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States of Fear: The Rise of the European Alt-Right Through the Eyes of Immigrant Populations

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States of Fear: The Rise of the European Alt-Right Through the Eyes of Immigrant Populations

Ellie Bowen

International Affairs Capstone

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Abstract

This research explores the rise of alt-right groups in Europe through a case study approach with a focus on Spain as well as a general approach focused on Europe as a whole. For the case study, blog posts from the Spanish female-immigrant centered forum, Afroféminas, were analyzed. To provide evidence from the broader European context while still centering immigrant and refugee voices, the PBS Frontline documentary film *Exodus: The Journey Continues* was utilized. Through the use of discourse analysis as well as theoretical grounding in Giddens' structuration and Bourdieu's praxeology, this research presented two main findings: (1) it is possible to see a strong "us vs. them" dichotomy between alt-right groups and immigrant/refugee groups, which is perpetuated through its continued use, and (2) strong emotions and fear can be seen as a factor which both divides and unites alt-right and immigrant/refugee groups in their struggles for a place and voice within society as a whole.

Introduction

The rise of alt-right and extreme nationalist groups in Europe is a phenomenon that has grown out of a recent rise in nationalism in Europe.¹ Some possible reasons for this rise include a growing dissatisfaction with the current political system or governing part(y/ies), as well as concerns that national identity is becoming obsolete due to changes such as a rise in immigration or the negatively perceived impacts of globalization.² This phenomenon can be seen in the European Parliamentary group called Identity and Democracy (ID), established in 2019, which includes nationalist and right-wing populist parties from ten different E.U. members.³ While the circumstances in which these groups have come to power may differ between countries, one commonality that they all share is their views towards immigrant groups. Many groups such as Germany's AfD (Alternative for Germany), Spain's Vox, and Italy's La Liga employ a strong anti-Islamic rhetoric throughout their immigration policies and standpoints.⁴ This study will analyze the response of immigrant and refugee communities to the rise of alt-right groups in Europe by asking: **(1) Where and why is the rise of alt-right groups happening? (2) Do immigrant and refugee communities feel persecuted or targeted by these groups? (3) Has immigrant perception of social belonging changed in light of the alt-right's anti-immigrant rhetoric?** This study will analyze current literature and newspaper publications on the subject in order to determine what influence alt-right groups have on immigrant and refugee populations in Europe. I will also use blog posts, current literature and a case study approach to focus on this phenomenon

¹"Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism: A Country-by-Country Guide," *BBC News*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006>.

²"Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism".

³"Platform," Identity and Democracy Party (European Parliament), accessed October 3, 2020, <https://www.id-party.eu/platform>.

⁴"Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism".

in Spain specifically and to understand the responses of these groups at a local, national, and inter-European scale.

Context

Understanding the rise of alt-right groups in Europe is a task which requires a complex and multi-faceted approach. In order to best interpret this rise, the political, economic, and cultural contexts must be taken into account. This paper will be analyzing the years 2015-2021, as this time period spans different election cycles in the European countries that have seen a rise in alt-right groups. While this more recent time frame is important in measuring the modern influence these groups have had in their respective countries, scholars also point to several main factors and events from earlier years as important contextual components.⁵ Gaining knowledge of the political, economic, and cultural contexts will aid in gaining a well-rounded understanding of the reasons for why these groups employ anti-immigrant stances, and how immigrant populations have responded.

One of the events that many scholars discuss as a prominent reason for the creation and growth of alt-right and nationalist groups is what is known as the European Refugee Crisis. According to aid organizations such as Doctors Without Borders (*Medecins Sans Frontieres*) and UNICEF, as well as the UN Refugee Agency, violent conflicts and political turmoil in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and others since 2011 have caused large influxes of refugees and migrants into European countries.⁶ There has been heavy resource strain for the countries where

⁵ These scholars include Colantone and Stanig, Caiani and Borri, Baier, Polyakova and Shekhovstov, and Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck.

⁶ MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES. (2021). Overview of the refugee crisis in Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.msf-me.org/overview-refugee-crisis-europe> ; U. (2018). *UNHCR* (Rep.). Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/2019-04/Refugee%20and%20migrant%20crisis%20in%20Europe%20consolidated%20report%202018.pdf> ; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (n.d.). 2015: The year of EUROPE'S refugee crisis. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html>

the largest refugees influxes have occurred, leaving lasting infrastructural impacts. This includes impacts on the economies as well as on the resource levels in general within these countries.

Understanding the economic recession of 2008 is also important when exploring the contextual factors that have led to the growth of alt-right groups in Europe. For many groups, the economic crisis was one of the major factors that led to anti-immigrant sentiment. In their research, Colantone and Stanig analyze the rise of alt-right groups using the lens of the 2008 recession, noting that many of these groups center their political platforms on economic nationalism. According to Colantone and Stanig, the economic nationalism platform is a combination of conservative and nationalist-based economic proposals, meaning it is inherently anti-immigrant.⁷ They regard immigration as “... a visible catalyst for the political consequences of the economic distress driven by structural changes...”⁸ The interconnectedness of the 2008 recession with other crises occurring within a similar time frame is also mentioned by Baier, who notes the connections between the economic aspects of fiscal crisis and precarity as well as the middle class’ fear of downward social mobility in relation to the European refugee crisis.⁹ Ongoing crises in Iraq and Syria have resulted in more than 1.4 million people fleeing these countries out of fear of persecution and attempting to seek refuge in Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain.¹⁰ The refugee crisis has affected the economic and social order within many European countries, which has in turn affected the political order. Polyakova and Shekhovstov mention the “triple threat” of mass refugee inflows, economic crisis, and a growth in Eurosceptic attitudes as the main factors contributing to the change of political reality within Europe, and the rise of many

⁷ Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig, “The Surge of Economic Nationalism in Western Europe,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (January 2019): pp. 128-151, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.128>, 128.

