

The Cultural Political Economy of Brexit in the Age of Austerity. A Corpus-Assisted Critical Realist Multimedia Discourse Analysis¹

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Abstract

Although the form of linguistic articulations in both mass and social media is central to understanding the construction of the nexus of austerity and Brexit, something else must be brought into the picture to understand their force. From the perspective of Cultural Political Economy this something else has to be located in material social structures and is essential to provide methods that can capture the interplay of the form of and the force behind multimedia discourses. The paper at hand presents a corpus-assisted critical realist multimedia discourse analysis that is able to do so.

This triangulation is made possible by the philosophical “underlabourer” of critical realism that allows for a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods on the basis of a post-positivist methodology that highlights that methods do neither produce unproblematic facts nor mere fictions, but something in between that can be called “ficts”. When they are understood as producer of ficts, corpus linguistic tools like keyword analyses are well-suited to deal with a large amount of data and are, therefore, a powerful tool in a time where the quantity of information steadily increases, especially in social media. As these quantitative regularities do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted qualitatively with the help of a critical realist discourse analysis that is able to “dig deeper” by connecting them with material social

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structures and, therefore, to explain the forces behind the linguistic surface and to criticize these in order to enhance human emancipation. The general features of this methodological triangulation will be exemplified by offering an explanatory critique of the discursive construction of “Brexit” in the age of austerity found in 193 texts of two traditional newspapers (The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph) that contain the search terms “Brexit” and “austerity” and in 30,000 Twitter messages containing the hashtag “#Brexit” contain the string “austerity”, posted between 06.05.2016 and 05.07.2016.

This paper will first explain the basic (meta-)theoretical assumptions of Critical Realism and Cultural Political Economy (section 1). Building on these foundations, the basic tenets and pitfalls of the methodological triangulation will be discussed (section 2) before it will be used within a “plausibility probe” of the cultural political economy of austerity and Brexit. It will show that neoliberal, Keynesian, nationalist and non-ideological critical imaginaries can be found within the media, and that the latter face a structural disadvantage because of the material and institutional dominance of the finance-dominated accumulation within the United Kingdom (section 3). Corresponding thoughts about the prospects about the fulfilment of a radical change in Britain in the direction of human emancipation conclude this paper (section 4).

1. Critical Realism and the cultural political economy of austerity and Brexit

The substantial arguments of Cultural Political Economy (CPE) are based on the meta-theoretical foundation of Critical Realism. Critical Realism in general and CPE in particular make it possible to navigate between the Scylla of textualism and the Charybdis of economic determinism (Sum/Jessop, 2013:147-95). The “holy trinity” (Bhaskar, 2002:12) of Critical Realism is characterized by “ontological realism (that there is a reality independent of the mind(s) that would wish to come to know it); epistemological relativism (that all beliefs are socially produced); and judgemental rationalism (that despite epistemological relativism, it is still possible, in principle, to choose between competing theories).” (Wight, 2006:26)

Ontological realism is based on the idea that social reality is an open system that is stratified between the levels of the real, the actual and the empirical (Elder-Vass, 2008:458). Because social reality can, therefore, neither be reduced to the actualization nor the empirical observation of real causal tendencies, causality here means something different than in positivist terms (Porpora, 2011). Causality here is not coupled with the goal to find reified ‘law-like regularities’ but instead must be understood in the sense of causal mechanisms that have the tendency to lead to certain events under certain conditions. Therefore, causal mechanisms

may be activated and they may also be observed empirically but their reality is not dependent on their actualization and even less on their empirical observation because in open systems counter-tendencies may always lead to their suppression. Although empirical analyses remain an important part of every kind of research (Wight, 2006:35), knowledge is, therefore, not reducible to empirical observation in open systems: “This is an explicit rejection of the Empiricist approach which states that only what can be demonstrated through experimentation is ‘knowledge’ – i.e. realism argues there are mechanisms that can be postulated as being in effect, even if they cannot (at a particular given point in time) be empirically proven.” (Hardy, 2011:81).

Critical Realism distinguishes between different kinds of causal mechanism in respect to their time-, space-, praxis- and concept-dependence (Benton, 1998), that means whether they are (highly) transitive as intersubjective meaning-giving or relatively intransitive like some essential causal powers and tendencies in material human subjects (Durkin, 2014:152, Griebel, forthcoming) and in material objects (Lawson, 2007). Accordingly, for Critical Realism, meaning is not reducible to the level of signifiers and signifieds but is formed within a “semiotic triangle” (Bhaskar, 2008:222f.); the referents of meaning-giving possess essential causal powers that are not reducible to the level of discourse. For Critical Realism, non-discursive and discursive mechanisms stand in an emergent relationship, that means that “one diachronically, or perhaps synchronically, arises out of the other, but is capable of reacting back on the first and is in any event causally and taxonomically irreducible to it” (Bhaskar, 1994:73). Intersubjective meaning structures have to be understood as causal mechanisms (Banta, 2012) on the ground of this “emergent powers materialism” (Bhaskar, 1997:144).

For some radical constructivist approaches, Critical Realism may smell of an “residual positivism” as it is said to “err on the side of abstracting mechanisms from the historical contexts in which they function, thus reifying them in a way that constrains their contingency and militates against their full contextualization.” (Glynos/Howarth, 2007:3) But these critics misunderstand Critical Realism, because many important mechanisms (for example competition in capitalism) or even most social mechanisms are, of course, understood as time-, space-, praxis- and concept-dependence and contextualized accordingly. However, *some* mechanisms like the human wish to flourish and to avoid suffering (Sayer, 2007) are indeed essential properties. In addition, some radical constructivists at least “flirt” with a “certain essentialism” like *jouissance* in Lacanian discourse analyses (Stavrakakis, 2007:77) or the we/us antagonism (Howarth, 2010:313). But despite some similarities between Critical Realism and radical constructivist approaches (Pühretmayer, 2010), “the small, but important,

difference” (Wight, 2006:165) between the both remains: Whereas critical realism argues that essential causal powers of referents play an important role, critical social constructivist accounts deny this (Laclau/Bhaskar, 1998).

