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Volume XXXVI

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Immigration Salience and Far-Right Electoral Discrimination: An Analysis of Ethnic Minority Candidates' Electoral Penalties in Irish Elections

Theo Puech

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

Welcome to volume 36 of the Social and Political Review! Whenever someone asks whether the SPR is an established journal, I tell them it is now in its 36th year; their reaction is a mix of admiration and surprise. I take great pride in that response, as it reflects the journal's longstanding consistency and credibility. Over the past 36 years, everyone involved has demonstrated unwavering passion and dedication, and I am honoured to be among them.

This volume marks an unprecedented year for the SPR. For the first time in the journal's history, we introduced a theme 'Identity, Communities, and Power', aiming to give the volume a clear direction and coherence. In today's political context, characterised by the erosion of the liberal international order, multiple and simultaneous conflicts, escalating migration flows, stricter immigration policies, and the marginalisation of the climate crisis, the distribution of power across cultural, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic identities has become especially salient. The prevailing rhetoric of identity politics often obscures deeper power dynamics, portraying certain groups as threats, liabilities, or even as barbaric others. Identities, in a very primordial way, are expected to carry far more explanatory weight than they are capable of. Therefore, the purpose is to interrogate how these identities are instrumentalised to serve the agendas of

the political elites. We trust this collection will inspire dialogue and guide future research on these underlying power landscapes.

Contributing to the far-right literature, Theo Puech shows that heightened immigration salience in Ireland local elections reduces voters' willingness to transfer preferences to ethnic-minority candidates, and Isabel Fellenz finds the AfD leveraged the October 7 Hamas attacks to reinforce Islamophobia while posing as a defender of Jews. On the other hand, Anna Zivkovich explains that the US' 2025 cuts to development aid leaves large funding gaps for the Global South. On the theme of racial governance: Faye Predergast shows how Mauritius preserves democratic stability by institutionalising racial categories through the Best Loser System, while Elsa Williams traces the Peoples Temple's rise and tragic collapse, arguing that unmet post-civil-rights racial promises helped the cult attract marginalised followers. There is a strong focus on identity politics: Clara Abreu argues that the FMLM's civilian-dependent insurgency combined shared identity, organisational incentives and local information networks to limit violence against civilians, and Ava Urquidez demonstrates that growing Protestant competition pushes the Catholic Church in Mexico and Bolivia toward more substantive protection of Indigenous peoples. Marysia Uklanska analyses Andrzej Wajda's film, Ashes and Diamonds, to reveal how competing wartime rituals prevent the formation of a legitimate post-war Polish polity. I congratulate the authors on their brilliant work; it has been a pleasure to read and an honour to publish.

Publishing an academic journal is a laborious process that depends on the commitment and expertise of many individuals

and institutions without whom the production of this volume would not have been possible. Dylan, Catarina, Isabelle J., Amir, Raina, and Prachi A. for their meticulous selection and editing of every submission. Maylea, Ila, and Sofia, whose keen eyes ensured linguistic precision throughout the volume. Isabelle S., for her organised approach to planning and executing events. Isabella, for her dedicated effort in enhancing our online presence and designing this volume. Elisa, for her competent oversight of the operations and successful securing of funding. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the Department of Political Science and Department of Sociology, together with our external partners Trinity Trust, Think-tank for Action and Social Change, and Grehan's Printers, for their indispensable support and resources.

I have served this journal for the last three years - first as an author, then as an assistant editor, and now as Editor-in-Chief. The review has played a central role in my university experience, and thus it deeply humbles me to write these words. SPR was established to provide the undergraduate students of Trinity an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the fields of sociology and political science, and it remains committed to showcasing such outstanding scholarship today. I trust that you will discover exactly this in our inaugural themed Volume XXXVI: Identity, Communities and Power.

Prachi Tailor
Editor-in-Chief

Immigration Salience and Far-Right Electoral Discrimination: An Analysis of Ethnic Minority Candidates' Electoral Penalties in Irish Elections

Theo Puech

Abstract

This project contributes to the literature on the electoral discrimination thesis, whereby some voters penalise candidates from ethnic minorities. An under-studied aspect of it is the role of issue salience in determining its extent. To address this gap, transfer rates from far-right voters to ethnic minority candidates in the 2024 Irish local elections are studied. Specifically, this project explores the extent of far-right electoral discrimination when immigration is of high salience, controlling for other key variables. The argument that high salience makes electoral discrimination more likely is backed up by the finding of a significant and negative effect on far-right transfer rates to ethnic minority candidates when immigration is prominent in a local area. This study touches on multiple under-researched areas, including voting behaviour in preferential systems, and has implications for the study of Irish politics and far-right voting behaviour.

Introduction

An increasing number of Irish people are from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds, and while their political participation

is growing, these groups still tend to be underrepresented in elected roles (Szlovak, 2018). Many factors contribute to this, including electoral discrimination by voters against ethnic minority candidates (EMCs) (Portmann, 2022). As an emerging area for research, many aspects remain underexplored, particularly the conditions that determine its scope. Another growing constituency in Ireland is far-right voters, whose voting behaviour warrants further investigation. This raises the following question: Is electoral discrimination against ethnic minority candidates by Irish far-right voters more likely when immigration salience is higher?

In the context of the Irish preference-based electoral system, this question presents the opportunity to learn more about far-right voting behaviour, a critical concept, and to better understand one of the barriers to political representation that ethnic minorities face. This could enable researchers and policymakers alike to combat this barrier, developing more descriptively representative democratic structures. This question offers clear empirical importance: because far-right parties tend not to run EMCs, far-right electoral discrimination has been near-impossible to study — Ireland's system allows this issue to be overcome (Besco, 2020). The impact of issue salience on individual candidates can also be better understood, with existing research mostly focusing instead on party choice (Dennison, 2019). Indeed, literature linking issue salience with electoral discrimination is currently almost non-existent. Theoretically, this question is intriguing: while this study argues that discrimination is more likely when immigration salience is higher, it is also possible that increased salience merely leads to a higher overall far-right vote without a

change in discrimination frequency, or indeed that a broader far-right base beyond core nationalists is more ideologically diverse, resulting in less discrimination against EMCs (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2024).

(Irish) Electoral Discrimination

A relatively recent conceptualisation, electoral discrimination research is a growing field. Nevertheless, electoral discrimination has been observed across countries and time periods (Besco, 2020; Ceva & Stojanović, 2025; Martin & Blinder, 2021). It refers to EMCs receiving fewer votes than equivalent majority-group candidates (Besco, 2020). EMCs are those from groups who differ in race or nationality, religious or cultural origin from the dominant group, which in this case is white Irish, who contest elections (Abba-Aji et al., 2022). An emerging pattern in the literature is that right-wing voters discriminate more than left-wingers; it seems near-certain that far-right voters would also discriminate (Auer et al., 2025; Martin & Blinder, 2021; Street, 2014). While Irish ethnicity-based electoral discrimination has not been studied, it is likely to exist in a political culture where individual candidates are as or more important than their party, and where electoral structures are also candidate-centric (Cunningham & Marsh, 2024; Weeks, 2017a). Far-right rhetoric also targets EMCs specifically, framing them as part of the replacement of native populations (Arlow & O'Malley, 2025). Therefore, this question seeks to move beyond whether electoral discrimination exists and instead examine why it occurs. This has not been examined with a specific focus on issue salience – one dimension that has been studied is whether electoral

discrimination is a function of in-group positive bias or out-group negative bias (Portmann, 2022).

Issue Salience and (Far-right) Voting Behaviour

Issue salience in this context is understood as behavioural, referring to the weight someone gives to an issue when voting (Dennison, 2019). The explanatory power of issue salience on voting behaviour is long-established (Gunderson, 2024; RePass, 1971; Sipma & Berning, 2021). However, this has been mainly limited to party choice, rather than candidate-level choices (Dennison, 2019). Relatedly, little research exists on this relationship in preferential systems like Ireland's, with Singh's (2009) study in Australia being a rare example. Finally, there is some indirect research on the effect of immigration salience, or issue salience generally, on the extent of electoral discrimination – one such example is experimental research finding that some EMCs in Britain, where immigration salience is high, could reduce discrimination by taking anti-immigration stances (Martin & Blinder, 2021). It therefore seems likely that high immigration salience would be associated with more electoral discrimination.

The far-right, a growing group in Ireland and internationally, is defined by two features: nativism and authoritarianism, with populism usually present too (Mudde, 2017). For far-right voting behaviour specifically, high immigration salience contributes to increased far-right vote share rather than a general increase in anti-immigration views (Dennison & Geddes, 2018). Far-right electorates are heterogeneous; it is not always the case that these voters are solely motivated by immigration (Harteveld et al.,

2022). Even among those motivated by immigration, there is diversity, with different economic/cultural factors involved (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). Typically, the peripheral voters who join a far-right party when it grows are more likely to be motivated by economic factors in their opposition to immigration (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2024).

Expectations

Electoral discrimination is expected to be higher where immigration is more salient: because of increased salience, they are likely to have more people who are motivated by core nativist views, even as a share of the overall far-right vote. Increased immigration salience is also likely to cause more immigration-motivated far-right voting, which would increase this share of the overall cohort at the expense of those who vote far-right based on other factors. Subsequently, immigration-motivated voters ought to be more discriminatory against EMCs, giving rise to a higher rate of electoral discrimination. If these expectations align with true voting patterns, far-right vote share should have little impact on electoral discrimination, with salience of immigration instead being a stronger predictor. The candidate-centric nature of Irish political culture is also expected to come into play when immigration salience is higher, with the simultaneous presence of these two variables combining to make electoral discrimination more likely.

Additionally, the reality of the Irish far-right must be considered: their vote share is very small, winning just 1.58% in the 2024 general election while not being particularly concentrated in any

one area, meaning that it is unlikely that far-right parties have succeeded in expanding beyond a core nativist base anywhere in the country (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2025).

Alternatively, based on the literature above it is possible that in areas with high immigration salience the far-right vote share is higher and thus broader and more diverse, leading to less electoral discrimination as more hardline nativists are drowned out by economics-motivated voters who may be more ambivalent towards individual EMCs; if this is the case, higher immigration salience should, via the variable of increased far-right vote, correlate with less electoral discrimination.

Research Design

The Irish electoral system is ideal for testing electoral discrimination, thanks to its preferential nature (Portmann & Stojanović, 2019). In this system, voters rank the candidates by preference, and the candidate with the lowest first preferences is eliminated, with their votes transferred to the second preferences. Electoral discrimination in this context is operationalised as the transfer rate from a far-right candidate (FRC) to an EMC. Local elections are more suited to studying electoral discrimination as candidates are less well-known, meaning voters necessarily place more importance on personal traits such as ethnicity (Matson & Fine, 2006). This makes the 2024 Irish local elections the most suitable for this question. Only one election should be studied to minimise independent variables. All vote data is available from official government sources, from which the transfer rate of each observation was calculated (Department of Housing, Local

Government and Heritage, 2025). Four far-right parties participated: National Party, Irish Freedom Party, Ireland First and The Irish People (Ahmed, 2025). Aontú and Independent Ireland are not included, categorised merely as right-wing (McElroy and Müller, 2025; Ó Rálaigh, 2025). Some far-right independents ran, but as independent voters in Ireland are distinctive and difficult to compare to party voters, these candidates have been excluded, giving 108 FRCs (Weeks, 2017b). EMCs were identified by their name and/or appearance, which both appear on ballot papers: while this strategy inevitably excludes some who identify as members of minority groups, e.g. Irish Travellers, and includes some who do not, e.g. someone who took their spouse's surname, the relevant factor is whether voters perceive them as EMCs rather than their actual identity (see Portmann & Stojanović (2019) for similar strategy). This gives 118 EMCs in 69 local electoral areas (LEAs). There were 52 observations in 27 LEAs of an EMC being in a position to receive transfers from an FRC, with 40 individual EMCs and 37 FRCs. Unfortunately, this sample size did not make it possible to compare degrees of discrimination faced by members of different groups, such as Black or Muslim candidates.

Independent Variable

The salience of immigration has not been directly measured on a local level; instead, it was operationalised by whether an anti-immigration protest had taken place in the LEA after the 2023 Dublin riots, when immigration became more salient nationally, and before polling day, which was the case for 32 observations (Arlow & O'Malley, 2025). It should be noted that anti-

immigration protests are treated here as both an indicator of, and a response to, local-level immigration salience, rather than the reverse. Whether an anti-immigration protest occurred in a given LEA was determined through date-ranged internet searches, checking local and national media. However, not every protest in a LEA was automatically indicative of immigration being salient locally. For example, in May 2024, then-Taoiseach Simon Harris was subject to anti-immigration protests outside his home in Greystones, but given that this was an indicator of national-level immigration salience, the Greystones LEA was not coded as having had a protest (O'Connor, 2024).

Controls

Three other independent variables were controlled for: incumbency and party affiliation of the candidate, and far-right vote share in the LEA. Incumbency is straightforward to ascertain and has an observed positive effect in Irish local elections; there were only five incumbent EMCs in the dataset (out of nine overall), limiting the utility of incumbency as a controllable variable for this question (Jankowski & Müller, 2021). Due to the smaller sample size, with most parties only having a handful of candidates in the dataset, using far-right transfer rates to each party would have been too unreliable; instead, a binary variable was used. Rather than left-right, the stronger delineation was between candidates from parties that were or have previously been involved in government coalitions (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and Green), and from those that have not (Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, People Before Profit, Aontú, Right2Change and independents), with the former group

receiving much fewer transfers from far-right voters than the latter. This pattern is not surprising theoretically, given the strong anti-government and populist rhetoric that exists in Irish far-right circles (Karlsson & Ördén, 2025). Inclusion of the 11 observable independent EMCs was possible as an investigation of their campaigns found no issues of potentially confounding variables, e.g. supporting anti-immigration policies. Finally, to control for the potential impact of a higher far-right vote in an area on the theoretical ideological make-up of voters, the total far-right vote share in the LEA was added to the model (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025).

With these four independent variables included and the transfer rate of FRCs to EMCs as the dependent variable, a standard linear regression was conducted, with the results presented below. A variance inflation factor (VIF) test to assess potential multicollinearity between protest presence, EMC incumbency and far-right vote share was also conducted. It is, of course, impossible to control for every variable, especially with such a small sample, but this model takes into account key individual factors like (non-)party affiliation and incumbency, as well as the theoretical ideological make-up of the far-right voters themselves. The final model is written below:

$$\textit{Transfer rate of FRC to EMC} = \textit{protest} + \textit{EMC party} + \textit{EMC incumbency} + \textit{LEA far-right vote\%}$$

Findings

Table 1: Predictors of far-right transfer rates to EMCs

Independent Variable	Model 1: No Control	Model 2: Party affiliation controlled	Model 3: Incumbency controlled	Model 4: LEA far-right vote share controlled
Protest happened	-2.1891** (0.7911)	-1.8925* (0.7613)	-2.0062* (0.7744)	-2.07016* (0.83294) [1.196164]
EMC stood for party of government	-	-1.8981* (0.7549)	-1.7905* (0.7668)	-1.75684* (0.78905) [1.091875]
EMC was incumbent councillor	-	-	-1.1078 (1.2742)	-1.10410 (1.28713) [1.048818]
Far-right vote share in LEA	-	-	-	0.05108 (0.22894) [1.160357]
Observations	52	52	52	52

The dependent variable is the transfer rate from FRC to EMC. Linear regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses, VIFs in square parentheses in Model 4. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Results

The results of this model indicate that increased local salience of immigration, operationalised as whether a protest occurred, does predict electoral discrimination towards EMCs by far-right voters, in the form of less transfers from the FRC in areas where protests happened. The first model, with no controlling variables, finds a negative and strongly significant effect on transfer rates. When controlling for the EMCs' party affiliation and

incumbency, this negative effect was still significant, admittedly to a slightly lesser extent. As anticipated, EMCs who stood for traditional parties of government received less transfers: this is not necessarily electoral discrimination but rather reflects anti-government and populist attitudes of far-right voters. Given the low number of incumbent EMC councillors included in the model, it was impossible to establish a significant effect of incumbency on transfer rate; with more than double the number of immigrant-origin candidates elected in 2024 than in 2019, the 2029 elections may provide a better opportunity in this regard (Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2024).

The final model incorporates far-right vote share in the LEA as an independent variable, as a way to isolate immigration salience from the potential knock-on effects of a broader and more diverse far-right vote. Despite the theoretical possibility that multicollinearity would be present here, with previous protests in a LEA and an incumbent EMC both potentially corresponding to a higher far-right vote share, all variables had VIFs less than 1.2, indicating insignificant issues of multicollinearity. Due to the low coefficient and sizable standard error of the vote share variable here, it is impossible to know the extent to which or even the direction of which far-right vote share is a factor in levels of electoral discrimination, if it even is one. On the other hand, in this model, a protest happening still had a negative and significant effect on transfer rates, albeit with very slightly less confidence than the previous model.

Overall, these models give credence to the expectation that higher issue salience of immigration makes electoral discrimination against EMCs more likely. The first model, with no controls, aligns with the argument that higher immigration salience does increase electoral discrimination against EMCs. When modelling with party affiliation and incumbency controlled for, this argument is still borne out by the evidence: even when their party affiliation is accounted for, EMCs in LEAs where immigration salience is higher suffered more electoral discrimination than those in other LEAs. In the final model, with the far-right vote share considered, and all of the implications on the ideological make-up of the far-right voter cohort this may theoretically bring about, higher issue salience of immigration was still significantly and negatively correlated with lower transfer rates from far-right voters, i.e. higher electoral discrimination.

While there is a theoretical mechanism for higher salience making electoral discrimination less likely, it does not materialise in the analysis. This is because the intermediate variable of this mechanism, far-right vote share, was not found to be a predictor of levels of electoral discrimination in a given area. We can therefore rule out the alternative expectation that higher immigration salience would lead to less electoral discrimination, as the indicator it relied on as a key link of the theoretical chain has been broken – in the Irish context at least. Of course, the particularities of this context mean that this is not necessarily a universalisable conclusion: in jurisdictions with less candidate-centrism and/or a more established far-right presence with a broader and more diverse voter base, this expectation could be supported by evidence. Additionally, the inability to properly

control for incumbency is an issue that casts some slight doubt on the overall validity of these results.

Nevertheless, these results have implications for the study of Irish politics. They indicate, for the first time, the existence of electoral discrimination against EMCs in Irish politics, an established barrier to ethnic minority representation in elected positions across Western democracies (Street, 2014). More than that, they also attempt to partially explain why electoral discrimination occurs by examining the role of issue salience, finding a clear predictive ability of immigration salience for levels of electoral discrimination. This suggests that the candidate-level choices of voters (or far-right voters at least), in this case, ethnicity-based electoral discrimination, are to some extent influenced by the salience of various issues, in this case, immigration.

These results also demonstrate the potential behavioural impact of issue salience on voters in preferential systems. It is likely, based on this analysis, that issue salience impacts Irish voters not just when deciding their most-preferred candidate, but also as they move down the ballot to their second, third and subsequent choices. Therefore, with voters having such a massive number of choices on their ballot paper in Irish elections, simply analysing first preferences alone does not come close to telling the whole story. Most previous research on issue salience and voting behaviour is subsequently insufficiently applicable to the Irish context, and that of other jurisdictions with preferential systems. While lower preferences of Irish voters may not seem like an area

worth studying, they are by no means an inconsequential aspect of Irish voting behaviour, regularly proving decisive in the actual results of elections: 14% of successful candidates in the 2020 general election were only elected because of transfers, having overtaken another candidate who received more first preference votes (Gallagher, 2021). Additionally, many seats, once first preferences and transfers have all been totalled, are decided by a very low number of votes, particularly in local elections where very few LEAs require more than 2,000 total votes to win a seat (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025). This means that these results, examining differential transfer rates to EMCs, are of strong empirical importance and are highly relevant to the study of Irish politics.