⁸ Colantone and Stanig, 144.

⁹ Walter Baier, “Europe on the Precipice: The Crisis of the Neoliberal Order and the Ascent of Right-Wing Populism,” *New Labor Forum* 25, no. 3 (2016): pp. 48-55, doi:10.2307/26420010, 51.

¹⁰ *Refugee Statistics: Europe*. (2020). Retrieved 2020, from <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

alt-right groups.¹¹ A Eurosceptic attitude implies an opposition to the European Union; many people who hold this attitude believe that their country should leave the European Union.¹² Many European countries, in fact, do not have sufficient infrastructure to be able to support and successfully integrate immigrants not only into their cultures and cities but into their job markets as well. This leads to many alt-right groups attempting to gain political traction through emphasizing an anti-immigrant agenda.

To further elaborate on the question of social order within these countries, it is extremely common for refugee and immigrant communities to face many difficulties throughout their acclimation to and integration within their host country. According to Robila, "...integration is a complex and multidimensional construct, referring to integration into the economic, educational, health, and social contexts."¹³ Because of this multidimensionality, there are many factors which play a role in the societal and cultural integration of immigrant communities. These are impacted by things such as their experiences, mental or physical health, as well as the level of societal support and acceptance of their communities.¹⁴ These factors are important to keep in mind when understanding the cultural changes that immigrant and refugee communities endure when assimilating to a completely new cultural environment.

Additionally, another facet of the rise in alt-right groups which connects to the immigrant and refugee question from an economic viewpoint is the impact that globalization has had on European countries. More specifically, many scholars suggest that the growing gap between the 'winners and losers' of globalization and modernization has been an important factor in

¹¹ Alina Polyakova and Anton Shekhovtsov, "On The Rise," *World Affairs* 179, no. 1 (2016): pp. 70-80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820016662746>, 73.

¹² Polyakova and Shekhovtsov.

¹³ Mihaela Robila, "Refugees and Social Integration in Europe" (New York, New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018), pp. 1-17, https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila_EGM_2018.pdf.

¹⁴ Robila, 10.

determining which socioeconomic classes are more likely to turn to alt-right and nationalist groups.¹⁵ For many of these groups, pointing fingers at minorities and immigrants for the economic decline has allowed them to attract more people from the working classes within their countries, pushing economic protectionism.

Since 2015, there have been many instances of anti-immigrant protests in European countries with some turning violent. Especially after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, many extreme-right parties began to intensify anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Islam rhetoric, which manifested through protests for the most devout followers of the groups.¹⁶ These anti-immigrant protests have become more common as alt-right and nationalist groups have begun to gain more traction within their respective countries. The Spanish alt-right party, Vox, has even taken to its social media outlets to broadcast their negative opinions about immigrants, producing videos alluding to the anti-Islam “reconquest” of Spain.¹⁷

It is important to ground this study of alt-right and immigrant groups in an understanding of the multitude of interconnecting factors contributing not only to the anti-immigrant sentiment that is often at the core of alt-right groups, but also the factors that catalyzed the formation of these groups as a whole. In turn, having a contextual grounding in the formation of the European alt-right facilitates this study’s understanding of the different ways in which immigrant populations are affected by these viewpoints and policies aimed towards them.

¹⁵ Baier, 49.

¹⁶ Harris, D., & Jesko, J. (2015). Anti-Immigrant Protests Grow as Thousands of Refugees Flood Europe. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/International/anti-immigrant-protests-grow-thousands-refugees-flood-europe/story?id=35888428>

¹⁷ Vox viste a Santiago Abascal de Aragón en un vídeo que llama a la "reconquista de España" desde Andalucía. (2018, November 13). *La Sexta*. Retrieved February, from https://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/elecciones-andalucia/vox-viste-a-santiago-abascal-de-aragorn-en-un-video-en-el-que-llama-a-la-reconquista-de-espana-desde-andalucia_201811135bea9bcf0cf2c54a3cf82e19.html

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks used throughout this study are structuration and praxeology. Structuration is a relativist critical theory which focuses on the relationships between actors and structures. It aims to go beyond notions of class to understand how classes operate and are experienced in practice.¹⁸ Its focus on both structure and agency was useful in understanding how alt-right groups interact within their nations. Anthony Giddens, a prominent theorist, focuses on how structuration can be a tool by which one can examine modernity and its impact on social relations and the formation of self-identity.¹⁹ This was relevant to my exploration of alt-right groups and their formation of self-identity at numerous scales, and it also aided in my analysis of the sentiments of immigrant populations towards these groups. Giddens explains that there are three types of structures present in all societies: structures of signification, structures of domination, and structures of legitimation.²⁰ In the context of my research, all three types of structures enhanced my understanding of the rise of alt-right groups in Europe. The framework of structuration was used to better understand the relationships between the alt-right groups and the structures that they interact with and that surround them, as well as other groups such as immigrants and refugees.

The second theoretical framework that was used is praxeology. Like structuration, praxeology is relativist and is a critical theory; however, it differs in that it understands cultural struggle as the main connector of structure and agency. While structuration focuses on established structures and agency, praxeology focuses on the relationships between lifestyle and material resources. Main concepts within the field of praxeology which pertain to my research are *the field*

¹⁸Pushkala Prasad, "11: Structuration and Praxeology," in *Crafting Qualitative Research: Beyond Positivist Traditions* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 207-235.

¹⁹ Prasad, 208.

²⁰ Prasad, 211.

and the game and *symbolic violence*. *The field and the game* acknowledges the multiplicity of levels and individuals involved in social structures, while *symbolic violence* refers to the internalization of violence that exists in a structural manner. Praxeology's focus on the methodology of ethnography is also applicable to my research. According to Pierre Bourdieu, power struggles are symbolic and cultural as well as economic.²¹ Praxeology was especially relevant to understanding the rise of alt-right groups in Europe because it attempts to explain how different social groups engage in contests over symbolic space, one example of which is national identity.²² Its focus on the strategies employed by various social groups in order to maximize their material and symbolic advantages was used to analyze and understand the rise of alt-right groups, as well as how these groups use their power (symbolic or otherwise) against immigrant communities.²³ Using a theoretical framework consisting of both structuration and praxeology was beneficial in understanding the structural and cultural aspects of the rise of alt-right groups in Europe, as well as how these groups justify their treatment of immigrant communities.

