6	4	3M	40-50	Hertfordshire	Leave
G7	3	2F,1M	30-40	Hertfordshire	Leave
G8	3	3F	30-40	London	Remain
G9	6	6M	30-55	London	Mixed
G10	6	4F, 2M	40-70	Hampshire	Mixed
G11	4	4M	20-22	South Wales	Mixed
G12	4	4M	45-52	South Wales	Mixed
G13	4	4M	70-77	South England	Mixed

Appendix A: EU referendum campaign posters (2016) used in focus groups 11- 13



Figure 1. 'Remain' poster 1



Figure 2. 'Remain' poster 2



Remain kind
Remain open
Remain inclusive
Remain tolerant
Remain together

Vote Remain [X]

Figure 3. 'Remain' poster 3



Figure 4. 'Leave' poster 1



Figure 5. 'Leave' poster 2



Figure 6. 'Leave' poster 3