Conclusion

This research question interrogates the relationship between increased salience of immigration and levels of electoral discrimination towards EMCs by far-right voters in Ireland, asking whether the presence of the former makes the latter more likely. Using real-life individual-level voting data from the 2024 local elections to study this discrimination, as opposed to aggregate data, surveys or experiments, this project finds that even when controlling for key variables such as the EMC's party affiliation and far-right vote share, higher immigration salience does predict increased levels of electoral discrimination in the form of lower transfer rates from far-right voters to EMCs. These findings align with the theoretical expectations of the project, that increased salience of immigration would align with more electoral discrimination towards EMCs due to the subsequent motivations

of far-right voters and the candidate-centrism of Irish politics, and are incompatible with competing expectations of no increased discrimination under these circumstances.

This research provides evidence that EMCs suffer electorally when immigration is a more salient issue for voters, although the research design has some limitations, principally due to the small sample size. There are a number of implications from this research that could be tested in the future. Generally speaking, issue salience and electoral discrimination is an under-studied relationship: more research is needed to clarify the extent and mechanisms of a potential causal relationship. Avenues for further research could include replicating this question in other jurisdictions with preferential systems where both EMCs are more common and far-right parties have more support, to attempt to verify the findings with a larger sample size. In the field of Irish politics, where ethnic-based electoral discrimination is understudied, further research could attempt to clarify the extent of electoral discrimination by voters from other right-wing and centre-right parties, which are more common than the far-right. Particularly in the cases of Aontú and Independent Ireland, with their generally anti-immigration programmes, the question discussed above could certainly be asked of their voters, and an analysis of the effects of immigration salience on discrimination from these parties compared to the far-right would make for interesting and important research.

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From Antisemitism to Islamophobia? The AfD's Rhetoric After October 7

Isabel Fellenz

Abstract

This paper examines how and to what extent the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) used the October 7th, 2023, Hamas attacks to advance its Islamophobic rhetoric. The theoretical puzzle arises from the party's simultaneous history of antisemitism and its current strong pro-Israel positioning, a stance seemingly in tension with its radical-right profile. Using qualitative text analysis of the AfD Bundestag speeches in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attacks, the study identifies how the party incorporated the crisis into its existing discursive patterns. The findings show that the AfD made relatively few direct references to Hamas or the October 7 attacks, but extensively framed rising antisemitism in Germany as the product of migration and policy failure. The party positioned itself as the bulwark against antisemitism and portrayed Muslims as an inherent threat. The analysis demonstrates that the attack of October 7 served less to introduce new narratives than to legitimise and intensify longstanding Islamophobic claims.

Introduction

Far-right parties in Europe typically position themselves along a pro-Israel or pro-Palestine line. Extreme right parties such as the People's Party Our Slovakia often adopt anti-Israel positions, while radical right parties like the AfD and the Freedom Party of Austria tend to present themselves as pro-Israel because

antisemitism is seen as a "toxic issue" that risks alienating voters (Wondreys & Zulianello, 2024, p. 486). This creates a central puzzle: despite a long-established history of antisemitism and ties to neo-Nazi currents, the AfD simultaneously promotes a pro-Israel stance (Wondreys and Zulianello, 2024; Burchett, 2025). Existing scholarship demonstrates that the AfD combines assertive Islamophobia with selective support for Israel to legitimise anti-Muslim narratives (Wondreys & Zulianello, 2024; Shroufi, 2024; Hafez, 2014), yet it is not yet known how this dynamic evolved after the October 7th 2023 Hamas attacks, a moment of heightened political sensitivity in Germany given its historical relationship with Israel.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the following research question: To what extent, and how, did the AfD use the October 7th Hamas attacks to advance Islamophobic rhetoric in the Bundestag? I analyse how the party framed the attacks and how it strategically linked them to broader narratives about Islam, security, and the defence against antisemitism in Germany.

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of AfD parliamentary speeches between October 12th and December 12th 2023, I argue that the AfD used the October 7 attacks to leverage rhetoric against antisemitism as a mechanism for advancing Islamophobic claims. I show that the party does this primarily by portraying itself as the bulwark against antisemitism in Germany, framing Muslims as a threat to Jewish communities, and attributing rising antisemitism to failures in German migration and integration policy, especially regarding immigrants from Muslim backgrounds. These findings support Hafez's (2014) argument

that Islamophobia enables far-right actors with historical links to Nazism or fascism to redirect their racism toward Muslims, and they extend Shroufi's (2024) claim that the AfD's pro-Israel stance is embedded within its Islamophobic strategy by demonstrating how the party uses the rhetoric of being the bulwark against antisemitism to legitimise anti-Muslim narratives.

Literature Review

Scholarship on the European far right widely agrees that the AfD has developed an assertive and consistent Islamophobic discourse, though explanations differ regarding how this discourse is framed and how it interacts with the party's ties to antisemitism.

A first strand of the literature interprets the AfD's Islamophobia through a civilisational-conflict lens. Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populist parties broadly frame Muslims as the "enemy of the people" (2013, p. 165). By attacking Muslims and what they consider to be Islamic values, these parties attempt to portray themselves as defenders of liberal values. This argument is extended in the European context by Oztig and colleagues, who find that Islamophobic populism is used by far-right parties in Europe to portray Islam as incompatible with European values and as a threat to European societies (2021). Betz further argues that these parties do not merely frame Islam as incompatible with Western values, but also present themselves as the "defenders of the core values of Western civilisation", rooted in Judeo-Christian culture, against the alleged "Islamisation" of Western society (Betz, 2021, p. 527). Burchett (2025) builds on this

argument in relation to the AfD, finding that the party claims to defend Jews from Muslim-Arab antisemitism in order to refute accusations of antisemitism. In doing so, the AfD portrays itself as pro-Israel while shifting its racism toward framing Islam as a socio-civilisational threat to European society.

Building on this work, scholarship also offers a "supply-side" explanation, arguing that the AfD's rhetoric responds to political opportunities arising from the increase in Muslim migration to Germany. Hansen and Olsen (2022) find that the AfD acts as a populist issue entrepreneur, instrumentalising existing cleavages around migration. This ultimately aligns with Mudde and Kaltwasser's argument that populist parties adjust their rhetoric in order to benefit from growing public perceptions of Muslims as a threat (2013). Taken together, this literature suggests that the AfD frames Islam as a threat to Germany's "Judeo-Christian" society within the context of growing discontent toward migrants, while positioning itself as the defender of German society and its values. If this explanation is correct, we would expect the AfD to use the October 7 Hamas attacks to reinforce claims about Islam's incompatibility with Western civilisation and to position itself as the defender of German society.

A second strand of the literature connects the AfD's use of Islamophobia, alongside its historical ties to antisemitism, to its pro-Israel positioning. This research shows that parties such as the AfD combine Islamophobic rhetoric with a nominally pro-Israel stance in order to maximise their electoral appeal. Wondreys and Zulianello (2024) suggest that radical-right and extreme-right parties tend to direct their 'hate' either toward

Israel and Jews or toward Palestine and Muslims, with the AfD, given its radical-right profile, expected to support Israel. Selent and Kortmann (2025) show that the AfD uses a combination of pro-Israel and antisemitic statements to appeal simultaneously to radical-right voters with antisemitic prejudices and to more moderate conservatives who reject hostility toward Jews. Hafez (2014) argues that Islamophobia enables parties with historical links to Nazism or fascism to obscure past antisemitism by redirecting racist rhetoric toward Muslims. This strategy is particularly relevant in Germany, where antisemitism is highly sensitive, and far-right parties must avoid associations with Nazism in order to retain moderate voters (Kahn, 2022). Taken together, this literature suggests that the AfD maintains an official pro-Israel stance while tolerating instances of blatant antisemitism among its politicians, allowing the party to appeal simultaneously to relatively moderate and more extremist supporters. If this explanation is correct, we would expect the AfD to use October 7 to advance Islamophobic narratives through a pro-Israel or pro-Jewish framing.

Across these strands, the literature offers several alternative explanations for how the AfD might respond to the October 7 attacks. The civilisational-conflict literature leads, and the supply side argument would expect the party to use the attacks to reaffirm claims that Islam is incompatible with Western civilisation, and position itself as the defender of German society. The scholarship linking Islamophobia to pro-Israel positioning suggests that the AfD would emphasise its support for Israel as a way to legitimise anti-Muslim narratives while distancing itself from antisemitism. These strands provide clear, testable

expectations about the AfD's post-October 7 discourse, which the subsequent analysis evaluates by examining how the party operationalised its Islamophobic discourse in the months following the October 7 Hamas attacks.

Research Design

This study analyses the AfD's Islamophobic rhetoric in the Bundestag following the October 7 2023, Hamas attacks. To do so, I conducted a qualitative text analysis of 18 publicly available AfD parliamentary speeches delivered between October 11th and December 12th 2023, in which the keywords identified in my coding framework appeared. The analysis begins with the first plenary session after the attacks, on October 11th, and ends with the final session of the year on December 12th 2023. Focusing on this period captures the immediate discursive response to the attacks, when parties rapidly sought to frame their positions and define the nature of the threat.

Germany constitutes a particularly interesting case to analyse the tensions between antisemitism and Islamophobia, and their respective deployment by the far right. Because antisemitism carries such significant historical sensitivity, far-right actors face reputational and electoral constraints that differ from those in many other contexts (Kahn, 2022). This makes the AfD's simultaneous use of pro-Israel rhetoric and Islamophobic framing especially revealing. Following Seawright and Gerring's (2008) typology, Germany can therefore be understood as a most-likely case for observing the strategic endorsement of pro-Israel rhetoric by a far-right party seeking to legitimise and

advance Islamophobic narratives while avoiding antisemitic stigma. If Islamophobia is framed as a defence of Jews or of Israel in this highly constrained environment, it provides strong evidence of a deliberate discursive strategy rather than incidental rhetoric. The post-October 7 period offers a particularly revealing window, as the attacks intensified public debates on security, migration, Islam, and antisemitism, thereby making rhetorical positioning especially salient.

I developed a coding framework based on expectations derived from the literature on the AfD's discourse around 'Islam,' 'Hamas' and related topics, including 'Muslim', 'Israel', 'October 7'. I extracted all sentences referencing these key terms, along with surrounding context, and coded them following the qualitative analysis principles used by Dilling and Krawatzek (2024). In line with this framework, and informed by the literature, I coded each extract according to (1) topic, referring to the thematic content; (2) modus, referring to how the claim was advanced; and (3) justification frame, referring to why the speaker claimed the argument was valid. The coding scheme was iteratively refined as new patterns emerged in the data. After coding the extracts, I completed a frequency analysis across the topics, the modi and the justification frames in order to examine how often the AfD used each. I also completed a pattern analysis in order to examine the AfD's dominant rhetorical strategy.

Operationalising search terms for coding

Code	Topic Label	Definition / Inclusion Criteria
A	Islam/Muslims as Security Threat	Islam or Muslims framed as dangerous to German people; portrayals of Muslims as terrorists; references to Islamist extremist groups operating in Germany.
B	Civilisational Incompatibility	Islam, Muslims depicted as incompatible with German or Western culture values; claims that Is;am threatens Judeo-Christian identity; arguments that Islam has no place in Germany/the West; depiction of Israel as defender of "the West."
C	Equating Muslims with Terrorism/ Hamas	Claims that all Muslims are terrorists, supporters of Hamas, or equivalent to Hamas; rhetorical generalisation of Hamas onto the entire Musilm population.
D	Islam/Muslims as threat to Jews	Depiction of Muslims as inherently antisemitic, claims that Islam threatens Jewish people in Germany or abroad: portrayals of Islam as a threat to Israel.
E	Protecting Jews/Israel to Attack Islam	Claims that the AfD uniquely protects Jews in Germany: use of Jewish safety as a justification for anti-Muslim rhetoric or policy positions.
F	Gender, Women, and Sexual threats	Claims that Muslims or Islamic norms threaten German women, portrayals or Islamic gender norms as incompatible with German society, references to sexual violence.

G	German Domestic Failure	Arguments that German migration or integration policies have failed: claims that antisemitism has been. "imported" via Muslim migration; blaming other parties or rising antisemitism or violence: references to left-wing extremism.
H	Security, Splicing, and Deportation Responses	Calls for policing, surveillance, deportations, bans, or other security responses directed at Muslims or Islamic organisations; proposals presented as necessary due to Muslim threat.
I	Use of October 7 as Evidence	October 7 framed as proof of Islam's extremism or inherent violence: claims that the attack demonstrates Islam's threat to Western civilization or Germany.

Modi

Modus	**Label**	**Definition / Inclusion Criteria**
1	Intensification	Use of October 7 to escalate or amplify existing Islamophobic claims; linking Hamas → Islam → Germany to suggest that the threat abroad reveals the threat at home.
2	Generalisation	Universalising Hamas's violence to all Muslims; portraying all Muslims as violent, dangerous, or inherently supportive of terrorism.

3	Instrumentali-sation	Using Jews or Israel as a rhetorical tool; invoking pro-Israel statements as justification for anti-Muslim policies or narratives.
4	Blame-shifting	Attributing the perceived threat to failures of the German Governments – e.g., migration policy "importing" danger, German financial aid benefiting Hamas, or inadequate government action against antisemitism and Muslim threats to Jews in Germany.
5	Policy Activation	Using October 7 to argue for or claim the AfD would implement, policies such as deportation ("reimgration") of Muslims, ban on Islamic/Islamist groups, ending aid to Palestine, increased surveillance, or strengthened border control.
6	Civilisational Antagonism	Framing Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Western or German society portraying Muslim values as opposed to Western norms and civilisation.

Justification Frames

Justification Frame	**Definition / Inclusion Criteria**
Security (terror, Islamists)	References to terrorism, Islamist extremists, or Muslims as a security threat to Germany.
Cultural threat	Claims that Islam or Muslim values threaten German or Western cultural

	norms.
Demographic threat	Statements suggesting population change or demographic decline caused by Muslims.
Gender threat / threat to women	Claims that Muslims endanger women or hold gender norms incompatible with German society.
Antisemitism / threat to Jews	Portraying Muslims as inherently antisemetic or as a direct threat to Jews in Germany or Israel.
Pro-Israel signalling	Statemetnts emphasising support for Israel or position the AfD as pro-Israel.
German policy failure	Claims that German government policies have failed to protect society or manage security threats.
Migration policy failure	Claims that migration or refugee policies have "imported" antisemitism or increased insecurity.
Threat of left-wing extremism	References to left-wing actors as a danger or contributing to insecurity.
German historical responsibility	References to Germany's historical relationship to antisemitism or the Holocaust as justification for political positions.

This research design has both contextual and methodological limitations. Contextually, the analysis focuses exclusively on parliamentary speeches. The Bundestag is a formal, institutional setting with a different audience and rhetorical style than social

media, rallies, or internal party communication, which may influence how Islamophobia is expressed, as the formal setting may somewhat restrain speakers. Methodologically, qualitative coding carries inherent subjectivity. As such, my interpretation determines what counts as Islamophobic rhetoric. To mitigate this, I documented my coding decisions transparently and provided a record of each extract, speaker, date, and assigned codes.

Analysis

Analytical Approach

The analysis below evaluates these competing expectations by examining how the AfD integrated the aftermath of October 7 into its rhetoric in the 104 coded units across the 18 Bundestag speeches analysed. While the research question assumes that the attacks may have served as a discursive opportunity for the AfD, the empirical findings indicate that direct references to the attacks were relatively rare. Instead, the party relied more heavily on the political aftermath, particularly on debates about rising antisemitism, pro-Palestinian demonstrations, and perceived failures of German migration and integration policy. The analysis, therefore, focuses on what the AfD did emphasise: narratives portraying Muslims as a threat to Jews, claims that German policy has "imported" antisemitism, and attempts to legitimise anti-Muslim positions through a self-presentation as the bulwark against antisemitism.

Limited Direct Use of October 7

One of the clearest findings is that the AfD only rarely referred explicitly to the October 7 attacks. Topic I ("October 7") appeared in only three extracts (5% of the sample), making it one of the least frequent topics. When referenced, the attacks were typically invoked through Modus 1 (intensification) or Modus 2 (generalisation), either to escalate existing claims about the inherent danger of Islam or to universalise Hamas's violence to Muslims more broadly. However, these instances were limited and did not constitute a sustained discursive focus. This low frequency requires a cautious interpretation regarding the extent to which the attacks themselves shaped the AfD's rhetoric. The party did not construct a detailed narrative about Hamas, nor did it anchor its argument in the specificities of the attacks. Instead, October 7 functioned primarily as a discursive trigger, an event that heightened the salience of themes the AfD was already advancing, particularly claims about rising antisemitism and domestic insecurity linked to Muslim migrants. In this sense, the attacks appear to have been used opportunistically rather than substantively. Rather than focusing directly on Hamas or the details of the attacks, AfD speakers used the aftermath to reinforce existing claims about Muslim migrants in Germany. In particular, they referenced protests in Germany against Israel's response as evidence of rising antisemitism and blamed Germany's migration policies for this development, while also using the attacks to advance claims about what they portrayed as the inherently violent nature of Islam and the supposed threat that the presence of Muslims in Germany poses. This finding is significant because it shows that the AfD did not rely on repeated

references to Hamas to sustain its narrative. Instead, it drew on the broader political and social reactions following October 7, such as the protests that emerged in Germany following the attack, to reinforce and extend its existing Islamophobic framing.

German Policy Failure and Blame-Shifting

The dominant theme in the data is the portrayal of German domestic policy as a failure. Topic G ("German domestic failure") accounted for 50 occurrences, representing 82% of all extracts (Figure 4, appendix). This makes it by far the most frequently invoked topic, significantly overshadowing all direct references to October 7. Correspondingly, Modus 4 ("blame-shifting") was the most common modus (41 occurrences; 67%) (Figure 5), and justification frames referencing German policy failure appeared 33 times**,** with "German migration policy failure" appearing in 14 extracts (Figure 6, appendix). This indicates that the AfD used the post-October 7 environment chiefly to criticise the German government, rather than Hamas or Palestinians. The central narrative was therefore that the government had "imported" antisemitism through its migration policies and had failed to prevent resulting security threats and extremist mobilisation. This argument drew on narratives portraying Muslims as inherently threatening to Jewish people and used this framing to claim that the German government had enabled the rise of antisemitism in Germany by allowing Muslim migrants into the country. Extracts frequently linked pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Germany to alleged policy failures, suggesting that German authorities had enabled "Islamist" or "antisemitic" actors to operate freely. For example: *Hordes of*

unqualified migrants have descended upon our homeland [...] We are experiencing progressive Islamization. Knife attacks and gang rapes are already commonplace. Islamist mobs are rampaging through German streets. [...] They are calling for the establishment of a caliphate in Germany and want to kill Jews. What a disgrace for Germany!" [1] This pattern directly supports the literature's expectation that radical right parties act as issue entrepreneurs by reframing the rise in antisemitism in Germany as a result of the violence and antisemitism of Muslims in order to legitimise their Islamophobia and anti-migration position.