Distinguishing Extremism from Radicalism and Common Characteristics

It is imperative that the terminology surrounding the topic of alt-right groups be thoroughly understood, beginning with distinguishing *extremism* from *radicalism*. While there are slight variations within the current literature, there are many commonalities which can aid in differentiating extremism and radicalism. According to Caiani and Borri, who note a strong sense of “terminological chaos” surrounding the topic, there are “... no fewer than twenty-six definitions

²¹ Prasad, 207

²² Prasad, 219.

²³ Prasad, 220.

of the extreme or radical right.”²⁴ Many of the scholars instead list their key characteristics. In comparing extremist and radical groups, Baier notes that their location on the political spectrum is a significant difference between them.²⁵ While extremist groups exist at the margin of this spectrum due to their encouragement of violence, radical groups are distinct in that they aim to operate within a parliamentary democracy.²⁶ Rydgren counters this by connecting the terms *radical* and *extremism*, noting that that the term *radical* in this context relates to *extremism*, as both of these groups present demands for major societal transformation. That is to say that these terms do not have many differences between them. Rydgren furthers this by defining extreme right groups as “anti-party parties” that “reject pluralist views”.²⁷ Where Rydgren might agree with Baier is in the socio-cultural context of the terms used to describe alt-right and extremist groups, as both note the difference between the two has cultural significance.

There are several common characteristics of alt-right groups that are prominently featured in the literature. Baier, Caiani and Borri, and Rydgren all note that both nationalism and populism are typical characteristics of alt-right groups.²⁸ While Baier specifies *ethnic* nationalism, Rydgren and Caiani and Borri go no further than simply mentioning the two concepts as common characteristics.²⁹ Baier also notes that despite these groups having the common characteristics of nationalism and populism, they are often divided by “competing nationalisms”.³⁰ Baier refers to

²⁴ Manuela Caiani and Rossella Borri, “Beyond Party Politics: The Search for a Unified Approach Research on Radical Right-Wing Movements in Europe.,” in *Social Movement Studies in Europe: The State of the Art*, ed. Guya Accornero and Olivier Fillieule (New York, New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), pp. 69-85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvgs0c35.10>, 72.

²⁵ Walter Baier, “Europe on the Precipice: The Crisis of the Neoliberal Order and the Ascent of Right-Wing Populism,” *New Labor Forum* 25, no. 3 (2016): pp. 48-55, doi:10.2307/26420010, 51.

²⁶ Baier, 51.

²⁷ Jens Rydgren, “The Sociology of the Radical Right.,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): pp. 241-262, <https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737762>, 243.

²⁸ Baier. Caiani and Borri. Rydgren.

²⁹ Baier. Caiani and Borri. Rydgren.

³⁰ Baier, 51.

competing nationalisms as one of the aspects which differs between European alt-right groups, while mentioning that despite this competition between nationalisms, these groups are often united by their strong anti-European views.³¹ Caiani and Borri also mention socio-cultural authoritarianism, which overlaps with Baier's mention of an authoritarian conception of society.³² Caiani and Borri mention xenophobia as their final core characteristic which relates to Rydgren's mention of anti-immigration sentiments.³³ However, Rydgren furthers this, discussing the connection between anti-immigration and economically protectionist viewpoints.³⁴ Finally, Baier expands upon the common characteristics of social chauvinism and anti-Europeanism, while Rydgren adds ethno-pluralism to the list of characteristics shared by these groups.³⁵ Ethno-pluralism, as defined by Rydgren, is the viewpoint that in order to preserve the national characters of different peoples, these peoples need to be kept separated.³⁶ In comparison, social chauvinism, as noted by Baier, is the viewpoint that the social state is exclusively for nationals of that state.³⁷

While Caiani and Borri divide their analysis into three main schools of thought, Rydgren splits the analysis into demand and supply-side factors. While demand-centered explanations focus on changing beliefs and attitudes among voters, supply-centered explanations focus on political structures and other organizational factors. To expand, the article mentions the previously noted anti-immigration issues along with a protectionist economic viewpoint, which are included in demand-side factors. The supply-side factors, according to Rydgren, include political opportunity structures, media, party organization, and electoral systems.³⁸ To contrast this, Caiani and Borri

³¹ Baier, 52.

³² Caiani and Borri. Baier.

³³ Caiani and Borri. Rydgren.

³⁴ Rydgren.

³⁵ Baier. Rydgren.

³⁶ Rydgren, 244.

³⁷ Baier, 51.

³⁸ Rydgren, 242.

analyze the phenomena of these groups through socio-psychological, systemic and environmental, and meso/institutional levels, stating that “...there is no single explanation of right-wing extremism and that in order to shed light on the phenomenon, it is necessary to consider the context of both structural (macro-level) and group- level dynamics, as well as conditions concerning the individual (micro level).”³⁹

My research will emphasize the importance of a multi-faceted approach when analyzing this phenomenon, similarly to the majority of the literature within this review. I borrow Caiani and Borri’s method of analyzing both macro and micro level dynamics, while also utilizing Rydgren’s demand and supply-side viewpoint. In terms of political characteristics, I borrow from Baier, Caiani, Borri, and Rydgren’s focus on nationalism and populism, while acknowledging Rydgren’s emphasis on the economic impacts of immigration. My research also acknowledges Baier’s inclusion of the ‘competing nationalisms’ between these groups and will acknowledge that radical and extremist groups can be closely associated because of their demand for major societal transformation.⁴⁰

Defining and contextualizing the term “Immigrant”

For many alt-right and extreme-right groups, both immigrant and refugee groups are often grouped together, yet it is important to understand the differences between the two. The term “refugee” refers to someone who has fled their home country due to risk or fear of human rights violation or persecution.⁴¹ The term “immigrant,” in comparison, is a foreign-born person who leaves their country of origin voluntarily, settling permanently in a new country.⁴² The current

³⁹ Caiani and Borri, 78.