Nevertheless, in order to offer a normative foundation for a critical social science that is more than a “crypto-normative” position (Sayer, 2009:776) of a self-dissolving dissolvent (Adorno, 1974:154, Morton, 2005:443) the “flirt” of radical social constructivists with some kind of essentialism has to become a loving marriage. Critical Realism, accordingly, follows a (qualified) ethical naturalism that believes in the possibility of social science to discover moral truths and to offer an explanatory critique of social ills in order to enhance human emancipation (Mingers, 2009, Elder-Vass, 2010) Critical Realists are, of course, aware that the talk about essential causal powers may be a speculation² and even be wrong, but “[g]etting things right is a practical, a political, and an ethical imperative, and although achieving it may be impossible, or knowing when we have achieved it extremely difficult, we cannot give up on the aspiration.” (Wight, 2007:380).

CPE uses this foundation to argue that the levels of semiosis, that is intersubjective meaning-giving in the form of imaginaries, and the extra-semiotic features of reality stand in a dialectic relationship. “Imaginaries are semiotic systems that frame individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculation about that world.” (Sum/Jessop, 2013:165). They help people to go on in a complex world. Imaginaries can be distinguished on the basis of their normative content. In respect to the recent financial and economic crisis, Fairclough and Fairclough (Fairclough/Fairclough, 2012:7, italics in original) detect “[a] primary division in arguments [...] between those which proceed from non-systemic accounts of the crisis to get back to ‘normal’, the ‘*status quo ante*’ or the economic situation which prevailed before the crisis, and those which proceed from systemic accounts of the crisis“. Non-systemic accounts just recognised a crisis *in* the capitalist formation, whereas systemic interpretations saw a crisis *of* capitalism. The latter accounts criticize capitalism in favour of human emancipation, whereas the former do not.³ It is important to note that, in contrast to a radical social constructivist understanding of semiosis, imaginaries should not be equated with ideologies (Sum/Jessop, 2013:170-72). But insofar as “the function of an ideology in any given society is to cover up the exploitation that prevails in it” (Collier, 2007:113), imaginaries are ideological when they contribute to the (re-)production of exploitive “power

² It is no coincidence, therefore, that there is a broad overlap between Critical Realism and the “speculative turn” in philosophy. See Bryant et al. (2011) and Gironi (2012).

³ For an analysis of the multimodal constructions of austerity in the Guardian based on this basic distinction see Griebel (2017). Building on this general insight Griebel (Griebel, forthcoming) offers a more detailed normative foundation of an explanatory critique build on the materialist social psychology of Erich Fromm.

over” relations.⁴ In contrast to systemic accounts, non-systemic imaginaries are, therefore, ideological with regard to economic relations.

In respect to the distribution of certain imaginaries media function as “nodal actors”, that “can make a difference thanks to their different capacities to persuade, read particular conjunctures, displace opponents, and rearticulate discourses and imaginaries in timely fashion.” (Sum/Jessop, 2013:166) They serve as “crucial intermediaries in mobilizing elite and/or popular support behind competing imaginaries.” (Sum/Jessop, 2013:167). From a critical realist perspective (Toynbee, 2008), “media” can be understood as “systems of human relations among social positions” (Porpora, 1989:198), used for communicative purposes. Media differ in respect of the shape of these structures (Bateman, 2016:56ff.). Whereas traditional mass media like printed newspapers are a “one-to-many broadcasting mechanism” [...], social media delivers content via a network of participants where the content can be published by anyone, but still distributed across potentially large-scale audiences.” (Page et al., 2014:5) Although printed media still play an important role in the distribution of certain imaginaries and the corresponding “production of consent” (Hall, 1982:81-84) the power held by newspaper editors has been challenged due to increased participation in social media (Baker et al., 2013:3), a participation that is, of course, itself marked by power structures and inequalities (Robinson et al., 2015).

The twitter network shows a variety of idiosyncrasies (such as the act of retweeting a tweet or following a user) which we do not consider in detail in the analysis at hand. However, it is worth mentioning that not all tweets can be regarded as genuine user content; some of the tweets might be produced by social bots and some content is automatically created when users click on share-buttons of websites (Schäfer et al., forthcoming). Another important feature of Twitter is that the communication format is very restrictive, it used to restrict the length of messages to 140 characters until very recently. This has not only consequences for the linguistic choices on Twitter in general (Murthy, 2012:1069f.) but also for the form of imaginaries and ideologies on Twitter, for the character restriction goes hand in hand with a compression of ideology (Fuchs, 2016b). Despite these differences, the relationship between traditional mass media and social media should not be understood as a duality, but as one of interdependence.

⁴ In Critical Realism, “power over” or power₂ relations have to be distinguished from “power to” or power₁ relations: “Power₁ is the transformative capacity intrinsic to the concept of action as such, whereas power₂ is the capacity to get one’s way against either the over wishes and/or the real interests of others either in virtue of structures of exploitation, domination, subjugation and control, i.e. generalized master-slave-type relations.” (Bhaskar, 1994:200) The relativistic and “crypto-normative” position of radical social constructivism knows only power₂ relations. See also Sayer (2012:188-91).