Muslims as a Threat to Jews and the AfD as the Bulwark against Antisemitism

A second strong finding concerns the framing of Muslims as a threat to Jewish people. Theme D ("Islam/Muslims as a threat to Jews") appeared 24 times (39%), and Theme E ("AfD as protector of Jews") appeared 15 times (25%) (Figure 4). The justification frame "antisemitism/threat to Jews" was the single most common frame in the dataset (36 occurrences, 59%) (Figure 6, appendix). Together, these results show that Muslims were frequently depicted as the primary source of antisemitism in Germany. Extracts describe Muslim migrants as bringing antisemitism into the country and as posing security risks to

[1] Stefan Keuter, 16/11/2023. Original German: "Heerscharen unqualifizierter Migranten sind über unsere Heimat hergefallen [...] Wir erleben eine fortschreitende Islamisierung. Messer-männer und Gruppenvergewaltigungen sind heute schon an der Tagesordnung. Islamistische Mobs marodieren auf deutschen Straßen. [...] Sie fordern die Einrichtung eines Kalifates in Deutschland und wollen Juden töten. Was für eine Schande für Deutschland!"

Jewish communities by generalising from those who carried out the Hamas attacks to Muslims more broadly. In this way, AfD rhetoric suggests that the presence of Muslim migrants in Germany is fundamentally incompatible with the country's responsibility to protect Jews. For example, "*[...] it is precisely people like the murderers of Gaza whom the established parties have allowed to enter our country unhindered for years. At the same time, they have slandered the only party that has taken a clear stand against the immigration of Jew-haters and mass murderers. Only the AfD never wanted these people in Germany. [...] This Islam does not belong in Germany."* [2]

As seen in this extract, the AfD positioned itself as the only party willing to acknowledge and confront this threat of Muslim antisemitism. Other parties were framed as negligent or complicit due to their support for migration. This is where Modus 3 ("instrumentalisation") plays a central role. With 30 occurrences (49%), instrumentalisation was the second most frequent modus (Figure 5, appendix). It captures how the AfD uses its pro-Jewish position rhetorically, primarily to legitimise anti-Muslim policies. The empirical pattern here aligns with the theoretical expectation that pro-Israel or pro-Jewish claims can serve as discursive tools in the construction of Islamophobic narratives. This provides clear evidence that the AfD used the post-October 7 context to

[2] Jürgen Braun (12/10/2023). Original German: "[...]: Genau solche Menschen wie die Meuchelmörder von Gaza haben die Altparteien jahrelang ungestört in unser Land einreisen lassen. Zugleich haben sie die einzige Partei verleumdet, die sich klar gegen die Einwanderung von Judenhassern und Massenmördern gestellt hat. Nur die AfD wollte diese Gestalten nie in Deutschland haben. [...]. Dieser Islam gehört nicht zu Deutschland."

strengthen its portrayal of Muslims as a threat to Jews, and portrayed itself as the sole actor prepared to combat this antisemitism, in order to justify its broader Islamophobic agenda.

Islam as a Security and Civilisational Threat

The portrayal of Islam as a broader security and cultural threat remained a prominent component of AfD rhetoric. Theme A ("Islam/Muslims as a security threat") appeared 25 times (41%), and Theme B ("civilisational incompatibility") appeared 14 times (23%) (Figure 4). Correspondingly, the justification frame "security threat" was highly frequent (31 occurrences; 50%) (Figure 6), and Modus 6 ("civilisational antagonism") accounted for 13 instances (21%) (Figure 5). These themes were often invoked alongside, rather than separately from, the narratives about Jews and German policy failure. Rather than discussing October 7 directly, the AfD framed the attacks as confirmation of its broader claim that Islam represents an existential danger to German society and civilisation. Drawing on nativist narratives, the party portrayed Islam and Muslim people as inherently violent and dangerous to Germans, arguing that Islam is therefore fundamentally incompatible with German society. Combined with the intensification and generalisation modes, these themes worked to universalise Hamas's violence to Muslims more broadly. The empirical pattern shows how the AfD used October 7 not to introduce new categories of threat through references to Hamas and October 7, but to legitimise and reinforce existing ones. The data therefore shows AfD used the aftermath of October 7 to advance Islamophobia by using it to justify and legitimise existing narratives.

Secondary Themes: Gendered and Demographic Threats

Secondary but noteworthy themes include gendered and demographic threats. Theme F ("gender/women/sexual threats") appeared 7 times (Figure 5, appendix), and justification frames relating to gender threat appeared 10 times, while demographic threat appeared 11 times (Figure 6, appendix). These themes typically appeared in conjunction with civilisational antagonism, reinforcing portrayals of Islam as culturally incompatible with Western norms. Although these themes were not dominant, their presence demonstrates the AfD's continued reliance on common far-right talking points. Importantly, however, they do not appear central to the party's mobilisation in response to October 7. Their inclusion in the dataset reflects broader Islamophobic discourse patterns rather than targeted reactions to the attacks.

Co-Occurrence Patterns

The analysis also reveals several recurring co-occurrence patterns that illustrate how the AfD fused topics, modi, and justification frames to produce coherent rhetorical narratives (Figure 7). The most common pattern combines German policy failure + blame-shifting + security threat, demonstrating that the AfD's primary strategy was to use the crisis to criticise the German government. A second dominant pattern involved Islamic antisemitism + AfD as protector of Jews, often expressed through instrumentalisation. A third pattern paired security threat with policy activation, presenting the AfD as ready to implement stronger deportation, policing, and surveillance measures. These patterns highlight how the AfD strategically used the October 7

attacks through the integration of the event into a broader narrative centred on Islam as a threat, the failed policies of the Government, and the AfD as the only credible protector against Islamic extremism and antisemitism.

Conclusion

This study examined the question: To what extent, and how, did the AfD use the October 7 Hamas attacks to advance its Islamophobic rhetoric? Germany provides a revealing context for analysing the intersection of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and far-right discourse, as the historical sensitivity surrounding antisemitism places unique constraints on far-right actors. Through qualitative text analysis of AfD Bundestag speeches delivered between October 11th and December 15th 2023, the analysis showed that the party used the aftermath of the attacks to position itself as a bulwark against antisemitism. It articulated this stance through Islamophobic framing that cast Muslims as a threat to Jews and criticised the government for having "imported" antisemitism into Germany through failed migration and integration policies. In doing so, the study addressed a gap in the literature on the aftermath of the October 7 attacks by demonstrating that the AfD exploited the political context created by October 7, rather than the event itself, to advance its Islamophobic rhetoric.

These findings contribute to existing scholarship by showing that the AfD used the political aftermath of October 7 to present itself as a defender against antisemitism while attributing the antisemitic threat to Muslim communities, a pattern consistent

with expectations in the literature. Research on civilisational-conflict narratives and the "supply-side" argument suggests that the AfD would use the October 7 attacks to reinforce claims about Islam's incompatibility with Western civilisation and to position itself as a defender of German society. The finding that the AfD portrayed itself as a "bulwark" against antisemitism adds nuance to Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2013) argument that radical-right parties attack Muslims and Islamic values in order to portray themselves as defenders of liberal values. In the German political context, where antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment are broadly condemned as right-wing, the "liberal values" invoked by the AfD took the form of pro-Jewish and pro-Israel stances.

The findings also support Betz's (2021) claim that radical-right parties frame themselves as defenders of Western civilisation. They align closely with Burchett's (2025) argument that the AfD claims to defend Jews from Muslim-Arab antisemitism in order to refute accusations of antisemitism against the party itself. By attributing rising antisemitism in Germany to Muslim communities, the AfD was able to redirect blame toward the government and its migration policies. The findings also extend Hansen and Olsen's (2022) argument that the AfD acts as a populist issue entrepreneur by demonstrating that the party not only adapts its rhetoric to benefit from public perceptions of Muslims as a threat but also capitalises on specific events, such as October 7, to reinforce these claims.

Furthermore, the literature on the AfD's Islamophobia and its historical ties to antisemitism, which suggested that the party would use October 7 to advance Islamophobic narratives

through pro-Israel or pro-Jewish framing, is supported by these findings. As expected, the AfD combined Islamophobic rhetoric with a pro-Israel stance to maximise its electoral appeal. In particular, the findings support Hafez's (2014) argument that Islamophobia allows parties with historical links to Nazism to obscure antisemitism by redirecting hostility toward Muslims. This study builds on Hafez's argument by showing that the AfD specifically blamed the government and its migration policies to redirect accusations of antisemitism toward Muslims, thereby also supporting Kahn's (2022) finding that, in the German context, the sensitivity surrounding antisemitism leads far-right parties to seek to avoid such accusations.

The findings show that the AfD did not rely heavily on direct references to the October 7 attacks. Instead, it leveraged the broader context of protests, public and political reactions, and concerns about antisemitism that emerged in the wake of the event to reinforce its existing Islamophobic rhetoric. The most prominent themes in the data include claims of German policy failure, portrayals of Muslims as a threat to Jews, and the use of pro-Jewish positioning to legitimise anti-Muslim agendas. October 7 thus served primarily as an opportunity to increase the legitimacy of the AfD's Islamophobic claims. This study has several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on Bundestag speeches, meaning the discourse reflects a formal parliamentary setting and an audience of political opponents, which may have amplified government-focused criticism. Second, qualitative coding involves interpretative judgement and therefore carries an inherent degree of subjectivity. Future research could compare parliamentary rhetoric with AfD communication in other settings

or examine whether similar mechanisms appear among other European radical-right parties.

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It's the End of the World as We Know It?: An Examination of Motives Behind Recent Funding Cuts to Development Assistance and Hierarchy in the International System

Anna Zivkovich

Abstract

Recent wide-scale funding cuts to development-centred foreign aid, concentrated among the Global North, have incited growing concerns that the current postnational liberal world order is nearing its end. This paper examines whether this diagnosis is true. Utilising Börzel and Zürn's (2021) framework of contestations and McKeil's (2020) conceptualisation of international disorder, it examines possible methods of challenging the world order and just how damaging such objections may be. It does so by conducting a secondary data analysis of primarily the United States' Trump Administration's cuts in 2025. It concludes that the US's recent actions are reform contestations, as it wields its strong influence granted by its hegemonic position to reject the intrusive usage of liberal authority. This rejection has caused disorder in the world hierarchy, as it has raised questions about the foundational values of the order, while also leaving massive funding gaps, particularly felt by numerous countries in the Global South that have come to depend on such aid. This paper aims to provide clarity in a time of uncertainty, while also placing such destabilisations into a larger context.

Introduction

An alarming amount of funding cuts to development-centered foreign aid was observed in 2025 and has continued thus far in 2026. This trend is concentrated among countries in the Global North, with the four major Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors all having cut official development assistance (ODA) in 2024, a cutting only expected to increase through the end of the decade (OECDa, 2025). This comes at a time when the need for such aid is only increasing as humanitarian crises continue and escalate. Additionally, these decreases in funding have been accompanied by several dismantlings of and withdrawals from various multilateral institutions. Multilateral and internationally coordinated foreign aid is a key component of the current liberal world hierarchy (Sharman, 2013; Zhang, 2023; Bermeo, 2017). Many deem the United States of America (US) as a hegemon in this hierarchy due to its 'outsized relative power' (McKeil, 2020, p. 209; Mbah et al., 2025; Watson & Burles, 2018). This paper analyzes the US' possible decline as a result of its recent cuts to development assistance funding, which will serve as the main evidence in this paper. It is important to note the distinction between development assistance and ODA, as ODA is the OECD's official metric of development assistance. Therefore, not all evidence discussed today will fall into the subcategory of ODA, leaving 'development assistance' the more appropriate variable. Due to the US's outsized influence, these actions have caused widespread negative effects throughout the hierarchy, bringing into question the structure itself. Many other countries

in the Global North are following suit,[1] leaving numerous states in the Global South—that have become dependent on this development assistance—in an increasingly vulnerable situation. This paper examines the effect of the contemporary liberal world hierarchy as a structure on these cuts and withdrawals. It also conceptualises the hierarchy itself as a continuous practice (Michalski, Brommesson, & Ekengren, 2024).

A wavering confidence in the current liberal world hierarchy as an effective and suitable structure has led to widespread disruptions to the system. One symptom of this is an alarming decrease in multilateral development-centred foreign aid in recent years. This paper first conducts a review of the relevant literature, establishing the concept and characteristics of the current hierarchy and its evolution, as well as the place of development assistance in such hierarchy. It then examines and synthesizes two theoretical approaches which inform the analysis: Börzel and Zürn's (2021) framework of contestations and McKeil's (2020) analytical conceptualization of disorder. Drawing on these theories, this paper then conducts an observational analysis of the US' recent dismantling of its development assistance as a case study, chosen due to its previously stated outsized influence. The analysis focuses on the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the proposed FY 2026 budget, and various presidential actions. Following this examination, the US's recent actions concerning international development aid are

[1] The effect of far-right and populist movements and actors have also been examined as possible causes, however this paper is not able to sufficiently examine this within its constraints.

decisively categorised as contestational and disorderly. They directly challenge the values of the current world order—rules-based, an open pursuit of liberal social purpose, and authority placed behind the nation-state—creating instability and uncertainty (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; McKeil, 2020).

Literature Review

The current global hierarchy can be definitively categorised as liberal. Börzel and Zürn (2021) label this period as Liberal International Order (LIO) II, distinctive due to its postnational liberalism. LIO II is characterized as rules-based and openly pursuing a global liberal social purpose, with authority placed behind the nation-state and legitimacy gained from nation-state alignment with liberal values. LIO II came into being in the late 1990s, after the end of the Cold War. Development assistance and the institutions that facilitate it are an integral part of LIO II, with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) becoming power brokers alongside governments during this wave of democratization (Chaudry, 2025; Sharman, 2013). However, with this pursuance comes an intrusiveness that Börzel and Zürn (2021) argue has led to an observable variety of contestations. They define contestations as "discursive and behavioral practices that challenge the authority of international institutions, their liberal intrusiveness, or the LIO as a whole" (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 288). Contestations can take a variety of forms, as they are inherently reactionary to exactly what they are contesting. Examples include rises in authoritarian and populist parties, the Second Gulf War, and growing non-Western blocks such as BRICS.

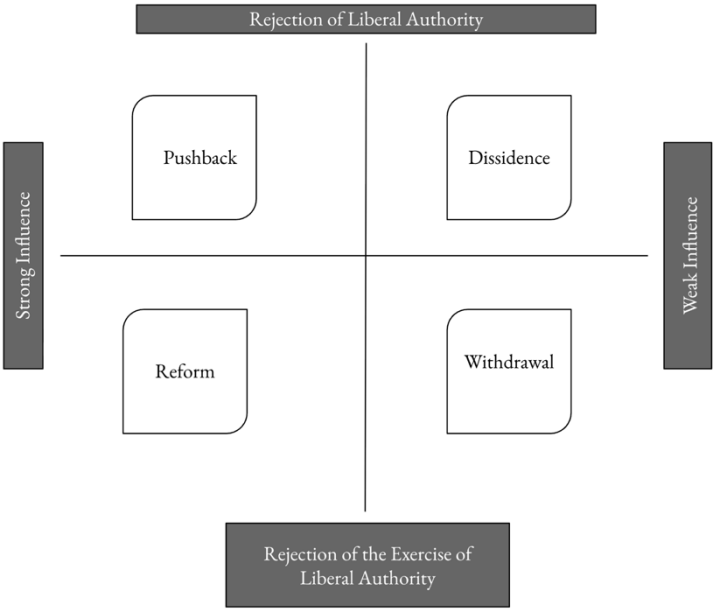
Many scholars conceptualise the current global hierarchy as a structure of relationships that requires practice to maintain (Michalski, Brommesson, & Ekengren, 2024; Sharman, 2013). Sharman (2013) critiques the view of hierarchy as contractual relationships between independent actors, instead emphasising the importance of social logics. Michalski, Brommesson, and Ekengren (2024) agree in this sense, examining the importance of status-related roles - inferring hierarchy, patterns of behavior, and conforming to norms in the upkeep of the international system. However, they acknowledge that the global hierarchy is currently weakened by 'heightened geopolitics' that cause interactions between states to become competitive, closing the avenue of integration into the rules-based order for emerging powers (2024, p. 143). Zhang (2023) observes that their security environment directly impacts foreign aid as a component of security cooperation. He finds that when the environment becomes competitive, donors tend to, in fact, increase their foreign aid budgets, measured by ODA, and decrease when their security environment is favorable. It therefore warrants critical scrutiny as to why, in this supposedly competitive security environment, a significant number of countries have decreased their ODA.

Returning to the concept of norms, various authors observe how norms, as a basis for the current global hierarchy, can be easily exploited. Coen (2021) examines how withdrawals from refugee protection can be partially explained by international refugee regimes' reliance on norms, and thus how obligations can be easily evaded. Kent (2023) additionally examines similar patterns,

positing that after contestations of the international refugee regime, rhetorically liberal states have failed to implement the necessary practices.

Thus, the current global hierarchy's foundation of norms guiding practice and maintenance lends it a weakness that challengers are currently exploiting. Sharman (2013) notes the role of development assistance in such norms explicitly, arguing that states, as "survivors from a previous era of imperial hierarchy", are able to adopt an identity of "good international citizens" by conforming to such normative values (p. 29, 28). However, they are able to maintain such hierarchical ties and the benefits of subordinating other states through development assistance. International institutions, such as those used in facilitating development assistance, serve as a key component of the hierarchy as more dominant states have used them to spread liberal norms and "achieve their security and foreign policy objectives" (Zhang, 2023, p. 876). Thus, the current contestations of development assistance are examined as challenges to the current global hierarchy.

Figure 1: Varieties of Contestations (Borzel & Zurn, 2021, p.289)



Theoretical Framework

This paper will synthesise two frameworks developed by academics: Börzel & Zürn's (2021) framework of LIO II contestations and McKeil's (2020) concept of international disorder as an analytical tool.

Börzel & Zürn's (2021) framework relies on the idea that growing intrusiveness causes growing contestation. Crises serve to make the presence of possibly intrusive external authority more visible, and thus increasingly able and more likely to be challenged. By intrusiveness, they mean LIO II's push for any states involved to

value the hierarchy's own universal liberal ideas over their popular sovereignty, exacerbated by the LIO II's growing authority being concentrated in the most dominant countries (the P5) through formalised institutional rules such as veto power (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Thus, they categorise contestations on an axis of contestants' degree of institutional influence and their preferences regarding the LIO II - a spectrum of whether they have a problem with a specific exercise of liberal authority to the mere existence of liberal international authority (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 288-289). On this axis - as visualized in Figure 1 - Börzel and Zürn (2021) label the four contestation strategies as: pushback, dissidence, reform, and withdrawal. This paper will categorise the US' recent actions according to this framework.

This paper also places the US' recent development aid policies in the framework of international disorder. McKeil (2020) makes the important distinction that international disorder has previously been viewed as alarmist, vague, and purely normative; he develops it for an analytical usage. He defines international disorder as "the disruption of ordering international behaviour, rules and norms, producing a condition of instability and unpredictability in international affairs." (2020, 203). He does note that this definition is still partly normative due to the component of stability or the disruption of such; however, he justifies its inclusion by stating that international orders do appear to want to produce a condition of international stability. After this disruption and instability, however, there may then be a process of 'reordering' the global hierarchy into a new, stable existence. The next section will show that it currently appears that we are in the phase of international disorder.

Disruption to Multilateral Development Assistance

A secondary data analysis of the recent disruptions to international development assistance will now be conducted, with the United States' failing confidence in the current global hierarchy serving as the main independent variable. The US was chosen particularly due to its previously mentioned 'outsized relative power' in the hierarchy, and more specifically, international development assistance (McKeil, 2020, p. 209; Watson & Burles, 2018). Its recent disruptions of development assistance have also been the most extreme and thus most visible. Other relatively influential actors, such as the European Union (EU) and various EU member states, will also be briefly considered. This method was chosen as it allows a consideration of both statistically measurable effects, as well as the language involved in the justifications of such actions.