⁴⁰ Baier, 52.

⁴¹ “Key Facts about Refugees and Asylum Seekers’ Rights.” Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants | Amnesty International, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>.

⁴² “Key Facts...” 2021

literature surrounding these two terms also includes other language, such as “migrant” and “asylum-seeker,” all of which apply to a wide set of circumstances or reasons for why an individual would relocate from one country to another. In the context of my research, immigrant and refugee communities are often grouped together from the view of many alt-right groups. This typically stems from the fact that these groups are foreigners hoping to make lives for themselves in a new country. To alt-right groups, the immigrants and refugee populations are coming from other places to steal jobs or to take advantage of social welfare programs. In order to better understand the positionality of the alt-right regarding immigrant and refugee populations, it is imperative to understand the common reasons why these groups form.

What causes radicalism?

Political reasons: Populism

While much of the current literature acknowledges the political reasons for the rise of alt-right groups, many scholars prefer to focus on economic, sociological, cultural, and psychological factors. Populism, however, is a political factor that few scholars leave out of their description of these groups, and it is also related to the aforementioned factors. Caiani and Borri note populism as being one of the four main traits of radical right groups, and Rydgren analyzes how populism has reflected a changing preference among voters.⁴³ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck address populism as an attractive coping mechanism for people who experience vulnerability.⁴⁴ They place a sociological lens on their research and delve away from the political in asserting that populist groups are strongest supported by stigmatized groups who face difficulties in finding a

⁴³ Rydgren, 242. Caiani and Borri, 70.

⁴⁴ Bram Spruyt, Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck, “Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): pp. 335-346, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916639138>, 342.

positive social identity.⁴⁵ In comparison, Polyakova and Shekhovtsov mention a political shift in alt-right groups from free-market liberalism to populism in an effort to attract more of the working class.⁴⁶ However, other than this brief acknowledgement, they do not expand upon how populism factors into the rise of these groups.

Political Reasons: Political Opportunity Structure

While Rydgren does mention political opportunity, it is mentioned in the context of a sociological perspective instead of a political one.⁴⁷ In Caiani and Borri's meso-level analysis, they mention political opportunity structure, which is a concept that is often used to explain the mobility of social movements and refers to both dynamic and stable contextual factors that may allow certain movements to be more mobile than others.⁴⁸ However, they also mention other factors such as societal support and the role of the internet, acknowledging that political factors often overlap with societal and informational ones. In contrast, political factors such as electoral systems and party organization are only briefly touched upon by Rydgren and Baier. For Rydgren both of these factors fall on the supply side, as they are influenced by the demands or votes of the people.⁴⁹ In comparison, Baier mentions several electoral factors, such as electoral abstention, yet glosses over any mention of party organization.⁵⁰

Economic Reasons: Globalization

Globalization is mentioned as a cause for radicalism and alt-right groups by both Colantone and Stanig as well as Polyakova and Shekhovtsov. In both articles the 'winners and losers'

⁴⁵ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 335.

⁴⁶ Alina Polyakova and Anton Shekhovtsov, "On The Rise," *World Affairs* 179, no. 1 (2016): pp. 70-80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820016662746>, 73.

⁴⁷ Rydgren.

⁴⁸ Caiani and Borri, 74.

⁴⁹ Rydgren, 254.

⁵⁰ Baier, 50.

terminology is brought up in the context of the results of globalization. Colantone and Stanig focus on how these winners and losers of globalization have contributed to growing political cleavages within many European countries.⁵¹ In contrast, Polyakova and Shekhovtsov assert that the “losers of modernization” are the ones who commonly support far-right parties, also noting the role that the refugee crisis has played in growing this support.⁵² While globalization is an important catalyst of radicalism, it has not been the sole cause. Rather, it has been a large contributing factor in exacerbating the fragile socioeconomic order in many European countries.

Economic Reasons: The Refugee Crisis

Another major event that has affected the socioeconomic order as well as the political order is the European refugee crisis. There has been large-scale displacement due to ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria, leading more than 1.4 million people to flee out of fear of persecution to Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain.⁵³ Refugees are able to use these countries as their bridge into Europe, sometimes attempting to connect with family members and ultimately settling in a diverse array of European countries.⁵⁴ Colantone and Stanig view migration as “...a visible catalyst for the political consequences of the economic distress driven by structural changes such as globalization and technological progress.”⁵⁵ Polyakova and Shekhovtsov instead focus on what they call the “triple threat” of economic crisis, Eurosceptic attitudes, and mass refugee inflows which have created a new political reality in many European countries.⁵⁶ They also note that these countries do not have the infrastructure or the cultural experience for

⁵¹ Colantone and Stanig, 129.

⁵² Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, 73.

⁵³ *Refugee Statistics: Europe*. (2020). Retrieved 2020, from <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

⁵⁴ *Refugee Statistics: Europe*. (2020).

⁵⁵ Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig, “The Surge of Economic Nationalism in Western Europe,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (January 2019): pp. 128-151, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.128>, 144.

⁵⁶ Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, 72.

integrating migrants, which has allowed alt-right groups to gain political traction through their anti-immigrant focused agendas.⁵⁷ The European refugee crisis is one that has had a great impact on many socio-political aspects of European countries, and it is possible to see how this impact has contributed to other crises as well.