To name only one of these interdependencies, Tweets often refer to texts that have been published in (online) newspapers (Fuchs, 2017:44).⁵

But although the analysis of imaginaries and media that distribute them is an essential task in itself in order to study different constructions of reality and of the power structures found within it, it is not enough to reconstruct imaginaries and discourses in different forms of media to answer the question *why* certain imaginaries get selected and institutionalized. The latter

“must have some significant, albeit necessarily partial, correspondence to real material interdependencies in the actually existing economic and political fields and their articulation with the wider ensemble of social relations. It is the interaction between the discursive and extra-discursive that gives relatively successful economic and political imaginaries their performative, constitutive force in the material world”. (Sum/Jessop, 2013:160)

Accordingly, and in line with the semiotic triangle, imaginaries cannot be understood by their semiotic form alone, but have to be analyzed as part of a “historical structure” (Cox, 1981), that is composed of ideas, institutions *and* material forces. Hegemony is based on a fit of these three dimensions. Although the relative importance of these elements varies in different time-space contexts, it can be argued that we can detect a proliferation of different imaginaries in times of “organic crises” within a historical structure. “An organic crisis is characterized by a loss of political hegemony by governing elites as many citizens cease to believe the rhetoric of their leaders and turn away from traditional governing parties to anti-regime alternatives.” (Baker/Schnapper, 2015:3) This is the time when the level of semiosis is most powerful. But material factors are getting more and more important when we move from the phase of variation to the ones of selection and retention or institutionalization. The power of materiality privileges imaginaries that are connected and grounded in material social structures and the accumulation regimes they form (Sum/Jessop, 2013:403).⁶ The loss of hegemony may, therefore, just be temporary and this explains why the different crises within capitalist regimes have led to a short re-politization of economic reality but not to the abandonment of capitalism. At best, this interplay of semiotic and material factors has led to a period of “interregnum”, that can also be felt in respect to austerity and Brexit, a situation in which in the words of Gramsci “the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” The nexus between austerity and Brexit found within the media texts can only be understood within this context, its contradictions and the accompanying instances of “organic crises” of the neoliberal British economic regime (Jessop, 2016, Simon, 1982).

⁵ From a (post-)Marxist perspective, this interdependence is also due to the determination of different cultural forms by material forces in the *first* instance (Hall, 1986).

⁶ In this paper, we will basically focus on the phase of variation and only briefly discuss the developments after the period under investigation here.

2. Studying austerity & Brexit – methodological considerations

To be able to uncover the variety of different economic imaginaries accompanying the cultural political economy of austerity and Brexit, texts that contain both strings “austerity” and “brexit”⁷ that have been published in a conservative (Daily Telegraph) and in a supposedly left-wing (The Guardian) newspaper as well as on *Twitter* have been collected for the period between 06.05.2016 and 05.07.2016. The newspaper texts have been gathered via *LexisNexis*,⁸ the Tweets were downloaded via the official REST API of Twitter using the ids collected by Milajevs between May and July 2016.⁹ The overall analysed corpus is summarized in table 2.

	Guardian	Telegraph	Twitter
Number of texts/Tweets	165	28	30,000
Number of tokens	206,882	24,273	614,195

Table 1: Corpus, own illustration

The ontological foundations of Critical realism and the corresponding epistemological *post-positivist* position (Smith, 1996:25) build the ground for a “critical methodological pluralism” that is able to combine quantitative and qualitative methods (Danermark et al., 2002:chapter 6). To analyse the mass and social media texts, a corpus-assisted critical realist multimedia discourse analysis is used that combines the strengths of computational and quantitative corpus linguistic (CL) methods and a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Baker et al., 2008). This combination allows for a critical examination of the digitalization of political discourses itself and of the methods that are used to analyse it, too. The approach taken here breaks with

⁷ We do not only search for the exact tokens “brexit” and “austerity”, respectively, in order to cover preceding hashtags, e.g. “#austerity”, and cases such as “anti-austerity”, “#AntiAusterity”, “austerity-EU”, etc. which is particularly necessary for social media texts.

⁸ LexisNexis, »Nachrichten Datenbank«, <https://www.lexisnexis.de> (30.06.2016). We processed (particularly tokenized, lemmatized, and pos-tagged) the newspapers texts by means of the Stanford CoreNLP ((Manning et al., 2014), see <https://stanfordnlp.github.io/CoreNLP/>). We took all articles that contain at least on occurrence of both “Brexit” as well as “austerity.” Note that there are some duplicates in the data basis (since Lexis provided both print and online content, which overlap to a substantial part), which is why we deduplicated our data set by means of a simple deduplication algorithm.

⁹ See <http://www.eecs.qmul.ac.uk/~dm303/brexit/>. Processing and annotating Twitter data provides a whole string of challenges which are tackled with state-of-the-art computational linguistic methods: To this end, we use off-the-shelf algorithms for tokenization and pos-tagging ((Owoputi et al., 2013), see <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~ark/TweetNLP/>) as well as a self-implemented lemmatizer which is based on a standard morphological analyzer for English ((Minnen et al., 2001), see <http://users.sussex.ac.uk/~johnca/morph.html>) combined with a heuristic mapping of the tweet tags. We have not excluded retweets because they are of particular interest in terms of ideology critique: “When a tweet is retweeted, a particular user’s linguistic choices (hence, ideological stance) are recast and repeated.” (McEnery et al., 2015:243)

the dominant “digital positivism” within the emerging field of computational social sciences by going beyond a superficial critique of the patterns that can be found on the linguistic surface in (social) media by connecting these semiotic dimensions of the analysed discourse with the underlying political economy of the phenomena under study and with the other elements of a historical structure. The overall goal of such an analysis is to offer an “explanatory critique” (Nielsen, 2007:55) of social ills in order to advance human growth and emancipation. Such a form of critical social science is not just interested in the form and force of semiotic artefacts but also in “the truth, truthfulness and appropriateness of texts” (Fairclough et al., 2002:13). Following Fairclough, such an analysis has four elements: An examination of the “a social form in its semiotic aspect”, the identification of “obstacles to addressing the social wrong”, an answer to the question “whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong” and the identification of “possible ways past the obstacles.” (Fairclough, 2009:167)