The dependent variable in this examination is development-centred foreign aid. In most of the evidence that will be presented, it will more specifically be ODA, as it is the main source of financing for development aid as designated by the OECD (OECD, 2025c). It defines ODA as "government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries" (OECD, 2025c). ODA comprises grants and loans to countries on the OECD's Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) list of ODA recipients, international NGOs, and multilateral agencies that are "undertaken by the official sector; with promotion of economic development and welfare as the main objective; at concessional financial terms" (OECD, 2025b). Other such statistics that will

be examined are not classified explicitly as ODA; ODA is not the main dependent variable.

Development-centred foreign aid has been significantly disrupted by decreases in recent years. Following a period of growth after the COVID-19 pandemic, ODA fell by 9% in 2024 and is projected to decline by an additional 9-17% in 2025 (OECD, 2025a). Eleven DAC state donors have announced ODA cuts for the 2025-2027 period, including the top four donors who collectively accounted for close to two-thirds of the total ODA contributions over the past decade (OECD, 2025a). Of the largest state donors in Europe, Spain is the only one to announce future plans to increase ODA funding (CSIS, 2025). The United Kingdom has announced cuts of 43%, while France has announced cuts of 37%, and the EU has announced a €2 billion cut to its main aid mechanism, along with a potential 35% cut in ODA (CSIS, 2025). Within humanitarian aid funding specifically, the US government dropped from the highest share (26.7%) of the total with $9.885 billion and the Department of State in second (11.4%) with $4.243 billion in 2024, to the US government in second (12.2%) with $2.734 billion and the Department of State in eleventh (2.9%) with $650 million in 2025 (OCHA, 2024; OCHA, 2025).

The most drastic cut to US development-centered foreign aid has been the dismantling of USAID and other such foreign aid organizations. It began with Executive Order (EO) 14169, Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, which issued a 90-day pause in "in United States foreign development assistance for assessment of programmatic efficiencies and

consistency with United States foreign policy" (The White House, 2025a). The reasoning for such was that the US foreign aid industry is "not aligned with American interests and in many cases antithetical to American values. They serve to destabilize world peace by promoting ideas in foreign countries that are directly inverse to harmonious and stable relations internal to and among countries" (The White House, 2025a). This cements the role of foreign aid in norm promotion, or what Börzel & Zürn (2021) label intrusiveness, and thus on a wider scale an ideological global hierarchy. By defining LIO II's values present in development-centred foreign aid as 'antithetical to American values', and rejecting their imposition onto other countries, the administration rejects one of LIO II's hallmark concepts.

The process of dismantling USAID quickly escalated, with the release of the Trump Administration's FY 2026 Discretionary Budget Request additionally reorienting American foreign aid. Included was the creation of the America First Opportunity (A1OF) Fund as well as cuts for every other program - besides the Fund and the Development Finance Corporation - under the Department of State and USAID section (Office of Management and Budget, 2025). Also included under Assessed and Voluntary Contributions to International Organisations was a provision stating that, "to preserve maximum negotiating leverage, the President can choose to fund these international organizations out of the A1OF if he chooses" (Office of Management and Budget, 2025, p. 2). The Trump Administration clearly understands these funding cuts as calculated disruptions, as it recognises the relative influence of the US through its sheer financial contribution to multilateral development aid, as well as

how to shape such institutions and therefore the wider hierarchy to their interests. USAID officially ceased operations on July 1, 2025, with a stated intention that any minuscule remaining components would be integrated into the Department of State (CSIS, 2025). However, as seen in the FY 2026 Discretionary Budget Request, the Department of State has also experienced significant personnel and funding cuts, leaving the future of US development-centred foreign aid uncertain (CSIS, 2025; Office of Management and Budget, 2025).

The dismantling of USAID can thus be categorised under the contestation strategy of reform, as the US wields a strong influence and is alright with liberal authority's intrusiveness, however seeks to change the policy spread by such intrusiveness to align more closely with the Trump Administration's 'America First' agenda (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, 290). Researchers have noted that it is not unique to the Trump Administration to align foreign aid with its ideology and policy goals, as "every administration over the last 80 years" has done so; it only furthers the argument that the administration is deliberately wielding foreign aid funding as a tool of shaping the current global hierarchy's norms (CSIS, 2025). It is not following the strategy of pushback, as it definitively aims to still influence world values through intrusive authority, as shown in the Assessed and Voluntary Contributions to International Organisations provision (Office of Management and Budget, 2025, p. 2). However, all such intrusive actions are required to align with the Trump Administration's values, which have been shown to be relatively less liberal - for example, with its rejection of distinctively liberal developmental aid. Additionally, its strategy is definitively not either withdrawal nor

dissidence, due to its strong influence exhibited by the sheer percentage the US' previous funding occupied amongst countries contributing developmental assistance.

This contestation can additionally clearly be categorized as international disorder. The massive gaps left in funding, as well as questions surrounding the ideological foundations of the hierarchy, all leave the hierarchy in a state of disarray. It is not one country, although the US' actions have had a significant impact, but rather a large proportion of the Global North seemingly moving away from the values perpetuated by LIO II. Norms that could previously be depended upon to order the international system are being rejected, therefore leaving actors within the system questioning what to do. Spending priorities are shifting towards those such as defense spending, and away from underlying liberal values such as cooperation (Chaudhry, 2025). Many are focusing on the large-scale impact to global health initiatives by these cuts, with one study estimating close to 14 million preventable deaths by 2030 due to lack of USAID funding alone (Cavalcanti, 2025). This only further erodes confidence in the well-being LIO promised. Various researchers and scholars are anticipating a range of possible new configurations of world order, such as a more multipolar distribution of authority (McKeil, 2020; OECD, 2025a), increased self-reliance (Mbah, et al., 2025), or even a rise of China as a replacement hegemon due to its Belt and Road Initiative (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Mbah, et al., 2025; Zhang, 2023). Whether or not the world order is reconfigured into one of these structures after a period of transition, as McKeil (2020) posits may happen, the present can be definitively considered disorderly. All such questionings and

predictions indicate a shift away from LIO II's values and norms.

Conclusion

It is clear that the United States currently seeks to create international disorder by wielding its relative influence to signal a decreasing confidence in its suitability and effectiveness. In particular, the Trump Administration seems to be pursuing a preservation of the current global hierarchy's authority by putting its own policies first, shaping the system's to align more closely with the 'America First' agenda. Whether the Trump Administration will have a significant impact on development assistance remains to be seen. There exists many other influences - such as China's recent development policies - that were unable to be sufficiently addressed here due to space constraints, which nevertheless warrant significant consideration moving forward. Development-centred foreign aid has served as a fixture in the global hierarchy for the past several decades, and the recent cuts have already and will only continue to cause irreparable harm to vast amounts of people. It seems likely during this period of uncertainty that such harm will continue as a result of these disruption.

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Governing Difference: The Racial State in Mauritius

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Abstract

This paper examines the paradox of democracy and race in Mauritius through an analysis of the constitutional 'Best Loser System' (BLS), an electoral mechanism designed to ensure minority representation in parliament. While Mauritius is often celebrated as a stable and multicultural democracy, the BLS requires political candidates to declare affiliation with one of four constitutionally recognised racial communities in order to contest elections. Drawing on Goldberg's concept of the Racial State and Mamdani's theory of the bifurcated postcolonial state, the paper argues that Mauritian political stability has been achieved through the institutional management of ethnic difference rather than its transcendence.

The analysis traces three dimensions of the system: its colonial origins, its legal and bureaucratic operation, and its political consequences. It demonstrates how colonial practices of racial classification were embedded within the independence settlement and continue to structure democratic participation through administrative and legal procedures. While the BLS has contributed to minority inclusion and long-term political stability, it also reproduces rigid communal categories and constrains the development of a more fluid national identity. The Mauritian case, therefore, illustrates how racial governance can coexist with liberal democratic institutions, producing stability through the bureaucratic management of difference.

Introduction

Mauritius has long been celebrated as a model of a multicultural democracy, a small island state whose remarkable political stability contrasts sharply with the ethnic violence that has troubled other postcolonial societies. However, beneath this image of harmony lies a paradox: Mauritius is one of the few democracies in which citizens must legally identify by race in order to contest elections. The constitutional mechanism that employs this requirement is the 'Best Loser System' (BLS). This system was introduced in 1968, when Mauritius gained independence, to ensure that minority communities, such as Muslims, Creoles, and Sino-Mauritians, are fairly represented in Parliament alongside the Hindu majority and Franco-Mauritian elite. This essay argues that the BLS embodies the paradox of what Goldberg (2002) terms the 'racial state'. Goldberg's theory of racial governance highlights how states actively produce and manage racial differences through formal institutions and administrative practices. Mamdani's concept of the bifurcated state explains how colonial systems of differentiated rule continued into postcolonial institutions. Together, these theories help demonstrate that the BLS is not simply an electoral device for fair representation, but a vessel through which communal identity is organised by the state.

Drawing on Goldberg's theory of racial governance and Mamdani's (1996) account of the postcolonial bifurcated state, the essay demonstrates how colonial logos of ethnic categorisation have been codified into Mauritius's democratic institutions. This paper argues that Mauritian political stability has

been achieved through the institutional management of ethnic differences. Rather than analysing the entire system solely through Goldberg's concept of the 'racial state,' this essay uses Goldberg specifically to explain how the BLS reproduces racialised categories through law and bureaucracy, while drawing on Mamdani's account for differentiated postcolonial rule to situate the system within a longer historical logic of state formation. By tracing (i) historical formation, (ii) legal operation, and (iii) political consequences of the BLS, it contends that Mauritius's stability has been achieved not despite race, but through its institutionalisation. The first section explores how the BLS emerged from colonial strategies of communal classification that were carried into the independence settlement. The second demonstrates that its legal operation continues to make communal identity a condition of political membership. Finally, the third section argues that its political consequences extend beyond representation alone, reproducing racial categories as enduring terms of democratic legitimacy. Mauritius sustains democratic inclusion through the bureaucratic management of difference.

Historical Formation

The origins of the BLS lie in the racialised structures of the colonial state. Under both French and British rule, Mauritius was organised through rigid hierarchies of labour, race, and religion. The French imported enslaved Africans to work on sugar plantations, while British colonisers, after abolishing slavery in 1835, brought indentured labourers from India and traders from China. These groups were governed through distinct

administrative regimes that tied social status and political rights to racial origin (Eriksen, 1998). An example of this was enslaved Africans and their descendants who were largely confined to plantation labour, while Franco-Mauritian settlers retained land ownership and political influence, and indentured Indian labourers were governed through separate labour contracts and migration regulations (Eriksen, 1998). This was not merely social prejudice but a calculated strategy of divide and rule, where differential treatment was the primary instrument of power. By assigning different legal statuses, economic roles, and forms of political access to each group, colonial authorities prevented the emergence of a unified political constituency and instead structured competition between communities for resources and recognition (Mamdani, 1996). Colonial censuses further institutionalised these distinctions. Populations were categorised along lines of race and religion—"Creole," "Hindu," "Muslim," and "Chinese"—categories that would later become constitutionally entrenched. Census-making, as Anderson (1983) has argued, is a powerful act of imagining communities; it transforms fluid identities into fixed bureaucratic realities. Once identities are recorded and reproduced through state statistics, they become the basis for political representation, resource allocation, and administrative governance. In Mauritius, these colonial classifications later informed the communal categories used in the electoral system, linking colonial knowledge practices directly to the institutional design of the BLS.

In Mauritius, the enumeration of differences produced a political landscape in which racial classification became the primary mode

of state knowledge. The "General Population" category, in particular, is a colonial construct, a catch-all group created to encompass everyone who did not fit the "Indian" or "Asian" labels (Eriksen, 1998; Miles, 1999), thereby amalgamating the descendants of enslaved Africans with the European plantation oligarchy and obscuring their vastly different historical experiences and power positions. While Franco-Mauritians retained economic dominance through land ownership and control of the sugar industry, Creoles largely occupied marginalised social and economic positions following emancipation. Grouping these populations within a single administrative category concealed these inequalities and presented them as a unified political community despite their divergent historical trajectories (Eriksen, 1998; Miles, 1999). By the late colonial period, British administrators faced a political dilemma. As independence approached, Hindu Mauritians, forming a demographic majority, were positioned to dominate electoral politics. Minority communities, particularly Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, feared marginalisation (Eriksen, 1998; Srebrnik, 2002). To secure their consent to independence, British commissioners introduced constitutional safeguards designed to preserve communal balance. The *Banwell Report* (1966) explicitly recommended a mechanism to guarantee minority representation, a proposal that would evolve into the BLS. When Mauritius achieved independence in 1968, the constitution retained these communal quotas. The *First Schedule* of the Constitution institutionalised the four officially recognised communities, embedding racial arithmetic at the heart of

democratic representation (Constitution of the Republic of Mauritius, 1968).

As Mamdani (1996) explains, postcolonial states often inherit the colonial bifurcated state, one that distinguishes between modern citizens and traditional subjects. In the Mauritius case, Indo-Mauritian populations were increasingly incorporated into the institutions of the electoral politics as the emerging democratic majority, while other communities—particularly Creoles and Franco-Mauritians—were positioned as minorities whose political participation was mediated through communal safeguards rather than through demographic strength (Boswell, 2006; Eriksen, 1998). In Mauritius, this bifurcation persisted not territorially, unlike in many African colonies, but communally. Citizenship remained mediated through racial classification. Rather than existing as an undifferentiated national status, citizenship was organised through officially recognised communal categories that determined how representation would be distributed within the political system (Eriksen, 1998; Srebrnik, 2002). The independent state thus did not create a unified citizenry but rather a federation of ethnic categories, each granted political standing through state-sanctioned labels. These labels determined eligibility for mechanisms such as the BL seats, meaning that communal identity became a prerequisite for accessing corrective representation within Parliament (Eriksen, 1998; Miles, 1999). Thus, independence did not dismantle the colonial racial order; it repackaged it within the language of democratic inclusion. The new state was founded on a contradictory logic, equality through differentiation. As Eriksen

(1998, p. 3) aptly observed, "Mauritius's unity has always been managed through difference." The BLS would come to embody this ethos, ensuring political stability by transforming colonial racial hierarchies into administrative categories of representation.

Legal Operations

The BLS institutionalises the racial logic of the Mauritian state through the mechanisms of law and bureaucracy by formally classifying citizens into fixed communal categories, thereby making race a routine part of governance; for instance, candidates have historically had to declare themselves within one of four constitutionally recognised groups in order for BL seats to be distributed. The National Assembly consists of sixty-two directly elected members and eight "Best Losers" selected to correct communal imbalances. To be eligible for election, candidates must declare their affiliation with one of the four constitutionally recognised communities: Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, or General Population (which includes Creoles and Franco-Mauritians). Refusal to declare one's community results in disqualification (Constitution of the Republic of Mauritius, 1968).

This requirement has been legally contested. In *Reshma Ramiah & Others v. Electoral Commissioner* (2005), several candidates argued that being compelled to identify racially violated their constitutional rights to equality and freedom of conscience. However, both the Supreme Court of Mauritius and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council upheld the law, ruling that the classification was essential to the electoral formula that guaranteed communal balance. The decision affirmed the state's

authority to enforce racial identification, in effect, to determine the legitimate terms of belonging. By ruling that communal classification was necessary for the functioning of the electoral system, the court established that participation in representative politics requires citizens to make themselves legible through the state's authorised categories. Political membership is therefore not grounded in undifferentiated citizenship but in recognition within a predefined communal taxonomy. Those who refuse classification are excluded from candidacy, meaning that full participation in democratic institutions is conditional upon accepting the state's framework of racial identification. In this way, the ruling transforms communal identity from a social descriptor into a legal prerequisite for political participation (Goldberg, 2002; Fessha & Ho Tu Nam, 2015).

It established that access to representation rests not on undifferentiated citizenship, but on recognition through one of the state's authorised communal categories. Citizens are thus rendered politically legible only so far as they submit to this classificatory order. This legal requirement reinforces racial identification because it continually reproduces the categories on which the BLS depends. Candidates must declare a community, electoral authorities must verify those classifications, and parliamentary seats are subsequently allocated according to communal arithmetic. Through these routine administrative procedures, racial categories are repeatedly enacted and stabilised within the political system. As Goldberg (2002) argues, racial states sustain themselves through precisely such institutional practices, where legal and bureaucratic mechanisms normalise

racial classification as a basic principle of governance. The judiciary, in this case, became an active agent of the racial state, prioritising communal arithmetic over individual liberty and thereby legally sanctifying the production of racialised political subjects.

Political Consequences

While the BLS entrenches racial classification, it has also underpinned Mauritius's remarkable political stability by institutionalising minority inclusion within the electoral system and reducing the risk that demographic majorities translate into permanent political domination. Scholars often cite it as a pragmatic solution to the dangers of ethnic domination. By guaranteeing representation to minority communities, the system has mitigated fears of Hindu hegemony and prevented communal violence (Lublin & Wright, 2013; Mahadew, 2013). Compared to other multi-ethnic postcolonial states such as Fiji or Sri Lanka, Mauritius has maintained an unbroken record of peaceful transfers of power and competitive elections (Srebrnik, 2002). This stability is often celebrated as an example of pragmatic multiculturalism: a model of governance that transforms diversity from a threat into an administrative asset by embedding ethnic representation within formal political institutions, allowing the state to anticipate, measure, and manage communal competition rather than leaving it to erupt unpredictably through extra-institutional conflict (Lublin & Wright, 2013; Modood, 2013). Political elites defend the BLS as a mechanism of 'communal harmony,' arguing that it ensures unity through inclusion. Abdool Razack Mohamed, leader of the Comité d'Action Musulman

(CAM), was included in one of these elites. He lobbied for safeguards to ensure minority representation in the Legislative Assembly, leading to the development of the BLS (Dobson, 2011). Empirical evidence supports the inclusionary effects of the BLS. Lublin and Wright (2013) found that the system significantly increases the probability of minority candidates entering Parliament. No major ethnic conflict has occurred since independence; a testament, perhaps, to the system's stabilising role. As Modood (2013) observes, multiculturalism can function either as a "celebration" of diversity or as its "bureaucratisation." Mauritius embodies the latter: it recognises difference, but only to the extent that it can be measured, categorised, and administered. Comparative insights deepen this analysis. Singapore's Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) model, examined by Barr and Skrbiš (2008), mirrors Mauritius's racial state logic. Both societies operationalise ethnicity through formal categories, managing potential conflict via state-controlled diversity by requiring individuals to be officially classified within recognised ethnic groups, which are then used to structure representation, public policy, and social programmes (Barr & Skbiš, 2008). In Singapore, for example, ethnic categories shape electoral institutions such as Group Representation Constituencies, which require parties to include minority candidates on electoral slates, as well as policies such as ethnic quotas in public housing designed to maintain communal balance. These mechanisms aim to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves or majoritarian domination by embedding diversity management within administrative rules (Barr & Skrbiš, 2008). Yet this harmony is ambivalent. Stability is achieved

through the very mechanisms that perpetuate racial boundaries because the same policies that secure representation and social balance also reinforce the salience of ethnic categories by requiring citizens to continually identify within them (Barr & Skrbiš, 2008; Goldberg, 2002). The success of the BLS, then, cannot be separated from the logic of racial management. The Mauritian state has achieved inclusion not by transcending race but by institutionalising it. Stability, in this sense, is a form of governance, a racial peace administered through law. As Goldberg (2002) might suggest, Mauritius demonstrates that racial states need not be oppressive; they can be benevolently bureaucratic, producing harmony through control.