Economic Reasons: The Economic Recession of 2008

The combination of the economic recession in 2008 with the refugee crisis only exacerbated the socio-political crises in Europe, and it is a period which can be seen as yet another contributing factor in the rise of alt-right groups in this region. Baier focuses on how the impacts of factors such as the refugee crisis have exacerbated “...fiscal crisis, precarity, and the middle strata’s fear of downward social mobility...” all of which have pushed people towards radical right groups.⁵⁸ A commonality between the literature of Colantone and Stanig and that of Baier is a focus on the influence that the economy, socio-economic class, and economic crises have on the creation and perpetuation of alt-right groups. While both agree on these common factors, Colantone and Stanig focus on job markets, whereas Baier puts more of an emphasis on how the fears of certain economic classes can be seen as motivators in their support of alt-right groups.⁵⁹

Economic Reasons: Economic Nationalism and Protectionism

In addition to the economic factors leading to the rise in alt-right and extremist groups in Europe there is also a growing shift of these parties towards economically protectionist policies. According to Colantone and Stanig, economic nationalism is a combination of conservative economic proposals and nationalist stances on immigration and international trade.⁶⁰ This definition can be used to further understand the overlapping roles of the economic and refugee

⁵⁷ Polyakova and Shekhovtsov.

⁵⁸ Baier, 50.

⁵⁹ Colantone and Stanig. Baier.

⁶⁰ Colantone and Stanig, 128.

crises in attracting more people to support extremist or alt-right groups. In contrast, according to Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, the most successful alt-right groups began with a potent combination of racist authoritarianism and free-market liberalism.⁶¹ However, in an effort to attract more from the working class, many groups dropped the free-market liberalism in favor of economic protectionism, pointing fingers at minorities and immigrants for the economic decline.⁶² While Colantone and Stanig provide an efficient working definition of economic nationalism, it is a term that is not frequently mentioned in the literature. In comparison, Polyakova and Shekhovtsov emphasize the political factor of authoritarianism and how it interacts with free-market liberalism.⁶³ They do not mention economic nationalism, yet they allude to a similar concept by emphasizing the importance of the connections between what they call ‘racist authoritarianism’ and free market liberalism.⁶⁴

Sociological & Psychological Reasons: Belonging, Status, and Identity

Within the current literature, many researchers acknowledge the importance of the sociological and psychological reasons of people joining alt-right groups. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck’s research is centered on the assertion that populist groups are strongest supported by stigmatized groups who face difficulties in finding a positive social identity.⁶⁵ They note that those who support these groups find “... a sharp group distinction that allows them to attribute responsibility for their own feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness to factors that lie beyond their control and responsibility so that they can maintain their self-respect... [and] the hope

⁶¹ Alina Polyakova and Anton Shekhovtsov, “On The Rise,” *World Affairs* 179, no. 1 (2016): pp. 70-80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820016662746>, 73.

⁶² Colantone and Stanig.

⁶³ Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, 70.

⁶⁴ Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, 73.

⁶⁵ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 336.

to overcome these troubles through the action of the sovereign people.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Caiani and Borri note the importance of the individual, stating that many people join these groups for a sense of belonging, status, and personal identity.⁶⁷ This viewpoint is centered in what Caiani and Borri call the ‘demand side’ of far-right politics, which focuses on the individual factors that lead people to sympathize with, join, or vote for extreme right organizations.⁶⁸

Sociological & Psychological Reasons: Coping Mechanisms and Frustration

While Caiani and Borri solely focus on the individual’s need for a sense of belonging, status, or identity, Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck instead focus on the individual turning to these groups as a coping mechanism and often out of frustration. They emphasize the importance of socio-psychological factors in understanding how populism structures both political and social space, and how these groups have become an outlet for people who experience vulnerability.⁶⁹ To compare Caiani and Borri’s approach with that of Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, it can be seen that the latter emphasizes the impact of individual psychological needs on the rise of these groups.⁷⁰ While both focus on the importance of an individual-level approach, Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck are able to expand upon this throughout their research, while maintaining the connection to an understanding of how populism’s function in alt-right groups.

Sociological & Psychological Reasons: Public Attitudes Towards These Groups vs. Current Support

The previous analysis of coping mechanisms and frustration connects strongly into a comparison of public attitudes towards these groups with current support, which is frequently

⁶⁶ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 336.

⁶⁷ Caiani and Borri.

⁶⁸ Caiani and Borri, 72.

⁶⁹ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck.

⁷⁰ Caiani and Borri. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck.

mentioned in the current literature.⁷¹ At an institutional level of analysis, Caiani and Borri mention political opportunity structure, societal support, and the role of the internet as the most important aspects.⁷² In comparison, Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck's research uses the case of Western Europe and looks at voting studies and how educational attainment has impacted the rise of these groups.⁷³ To expand, their research shows populist attitudes can be empirically distinguished from feelings of lack of external political efficacy.⁷⁴ While Caiani and Borri focus on societal support as it pertains to political opportunity structure, Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck place a focus on current research of public's attitudes towards these groups as well as how current support for populism is distinct from feelings of lack of policy efficacy.⁷⁵

Immigration

As mentioned in previous sections, many European countries have experienced influxes in immigrants and refugees. These influxes in immigration have been due to a variety of reasons which can range from war, to climate and environmental factors, to religion, and many others. The social changes that come with influxes and outfluxes of populations also imply that there is movement and action between and within many levels of society and culture.⁷⁶ In order to enact social change surrounding immigrant and refugee or other marginalized groups it is important to identify why or how social inequalities happen in the first place. Mengibar's work uses a discursive lens to focus on how Spanish society views immigrant populations, noting the importance of understanding both the socio-political and economic contexts for clues as to why immigration is

⁷¹ Caiani and Borri. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck.

⁷² Caiani and Borri.

⁷³ Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 335.

⁷⁴ Caiani and Borri.

⁷⁵ Caiani and Borri. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck.