With regard to the semiotic aspect of the nexus of austerity and Brexit within a historical structure, CL methods – like a Swiss pocket knife (Scott, 2001:47f.) – are well-suited to detect regularities at the linguistic surface that give hints to imaginaries found within a society that might be unrecognized from a purely qualitative perspective. In contrast, CDA – like a “depth driller” (Griebel, 2015) – is able to reconstruct the material structures that stand in a dialectic relation to these imaginaries while also being sensitive to rare expressions of the latter. The two methods thus stand in a “Checks and Balances” (Mautner, 2009) relation. Of special interest on the quantitative side are keyword analyses. Keywords are understood as words that occur statistically more often in one corpus in comparison to another (Baker, 2004). Like “tips of icebergs” they point to “complex lexical objects which represent the shared beliefs and values of a culture” (Stubbs, 2010:23). They are, therefore, also markers for imaginaries. In order to detect imaginaries in different media, we will compare¹⁰

- the Guardian with the Daily Telegraph
- the overall media discourse (Guardian and the Daily Telegraph) with the tweets

Two notes of caution have to be made here concerning the value of corpus linguistic tools within a critical realist framework. They do not produce universal facts but only “facts” about “demi-regularities” (Griebel, 2016:section 3.3). As ontological realism includes the assumption of *open* social systems, linguistic patterns that might be detected with corpus linguistic tools should not be understood as universal law-like regularities in a positivist sense, but as demi-regularities, that is time-space dependent regularities that are relatively stable, but that (might)

¹⁰ For a similar strategy see McEnery et al. (2015:241).

change (Lawson, 1998:149). In addition, certain mechanisms operating beneath the linguistic surface, like neoliberalism's prioritization of exchange over use value, might *not* be visible in computed semiotic regularities. These cases can be called non- or negative results in the language of quantitative social science. "Non-results are results that at first glance say nothing. [...] This might happen [...] in a content analysis of interviews in which no general pattern fitting or contradicting the original research question emerges." (Lehrer et al., 2007:56) For Critical Realism, non-results might emerge because of the stratification of reality into the levels of the empirical, the actual and the real (Hubbard, 2016:84). Neoliberal mechanisms that are operating in society might be real and actual, but they might not be visible regularities on the linguistic surface because they are suppressed by other mechanisms or because they are not grasped by a particular corpus design and / or methodology. Keyword analyses might, therefore, fail to detect words that are strongly connected with a neoliberal imaginary. This case does not prove that the underlying abstract assumptions about the dominance of neoliberalism are false, but that it is necessary to rethink the corpus design and the boundary conditions of the assumed mechanisms.

This is also the reason why (the absence of) demi-regs should be understood as "ficts". In accordance with the Critical Realism's "holy trinity" of ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationalism, the reconstruction of demi-regularities does neither produce unproblematic facts or arbitrary fictions, but ficts, that is "contingent assertions of relations, possible descriptions, sources of speculation and sources for explanation" (Olsen/Morgan, 2005:260). The ficts-character of the results of a CL analysis is not (only) due to the mistakes of the researcher, for example, concerning the design of the corpus.¹¹ An even more important topic for the critical reflection of the impact of the digitalization of social science is the way the software packages work and how they are used. It is also important to keep in mind that corpus linguistic tools do not work like a calculation machine, because "differences in the way tools are designed will have an impact on almost all corpus analyses." (Anthony, 2011:151). Another important topic is the choice of the software settings, especially in the form of statistical measures that are used. Different measures will produce different results (Baker, 2006:102). In order to combine the strengths of frequency statistics that are valuable in respect to the detection of genres and effect size statistics that are more suitable for

¹¹ One big problem in this respect is the quality of the LexisNexis data. Although this database is of great value for scientific purposes, some its sources are plagued by problems. The Guardian, for example, contains material from the USA and Australia as well as. Another problem is that online and the printed content is indistinguishable for the period under investigation. We are still working on solutions for these problems with the LexisNexis data that are rarely discussed in the corpus linguistic literature. For a notable exception see Grundmann et al. (forthcoming:97f.).

a critical analysis (Pojanapunya/Watson Todd, 2016), we will use a combination of the log-likelihood and the log ratio for the keyword analyses within CQPweb (Evert/Hardie, 2011, Hardie, 2012).¹²

Although corpus linguistic analyses of texts and texts themselves do not lead to unproblematic facts, they are nevertheless potentially more than mere constructions: “We construct as opposed to find our data, but we make it out of something, not of nothing.” (Byrne, 2002:15) The questions about the reference and adequacy of texts and scientific analyses are, therefore, crucial from a critical realist perspective and critical. This is an urgent need for a critical analysis that does not stop at the linguistic surface, but that also wants to connect the semiotic aspects of phenomena with the underlying material structures. In order to achieve this, the most interesting results of the corpus linguistic analyses from the viewpoint of the theoretical considerations described above will be – in a form of elaborated cherry-picking (Griebel, 2016:140)¹³ – interpreted qualitatively in accordance with the four elements of a critical discourse analysis and then used to reconstruct the British cultural political economy of austerity and Brexit. This calls also for a qualitative interpretation of the texts “with regard to their unconscious and unintended meaning.” (Fromm/Maccoby, 2014) This step has also consequences for the use and presentation of the quantitative results. Such a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Leiter, 2004) demands for a more fine grained qualitative analysis beyond the level of concordances, at least in respect to the newspaper articles. The structure of Twitter communication makes the reconstruction of positive imaginaries and false ideologies an even more demanding task.¹⁴ One way to handle this is the search for connections to mass media (like the Guardian or the Daily Telegraph) to understand the more complex argumentation underlying a particular Tweet. But the already rather speculative task of a critical discourse analysis of imaginaries within traditional newspapers is, in any case, even more speculative with respect to Twitter media data. The fictitious character is therefore not just due to quantitative

¹² We have used a minimum log likelihood value of 10.83 in all cases. In order to filter out genre specific expressions on Twitter, we have set the minimum frequency for the newspaper corpus when it is used as a reference corpus for the Tweets to 1.

¹³ It has to be noted, though, that a more balanced combination of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analyses would demand a qualitative analysis of all texts within the corpus. Such a procedure would also help to handle the problem of negative or ambiguous results for the quantitative analyses. This step will be taken at a later time.