The same system that promotes stability also reproduces colonial hierarchies and limits social mobility. The four communal categories, Hindu, Muslim, Sino-Mauritian, and General Population, are frozen in time, bearing little resemblance to the island's complex contemporary identities. Intermarriage, Creole diversity, and mixed-race identities are ignored because the electoral framework requires citizens to align themselves with one of the four constitutionally recognised communities regardless of the complexity of their social identities. Individuals whose background spans multiple communities must therefore select a single category for political purposes, effectively simplifying and erasing hybrid or evolving identities (Eriksen, 1998). This is important as the persistence of these rigid classifications demonstrates how colonial categories continue to structure modern political participation, transforming historically contingent racial labels into enduring institutional requirements

(Eriksen, 1998; Goldberg, 2002). The census categories that once served colonial labour management now define democratic participation (Eriksen, 1998). For instance, the children of a Sino-Mauritian father and a Creole mother face an arbitrary and politically charged choice, forced to align with one part of their heritage for political purposes, a decision that has tangible consequences for their political viability depending on the constituency they contest. This ossification sustains old hierarchies. Hindus, as the demographic majority, dominate political institutions, while Creoles remain underrepresented in higher education and business (Shilliam, 2015). Political parties continue to mobilise along ethnic lines: the Labour Party being predominantly Hindu, the Parti Mauricien Social Democrats (PMSD) as Creole-Franco-Mauritian, in turn, transforming elections into exercises in communal arithmetic rather than ideological debate. This stifles the development of a robust, issue-based political culture because political competition becomes structured around the mobilisation of communal voting blocs rather than policy platforms, incentivising parties to appeal to ethnic loyalties instead of cross-cutting social or economic issues (Srebrnik, 2002; Eriksen, 1998) and discourages the emergence of political entrepreneurs whose platforms transcend communal appeals.

The BLS also produces exclusion through neutrality. Candidates who refuse to declare a communal identity are barred from participation. For instance, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC, 2012) ruled in *Koonjul et al. v. Mauritius* that this mandatory classification violates the right to equality under

international law. The case arose when Mauritian activists sought to contest parliamentary elections without declaring affiliation with one of the four constitutionally recognised communities. They argued that the constitutional requirement to classify themselves as specific ethnicities compelled them to adopt a racial identity imposed by the state and therefore infringed their rights under Articles 25 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantee equal access to public office and protection from discrimination. The Human Rights Committee agreed that the requirement effectively excluded individuals who refused communal classification from standing for election on equal terms with other citizens. By making participation in the democratic process conditional on accepting the state's racial taxonomy, the electoral system restricted the political rights of those who rejected communal identification (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2012).

Yet the Mauritian government defended the system as essential to maintaining national unity. In its response, the state argued that the Best Loser System formed part of a constitutional compromise designed to prevent ethnic domination and preserve political stability in a deeply plural society. According to the government, a communal declaration was necessary to ensure that minority groups remained represented in Parliament and to maintain the delicate balance that had sustained peaceful politics since independence. This response illustrates Foucault's (2003) notion of biopolitical management: the state defines who belongs and on what terms, exercising power not through repression but through classification. Rather than excluding citizens through

overt coercion, the state governs the population by organising it into recognised racial communities and regulating political participation through those categories. The state's defence is a classic biopolitical argument: the infringement of individual rights is framed as a necessary and benevolent measure for the protection of the population's (racial) body politic as a whole.

Despite its historical success, the Best Loser System has faced growing scrutiny within Mauritius and abroad. For instance, from 2001 to 2014, a series of electoral reform commissions recommended replacing the system with a proportional representation model that would retain inclusivity without requiring racial declaration (Mahadew, 2019). Public debate intensified after the *Reshma Ramiah* case (Fessha & Ho Tu Nam, 2021). Younger Mauritians, raised in a more globalised society, increasingly question why they must "choose a race" to participate in a supposedly meritocratic democracy (Auerbach, 2023; Fessha & Ho Tu Nam, 2021). Civic movements such as *Rezistans ek Alternativ* and *LALIT* have called for a shift toward national, rather than communal, identity (UNHRC, 2012; Ah-Vee & Lallah, 2010). These movements often leverage the discourse of human rights and cosmopolitanism, arguing that the BLS is an anachronism that tarnishes Mauritius's international image as a modern democracy. Yet reform has been slow. The state fears that abandoning communal safeguards might destabilise the delicate balance that has ensured peace for over five decades. This fear is potent; the spectre of ethnic strife is a powerful tool used by political incumbents who have built their careers within and benefit from the current communal system.

Fessha and Ho Tu Nam (2021) characterise this dilemma as the "Mauritian paradox." The BLS is both the symbol of the nation's unity and the obstacle to its modernisation. Efforts to replace it have repeatedly stalled because any reform that threatens communal balance risks undermining the very harmony it seeks to perfect.

The persistence of the BLS thus reveals the resilience of the racial state. Even reform discourse operates within its logic, seeking new ways to manage, rather than transcend, communal differences (Mahadew, 2019; Fessha & Ho Tu Nam, 2021). Proposed alternatives, such as a purely proportional system or reserved seats without individual declaration, still grapple with the fundamental question of how to define the communities being protected, thus remaining trapped within the taxonomic framework the state has created (Mahadew, 2019; Fessha & Ho Tu Nam, 2021). Mauritius remains a rare case where race is not a vestige of the past but a constitutional principle of democracy itself.

Conclusion

Mauritius's Best Loser System illustrates how the racial state can thrive within a successful liberal democracy. The system embodies Goldberg's (2002) insight that the racial state is not defined by overt racism but by its bureaucratic normalisation of race as a category of governance. Through the BLS, Mauritius has institutionalised race as the foundation of democratic participation. It has achieved peace by transforming colonial hierarchies into an administrative order. Mamdani's (1996)

bifurcated state persists, not through colonial despotism but through constitutional design. The BLS ensures inclusion by managing difference, a strategy that both empowers minorities and constrains the evolution of national identity. The paradox of Mauritius lies in its success. Stability has been purchased at the cost of perpetuating racial categories that no longer reflect social realities. Reform efforts continue to grapple with this tension: to abolish the BLS risks instability; to preserve it entrenches inequality. The Mauritian case thus forces a re-evaluation of the very timelines of decolonisation, suggesting that the formal end of empire may be followed by a long, indefinite period of institutional and psychological dependency on colonial forms of knowledge and control.

Ultimately, Mauritius invites a broader reflection on postcolonial governance. It challenges the liberal assumption, such as Goldberg (2002), that racial states are inherently illiberal, showing instead how racial administration can coexist with democracy, tolerance, and peace. Yet it also warns of the limits of bureaucratic multiculturalism, which can be viewed through the lens of Modood (2013). The Mauritian model, for all its pragmatic glory, ultimately represents a politics of containment rather than liberation. It manages differences efficiently but offers no vision for its dissolution into a more integrative and fluid national identity. True harmony may require not the management of difference but its transcendence; politics that affirms diversity without reducing it to race. Mauritius poses the international challenge of how to build a common future without being perpetually governed by the bureaucratic ghosts of a segregated past.

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"Are We Black, Proud and Socialist, or What Are We?" Racial Politics and The Appeal of The Peoples Temple

Elsa Ochoa Williams

Abstract

Why did a movement promising racial equality end in one of the most infamous tragedies of modern American history? This essay explores the rise and fall of the Peoples Temple to examine how racial politics shaped the appeal of cult movements in post-Civil Rights America. Drawing on sermons, internal recordings, and members' testimonies preserved in the Jonestown archive at San Diego State University, it argues that the Temple gained influence by presenting itself as an interracial community capable of delivering the social justice that mainstream institutions had failed to provide. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement and its limited gains, the Temple's rhetoric of collective empowerment and communal living resonated strongly with marginalised Americans seeking meaning and belonging. Yet, the tragedy of Jonestown reveals how the language of racial justice and liberation was corrupted under the charismatic leadership of Jim Jones, culminating in the mass murder-suicide of over 900 of his followers. The story of the Peoples Temple ultimately demonstrates how the unfulfilled promises of post-civil rights America paved the way for alternative communities whose utopian visions proved both profoundly appealing and exceptionally destructive.

Introduction

Following the collapse of the 1960s American counterculture, former adherents of the movement were left with an interpretative void, lacking both present meaning and future vision. New religious movements thus found fertile ground amid the disruptive social and economic changes of the time (Lewis, 1998). The search for alternative lifestyles led to exponential growth in cult membership, as illustrated by movements such as the Manson Family, the Children of God, the Unification Church and the Peoples Temple. The latter, led by Jim Jones, framed itself as an activist church focused on multiracialism and social justice, while simultaneously promoting socialist philosophy and faith healing (Lewis, 1998).

Born at a moment when legal equality coexisted with persistent structural segregation, the history of the Peoples Temple invites reflection on the relationship between racial politics and the appeal of cult movements in post-Civil Rights America. Specifically, statements from members and from Jones himself reveal that the cult gained influence by offering the promise of an interracial community that the US political system had failed to deliver. The Temple's trajectory ultimately exposes the tension between emancipatory ideals and the authoritarian structures that may arise within utopian communities. Relying on the primary sources available via San Diego State University's digital archive, this essay will first situate the surge of alternative religions in the broader racial and sociopolitical context of 1960s-70s America. It will then examine the rise of the Peoples Temple led by Jim Jones, focusing particularly on the movement's racial ideals.

Finally, the establishment of Jonestown and its tragic conclusion will be analysed as a testimony to the political power of cult ideology.

Context

As mentioned above, the rise of new religious movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s cannot be understood separately from the broader context of post-civil rights America. Although it effectively ended legal segregation in public facilities and banned employment discrimination (Dierenfield, 2004), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had many inherent limitations that left Black communities frustrated with the legal system. The Act did not immediately solve all racial inequalities; it notably failed to effectively eliminate systemic economic inequality, address deep-seated housing discrimination, or prevent the persistence of educational disparities (Dierenfield, 2004). Specifically, the Act did not provide strong mechanisms to remedy long-standing inequalities in hiring practices or access to skilled labour, allowing structural economic imbalances to persist (Dierenfield, 2004). Furthermore, the implementation of the Civil Rights Act faced significant resistance in Southern states, with de facto segregation keeping many churches racially divided well beyond the 1960s (Hutchinson, 2017). Subsequent legislation, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, sought to address additional dimensions of racial inequality, but they too did not fully resolve structural discrimination. For instance, the Fair Housing Act failed to dismantle redlining, a practice in which banks and insurers systematically denied financial assistance to Black families (Dierenfield, 2004). Frustrated by this

stagnation, Black Power and other radical political collectives emerged in the mid-1960s to champion Black self-determination, self-defence, and cultural identity, seeking to reclaim agency where legal reform had fallen short. Fundamentally, these groups appealed to people's growing distrust of government institutions and disappointment with the limits of liberal reform.

Correspondingly, the reality of post-civil rights America helps explain why the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed such a spectacular growth in new religious movements that did not only have spiritual appeal, but also spoke directly to people's political and social grievances. In parallel to the social unrest of the time, the counterculture, which peaked around 1967, opened spaces for racially inclusive, socially radical communities. Countercultural leaders prompted many to reject the American "white picket fence" dream in favour of communal living and unconventional philosophies (Barker, 2014). These movements operationalised empowerment in tangible ways: communal living arrangements encouraged shared responsibilities and decision-making, collective work projects provided vocational skills and economic support, and active participation in political protests and social outreach enabled members to advocate for their rights directly (Barker, 2014). Members often took part in running schools, food programmes, or care facilities, giving them a sense of agency and visible impact in their communities. Notorious examples of religious cults which emerged from the counterculture include the Manson Family (apocalyptic millenarianism), Children of God (evangelical communalism), the Unification Church (anti-communist messianism), and the Rajneesh Movement (neo-spiritual utopianism).

As early as 1955, Jim Jones built his church on principles of racial equality and Marxist community, a combination that was exceptionally radical for its time. Jones (1976) believed that the Church had a moral responsibility to address social problems, arguing that faith should not be limited to spiritual matters but actively address poverty, discrimination, and inequality, which were deeply intertwined with racial oppression. By linking religious duty with social activism, he positioned the Temple as a vehicle for practical change as well as moral guidance. In the heavily segregated city of Indianapolis, Jones set up a food pantry, a free restaurant and care homes for the elderly, all with the help of his wife Marceline (Moore, 2022). These initiatives made the Temple particularly attractive to non-white working-class adults, predominantly African Americans, because they provided immediate material relief in the face of systemic neglect (Hutchinson, 2017). In a city where segregation and discrimination significantly affected the quality of life, the Temple offered tangible support, communal solidarity, and the promise of dignity.

However, further research reveals that Jones' politics were largely one-dimensional and underpinned by questionable moral foundations. While he initially associated with communist ideas during his time at Indiana University, he broke with the Communist Party of the USA when it distanced itself from Joseph Stalin, whom he admired (Moore, 2022). Instead, Jones (1977a) developed what he called his "own brand of Marxism". According to Harris and Waterman (2004), Jones' Marxism was exclusively defined by opposing anything that the US government supported. For instance, he condemned the white

minority governments in Rhodesia and South Africa, portraying himself and the Temple as defenders of the oppressed (p. 116). In turn, Jones uncritically admired communist regimes, lauding that there was no need for psychiatrists in China because "communists don't get mentally ill" (p. 117). Jones relied heavily on Soviet outlets like Tass, which narrowed his understanding of global politics (p. 117). This selective and superficial engagement with Marxism illustrates Jones' one-dimensional approach: socialism was not a coherent framework for systemic critique, but a malleable ideology that he could use to rationalise anything he did or said.

Moreover, the Temple leader had a problematic tendency to refer to himself as Black, or alternatively, Native American, as reported in members' testimonies (Wagner-Wilson, 2008). In the words of Rebecca Moore (2018, p. 170), who lost three family members to the cult, "to live in solidarity with the oppressed, for Jones, was to be Black." Invited on the Ted Dunbar Show in 1972, Jones was also very proud to declare his adoption of "several children of all nationalities and racial backgrounds." Like most cult leaders, Jones (1973a) thought of himself as God and even required his followers to call him "dad." These acts served as performative demonstrations of racial inclusivity, presenting Jones as a leader committed to bridging racial divides and embodying the ideals of the civil rights movement. By adopting the identities of marginalised groups, Jones positioned himself as a progressive figure who transcended conventional racial hierarchies, even as these gestures masked underlying manipulations of power. In this way, race became a credential, used to signal Jones' progressive identity to both followers and

outsiders.

Life within the Temple shows how ideals of racial equality and collective empowerment could be both realised and controlled in practice. First, recorded sermons and members' testimonies revealed that the Peoples Temple articulated a radical critique of American racism and capitalism, positioning itself as an alternative born directly from the failures of liberal reform. Using rhetoric reminiscent of that of the Black Panthers, Jones (1973b) proclaimed during a service: "If you're born in capitalist America, racist America, fascist America, then you're born in sin. But if you're born in socialism, you're not born in sin." This phrasing fused racial consciousness with moral absolutism by framing systemic oppression in American society as sinful. In turn, Jones recast socialism as a form of political salvation capable of liberating oppressed communities. Leslie Wagner-Wilson (2008, p. 25), who wrote a memoir after surviving Jonestown, specifically recalls a Jones sermon about Black history: "It was the first time I heard of Blacks having a life before slavery, and it amazed me when Jim talked about my people as if he were not only deeply knowledgeable, but sympathetic." Her recollection illustrates how the Temple's services validated members' identities by acknowledging experiences often ignored in mainstream education and society, while simultaneously deepening emotional reliance on Jones as an authoritative interpreter of racial meaning. Overall, the Temple seemed to offer the recognition and dignity that were absent from most churches and civic organisations at the time.

In parallel to formal ideology, collective identity was also

reinforced through daily embodied practice. Shared living arrangements and political activism gave Jones' followers the experience of racial integration that mainstream American institutions had failed to provide. As described in the Temple's official newspaper, *People's Forum* (1976), a 40-acre children's ranch was operated by the church, along with care homes for senior citizens. In the Alvarado Terrace Apartments, common spaces like kitchens, dining halls and bathrooms encouraged interracial cooperation. Members were further incorporated into Jones' political project through labour and obedience to collective goals. For instance, Leslie Wagner-Wilson (2008, p. 31) was part of the "advance crew" in Seattle, where she went out onto the streets to preach equal rights, freedom, and socialism alongside white adherents of the church, "with no regard to colour or social status." Temple members also frequently participated in marches, such as the Bakke protest in 1977, which denounced a Supreme Court decision against affirmative action admissions to the university. Through these practices, the Temple did more than provide a sense of belonging and moral purpose: it operationalised its ideology by providing a perceived solution to unresolved inequalities. By participating in both communal labour and political activism, members experienced a tangible enactment of the Temple's ideals. In this way, the appeal of cult membership was inseparable from the ways in which the Temple translated abstract principles of justice into lived, everyday practices.

Nevertheless, this perceived solution has been suspected by many scholars to have largely been a facade. Moore (2018), who has become the leading historian on the Peoples Temple,

recently conducted a statistical study into the demographics of the Temple. Using first-hand accounts from members and official administrative records, she concluded that the Temple's power structure was overwhelmingly white, despite the clear majority of African American membership (p. 170). This observation is in line with the work of Hutchinson (2017), who has questioned the legitimacy of white leadership in an organisation with such pro-Black politics. As a matter of fact, eight followers of the Temple left the organisation in 1973, denouncing the promotion of new white members to positions of power at the expense of more experienced Black members (Moore, 2019). These internal tensions reveal the fragility of the Temple's claims to racial equality when confronted with questions of authority and control. While some members raised concerns about these contradictions, they were largely ignored within the broader movement, where Jones' rhetoric of collective struggle discouraged internal dissent. In hindsight, the 1973 defections serve as an early indication of the structural imbalances that would later intensify within the isolated environment of Jonestown.

The most consequential event of the Temple's history is, with no doubt, the establishment of Jonestown. In the summer of 1977, Jim Jones and hundreds of his followers moved to Guyana with the goal of creating a racially utopian community. Nonetheless, many suspect that Jones was actually trying to escape US scrutiny, as he had been targeted with allegations of abuse and fraud (Hutchinson, 2017). Jones' eponymous town was designed as an agricultural project, which he defined as "27,000 acres undertaken abroad in a mixed society, [...] a beautifully racially

inclusive society" (1977b). Charles Garry (1978), the Temple's attorney, further described it as "paradise" and a "panacea" free from "ageism, racism, sexism, and [...] hunger." Neither Jones nor Garry addressed the fact that the land had been acquired through a series of backroom deals, which ensured that the police would stay clear of Jonestown and let Jones import drugs and weapons into the country (Moore, 2018). Despite calling himself a Marxist, Jones seemed oblivious to the colonial legacies entrenched in Guyana, demonstrating a disconnect between the Temple's politics and the broader social and historical realities of the land they occupied. Retrospective analyses by Guyanese sociologists have characterised the project as a plantation, denouncing the racial dynamics of a white man of Irish and Welsh descent supervising physical labour performed primarily by his African American followers (p. 171). Indeed, the inhabitants of Jonestown had to build the commune from the ground up, first clearing the land and then constructing buildings from scratch. These efforts highlight the contradictions inherent in pursuing racial and social equality under an authoritarian hierarchy that often exploited the very members it claimed to empower. The establishment of Jonestown overall illustrates the extent of the Temple's political ideals and the lengths members went to pursue them, even when this pursuit seemed at odds with the church's very principles.