⁷⁶ Mengibar, Ana Caballero. "Critical Discourse Analysis in the Study of Representation, Identity Politics and Power Relations." *Communication & Society* 28, no. 2 (February 17, 2015): 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003>.

seen as a threat in a given country.⁷⁷ Especially when studying such fluid topics as immigration and population movement it is imperative to utilize discourse analysis to observe the types of words that are being used to describe these groups. While Mengibar notes the importance of using specific terms to guide the discourse, it is also useful to acknowledge the many different ways that there are to both contextualize and categorize the meanings of different words.⁷⁸ Especially with the terms “immigrant” and “refugee,” there are many contributors to how these populations are represented and categorized in society. This study utilizes Mengibar’s critical discourse analysis framework to understand the unique power relations that occur between immigrant populations and the established populations in Spain. This framework is applied to both a Spanish context, similar to Mengibar’s work, as well as a European context in an effort to broaden its scope and provide an interesting comparative analysis.

Limitations in the Literature

Questions That Remain Unanswered

While many sources delve into contributing factors that have aided in the rise of alt-right groups, or factors which perpetuate or consolidate their popularity, few of them question what is happening with these groups now and what the current societal responses have been. While Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck briefly touch on feelings of policy efficacy, they do not fully delve into what the modern responses to these groups have been. Researchers such as Baier, Colantone and Stanig, and Polyakova and Shekhovtsov include steps that institutions such as the U.N. or countries such as the U.S. should take in order to stop or hinder the rise of these groups.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Mengibar, 43.

⁷⁸ Mengibar, 46.

⁷⁹ Baier. Colantone and Stanig. Polyakova and Shekhovstov.

For example, Baier notes the importance of left political parties in filling in gaps in political institutions such as parliaments in order to prevent alt-right groups from taking power and Polyakova and Shekhovtsov note that other allies need to continue to be engaged in European politics in order to prevent this phenomenon from progressing.⁸⁰ However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the responses to the rise of alt-right groups, especially from a group which they frequently target, which is immigrant and refugee communities.

Despite offering solutions or making inferences about potential solutions, the current literature does not offer insight into what the current responses to the rise of these groups have been. It also does not address if any of the proposed plans to deny alt-right groups power have been successful, nor does it address the viewpoint of immigrant populations towards these groups, many of which have explicitly stated anti-immigrant policies in many spheres of their existence and political goals.

My research contributes to the research around modern responses to these groups and focuses on a range of levels from public opinions to alt-right group propaganda and online publications to immigrant and refugee viewpoints. A multi-level approach is important in addressing this multifaceted question at every level possible. It provides valuable insight on the cultural and social influence that the alt-right groups have within their countries and will attempt to predict what their futures might entail given their current political positions. Finally, my research will be able to give voice to the immigrant and refugee communities that are so frequently targeted by the alt-right in their countries.

⁸⁰ Baier, 48. Polyakova and Shekhovtsov.

Methodology

In order to understand the rise of alt-right groups in Europe from the point of view of immigrant and refugee communities, this study drew upon both national and regional newspapers as well as blogs and online forums, in addition to several reports created by European NGOs. As previously noted in the literature review, the major variables within my research are refugee and immigrant communities and alt-right groups. For the purposes of my research, immigrant and refugee populations were grouped together. I chose to do this because these groups are often perceived in the same way by the alt-right, and garner very similar societal and cultural responses. These terms refer to persons who relocate from their country of origin and have the ultimate goal of settling in another country.⁸¹ As mentioned in the literature review, there are many definitions which attempt to categorize the term “alt-right”. For my research, these groups were defined as groups which exist within the typical political spectrum and share common characteristics of nationalism, populism, and an authoritarian conception of society.⁸² These aforementioned definitions were used to identify both immigrant/refugee groups as well as alt-right groups within my data.

Data Collection

In order to obtain the most well-rounded and ethnographically based data possible, this research utilized qualitative data. Being able to qualitatively understand the feelings that alt-right groups create in immigrant and refugee communities, as well as the causes of those feelings,

⁸¹ “Key Facts about Refugees and Asylum Seekers’ Rights.” Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants | Amnesty International, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>.

⁸² Manuela Caiani and Rossella Borri, “Beyond Party Politics: The Search for a Unified Approach Research on Radical Right-Wing Movements in Europe.,” in *Social Movement Studies in Europe: The State of the Art*, ed. Guya Accornero and Olivier Fillieule (New York, New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), pp. 69-85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvgs0c35.10>, 72.

necessitates a closer look at literature which is focused on giving a voice to those viewpoints. Qualitative data lends itself best to interpretive analyses, and therefore to my research as well because of my aim to gain in-depth insight into the phenomenon of the rise of alt-right groups through the eyes of immigrant and refugee populations. I chose the time frame from 2015-early 2021 for my investigation. This time frame is important as it is the time period in which many of the alt-right groups in Europe began to gain more traction, more media attention, and in turn, more followers. My existing knowledge of available newspaper outlets within Spain and Europe was used in order to determine which sources were to be analyzed for my research. This research drew upon primary sources of blog posts and newspaper publications and also one documentary film. A 2018 Pew Research Center study was used to understand public opinions towards these news outlets and to choose the ones which best represented the viewpoints that were being explored in my research.⁸³ More specifically, for the case study and for a closer look at this phenomenon within Spain, the blog *Afroféminas* was used, as well as *SOSRacismo*, a web page of an organization dedicated to eradicating racism within Spain. The conservative Spanish Newspaper *ABC* was also used, as well as the official website of Vox, Spain's alt-right political party. For the more general sources involving Europe at a broader scale, news outlets such as *BBC*, and United Nations or other NGO publications were used.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis as well as schema analysis are the analytical techniques used for my research. Due to the analysis being centered on the written word through blog posts and newspaper articles, discourse analysis was used to analyze and deconstruct these texts, allowing for an in-

⁸³ Amy Mitchell et al., "News Outlets Are Less Politically Polarized than Western Europeans Perceive," *Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media*, 2018, <https://www.journalism.org/2018/05/14/news-outlets-are-less-politically-polarized-than-western-europeans-perceive/>.