¹⁴ It has to be noted here that we follow Fuchs with regard to research ethics concerning Twitter data: “It is reasonable to assume that users, who tweet about a political issue [...] during a time of general public attention [...] direct their messages at the public for discussion and therefore also reasonably expect to be observed by strangers such as journalists and researchers. Not revealing the profile names of everyday users, but instead using pseudonyms, seems in this context to therefore be a sufficient ethical measure”. (Fuchs, 2016b) On the question of research ethics guided by critical realism see also Fuchs (2017).

analytic steps in the analysis, but to the qualitative speculations, too. The overall research design is summarized in figure 2.

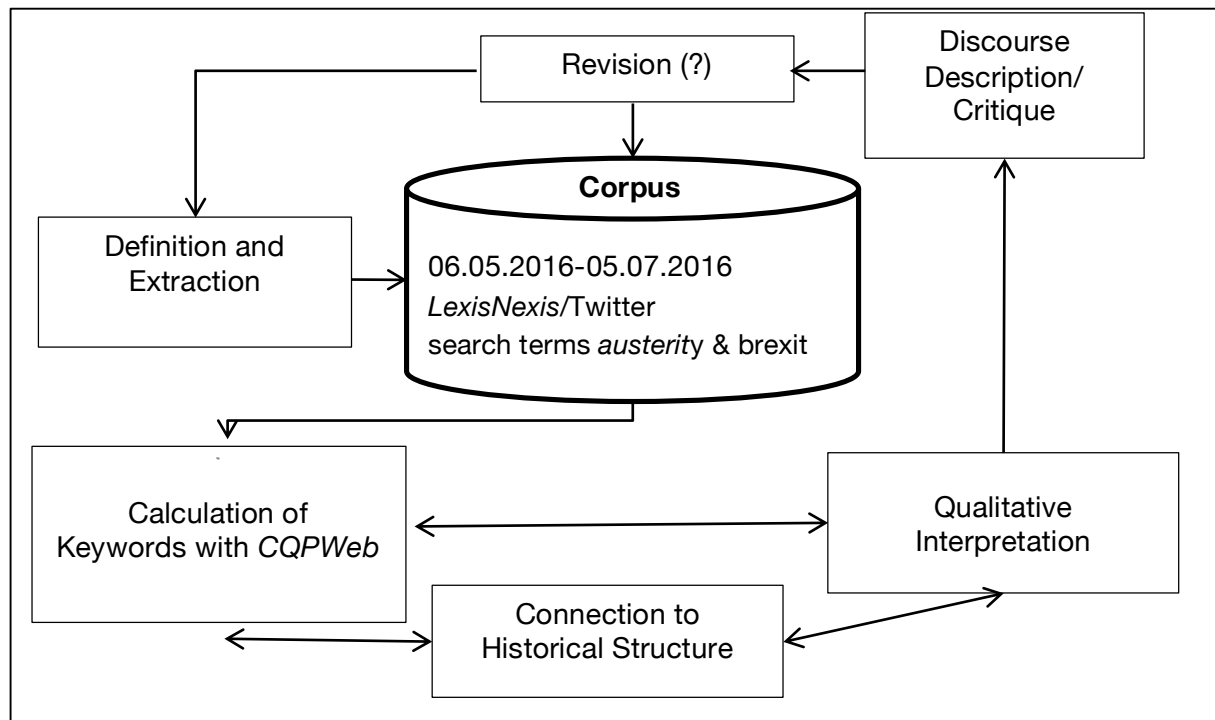


figure 1: research design

In sum, the stratification of social reality that only produces demi-regs and analyses that try to grasp these that only produce ficts should remind us that “[t]heory-building and testing are never final and complete: they are always ‘under construction’ based on a movement between more theoretical and more empirical phases. For critical realists, then, science involves a continuing, spiral movement from knowledge of manifest (empirical) phenomena to knowledge of the underlying structures and causal mechanisms that generate them.” (Sum/Jessop, 2013:9) The following arguments are one step in this direction. Because it has not been possible to analyse the overall corpus in depth yet, they should be undertood as a “plausibility probe” (Odell, 2001:166).

3. The cultural political economy of austerity and Brexit

Starting with an examination of interesting keywords for the Guardian in comparison to the Daily Telegraph, we can indeed detect words that point to a more left-wing interpretation of the events in the context of Brexit. The words that are most interesting from a cultural political

a form of sane capitalism and government intervention to foster job-creating production to counteract inequality.

“It was n't always that way : the late 1970s were the most equal time in our history , when boardrooms dared not pay themselves obscene sums and unions stopped pay falling back . But since Margaret Thatcher took the lid off `` aspiration " for the top few , **inequality** soared and never recovered . Labour redistributed with tax credits and invested in public services - but that 's been swept away . Brexit would reap whirlwinds for the **inequality** sowed over the past 35 years . The right has used immigration and a diet of lies about the EU to distract from austerity-stricken public services , most damaging to those whose living standards have stagnated for over a decade .” (Guardian) See also (Guardian).

The real causes of the Brexit crisis, in this line of argumentation, is definitely not capitalism as such but just the wrong form of capitalism. Training (Guardian) productivity and investment should be improved within the current economic regime:

“We did this not because we were part of Project Fear , but because of our understanding of the problems in the UK 's economy , and their real causes . These include low investment , weak productivity and high **inequality** , problems that will not be solved by a Brexit . Britain 's politicians have failed to provide a vision about their nation 's future , or a sense of direction Since the seismic events of Friday morning , there has been a lot of political manoeuvring and wishful thinking .” (Guardian)

The defense of a form of sane capitalism that fosters productivity and economic growth can also explain why some traits of the writing within the Guardian can also be described as neoliberal. This tendency has already been detected in respect to the Guardian’s interpretation of the economic and financial crises and austerity policies before the Brexit referendum (Berry, 2016b:548f., Pirie, 2012:342f.). These neoliberal elements are even critical of distributing income from capital to labor in order to fight inequality and are concerned about the future prospects of investors within a slow growth environment.