Accounts of life in Jonestown are varied, yet they consistently emphasise one defining feature: the extreme isolation of the settlement. Surrounded by dense jungle and lacking road access, Jonestown could only be reached from the capital, Georgetown, by plane or riverboat. This geographical reality effectively

functioned as a deliberate mechanism of control, as members were prohibited from leaving without explicit permission and, dissidents were punished (Moore, 2019). Visitors were exceptionally rare, and their arrival was invariably preceded by rehearsals in which Jim Jones coached residents on how to respond to journalists and officials. Such rehearsals transformed testimony into performance, ensuring that dissenting experiences remained unheard while projecting an image of racial harmony and collective fulfilment. Additionally, individual experience was valuable only insofar as it conformed to the Temple's political myth of racial uplift. The following exchange, which has been transcribed from a tape recovered by the FBI, is particularly revealing:

> Jones: Let's practice. (Pause.) Uh, what would you find wrong with this place?
> Man: Um, I don't find anything wrong. I've had more opportunities here than, um, any other- than I ever did in the States. I have a chance to learn skills that I've never learned before, and uh, I can- It's just- It's a fantastic place. There's no-
> Jones: You might say, before I came into this church, I was wasting my life on drugs and that sort of thing, you know, something like that. (Jones, 1973a)

These rehearsals exposed something deeper about Jones' cultivation of a narrative of persecution. Ever since the move to Guyana, Jones had grown increasingly distrustful of the media and the US government. He most notably claimed that Jonestown was under imminent threat of racist annihilation by

US intelligence agencies (Buford & Tropp, 1978). The US did have an interest in Jonestown, but not necessarily for the conspiratorial reasons stressed by Jones. Public scrutiny intensified following the Stoen affair, in which former Temple members campaigned against the abuse they had experienced within the Temple (pp. 316-381). In response, Jones declared a state of siege, urging residents to arm themselves. The siege lasted six days and received support from Angela Davis, a leading figure in the Black feminist and Marxist movements. In a statement openly acknowledging the conspiracy against Jonestown, she communicated her gratitude to the Peoples Temple for their contribution to the fight against oppression (Davis, 1977). By framing Jonestown as a frontline in the struggle against racism, Davis' endorsement lent legitimacy to Jones' claims. The sustained emphasis on persecution not only justified heightened surveillance within the community but also fostered cohesion through a shared sense of impending danger. By inflating the threat posed by external enemies, Jones was able to consolidate authority, conditioning followers to accept strict obedience as necessary for the community's survival.

Indeed, the ultimate tragedy which unfolded in Jonestown demonstrates the power of cult ideology in binding members to the community and subordinating individual survival to collective belief. Heightened scrutiny culminated in the visit of US Congressman Leo Ryan on 18 November 1978, whose investigation was interpreted by Jones as confirmation of the conspiracy against the Temple (Hutchinson, 2017). Accompanied by journalists, Ryan was passed notes by residents requesting assistance in leaving, exposing the fragility of

Jonestown's carefully curated public image (Lewis, 1998). Perceiving Ryan's attempt to depart with defectors as an existential threat, Jones ordered his assassination. Fearing further defections and the collapse of his authority, Jones commanded 900 Jonestown residents to commit mass suicide by cyanide. Over 300 were children (Hutchinson, 2017). In the infamous "death tape," Jones (1978) can be heard justifying the act as "revolutionary suicide," prompting his audience: "Are we Black, proud and socialist, or what are we?" Jones' rhetorical question reveals how the Temple's critique of American mainstream society was ultimately weaponised to demand absolute obedience, transforming the language of liberation into an instrument of control. Subsequent investigations revealed that this mass murder-suicide had been frequently rehearsed during what Jones called "white nights" (Moore, 2019). Leslie Wagner-Wilson (2008), whose testimony has informed much of this essay, survived by escaping earlier that day under the pretence of going for a picnic.

The story of Jonestown therefore underscores not only the enduring significance of racial politics in shaping the appeal of alternative communities in 1960s-70s America, but also the dangers of utopian projects led by charismatic leaders. Initially imagined as a practical experiment in racial equality, Jonestown ultimately collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions: the tension between ideals of integration and the reality of a white-dominated hierarchy; the enforcement of obedience through coercion and fear; and the isolation that amplified both paranoia and surveillance. These structural problems were compounded by the inherent contradictions of Jim Jones

himself. His moral authority was deeply questionable, shaped by self-serving interpretations of Marxism, and his purported commitment to racial equality often served more to enhance his personal power rather than to empower his followers. While the Temple first seemed to offer tangible solutions where mainstream society had failed, these solutions were rendered dangerous when concentrated in the hands of a morally-compromised authoritarian leader. The story of the Peoples Temple thus illuminates both the appeal and the peril inherent in the utopian experiments that sought to redress the unfulfilled promises of post-civil rights America.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the rise and fall of the Peoples Temple symbolise both a critique and a product of post-Civil Rights America. By promoting interracial integration and equality, the Temple borrowed the language of the civil rights movement while operating in a post-civil rights reality shaped by disillusionment with liberal reform. For Black congregants "suffering from post-traumatic Watts syndrome," the movement's appeal was deeply rooted in the promise of tangible political change (Harris & Waterman, 2004, p. 120). Yet, the cult of personality built around Jim Jones corrupted these ideals. Primary testimonies reveal how Jones' rhetoric of liberation and racial solidarity was transformed into a mechanism of obedience, demonstrating the political power of cult ideology in exploiting unresolved social grievances. Jonestown ultimately stands as a grim reminder of how unfulfilled political promises, when refracted through charismatic authority and conspiratorial narratives, can culminate not in emancipation, but in catastrophe.

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Identity, Community, and Insurgent Restraint in El Salvador's Civil War

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Abstract

In many civil wars, insurgent organisations rely heavily on civilian communities while avoiding systematic violence against them. This article examines how a civilian- dependent insurgency built sustained capacity—understood as the ability to recruit, coordinate, govern, and persist—while limiting direct violence against civilians, in a war in which the vast majority of serious violations were committed by state forces and allied paramilitaries. Focusing on the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in Morazán and Chalatenango, it analyses how campesino cooperatives, liberation theology Christian base communities, and clandestine village communities structured mobilisation, organisation, and control under intense counterinsurgent repression and fragmented authority. Rather than treating identity, organisational incentives, and information as alternative explanations for restraint, the article develops a cumulative account in which each operates at a distinct analytical level: mobilization through shared identities provides the social foundations for participation; organisational incentives, typical of activist insurgencies in resource-poor contexts, shape recruitment, discipline, and investment in governance; and community-embedded information networks enable selective enforcement of violence. Within the Cold War context in which the FMLN emerged as a "robust insurgency" (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010), the analysis shows why systematic predation by the insurgency would have been counterproductive and strategically self-defeating. This article contributes to debates on identity,

insurgent organisation, and civilian protection by showing how political identities formed within local communities became sources of insurgent capacity and constraint, shaping both mobilisation and the character of violence.

Introduction

The Salvadoran civil war (1979–1992) grew out of extreme inequality and a closed political system in which reformist mobilisation was met with escalating repression, culminating in armed conflict between the Salvadoran state and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (McClintock, 1998, pp. 41–56). The conflict is commonly associated with massacres, scorched-earth campaigns, and death-squad terror on the one hand, and, on the other, with campesino cooperatives and Christian base communities that sustained a long-term insurgency under the FMLN, even as these same communities became primary targets of state repression (McClintock, 1998, pp. 41–43; United Nations, 1993, p. 36). This article views the FMLN as the political and armed expression of an insurgent community in which many rural people redefined their class position, civic status, and sense of agency. Long treated as subordinated labourers and people excluded from political participation, these same rural people came to see themselves as collective actors and citizens with rights. This article analyses how campesino communities (rural peasant communities organised through cooperatives and Christian base communities) in El Salvador, especially in the insurgent strongholds of Morazán and Chalatenango, generated power for the FMLN. That power constrained direct insurgent violence against civilians, while the

vast majority of violations during the war were perpetrated by state forces and allied paramilitaries (United Nations, 1993, p. 36; Wood, 2003, p. 15). As a result, the movement's strength rested less on material resources, given the movement's limited access to lootable assets, than on robust social endowments. As an activist insurgency in Weinstein's sense (2007, p. 97), it relied on long-term cooperation rooted in community institutions while investing in governance rather than short-term predation (Wood, 2003, pp. 18, 193).

Methodology

The analysis combines close reading of secondary sources with a structured case study of Morazán and Chalatenango organised around the causal mechanism outlined above. These departments became core FMLN strongholds due to the combination of mountainous terrain and dense campesino organisation and are at the core of Wood's village-level study (McClintock 1998; Wood 2003). The analysis draws on three main bodies of evidence, combining Wood's detailed village-level material with McClintock's broader comparative account of the conflict and the United Nations Truth Commission's findings on patterns of civilian victimisation. Wood's (2003) ethnography provides detailed accounts of how cooperatives, Christian base communities, and popular organisations redefined campesino identities and structured participation, information flows, and local governance (Wood, pp. 10–11, 14). McClintock's (1998) comparative study offers data on regime type, repression, FMLN organisational strength, and patterns of political violence, including estimates of the movement's relative military capacity

and civilian support. The United Nations Truth Commission report provides systematic evidence on civilian victimisation, notably the finding that approximately 85% of documented serious human rights violations during the war were attributable to state forces and allied paramilitaries, with only a minority attributable to the FMLN (United Nations, 1993, p. 36). Because these figures reflect documented cases rather than all acts of wartime violence, they should be interpreted as an estimate of responsibility for major violations rather than a comprehensive record. The analysis is organised around a theoretical framework that integrates Kalyvas's account of violence and territorial control (2006), Weinstein's theory of activist insurgency (2007), Elisabeth Jean Wood's work on insurgent mobilisation (2003), Reed Wood's work on rebel capability and civilian victimisation (2010), and Valentino et al.'s theory of mass violence (2004).

The case study is structured around a common set of questions applied to each layer of the argument:

(a) How were campesino identities and community institutions transformed and linked to insurgent participation?
(b) How did FMLN recruitment, discipline, and governance practices reflect an activist insurgency reliant on social endowments?
(c) How did patterns of territorial control, information, and threat shape the use of violence against civilians?

These questions organise the empirical sections that follow. They guide the analysis of the cumulative causal mechanism within the single case of the Salvadoran civil war. The analysis traces the

sequential causal pathway—from identity-based mobilisation through activist organisational incentives to community-embedded information networks—through which insurgent restraint was produced in this case. Mobilisation through shared campesino and Christian identities drew rural residents into insurgent participation. Recruitment through cooperatives, Christian base communities, and village organisations created incentives that tied FMLN survival to governance and discipline rather than predation. These same community networks structured information flows. They allowed the FMLN to exercise authority through selective enforcement rather than indiscriminate violence against civilians.

Context

Before the civil war, rural El Salvador was organised around large estates that combined economic exploitation with civic exclusion (McClintock, 1998, p. 98). The late nineteenth-century coffee boom expropriated communal land and cemented a highly unequal agrarian order, enforced by the army and allied security forces, including the National Guard and Democratic Nationalist Organisation (ORDEN) (McClintock, 1998, p. 98). The 1932 massacre, in which tens of thousands of rural people were killed following a peasant uprising, became a reference point in popular memory, reinforcing the expectation that collective challenge would be met with annihilation (McClintock, 1998, p. 103).

From the 1960s onwards, this context began to change. Progressive liberation theology Jesuits formed Christian base communities in which peasants read Scripture and were

encouraged to see themselves as agents and subjects of history rather than passive recipients of charity (Wood, 2003, pp. 56–58). In parallel, peasant unions and federations demanded access to land and better wages, while agrarian reform programmes in the late 1970s created cooperatives that gave some rural workers formal control of land and collective decision-making (Wood, 2003, pp. 90–92). These community-led programmes provided practical training in assembly, leadership, and mutual obligation (Wood, 2003, 95–97).

At the same time, these developments occurred within a political system that remained closed and increasingly repressive. Military–oligarchic alliances dating back to the 1930s, fraudulent elections in the 1970s, and escalating repression under the military dictatorship of General Carlos Humberto Romero made clear that peaceful mobilisation would not translate into political power (McClintock, 1998, pp. 93–104). Violence against civilians intensified sharply in the late 1970s as security forces and allied paramilitaries targeted opposition groups, while massacres became more frequent with the onset of full- scale civil war after 1980 (McClintock, 1998, pp. 114–115). Subsequent investigations attributed the vast majority of serious human rights violations during the conflict to state forces and allied paramilitaries (United Nations, 1993, p. 36). When the FMLN was formally created in 1980 as a coalition of five insurgent organisations, many rural communities—particularly in Morazán and Chalatenango—already practised self-organisation, clandestine cooperation, and mutual defence and supplied recruits, local knowledge, and local networks to the insurgency (McClintock, 1998, p. 291; Wood,

2003, p. 193).

Taken together, this context yielded three features that anchor the subsequent analysis: dense networks of community organisations, such as cooperatives and Christian base communities (Wood, 2003, p. 193); a closed, violently exclusionary regime that made claims to citizenship rights dangerous for campesinos (McClintock, 1998, pp. 93–104); and a particularly strong insurgency dependent on civilian support (the FMLN) that drew its capacity and resilience from these community networks even as these communities became targets of counterinsurgent violence (United Nations, 1993, p. 36; McClintock 1998, p. 91).

Identity, Community, and Insurgent Power

This section examines how campesino and Christian identities were redefined within community organisations and how these redefinitions generated participation, collective action, and the social foundations of insurgent power.

In the Salvadoran civil war, identity mattered not as an abstract ideological label but as a set of contested, historically grounded understandings of class position and citizenship — whether rural people were subordinate labourers subject to elite authority or members of a political community entitled to participation and protection (McClintock 1998, p. 56; Wood 2003, pp. 51–54). Identity is treated here as socially embedded and relational: the meanings through which peasants, clergy, organisers, and combatants interpreted their social positions and collectively

acted on those interpretations (Wood, 2003, pp. 54–56). Communities are organised networks—cooperatives, liberation theology Christian base communities, village committees, and insurgent structures—that institutionalised these understandings in everyday life and provided arenas for mobilisation, coordination, and governance (Wood, 2003, pp. 87–90). Power refers to the collective capacity generated within these communities to recruit, coordinate, govern, and survive under ongoing state repression (Wood, 2003, p. 193).

For Wood, participation in the insurgency and collective action are instances of campesinos actively remaking their identities and claiming political agency (Wood 2003, p. 193). Drawing on village-level accounts, Wood shows that mobilisation followed the reinterpretation of long-standing subordination as unjust, with insurgent involvement understood as a means of claiming dignity, agency, and political inclusion (Wood, 2003, pp. 193–194). A similar interpretation appears in McClintock's account of the insurgency. Militants emphasised authoritarian exclusion, class domination, and the closure of legal avenues for reform, and the FMLN's project was framed in terms of democratic participation and social justice, while communities adopted deliberation, leadership, and collective decision-making in everyday practice (McClintock, 1998, p. 56; Wood, 2003, p. 193). These transformations were consequential because they enabled sustained cooperation with the FMLN without the latter resorting to systematic violence against civilians (Wood, 2003, pp. 194–195).

Motivation alone, however, cannot explain how authority is

exercised or how violence is regulated within civilian populations. In this context, Kalyvas's (2006) account of violence at the local level is essential. He shows that patterns of violence in civil war are shaped by the interplay of territorial control and information about civilian loyalties, rather than by ideology or strategy alone. In zones of fragmented or contested control—where neither incumbents nor insurgents exercise stable sovereignty—armed actors face acute informational uncertainty and rely heavily on civilian collaboration to identify supporters, defectors, and rivals (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 173–175). Where insurgents are embedded in tightly knit local networks, this uncertainty can be partially mitigated: information flows, monitoring, and dispute resolution become feasible, allowing authority to be exercised through selective enforcement rather than indiscriminate coercion (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 176–178). Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) place these dynamics within a broader Cold War configuration of "robust insurgency," in which revolutionary networks linked urban activists, clergy, and students to rural bases. The same dynamics provided organisational templates and legitimating frames that sustained coordination across social spaces even amid contested territorial control (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010, pp. 418–420).

These informational dynamics intersect with organisational incentives, as defined by Weinstein's distinction between activist and opportunistic insurgencies and by Reed Wood's work on rebel capability and violence. Weinstein (2007) argues that resource-poor movements recruiting through dense social ties tend to attract high-commitment cadres and invest in governance

and discipline rather than short-term extraction (Weinstein, 2007, p. 97). In the Salvadoran case, limited access to lootable resources and reliance on cooperatives, Christian base communities, and village networks as recruitment channels meant that the FMLN functioned as an activist insurgency: it depended on social endowments and long-term cooperation, discouraging opportunistic joiners and reinforcing a long-war view (Weinstein, 2007, p. 97; Wood, 2003, p. 193). Reed Wood (2010) extends this logic, showing that more institutionalised insurgents capable of providing security and basic services are systematically associated with lower levels of direct violence against civilians (Reed Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604). Recruitment mediated through community institutions thus served as a filter: it tied organisational survival to continued civilian cooperation, linked governance provision to legitimacy, and made systematic predation costly (Weinstein 2007, p. 97; Wood 2010, pp. 603–604).

Taken together, these strands specify a cumulative mechanism by which identity becomes insurgent capacity. At the motivational level, mobilisation through shared identities supplies the moral and social foundations of participation, making long-term cooperation feasible (Wood, 2003, p. 193). At the organisational level, incentives characteristic of activist insurgencies condition how that participation is incorporated into armed structures, thereby shaping discipline, recruitment, and investment in governance (Weinstein, 2007, p. 97; Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604). At the informational level, networks within local communities structure how authority is exercised on the ground, allowing selective regulation of behaviour and reducing reliance on

indiscriminate violence in settings of contested control (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 173–175). In this configuration, insurgent power depends on preserving the social relations through which it is exercised: systematic predation against civilians would undermine recruitment, disrupt information flows, and weaken capacity (Weinstein, 2007, p. 97; E.J. Wood, 2003, p. 193; R. Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604). Valentino et al.'s and Reed Wood's work on strategic mass violence and capacity suggests that this configuration is particularly consequential when insurgents are powerful and dependent on civilian support, as is the case in El Salvador, because insurgent restraint towards that base remains a condition of their own strength (Valentino et al., 2004, pp. 384–385; Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604).

Activist Insurgency in Practice: The FMLN

In FMLN strongholds in Morazán and Chalatenango, the mechanism operated as follows: at the motivational level, Wood's (2003) interviews and village-level accounts show campesino participation framed as a rejection of subordination and an assertion of dignity and civic worth, with insurgent involvement understood as a claim to agency and political inclusion (Wood, 2003, pp. 193–194). At the organisational level, recruitment flowed through cooperatives, Christian base communities, and village networks, favouring participants embedded in long-term relationships and discouraging opportunistic joiners whose loyalty would be contingent on short-term benefits (Weinstein, 2007, p. 97; Wood, 2003, p. 193). These same community structures supported governance and dispute resolution, providing the institutional channels through which commanders

coordinated labour, mediated conflicts, and enforced discipline (Wood, 2003, pp. 194–195).

Rebel capability and community governance formed the third component of this configuration. The FMLN's ability to provide rudimentary courts, health and education services, and to regulate collective agricultural work supplied tangible benefits that anchored civilian cooperation in its zones of influence (Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604). These practices directly linked insurgent capacity to civilian well-being: the institutions through which power was exercised—assemblies, cooperative structures, Christian base communities—were the same ones that would be degraded by systematic predation, making abuse self-undermining in terms of capability (Wood, 2010, pp. 606–607). Governance and capacity were thus mutually reinforcing: providing order and basic services increased community dependence on and loyalty to the movement, while that dependence in turn widened the organisational costs of violence against civilians, a pattern consistent with findings that more institutionalised insurgents providing security and basic services tend to commit less direct violence against civilians (R. Wood 2010, pp. 603–604; Weinstein 2007, p. 97).

Kalyvas's (2006) framework linking information and territorial control clarifies how these community ties shaped patterns of violence. He argues that in zones of fragmented or contested control, armed actors resort to indiscriminate violence when they lack information about loyalties, but rely on selective measures when embedded in local networks that provide reliable information and enforce sanctions (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 173–175).