depth comparison of the different perspectives. Doing so allows the researcher to closely interpret interactions that occur naturally.⁸⁴ Discourse analysis was also used in an analysis of the documentary film that I watched. Similar to Mengibar's (2015) study, my research employed a more critical and multidisciplinary approach to discourse analysis, with an intent focus on the social power dynamics within my subjects of study.⁸⁵ Aside from this method, schema analysis was also used to understand the societal rules that impact the members of these groups in not only their daily actions but also in their viewpoints towards others. Schema analysis allows for a cultural and rule-based explanation of a certain phenomenon, which in this case, is the rise of alt-right groups and the responses to them from immigrant populations.⁸⁶ This analytical technique was used to understand the potential for rules to differ between members of immigrant/refugee populations in comparison with members or followers of alt-right groups.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

While this research is centered in Europe at a general level and Spain in terms of the case study, it is being conducted and analyzed in the United States of America. The current limitations that the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to place on this situation have also impacted this field of study. Immigrant and refugee populations not only have had to be concerned about their safety and security, but now have also had to be aware of the pandemic and the dangers that it causes. The pandemic has also caused many organizations and aid centers that work with immigrant and refugee populations to solely focus on helping to manage the impacts that these populations have felt as a result. Many of these organizations have also been dealing with smaller

⁸⁴ Bernard, H. Russell. *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 36.

⁸⁵ Mengibar, Ana Caballero. "Critical Discourse Analysis in the Study of Representation, Identity Politics and Power Relations." *Communication & Society* 28, no. 2 (February 17, 2015): 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003>.

⁸⁶ Bernard, 32.

budgets and other constraints created and exacerbated by the pandemic. Because of this prioritization in a time of crisis, it was difficult to engage with these organizations in order to gain information about how immigrant and alt-right groups have been impacted by the rise of alt-right groups, directly impacting my ability to understand the phenomenon from

In terms of my positionality as a researcher, it is important to remember that this study aims to bring light to a topic through giving power and space to marginalized voices within academic discourse. Being a white woman from the United States, I have no personal connection with immigrant or refugee groups in Europe or Spain. I cannot give any more light to their experiences than through their own words that I have analyzed for this research. Due to time constraints, I was limited in the quantity of primary data sources that I was able to read, as well as in the overall breadth of my research project. Another aspect that is important to acknowledge is the impact of western-Europe-centric literature on the topics of alt-right groups and immigrants as well as immigrant groups' responses. When conducting research surrounding a certain population or populations it is especially pertinent to keep in mind the ethical considerations and implications that this might have on the research. Both the inclusion of specific sources and certain experiences as well as the exclusion of others is important to understand when considering the ethical implications of research as well.

Research Findings

Finding 1: "Us vs. Them"

My first finding is based upon many levels of coding of Afroféminas blog posts as well as scenes from *Exodus: The Journey Continues*. The title "Us vs. Them" references the dichotomy that I saw between alt-right and immigrant groups within the blog posts as well as in the documentary film. In an example from one of the blog articles that I analyzed, "Estrategia y

esperanza ante la amenaza violenta de la extrema derecha”, the different tags that were used to group the article were already associating the alt-right with other terms such as “fascismo” (facism).⁸⁷ This quote from Elvira Swartch Lorenzo, an Afroféminas contributor, best demonstrates the presence of the “Us vs. Them” rhetoric which I found to be extremely present:

“Si no *tenemos* cuidado *estamos* a un paso de que VOX utilice a las bandas nazis que *les* acompañan en *sus* mítines como seguridad callejera...”⁸⁸

[“If *we* aren’t careful *we* are a step away from Vox using the Nazi gangs that accompany *them* at *their* rallies like street safety...”]⁸⁹

As can be seen from the quote, the use of different conjugation forms within the Spanish directly translates to the perpetuation and creation of the division between alt-right and immigrant groups. The Spanish words ending in “-mos” indicate the verb is being conjugated in the “we” form, while the words “les” and “sus” indicate a “you” plural (them) conjugation of the verbs.

In the film *Exodus: The Journey Continues*, there are many examples of the “Us vs. Them” rhetoric and dichotomy, which only furthers its perpetuation. One such example can be seen in a quote from Sadiq, an Afghani refugee and subject within the documentary. In this quote, Sadiq is in Finland and is discussing how he feels Finnish people (and Europeans) view him and his fellow refugees:

⁸⁷ Swartch Lorenzo, Elvira. (2020, November 2). Estrategia y esperanza ante la amenaza violenta de la extrema derecha [web log].

⁸⁸ Swartch Lorenzo, Elvira. Researcher’s emphasis.

⁸⁹ [Researcher’s translation and emphasis]

“*They* don’t really like people like you and me.”⁹⁰

This quote is immediately followed by footage of Finnish alt-right groups staging an anti-immigrant protest, further driving home the message that Sadiq expresses in his quote. This example from *Exodus: The Journey Continues* aids in demonstrating the prevalence of the “Us vs. Them” rhetoric and dichotomy between alt-right and immigrant/refugee groups.

This dichotomy creates a division from not only a literary standpoint (as explored in the Afroféminas blog post) but can also be seen as something that translates into the lived experiences of both of these groups. To view this with a structuration lens, the dichotomy that is created by these groups is a social structure which reproduces itself through these actors’ word choices and viewpoints. This finding allows for an in-depth look at one specific viewpoint regarding alt-right groups from the points of view of immigrant and refugee communities. The finding proves useful in better understanding the power dynamics and structures at play in interactions between alt-right groups and immigrant/refugee groups and how they are perpetuated through this dichotomy.