““The warnings over **inequality** come as a respected thinktank releases fresh evidence that low - and middle-income families in Britain have seen their living standards stagnate for more than a decade . [...] Joachim Fels , a global economic adviser at Pimco , wrote in a research note : `` As I see it , the vote in the UK is part of a wider , more global , backlash against the establishment , rising **inequality** and globalisation . [...]`` Even if populist , separatist and nationalist parties do n't come to power , the Brexit shock is likely to intensify the pressure on current and future mainstream governments to address **inequality** , become more protectionist and limit migration . [...] Now writing days after the 52 % -48 % victory for the leave camp , Fels said the Brexit message on **inequality** and its political impact meant investors should factor in a higher risk of stagflation - a damaging combination of higher inflation and slower growth - over the next three to five years. [...] Fels wrote : `` This would likely come to pass if current or future governments turn more protectionist by erecting barriers to trade and migration , and take up or intensify the battle against **inequality** by redistributing income (through taxation and regulation) from capital to labour . This could lower potential growth even further and would likely lead to higher wage and inflation pressures .” (Guardian)

But some texts go, to the contrary, beyond a defense of the current system by recognizing the class nature of inequality and by calling for a look at the deeper structural and class related causes (Guardian) of Brexit. This reflection in some cases even calls for a “fundamental change to the economic system” (Guardian), for example, by a reformulation of centrist socialism in Europe in general that would stop to pursue the dogma of free-market economics and of

austerity policies. But although these elements can be described as unideological, it remains unclear where this way would lead to.

“The idea that migrants or politicians in Brussels are the problem with modern , unequal Britain was the canard at the core the referendum debate . Britain 's problems come from a place much closer to home . They come from successive government policies that have promoted the financialisation of our economies and public services , thereby valuing profit over people . They come from a Tory government slashing public services and widening **inequality** under the dubious banner of austerity . And they come from a prime minister who was passionate about nothing but his own political survival . These **problems** are so systemic today that fixing them will take a radical change to the structure of both our economy and political class . [...] More of the past will not do to resolve the very real and interconnected global issues of our time : vast and rising wealth **inequality** , climate change and a foreign policy trapped in a cycle of destruction .” (Guardian)

“Social democracy 's electoral decline - from Scotland to Poland - is rooted in its attachment to free-market economics , which it needs to deliver rising wealth and wellbeing for the broad mass of people . The years since 2008 have shown that it does not and it can not . From Matteo Renzi in Italy to Kezia Dugdale in Scotland , a generation of technocratic centrists across Europe have found that personal charm and modernity can not counteract the toxicity of a form of economics that brings only **inequality** and stagnation [...] Centre-left socialism is still in the anger-denial stage of grief; it has advanced no theory of its own ineffectiveness and produced no substantial account of how it alienated large parts of its voting base - both among the progressive salariat and the traditional working class. [...] All across Europe, social democrats need to say [...] form an anti-austerity coalition and redefine centrist socialism around something better than the dole queue and the riot policeman's stick. “ (Guardian)

In contrast to the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph is one of the “[i]deological workers supporting Cameronism” which is centered around “questions of national identity, the European Union and immigration” (Fuchs, 2016a). In respect to these questions, the Telegraph is one of “those newspapers which directly attack the EU” (Elabed, 2017). It has to be noted right from the start that the keywords for the Guardian are of course not also keywords for the Telegraph. The words that hint at the Guardian’s Keynesian imaginary with elements of a deeper critique of capitalism are not key for the Telegraph. This already highlights that left concerns for class and inequality are absent in the Telegraph. In comparison to the Guardian, the Telegraph uses words like “IMF”, “bail-out”, “Christine Lagarde”, “Depression”, “mortgage”, “rescue”, “creditors”, “QE”, “Armageddon”, “errors”, “depreciation”, “relief” and “dissipate” more frequently. But as promising as these results may seem, the qualitative analysis of the keywords returned something like a non-result or an ambiguous result at best. The individual hits for every keyword have not been interpretable as easily as in the case of the ones for the Guardian. But the keyword IMF is suitable to provide an illustration of the imaginary that underlies the Telegraph’s argumentation about austerity and Brexit.¹⁵

¹⁵ It has to be noted though that although the keyword IMF appears 57 times, it does so only in four texts.

democracy. In this imaginary, a defense of British neoliberal austerity policies with a nationalist rhetoric that support Brexit go hand in hand:

“The **IMF** has also been badly wrong about the UK 's economy . In 2013 the IMF forecast that the UK economy would spiral into recession , and publicly downgraded its growth forecasts for the UK economy . The chief **IMF** economist , Oliver Blanchard , accused George Osborne of `` playing with fire " . In fact Osborne was right : in 2014 the UK economy actually turned out to have the highest growth rate of any advanced industrial nation . [...] The **IMF** 's forecasts of economic decline outside the EU in the event of Brexit are likely to be just as wrong now as they were in 2013 . [...] There is an additional problem with the **IMF** opining on Brexit , namely that its advice can not be deemed independent . The **IMF** receives 30pc of its funding from EU countries . The leaders of the IMF have always been selected from inside the EU . [...] Reflecting these external pressures , one of the **IMF** 's and Lagarde 's top priorities is to defend the misery machine otherwise known as the euro . One-sided interventions by the **IMF** represent an unwelcome intrusion into British democracy . [...]” The British people should know that the **IMF** has a long and miserable record of economic forecasting . It should also know that the IMF has a vested interest in defending the euro at the expense of our democracy .” (Telegraph)

In sum, the comparison of the individual newspapers showed tendencies of different imaginaries about austerity and Brexit. The Guardian’s imaginary includes Keynesian, neoliberal and also socialist elements, whereas the Telegraph either backs austerity policies by a neoliberal storyline or Brexit by a nationalist imaginary. Now we want to see, what tendencies can be detected on Twitter in comparison to the overall newspaper corpus. We will again focus on some of the most interesting keywords that are depicted in the word cloud.