In FMLN strongholds in Morazán and Chalatenango, commanders drew on cooperative leaders, catechists, and village committees to assess who was collaborating with the army, mediate conflicts, and distinguish coerced compliance from active collaboration (Wood, 2003, p. 193). These dense networks meant the FMLN did not face the same information scarcity that drives indiscriminate violence in Kalyvas's (2006) model; instead, it operated in zones where selective, often limited sanctions—warnings, social ostracism, limited punishment—were viable (Kalyvas, 2006, pp. 176–178; Wood, 2003, pp. 193).

Importantly, insurgent and community identities overlapped. "Combatant" was not a separate identity from "campesino" or "Christian" but was layered onto them: many fighters came directly from cooperatives and Christian base communities and remained embedded in those communities (Wood, 2003, pp. 193–194). To target civilians indiscriminately would therefore have meant targeting the very people whose class grievances and citizenship claims the movement articulated, including members of liberation theology communities who framed their support as a Christian duty (McClintock, 1998, p. 56; Wood, 2003, p. 194). In Kalyvas's (2006) terms, the FMLN used its informational advantage to manage collaboration and defection through practices embedded in community norms—governance, negotiation, and limited sanctions—rather than through widespread selective killing.

Patterns of violence align with this three-part mechanism. Available data indicate that the FMLN was responsible for only a minority of civilian deaths compared with state forces, with the

UN Truth Commission attributing approximately 85% of documented serious human rights violations to state agents and allied paramilitaries (United Nations, 1993, p. 36; Wood, 2003, pp. 233–235). Valentino et al. (2004) argue that regimes confronting powerful insurgencies dependent on civilian support may resort to mass violence against suspected supporter populations. El Salvador fits this broader pattern: state forces and allied paramilitaries targeted rural communities that sustained the FMLN (United Nations, 1993, p. 36; Wood, 2003, pp. 233–235).

This section has suggested that the configuration identified by Wood (2003) helps explain why the FMLN remained relatively restrained towards its own civilian supporters. Operating under the kind of acute threat that Valentino et al. (2004) identify in their theory of strategic mass violence, the Salvadoran state directed large-scale violence against suspected supporter populations (Wood, 2003, p. 193; Valentino et al., 2004, pp. 383–385).

Strategic Threat, Fragmented Control, and Civilian Risk

In El Salvador, although the FMLN emerged amid an acute strategic threat and highly fragmented territorial control, it was widely perceived as capable of taking power, particularly between 1979 and 1982 (McClintock, 1998). This possibility was ultimately foreclosed not by the collapse of insurgent support but by extensive U.S. military assistance to the Salvadoran state, which shifted the balance of coercive capacity while leaving underlying socio-political grievances largely unaddressed (McClintock, 1998,

pp. 8–9). The resulting asymmetry produced a conflict in which the state retained overwhelming firepower, while the insurgency remained embedded in rural communities (McClintock, 1998, p. 291).

The consequences for civilians were severe: providing food, shelter, information, or recruits exposed individuals and villages to massacres, disappearances, and displacement. This pattern of violence aligns with Valentino et al.'s "draining the sea" framework and Reed Wood's capability–violence argument: a regime confronting an insurgency dependent on civilian support has incentives to target the communities from which that support is drawn, whereas an insurgency that relies on those same communities for recruitment, information, and governance has strong incentives not to use systematic violence against them (Valentino et al., 2004, pp. 383–385; Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604).

Crucially, as Wood (2003) emphasises, the persistence of civilian support for the FMLN did not rest on reliable protection from state violence; participation entailed extraordinary risk rather than safety (Wood, 2003, pp. 233–235). In Reed Wood's terms, indiscriminate regime violence can lower the threshold of protection required to sustain civilian cooperation. Under pervasive repression, even limited improvements in local order, dispute resolution, and everyday security may sustain collaboration relative to the alternative of unmediated state violence (Wood, 2010, pp. 603–604). The strategic significance of this context is therefore twofold. First, it clarifies why regimes confronting powerful insurgencies dependent on local communities may resort to mass violence against civilians, as

Valentino et al.'s (2004) macro-level theory suggests. Second, it shows that insurgent restraint, as in the FMLN case, is costly and contingent. Sustaining such restraint requires the incentives characteristic of activist insurgencies and governance organised through local communities, as outlined in the previous section.

Conclusion

The Salvadoran case shows how campesino and Christian identities, rooted in cooperatives, liberation-theology communities, and popular organisations, generated insurgent power without resorting to systematic violence against civilians, transforming rural people into actors who understood themselves as citizens with claims to dignity and agency.

The fact that approximately 85% of documented atrocities were attributed to state forces and allied paramilitaries, with only a minority attributed to the FMLN (United Nations, 1993, p. 36) provides a rough empirical test of the expectations developed here: in a war featuring a powerful, civilian-dependent insurgency, it was the threatened, low-legitimacy state—not insurgents embedded in community networks—that engaged in systematic mass violence against civilians. In debates on identity, communities, and power, the case suggests that identities rooted in participatory communities become sources of both organisational capacity and constraint, simultaneously enabling mobilisation and limiting the strategic resort to violence against civilians.

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Reshaping Indigenous Power Through Religious Competition

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Abstract

This paper examines how religious competition reshapes identity, community dynamics, and power structures by influencing whether religious elites offer symbolic or substantive protection to Indigenous communities. Drawing on the religious economy model, social capital theory, and religious syncretism, it argues that rising competition from Protestant and Pentecostal groups has incentivised the Catholic Church to reconfigure its relationship with Indigenous communities to be more inclusive and empowering. The paper employs a most similar comparative case design of Mexico and Bolivia to show that elite incentives and religious competition reshape identity-based communities. These cases are selected because they contain the largest Indigenous populations in Latin America, with Mexico the largest in absolute terms and Bolivia proportionally, and share a history of Spanish colonial Catholic dominance. In Mexico, competition motivated organisational and political forms of substantive protection through liberation theology and grassroots mobilisation. In Bolivia, competition intersected with the revival of Indigenous political pride, leading to cultural forms of substantive protection through religious syncretism. This research contributes to broader debates on identity, community, and power by illustrating how Indigenous communities are moving from symbolic recognition toward substantive inclusion within religious institutions.

Introduction

The Latin American region contains the largest number of people who identify as Catholic in absolute terms globally, accounting for nearly 40% of the global Catholic population (Pew Research Centre, 2014). This religious dominance dates back to Spanish colonisation in the fifteenth century, during which Spanish colonists imposed Catholicism to establish their superiority over Indigenous pagan beliefs. While some bishops and priests protested the severe oppression of Indigenous people under the encomienda system, which forced Indigenous communities into unpaid labour, Catholicism as a whole contradicted Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices (Gumucio, 2002). This fundamental tension limited the Church's willingness to recognise Indigenous autonomy or land claims. As a result, the Church offered little symbolic or substantive protection, leaving Indigenous communities uniquely vulnerable as a minority group. However, modern-day Latin American states are secularising from Catholicism, as religious diversification coincides with greater public affirmation of Indigenous identity (Gumucio, 2002). This essay uses the religious economy model, which views religious institutions competing for followers in a religious marketplace, to argue that the rise in religious competition has aided the substantive protection of Indigenous communities. In response to rising Protestant and Pentecostal competition, the Catholic Church has increasingly invested in Indigenous outreach, advocacy, and syncretic practice. However, while this competitive pressure has deepened the Church's substantive engagement, its extent differs across Latin America due to differing histories and church-state dynamics. This essay first outlines the key theoretical frameworks, then applies these

theories to Mexico and Bolivia in a comparative case study to examine how religious competition has shaped the Catholic strategy with Indigenous communities in each context. A final section synthesises the two cases to assess the broader applicability of this argument across Latin America. Beyond explaining variation in religious protection, this paper contributes to debates on identity, community, and power by showing how religious competition reconfigures moral authority and political power away from religious elites and toward Indigenous actors.

Key Theories

This argument draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks: the religious economy model, the social capital theory, and religious syncretism. Together, these frameworks explain how religious competition shapes whether religious elites offer symbolic or substantive protection to Indigenous communities.

Stark and Iannaccone (1994) formalised the religious economy model to illustrate how religious institutions behave strategically in a competitive market. In this model, religions are conceptualised as suppliers of spiritual and social goods operating in response to societal demand. When one religion dominates the supply side, as Catholicism historically has in Latin America, it faces little incentive to alter its exclusionary practices toward marginalised groups. However, unaddressed social, cultural, or political grievances can push individuals away from the dominant church and toward alternative religions. The emergence of credible alternatives then increases religious competition, forcing

dominant institutions to adapt their strategies to retain followers. Isaacs (2017) applies the religious economy model to ethnic conflict, arguing that religious fragmentation heightens religious salience as it incentivises elites to compete for followers, while religious unification reduces such incentives. As religious elites adapt their strategies, they redefine who belongs, whose culture is recognised, and which identities are politically legitimate.

Putnam and Campbell (2012) outline the social capital theory, which distinguishes between bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital refers to the strong ties built within a homogeneous religious community, reinforcing a shared social identity with mutual support. By contrast, bridging capital describes relationships between members of different religious or social groups. While bonding capital can provide social cohesion in a religious community, excessive inward identification may create social isolation, out-group prejudice, and the exclusion of minorities. This dynamic can deepen hierarchical religious structures and generate grievances among those with alternative beliefs. On the other hand, bridging capital, described by Arikan et al. (2015) as the "compassion hypothesis", facilitates cooperation and positive relationships between people across religious groups, promoting more inclusive and progressive social and political attitudes. When one religion dominates and fails to develop bridging capital, this runs the risk of excluding minority groups, producing grievances, and possibly leading to conflict.

Finally, the theoretical framework of religious syncretism illustrates how Catholicism has engaged with Indigenous culture and belief systems in Latin America both historically and

contemporarily. Gumucio (2002) shows that early Catholic syncretism was largely symbolic, initially equating "Christianisation" with "civilisation", and later incorporating Indigenous practices only superficially. This reinforced a hierarchical relationship between Catholic and Indigenous worldviews and reflected a broader dynamic of institutional exclusion. Acemoglu et al. (2001) demonstrate how extractive colonial institutions generated path-dependent trajectories that limited post-colonial political and economic development. In Latin America, these legacies normalised the symbolic rather than substantive inclusion of Indigenous identity within national frameworks shaped by Catholic dominance. However, this relationship has shifted as democratic norms strengthen, Indigenous movements expand, and religious competition increases. In response, Catholic elites have increasingly moved beyond symbolic recognition toward more substantive engagement with Indigenous communities. This shift is closely aligned with the rise of liberation theology, which emphasises social justice and explicitly supports Indigenous rights, territorial claims, and cultural recognition (Norget, 1997). By reframing Catholic practice around equality and inclusion, liberation theology has enabled a more nuanced form of religious syncretism, in which individuals increasingly identify as both Catholic and Indigenous, reflecting the emergence of a more integrated contemporary religious landscape in Latin America.

Mexico: Substantive Organisational Protection

According to the 2020 census, 78% of Mexico's population identifies as Catholic, 11% as Protestant, and a growing 8% is

non-religious (Humanists International, 2021). Mexico also contains the largest absolute number of Indigenous people in Latin America, with nearly 8% of its population identifying as Indigenous (Trejo, 2009). While Catholicism remains highly dominant among the population, the Mexican state has historically mitigated its influence. The 1917 Constitution revoked legal recognition from all churches, prohibiting religious institutions from owning property for 75 years (Ross et al., 2022). Only in 1992, with the legalisation of "religious association", could churches legally operate again (p. 179). Despite this prolonged, restrictive legal environment, Catholicism remained deeply embedded in Mexican culture and political identity.

Trejo (2009) characterises the Mexican Catholic Church as a "lazy monopoly", a dominant religious supplier with little incentive to substantively protect marginalised groups (p. 326). Due to the Catholic Church's primary financial base being derived from elite and wealthy Catholics, as opposed to the largely poor and disadvantaged Indigenous population, the institution focused its resources on elite interests and offered only symbolic engagement with Indigenous communities, whose cultural practices and political demands were often dismissed. However, the rapid rise of Protestantism beginning in the 1940s has fundamentally altered this dynamic (Ross et al., 2022). Protestant organisations gained mass support due to their more inclusive religious approach by making the Bible accessible in Indigenous languages, training Indigenous clergy, and providing welfare and community services. Their inclusive outreach increased religious competition and decreased the demand for Catholicism (Ross et al. 2022; Trejo, 2009). As the religious economy model predicts,

this competitive pressure forced the Catholic Church to adapt its strategy. To maintain its power and influence, Catholic elites began providing substantive rather than solely symbolic protection to Indigenous communities by investing in grassroots organising, supporting Indigenous mobilisation, and developing a new religious contract that embraces liberation theology (Norget, 1997; Trejo, 2009). Therefore, religious competition reshaped Indigenous identity by transforming Catholicism from a symbolic national religion into a mode of community-based political mobilisation.

Liberation theology in Mexico focused on bridging social capital, which allowed priests and bishops to recognise Indigenous identities and territorial claims as legitimate components of Catholic social action. However, this shift did not occur without some tension. Norget (1997) documents cases, such as in Oaxaca, where Indigenous groups criticised liberation theology as paternalistic and gender-hierarchical. This reveals limits to the Church's fast-acting strategic approach to dominate religious competition. Nevertheless, competitive pressures enabled deeper forms of religious syncretism that went beyond symbolic inclusion, as Indigenous individuals increasingly served as clergy while maintaining strong communal identities, even as residual hierarchies persisted. A national symbol of this syncretism is the Virgin of Guadaloupe, whose significance integrates Catholic and Indigenous history and demonstrates cultural substantive protection (Ross et al., 2022). Overall, the Mexican case demonstrates that religious competition was central to shifting Catholic elites from symbolic recognition of Indigenous

communities to organisational substantive protection, consistent with the predictions of the religious economy model.

Bolivia: Substantive Cultural Protection

Bolivia is an Andean state of South America with a significant Indigenous population, with 41% identifying as of Indigenous heritage, and nearly 62% speaking an Indigenous language, making it a particularly relevant case for examining how religious competition reshapes Indigenous identity and power (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2014; Postero, 2010). 78% of the population identifies as Catholic and 16% as Protestant, with only 3% reporting no religious affiliation, indicating a slower pace of secularisation than in Mexico (Association of Religion Data Archives, n.d.). In Bolivia, religious competition intersected with a state-led Indigenous political revival, producing a different pathway of identity integration within Catholic communities. Historically, Catholicism held official status within the Bolivian state from independence in 1825 until the 20th-century (Ross et al., 2022). Under the religious economy model, the Church thus operated as a dominant supplier with state support and little competitive pressure. However, as more immigration diversified religious practices, religious tolerance increased, resulting in the 1938 constitutional principle of "freedom of worship" (Ross et al., 2022). Although Catholicism continued to represent 98% of the population during much of the 20th-century, the loss of state support left the Church exposed, making it increasingly vulnerable to emerging religious competition (Ross et al., 2022).

Bolivia differs from Mexico in its political relationship to Indigenous communities. The election of Evo Morales in 2006, the country's first Indigenous president, marked a transformative moment in state-Indigenous relations. Morales aimed to build a plurinational state that formalised the presence of multiple Indigenous nations, expanded their autonomy, and restructured political authority to reflect Bolivia's Indigenous majority. Article 4 in The 2009 Plurinational Constitution formalised religious freedom as a part of this new plurinational state by writing that "the State is independent of religion" (Ross et al., 2022, p. 83). However, while Morales promoted Indigenous rights and symbolic inclusion, critics argue that his dedication to plurinationalism was instrumental in enhancing his political legitimacy while governing through centralised power and undemocratic means (Postero, 2010). This indicates that, on the part of the state, some protections offered to Indigenous communities were largely symbolic, aimed at consolidating political support rather than deepening democratic representation.

Despite these political tensions, Bolivia's religious landscape changed significantly after 2009. With no state-supported religion and a growing national pride in Indigenous heritage, the Catholic Church has faced increasing competition from Protestant and Pentecostal groups, while also confronting the rise of Indigenous identity brought through the plurinational framework (Ross et al., 2022). This transformation heightened Catholic exposure and reduced the relative dominance it previously held. In response, Catholic elites adopted a new strategy consistent with the

religious economy model: they implemented practices that promoted bridging social capital and forms of religious syncretism that aligned Catholic practices with Indigenous identities to preserve their membership base. Ross et al. (2022) show that many Bolivians now hold dual religious identities, where those identifying culturally as Indigenous remain formally Catholic. This dual affiliation demonstrates substantive protection, as it normalises Indigenous values within Catholic practice and empowers Indigenous identity as a legitimate part of Bolivia's religious sphere. The Bolivian case, therefore, demonstrates that Catholic elites, when confronted with rising competition and weakened state support, shifted from offering historically symbolic engagement with Indigenous culture to adopting more substantive forms of protection that recognise Indigenous identity within Catholic life.

Comparative Synthesis

Although the contexts of Mexico and Bolivia differ in their church-state relations, forms of state recognition, and Indigenous political histories, the Catholic Church's shift from symbolic to substantive protection consistently corresponds to the rise of religious competition. In Mexico, the rise of Protestantism and Pentecostalism directly threatened Catholic dominance among lower socioeconomic and Indigenous communities. This competitive pressure incentivised Catholic elites to adopt liberation theology, expand pastoral outreach, and materially support Indigenous mobilisation in poorer communities, demonstrating a transition from symbolic gestures to substantive protection (Norget, 1997). By contrast, Bolivia exhibits a different pathway toward substantive protection. Catholicism

faced competition not only from Protestantism but also from the cultural and political revival of Indigenous identity under the plurinational state. Due to political mobilisation for Indigenous rights being largely state-led rather than Church-led, Catholic adaptation took a cultural form. Rather than investing in organisational and political advocacy, Catholic elites implemented syncretic religious practices and increased recognition of Indigenous values. This represents substantive cultural protection, differing from the institutional advocacy seen in Mexico. These cases demonstrate that religious competition does not produce a uniform response. When competing religious suppliers attract members through social services and mobilisation, Catholicism responds organisationally. When the competitor is a culturally empowered Indigenous identity, the Church responds by integrating and elevating Indigenous culture and values.

Alternative Explanation

Some may argue that the increased protection for Indigenous peoples stems from broader political changes, such as constitutional reforms, Indigenous mobilisation, and evolving national identities, rather than from religious competition (Postero, 2010). From this perspective, Catholic elites adapted because state institutions and social movements demanded it, not because Protestant or Pentecostal growth threatened their dominance in Mexico or Bolivia (Trejo, 2009). Despite this argument, the timing, intensity, and form of Catholic engagement correspond more directly with the rise of religious competition under the religious economy model. Political reforms may

encourage symbolic inclusion, but they do not account for the organisational investments, such as training Indigenous clergy, funding social services, and adopting liberation theology that emerged specifically in highly competitive religious environments. Where Pentecostal and Protestant groups gained members among Indigenous communities, the Catholic Church committed to investing in lower socioeconomic Indigenous communities through legal advocacy, community-based pastoral engagement, and culturally integrated religious practice, demonstrating substantive rather than symbolic protection (Trejo, 2009). In Mexico, substantive Catholic engagement intensified most sharply in regions experiencing the highest Protestant and Pentecostal growth, rather than following constitutional reform alone (Trejo, 2009). Similarly, in Bolivia, Indigenous recognition preceded Catholic adaptation, but substantive cultural integration only occurred after the Church faced heightened religious competition. This pattern therefore supports the religious economy model, where an increase in competitive pressure reshapes incentives and pushes religious elites to shift from symbolic gestures to substantive protection to maintain salience and membership.