Finding 2: Emotion and Fear

The “Us vs. Them” rhetoric is not the only narrative that contains power within the relations and structures at play between immigrant/ refugee groups and alt-right groups. In fact, many alt-right groups are often motivated by one emotion which can greatly affect their narrative—fear. This can stem from potential feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability within society, an important praxeological element to keep in consideration. Fear is also an emotion that immigrant and refugee groups relate with, creating a unique similarity between

⁹⁰ Bluemel, J. (Producer). (2018, January 23). *Exodus: The Journey Continues* [Video file]. Retrieved 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/exodus-the-journey-continues/> , 1:44:40.

immigrant/refugee and alt-right groups. An example of this within my research which can be seen from my case study research in Spain is the characterization of the alt-right (“la extrema derecha”) by Afroféminas contributor A. Zuri. Throughout her article, Zuri uses many different emotionally charged words to describe the alt-right. These include: “cobarde” (cowardly/coward), “mentirosa” (liars), “racista” (racist), and “facista” (fascist).⁹¹ Zuri’s post ends with one word, in all-caps: “COBARDES.” (cowards).⁹² These words strongly showcase the strong hate and emotion that Zuri, an immigrant woman, feels towards the alt-right in Spain. To take this emotional aspect to a larger scale, in *Exodus: The Journey Continues*, emotion is conveyed in more subtle aspects within the cinematography. These aspects include things such as camera movement, background noises and soundtrack, as well as darker colors during specific scenes. One such example occurs while the narrator is describing Germany’s alt-right groups.

“The AfD, or Alternative for Germany, has only existed for three years. But in that time, it has attracted lots of support for its anti-migrant views.”⁹³

Immediately after this quote, the film then cuts to footage of Tarek, one of the refugees that the film follows, walking through AfD counter-protests and asking a passerby what is going on. This scene utilizes imagery, sounds, and colors in order to convey the emotions (and fear) of Tarek during this moment. The imagery used are scenes of alt-right demonstrations against immigrants, with close-up shots of anti-immigrant signs. There is also a darker filter placed over these scenes, giving them a gloomy look and adding to the emotion and fear-inducing aspect. These aspects,

⁹¹ Zuri, A. (2021, January 10). Trump, Abascal y la cobardía [web log]. <https://afrofeminas.com/2021/01/10/trump-abascal-y-la-cobardia/>.

⁹² Zuri, A.

⁹³ Bluemel, J.

coupled with the sounds of siren noises and chanting create an atmosphere of fear and tension for the viewer.

My research points to the use of emotions in the characterization of views towards immigrant groups as a way to create leverage in a perceived struggle over societal power. Alt-right groups and immigrant groups both *feel* threatened, which is an emotion. Utilizing praxeology to better understand these relationships between and struggle for lifestyle, life chances, and *material resources* is a way in which my research aims to fill a knowledge gap. As seen throughout my research and in the provided examples, emotions are a major way in which these groups express this struggle. This finding signifies that both alt-right and immigrant groups have a need to express their emotions, struggles, and concerns. Surprisingly, my research shows that these struggles and concerns often make interesting overlaps. My work makes the connection between the emotional expressions of these two groups and their current societal positionality and struggles. My research gives an in-depth look at two specific situations, the creation of alt-right groups and the creation of immigrant and refugee communities' perceptions towards them, in order to understand the deeper emotions that exist within this space at a larger scale. Finally, it uses concepts of praxeology to frame and understand the tension between alt-right groups and immigrant/refugee groups.

Conclusion

My research aimed to answer the following questions: **(1) Where and why is the rise of alt-right groups happening?** **(2) Do immigrant and refugee communities feel persecuted or targeted by these groups?** **(3) Has immigrant perception of social belonging changed in light of the alt-right's anti-immigrant rhetoric?** My first and most prominent finding, the "Us vs. Them" rhetoric, is prevalent both within the writings on the Afroféminas blog as well as within

the film *Exodus*. This finding is important to keep in mind when understanding the broader applicability of this research. This creation and perpetuation of a dichotomy between immigrant groups and alt-right groups will have drastic implications for the future of politics in many European countries, as well as the world. Mainstream media as well as smaller outlets and blogs, such as the ones used in this research, only aid in perpetuating this divisive rhetoric, allowing avenues for these groups to express themselves and their opinions with little chance for shared dialogue between the two. It is important to understand the future implications of my finding centered around the “Us vs. Them” narrative and dichotomy, as well as the role that the media—including blog posts and documentaries—plays in perpetuating this. As my research shows, fear is a large factor for both immigrant and alt-right groups, which influences their actions within the larger structure of society. Fear can also be seen as an inhibitor of the communication that will become necessary between these groups, especially in the long term.

Especially given the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been many new or exacerbated stressors on both immigrant groups as well as alt-right groups, some of which have led to clashes and public unrest or protest. For example, refugees in the Canary Islands (or *Islas Canarias*), a Spanish territory, have begun to be housed in the island’s resorts, which have laid vacant due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. This has been at the expense of the Spanish government, which is paying 45 Euros per refugee per day, enraging alt-right supporters in the Islands and across all of Spain, ultimately sparking protests.⁹⁴

To further this research, it would be extremely insightful to conduct interviews with both alt-right group members and refugee and immigrant communities in Spain as well as in other

⁹⁴ Jiménez, David. “No Somos Racistas. Es Solo Que No Nos Gustan Los Pobres.” *The New York Times*, 17 Dec. 2020, www.nytimes.com/es/2020/12/17/espanol/opinion/migracion-espana.html.

European countries with a strong alt-right group presence (Germany, Hungary, France). These interviews would lend a stronger ethnographic viewpoint to the sentiments that these groups feel towards each other and would bring a deeply personal viewpoint to the topic as well.

The rise of alt-right and nationalist groups is not a phenomenon that is confined to Europe. This rise is occurring in many regions throughout the world—from North America to South America and many places in between. Because of this, it is important to better understand the reasons for the rise of alt-right groups as well as the emotions—fear especially—that are so central to this rise and many of these groups' viewpoints towards immigrant and refugee groups.

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