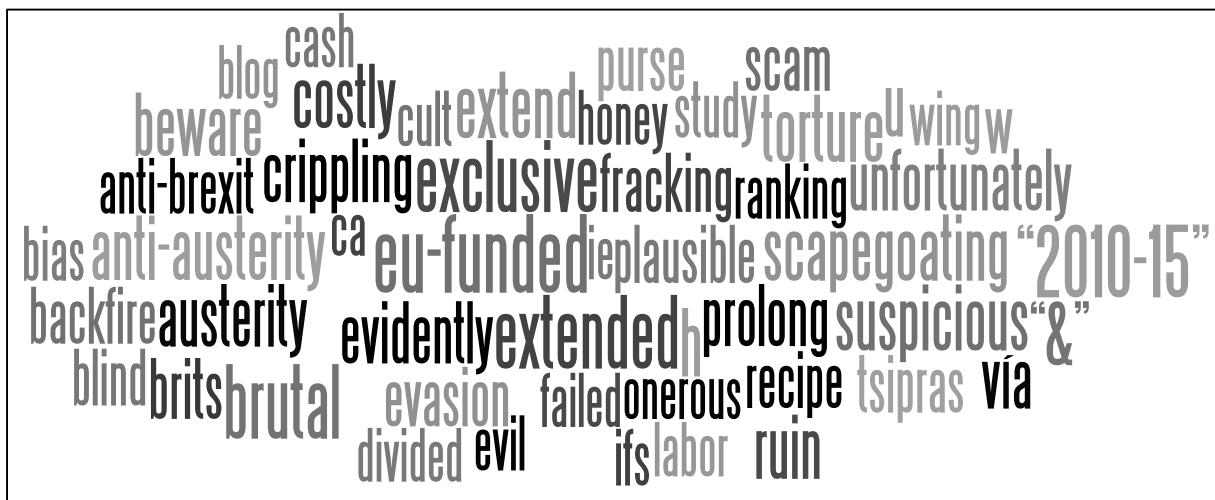


figure 4: first 50 keywords for the Tweet corpus in comparison with the total print corpus.

“2010-15” is a marker for the xenophobe and nationalist imaginary that shows some similarities with the imaginary found within the Daily Telegraph and that has guided the official Leave campaign:

“austerity savings **2010-15** : £36 billion eu contributions 2010-15 : £42 billion (net) #brexit to fund proper patrols”

The slogan not only indicates that Great Britain can save more money outside the European Union than through austerity measures. It is also connected to the question of immigration, as the word “patrols” shows. The Tweet included the claim that austerity has had negative effects on border controls and that this is threatening the security of Great Britain. “Not just people! WEAPONS & drugs are being smuggled into the UK”. The money that is supposedly being saved by leaving the EU shall be used to strengthen border controls again. Immigrants are not directly accused of being responsible for the problems within the United Kingdom, but they are nevertheless indirectly constructed as a threat and it is interesting to see the priority of border control here and not, for example, social spending.

But there are also other views about the relationship of austerity and immigration, as the keyword “Scapegoating” highlights. All but one of the 307 hits of scapegoating refer to the same sentence. The reason for this is that sentence is retweeted 278 times in the overall corpus. This retweet offers a critique of the ideology that immigrants have created economic suffering in Great Britain.

“**scapegoating** immigrants for economic suffering is easier than confronting [politicians that crafted] austerity [policy].”

But due to the character limit of Twitter it is not possible to judge the (hidden) meaning of the argument in terms of its ideological content. To do so, it is necessary to look at the article from the US newspaper The Nation that is the source of this (Re-)Tweet. Here we can see how intertwined mass and social media discourses are. The article within the newspaper offers an argument that is sympathetic to left-wing politics but within some kind of Keynesian imaginary that does again just criticize excesses of the current system, but not capitalism as such. Although the author argues that the “EU referendum became a conduit for anger on many issues: immigration, economic inequalities, London’s disproportionate economic boom, and disenfranchisement by an aloof political elite,” and that “inequality”, “economic deprivation” and austerity policies are the “root causes” of the present crisis, she also argues in favor of “a progressive fight” that is focused on “the best possible trade and migration terms” (Foster, 2016) after the referendum. This goal is surely no sign of a profound critique of capitalism.

But this does not mean that there is no non-ideological emancipatory potential on Twitter, too. Although the following Tweet that contains the keywords “evasion” and “fracking” is again difficult to interpret because of the technical structure of Twitter, it is based on a combination of words that points into the direction of a radical critique of the current system:

“Brexit Anti migrants Trident Austerity Tax **evasion Fracking** "We've got our privatised, neoliberal, xenophobic, imperialistic country back".”

Although a lot more work needs to be done to reconstruct the exact form of the imaginaries that can be found within the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph and on Twitter, the analysis has shown so far that neoliberal, Keynesian and non-ideological imaginaries can be found within the discourse of austerity and Brexit in Britain in both media. The neoliberal, Keynesian and nationalist imaginaries have some competitive advantage over their non-ideological counterpart because they fit with the dominant material social structure of the British economy. The neoliberal regime that is the dominant mode of production in the UK since the end of the 1970s is based on liberalization, deregulation, privatization, increased market-orientation in the public domain, tax reductions in favor of the wealthy and internationalization (Jessop, 2015a:23f.). The development of neoliberalism was accompanied with rising inequality, the increasing importance of the financial sector that transformed itself in the direction of speculation and accompanying “bubbles” and financial crises (Kotz, 2009:307).¹⁷ Neoliberalism’s features are not reducible to ideas but also connected to institutions like the Bank of England (Widmaier, 2016) and the state as well their respective material capabilities like the state’s monopoly on the legal use of force (Montgomerie, 2006:120) or the Bank of England’s or the City of London’s monetary power. Neoliberalism’s general features have a special shape in the British context, where a finance-dominated accumulation regime forms the heart of the neoliberal historical structure. Financialization

“incorporates economic, political, and cultural dimensions and is defined here expansively as encompassing the enhanced role and status of the finance sector in the economy, an intensified focus of most private economic actors on short-term financial returns, greater interaction between individuals and financial services, and the personalisation of financial risks as collectivised risk-sharing mechanisms are dismantled.” (Berry, 2016a:19)