Conclusion

Across both comparative cases, Mexico and Bolivia, this paper has shown that rising religious competition reshapes how religious elites engage with Indigenous communities, altering not only organisational strategies but also the distribution of symbolic, substantive, and moral power. In Mexico, Protestant and Pentecostal competition incentivised the Catholic Church to adopt organisational and political forms of substantive protection

through liberation theology and grassroots mobilisation. In Bolivia, competition intersected with the revival of Indigenous political identity, producing cultural forms of substantive protection through religious syncretism. These findings demonstrate how Indigenous communities evolved from being marginalised recipients of recognition to legitimised actors influencing Latin America's religious and political identity, renegotiating power within historically hierarchical institutions. This research contributes to broader debates on identity, community, and power by demonstrating that identity-based protection is not solely a result of state reform or social movements, but can emerge from competitive pressures within religious institutions. By showing how religious competition reshapes Indigenous identity and community dynamics, it challenges traditional understandings of both religious dominance and Indigenous marginalisation. More broadly, it highlights how communities formed around identity are active agents capable of negotiating power within dominant institutional structures.

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The Hangover of a Victory: Ritual, Power, and Contested Legitimacy in Postwar Polish Cinema

Marysia Uklanska

Abstract

Victory in war does not translate to political legitimacy. This essay examines how contested political identities prevent the formation of legitimate national communities in the aftermath of war, using Andrzej Wajda's (1958) *Ashes and Diamonds* as a critical case study. It argues that the film visualised post-1945 Poland as a battleground where power is disputed because rival identities, one rooted in national sacrifice and the other in burgeoning communist modernity, produce irreconcilable 'imagined communities'. Analysing the film as a political text through a lens of performative theory, the essay demonstrates how this stalemate is enacted through competing rituals of power: 1. The state's coercive spectacles of normalcy, 2. The resistance rituals of martyrological memory, and 3. The consequent foreclosure of a public realm in which individual freedom and the synthesis of rival political identities could occur. This analysis reveals that when power is exercised through exclusionary and violent performances, it perpetuates the conflict it initially sought to end, rendering legitimacy impossible. Ultimately, this essay contends that Wajda's framework provides a vital lens for diagnosing contemporary 'memory' struggles where unhealed historical identities continue to fracture communities and destabilise political legitimacy long after 'formal' transitions of power.

Introduction

On May 8th, 1945, the Second World War in Europe ended. But in the provincial town, Ostrowiec, depicted in Andrzej Wajda's (1958) *Ashes and Diamonds,* the conflict merely shifted forms. The film opened with a jarring contradiction: a quiet, serene landscape interrupted by a botched assassination. In a single frame, Wajda captured the central dilemma of the post-war condition, the gap between peace on paper and the ongoing, latent, and violent contest for legitimacy. A few frames later, fireworks erupted in the public square, while in the private corner of a hotel bar, a man in sunglasses waited for an assassination order.

This is not the classic portrayal of the Second World War but a hangover story. Yes, the war has 'officially' ended, but the morning after has a cost. *Ashes and Diamonds* is a portrait of unresolved aftermath, the space in which legitimacy remains unresolved despite formal victory.

Decades after its release, *Ashes and Diamonds* does not read as a period piece but as a primer for today's weaponised memory. From the dismantling of Confederate statues in the United States to the contemporary Polish government's efforts to rewrite Polish complicity in the Holocaust, contemporary politics is fiercely engaged with the same struggle Wajda captured, a battle for more than power, one over who will be sanctified, which sacrifices will be remembered, and who, therefore, belongs to the legitimate political community (Aguilera, 2020; Bethke, 2018). The film depicts two competing claims to power: the anti-Communist Polish Home Army, whose struggle is rooted in the

identity of patriotic sacrifice, and the Communist state, which projects an identity of modernising order. Together, these representations speak directly to contemporary struggles over how political communities form and legitimise authority.

Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* presented postwar Poland as a space where legitimacy is unresolved despite the official victory against the Nazis. This essay examines how Wajda visualises this struggle for legitimacy. First, this essay will qualify film as a critical medium of political text, analysing how competing national identities are performed and how power operates beyond spectacular warfare. It then conducts a close reading of key scenes to show how each party's claim to authority is staged and why both fail. Finally, it argues that the film's enduring insight lies in its warning: when the authorities reproduce the violence they seek to end, legitimacy remains an illusion, and the nation's communities remain repressed, divided, and unfree.

Conceptual Framework

To interpret Wajda's cinematic argument, film must be established as a medium of political scholarship. Literature suggests that cinema is a form of political interpretation, this analysis approaches *Ashes and Diamonds* not merely as a historical narrative but as a deliberate intervention in debates over Poland's post-war identity and legitimate authority (Rosenstone, 1995; Shapiro, 2008). Cinema functions as a political playground, where directors can visualise political concepts, thereby making theoretical claims more accessible to a broader audience (Shapiro, 2008).

At the core of *Ashes and Diamonds,* Wajda illustrated the concept of legitimacy. Here, legitimacy is defined as the capacity to exercise power while being reliable and upholding a social contract, without relying on violence (Day et al., 2020, pp. 21-22). The authors asserted that in moments where state authority collapses or is violently contested, legitimacy itself becomes a battleground, fought through competing narratives of the past and visions of the future. This struggle is fundamentally about identity and community. Anderson (1983, pp. 5-6) argued that nations are 'imagined communities' sustained by shared symbols and memories. In the aftermath of a war, rival groups representing competing 'imagined communities' each offer a different answer to the question: who are we, and who therefore has the right to govern us?

This struggle with identity is made visible through competing performances of power. Political authority cannot be simply assumed; it is continually enacted and reaffirmed through rituals, spectacles, and symbolic acts. (Kertzer, 1988). Drawing on Kertzer's scholarship, political rituals are "dramas of power" that use symbolic action to define social relationships and legitimise authority (p. 1). Through participation in these acts, citizens can identify with larger political forces that are visible only symbolically (pp. 1-2). Similarly, Foucault's (1977) analysis in *Discipline and Punishment* emphasises how power operates in different contexts. Foucault distinguishes between the spectacle of sovereign power, the loud and obvious kind, and disciplinary power, which operates by imposing a "principle of compulsory visibility" (p. 187). In disciplinary regimes, as depicted in the film's landscape of post-war Poland, citizens are constantly

judged and are seen internalising the norms of authority (p. 187). Thus, in a post-conflict setting, public rituals like victory parades function dually: first as Kertzerian dramas of sovereign legitimacy and as Foucauldian examinations that seek to normalise and discipline the populace.

This performative contest is especially fraught when the transition of power is incomplete. Scott (1990, p. xii) theorised that the "public transcript" of peace and authority often coexists with a "hidden transcript" of continued resistance and latent violence. The gap between the official narrative ("The war is over!") and the unofficial persistence of conflict creates a zone of contested legitimacy in which power remains in an unstable limbo. Here, legitimacy is tested not by the cessation of open warfare alone, but by whether performances establishing the new order can synthesise a shared political identity or instead deepen fractures within the nation. Finally, the tension between the collective demands and individual experience illuminates another defining dimension of post-conflict legitimacy. Arendt (1958, p. 198) noted that true political freedoms require a "public realm" where people can act and speak among peers. When this public realm is dominated by coercion, the possibility of such freedom and the everyday liberties that make human life so special are foreclosed (Arendt, 1958). Thus, this legitimacy is also felt at the intimate level, in the freedom to love, work, and imagine a future without fear (Arendt, 1958; Kertzer, 1988).

This theoretical framework allows *Ashes and Diamonds* to be interpreted as an open wound and a visceral exploration of Poland's postwar crisis of legitimacy. The conceptual tools

assembled above illuminate the precise mechanisms by which legitimacy is won or forfeited scene by scene, ritual by ritual, in the world of the film. Each theory traces a different dimension of the same central failure, the impossibility of building a shared political community when the tools of governance remain coercive and deaf to the memories of the governed.

Historical and Narrative Context

Poland was the first country invaded by Nazi Germany in World War II. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944, led by the Polish Home Army, resulted in catastrophic loss and profound national grief. This history forms the backdrop to Andrzej Wajda's war film trilogy—*Pokolnie* (1955), *Kanał* (1957) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958)—which chronicles the wartime and postwar experiences of his generation.

Ashes and Diamonds is set over the course of one day: Victory in Europe Day, May 8th, 1945. In the ensuing vacuum, a new Communist backed regime and the surviving structures of the Home Army both claimed to speak for the nation, leading to an immediate contest for legitimacy. The film follows Maciek, a Home Army assassin, and Szuczuka, a top Communist official, over a single fateful night. Maciek is ordered to kill Szczuka but fails in his first attempt. The narrative traces their parallel paths through a town superficially celebrating peace, culminating in Maciek's successful assassination, his fleeting dream of escape with a barmaid named Krystyna, and his own death in a trash-strewn field as a state parade marches nearby.

The stakes are existential, circling what the film presents as two

half-truths. Maciek's camp believes that sacrifice establishes the right to decide Poland's future. Having bled for the flag, they feel a bloody debt grants authority. Szczuka's side believes that stability establishes that same right. His claim is rooted in state-building capacity and the promise of a secure modern future. These are not merely rival political platforms but competing foundations for the nation itself, one legitimising power through control of the future (Heywood, 2019; Day et al., 2020). The victor will not only seize administrative control but will also authorise the definitive narrative of Poland's emergence from war.

Scene Analysis

Scene 1 – Public Peace, Private War

The opening plays like an ironic joke. Birds sing. Flowers sway. The world is trying to return to normal, but it is not. In a sudden movement, Maciek and his partner are shooting at a man and miss, accidentally killing two bystanders. The scene cuts to a victory banquet taking place at Hotel Monopol, where a cabaret and some joyful toasts almost make us forget about the violence. The habits of violence, as Day et al. (2020, p. 3) described them, are the residual behaviours and loyalties that war leaves behind in private life after formal hostilities have ceased. These habits are the mundane continuation of wartime logic into peacetime reality, the soldier who still takes orders, the assassin who still has targets, and even the man who cannot imagine a life not structured by violence. The gap between the public declaration of peace and the private conduct of war is where legitimacy is contested. Legitimacy, as this essay has established, is dependent

on whether the governed recognise the authority of those who govern them. The new communist-backed order declares itself a legitimate power, but Maciek's continued violence is a material refusal of that claim. He refuses the new order's right to declare the end of the war, because for him and the Home Army, the political question of who speaks for Poland remains unanswered.

Legitimacy is therefore contested in this gap between the celebratory banquet and the assassination orders enacted by Maciek and his partner. This is precisely what Scott's (1990) theory of public and hidden transcripts illuminates. The viewer experiences the state's performance of victory (the banquet and fireworks), which is instantly breached by the continued Polish resistance (the botched assassination). What makes this scene politically powerful is that Wajda shows both transcripts operating simultaneously. The new order does not know, or refuses to acknowledge, that its public transcript is being contradicted in real time. The space between the story the state tells and the violence it cannot see reveals how ongoing violence undermines the public declaration of peace. The assassination attempt exposes the state's claim to have restored order as performance rather than reality because the state's authority is not yet recognised. No statement, however official, can conjure the consent legitimacy requires when men are still shooting in the dark while others toast in the light.

Scene 2: The Banquet – The State's Ritual of Normalcy

The banquet at the hotel is a carefully staged spectacle of forced gaiety. Ordered seating and political toasts perform a 'new normal' into existence. Consent is manufactured through

compulsory participation, as attending the celebration is an endorsement of the new order. This sequence functions as Kertzer's (1988, pp. 1, 78) "drama of power", a ritual that functions in order to make the state's desired reality of control and normalcy visible and shared. That desired reality is visualised through the *mise-en-scène* itself, with long tables that resemble hierarchy and order and the scripted toasts that invoke collective purpose. The state stages legitimacy, trusting that the performance will translate into reality. Through Foucault's (1977) lens, the banquet dually acts as a disciplinary mechanism. The compulsory attendance and visible conformity enact what Foucault calls the "principle of compulsory visibility" where citizens are expected to comply and internalise the new order's norms (p. 187).

Yet, the veneer of peace and conformity is thin and revealed when Maciek wears his drunken cynicism openly and the revelry feels brittle. These are traces of hidden violence pressing through the surface of spectacle which is what makes the revelry feel so hollow. This hollowness points to a deeper failure that Anderson's (1983) framework makes legible; the banquet and celebrations presuppose a unified imagined community that does not yet exist. For a ritual of collective celebration to be successful, those participating must share a collective story about their identity. But the men in the room do not. The Communist officials and the Home Army remnants seated at the same tables belong to irreconcilable imagined communities. The ritual cannot manufacture the shared identity it performs because Anderson's community must be built slowly through shared

symbols, memories, and narratives (pp. 5-6) – none of which the new order has yet earned.

The absence of the shared imagined community reveals the banquet's ritual as coercive memory manipulation rather than genuine celebration. The attempt to overwrite the trauma of the war with a performance of normalcy ultimately fails in that it rings false to the viewer and is not able to politically produce genuine consent and therefore no legitimate community. The spectacle deepens the fracture between the rival nationalist and communist camps because those who cannot authentically participate, men like Maciek for whom this is not their victory, are excluded by the very ritual meant to unify (Kertzer, 1988). The manufactured legitimacy cannot deliver on even the most ordinary freedoms, exposing the hollow facade of its claim.

Scene 3: The flaming shots — Resistance's Ritual of Memory

In stark contrast with the state's public spectacle, the resistance stages its own ritual in the bar. Maciek and his friend are, in true Polish fashion, indulging in vodka shots. Maciek lines these shots up and ignites them, dedicating them to fallen comrades. Memorial candles are a ritualistic symbol of Polish loss and grief; these flaming shots are akin to those often lit for the dead (Dudek, 2018). Wajda films this with solemn, liturgical gravity. The close-ups on the flames and the men's faces transform a private act of grief into a public, political claim. Filming this act of mourning with the visual grammar of a religious ceremony, Wajda encodes it as a sacred witness rather than personal sorrow. What is experienced together becomes a shared truth, and shared truths are the basis of political communities (Kertzer, 1988).

This performance binds the men through co-authorship, by jointly naming and honouring the dead, they produce a shared version of history where their sacrifice was meaningful forging a collective identity out of collective loss (Kertzer, 1988). Simultaneously, it acts as a Foucauldian (1977) counter-performance where a rival system of knowledge about who suffered and therefore has the right to speak for Poland directly contests the communist narrative that erased these sacrifices. This ritual constructs an imagined community defined by martyrdom, those who bled under the nationalist banner are Poland's true people and those who did not are excluded. Through Anderson's (1983) theory of shared symbols and memory, this ritual reproduces the boundaries of belonging, determining who is represented within the national narrative. Yet, their method, while emotional and visceral, is also divisive as it keeps the conflict alive by reinforcing a partisan identity which prevents the synthesis needed for a unified nation.

Scene 4: The Chapel – The Individual's Quest for Freedom

The film's most intimate scene occurs in a dim chapel between Maciek and Krystyna. He confesses his exhaustion and fantasises about escaping with her to a normal life. He offers routes of escape as a way to test a world defined by small freedoms rather than grand ideologies. This scene directly engages Arendt's (1958) notion of political freedom. Maciek desires a space in which he can act and love without the threat of violence. The failure of their romance is political, as Maciek's duty and the ambient violence dictate his choice, demonstrating how the unresolved conflict destroys his possibility of private liberty (p.

58). Legitimacy's true measure, the film argues, is 'everyday freedoms,' and here those freedoms are shown to be impossible. The unresolved conflict leaves Maciek with no choice at all as his commanding officer's orders and his loyalty to the deceased foreclose the possibility of freedom. When coercive power fills all available space, Arendt's public realm, the condition of true freedom, simply does not exist (p. 198).

Scene 5: The Finale – Death and the Indifferent Parade

The film refuses to declare a clear winner at the end. Maciek, after having killed Szczuka, is himself shot and dies in a trash-strewn field. In the background, the state's victory parade marches on, its music faint and indifferent. This final dichotomy is the ultimate visualisation of failed unification. The state 'wins' merely by outlasting its rival, not by conceding it or integrating the narratives of the ordinary citizens. Power is maintained through the brutal, silent erasure of alternative forms of resistance. The parade, the ultimate public transcript of order, continues oblivious to the corpse that represents the extinguished hidden transcript. This is coercive legitimacy, and it guarantees that the 'hangover' of unresolved conflict will be permanent (Heywood, 2019, p. 170). The state's indifference to Maciek's death ensures his martyrdom will become the next generation's grievance. By choosing spectacle over reconciliation, the hidden transcript will outlive its authors. The state holds power, but its legitimacy is hollow, having erased competing memories, and made freedom irrelevant.

Ashes Without Diamonds: Beyond 1945 and the Film

The film's diagnosis extends far beyond 1945 Poland. It offers a critical lens for understanding any post-conflict society or contemporary "culture war" in which power is contested but legitimacy remains unresolved. Antebellum America is one case where the Union's military victory did not translate into legitimate, integrated nationhood, allowing segregation and racial violence to endure for a century longer because the imagined community was never incorporated into a shared national narrative. Post-apartheid South Africa offers an instructive contrast. There, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created an institutional mechanism for acknowledging competing memories and incorporating rival narratives into a shared national story (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998). The result was imperfect, but meaningfully different from Wajda's parade marching past the unacknowledged corpse. The film teaches us to scrutinise the methods of claiming power after a rupture. When those methods replicate the logic of the preceding conflict, the resulting order will be unstable and its legitimacy perpetually in doubt. However, Wajda's framework has its limits as a diagnostic tool as the film is an anatomy of a failure without a path to success. It is not able to forecast how inclusive memory is institutionally achieved or how deeply divided communities can reconcile. The film poses these questions rather than answering them.

Conclusion: An Unformed Diamond

The title *Ashes and Diamonds* is drawn from a 19th-century poem by Cyprian Norwid (1866), which asks: "Will only ashes be left,/

Hurled into the abyss from the tempest?/ Or do the ashes hold the glory/ Of a celestial diamond/ The Dawn of everlasting triumph". The metaphor poses the central question of the film, and of post-war Poland: From the ashes of conflict, will there emerge only debris, or a hard-won diamond of legitimacy?

The film demonstrates that legitimacy remained a phantom in post-war Poland because competing camps employed methods that perpetuated violence and prevented a political community from forming. True legitimacy requires the aforementioned absent ingredients: an end to violence, an inclusive memory that honours sacrifice, and the liberty to exercise everyday freedoms. This is derived from the convergence of the theoretical frameworks. Arendt's public realm demands freedom from coercion, Anderson's imagined communities require inclusive memory, and Heywood's definition of legitimacy requires a social contract that the governed actively recognise (Arendt, 1958; Anderson, 1983, Heywood, 2019). What Wajda's film contributes is the visualisation of what happens when all three are absent.

In contemporary Poland, the metaphor of ashes and diamonds remains tragically apt. Even after the fall of Communism in 1989, the memory of the war and its aftermath continues to be manipulated and weaponised. Political parties of the left and the right still contest the narrative of Polish identity and victimhood, often deepening social divisions rather than healing them (Bethke, 2018). The open wound of the past, as Wajda depicted, has never fully closed.

Diamonds, like legitimate nations, take time and immense pressure to form. *Ashes and Diamonds* suggests that legitimacy cannot be established in the space of a single victory night. It requires the patience to engage with living memory and the mercy to incorporate competing stories. If a new regime ignores its people's memory, it does not secure peace and instead fuels the next conflict, prolonging the political hangover. Wajda's film endures as a masterpiece because it reframes Poland's historical dilemmas as a timeless question of identity, community, and power. A question that every society, in its own dawn after conflict, must eventually come to answer.

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