The financial sector in the United Kingdom contributed, as a result of this development, to approximately 10 percent of the British GDP in 2009, a value that is almost double in size compared to Germany and France (Pirie, 2012:358). The process of financialization that culminated in the financial crisis 2008/2009 and the austerity measures taken to counteract the structural contradictions of finance-dominated accumulation provide the deep structural cause of the Brexit vote. Finance-dominated accumulation is marked by a deep and profound contradiction that the target rate of return of financial capital is several times higher than the rate of returns that can be achieved in the real economy. Financial crises occur because the validation of this fictitious capital far exceeds the capacity of profit-producing capital in the “real” economy. The resulting burst of bubbles has to be managed, bankrupt banks have to be bailed-out by public institutions. The resulting increase in public debt is then used as the

¹⁷ For the interaction of financialization and inequality see Stockhammer (2012).

foundation of a neoliberal imaginary that calls for cuts in public spending and further neoliberal steps in the transformation of society through austerity measures (Jessop, 2015b:95).

This line of thought is based on the idea that the shrinking of the state will lead to a growth of the economy as a whole (Dellepiane-Avellaneda, 2015:410ff.) and blames supposedly too high public expenditures instead of bank bailouts amounting to £550 billion (Seymour, 2014:116) as the cause of the rise of public debt. 80 percent of the 81£ billion budget consolidation package has, accordingly, been based on spending cuts that have to be carried mostly by lower income classes (Bandau, 2013:449-53). The poor not only had to pay the (relative) price for the deindustrialization of the British economy in the process of financialization (Nölke, 2017:231), but also for the effects of the latter's crisis tendencies (Tepe-Belfrage/Wallin, 2016). "Austerity", in this sense, "is a signature of the neoliberal era much as neoliberalism can be understood *as* austerity." (Whiteside, 2016:50, italics in original).

The Brexit discourse has to be understood within this context. "'Brexit 'wars' [...] reflected deep divisions and inequalities that have their roots in 40 years of neoliberalism, and have become especially brutal under austerity program assaults on public services, welfare and work security." (Powell, 2017:226) Immigration that is said to have been at the heart of this discourse should not be seen as the main driver of Brexit. The xenophobic rhetoric of the Leave campaign was instead just a malignant form of the double movement of capitalism between market strengthening and community strengthening phases (Hopkin, 2017) that tries to hide the fact that that inequality and strained budgets are not caused by immigration but by the neoliberal restructuring of society (Khalili, 2016: Kindle-Position 212-13, Schmidt, 2017:255). The xenophobic and nationalist countermovement against neoliberalism does *not* reflect a crisis *of* neoliberalism. It is at best a crisis *in* it, but it can also highlight an overlap of neoliberal and nationalist ideologies in the sense that they both search for scapegoats in order to explain economic crises (Patomäki, 2017:26). The tragedy is that the nationalist imaginary even strengthens neoliberalism. "[T]his strategy is against liberalism and neoliberalism by restricting the 'free' labour markets desired by capital. But it *also* reinforces liberalism and neoliberalism by weakening the solidarity of the working class as a whole and consequently its ability to resist capital." (Gough, 2017:369) This imaginary, therefore, backs and is still backed by the dominant accumulation regime within the United Kingdom.

A similar problem plagues the Keynesian "alternatives" to neoliberalism. The Keynesian narrative does not offer a solution to these problems or ways to enhance human emancipation in a deep sense. It misses an acknowledgment of the real crisis generating mechanisms of the financial crisis (Carchedi/Roberts, 2013) and the corresponding ones in the

British economic regime. The reason for this is the interdependence of neoliberalism and Keynesianism that form both variants of neoclassical economics. Keynesianism's demand side economics may provide an alternative for neoliberalism's supply side economics within the logic of the capitalist system but not for the capitalist system as such. This is the reason why Keynesianism not only lay the ground for neoliberal excesses (Mann, 2016:130)¹⁸ but is also an important element for the stabilization of capitalism. A radical critique of capitalism and the media that support it is, therefore, needed, not just the articulation of an Keynesian imaginary (Garland/Harper, 2016).

4. Instead of a conclusion

*I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but
an optimist because of will. (Gramsci)*

Only a radical alternative and non-ideological imaginary like the one found in some texts within the Guardian and in some Tweets, an imaginary that criticizes the deep structural layers of capitalism and neoliberalism fulfills Critical Realism's demand for an "explanatory critique" in the service of truth and human emancipation. But it faces some structural disadvantages. It does not only have to compete with overlapping neoliberal, nationalist and Keynesian imaginaries in respect to meaning-giving. The other imaginaries found within the media are also connected to the material dimension of the British historical structure. The fact that the British voters decided to leave the European Union although the neoliberal power bloc of the City of London and business were against such a decision does not reflect a defeat of neoliberalism or capitalism. Just like the months following the economic and financial crises, Thatcherism and neoliberalism may be dead in some sense (Crouch, 2011) after Brexit, but they are definitely not buried (Jessop, 2015a). The Brexit vote may have weakened the *actual* influence of the City of London (James/Quaglia, 2017) and the Conservative power bloc (Spours, 2017) but it will still have to be seen whether Brexit will "lead to a deepening, a transcendence or reconfiguration of the UK's national business model" (Lavery et al., 2017:2) and the corresponding material *structural* power that privileges ideological imaginaries. This would demand not just a change of discourses but also of the material and institutional dimensions of the British accumulation regime. Although this is rather unlikely because of neoliberalism's record of recovery after different crisis periods, the left cannot give up the aspiration to work in this direction.

¹⁸ „In the 'welfare-military Keynesianism' that characterized advanced industrial economies during the postwar boom, the trend to the commodification of labour, nature and knowledge was powerfully present, and in this respect the advent of neoliberalism did not mark a turnaround." (Dale, 2012:15)

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