

Immigration Discourse as a Distraction from Institutional Failures

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the intense focus on immigration in Western societies serves as a distraction from more fundamental institutional failures across various sectors. Through a multi-faceted qualitative approach combining critical discourse analysis, comparative institutional analysis, and philosophical inquiry, we investigate the rhetoric surrounding immigration and its purported impacts. Our findings reveal that immigration discourse often functions as a smokescreen, obscuring systemic issues such as economic stagnation, housing crises, healthcare inefficiencies, and educational shortcomings. By applying theoretical frameworks from thinkers like Girard, Habermas, and Žižek, we demonstrate that the scapegoating of immigrants is a complex societal mechanism allowing for the displacement of anxieties stemming from institutional dysfunction. The research highlights the contrast between stagnation in traditional sectors and the dynamism of the technology industry, underscoring the need for comprehensive institutional reform. We argue for reframing public discourse away from divisive immigration debates and towards addressing root causes of social and economic challenges. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary societal issues and calls for a shift in focus towards meaningful institutional reform to create more efficient, institutions capable of addressing 21st-century challenges.

KEYWORDS

Immigration, institutional dysfunction, scapegoat mechanism, mimetic theory, economic stagnation, social stagnation, institutional innovation, social philosophy

Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, the intense focus on immigration has emerged as a contentious issue dominating political discourse. This paper argues that this preoccupation serves as a significant distraction from a more critical problem: the systemic failure and inefficiency of key institutions across the social spectrum. By examining the rhetoric surrounding immigration and its purported impacts, we aim to uncover how this discourse diverts attention from deeper institutional issues and hinders meaningful reform. Our analysis draws upon the work of key thinkers such as René Girard, Jürgen Habermas, Byung-Chul Han, Slavoj Žižek, and Hannah Arendt. These theoretical frameworks help explain how immigration has become a proxy for broader societal anxieties, obscuring more fundamental institutional shortcomings. Empirical studies support this perspective. Research from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) and the OECD (2021) indicates that immigration has minimal negative economic impact and often contributes positively to host countries. Studies like those from the McKinsey Global Institute (2020) reveal significant productivity stagnation across various sectors, pointing to broader institutional failures beyond the immigration debate. The central problem this research addresses is the misdirection of public attention and policy efforts towards immigration issues, while more fundamental and pervasive institutional failures

remain unaddressed. This misdirection results in neglected systemic issues across key sectors, perpetuation of inefficient structures, exacerbation of social divisions, and hindrance of meaningful reform. This study aims to reframe the immigration discourse within the context of broader institutional failures in western societies. By analyzing immigration rhetoric, examining its distracting effects, investigating areas of institutional failure, and exploring contrasting examples of institutional success (such as the technology sector), we seek to redirect attention to the root causes of social and economic challenges. Our research strives to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of societal issues and encourage a shift in public discourse towards meaningful institutional reform.

Methods of Research

This study utilizes a multi-faceted qualitative research approach, combining critical discourse analysis, comparative institutional analysis, and philosophical inquiry to examine the complex relationships between immigration discourse and institutional failures in Western societies. Critical discourse analysis is utilized to examine the rhetoric surrounding immigration in political speeches, media coverage, and public debates, identifying recurring themes, analyzing narratives, and uncovering implicit. Comparative institutional analysis is employed to assess the extent of



institutional failures across various sectors, including economic institutions, healthcare systems, housing and urban development, and education systems. This comparative approach allows for the identification of common patterns of institutional stagnation and areas of potential reform. The research integrates philosophical analysis to provide a deeper understanding of the societal dynamics at play, applying Girard's mimetic theory, Habermas's concept of the public sphere, Žižek's notion of ideological displacement. While acknowledging limitations such as the qualitative nature of the analysis potentially limiting quantitative generalizability, this multi-faceted approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the complex relationship between immigration discourse and institutional failures. By combining these methodological approaches, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that can serve as a foundation for reframing public debate and policy priorities surrounding immigration and institutional reform.

Results and Discussion

The immigration debate offers a tempting arena for politicians, policymakers, members of academia and general public on virtual market squares, as it allows for the proposition of seemingly straightforward solutions to complex societal problems. On the right side of the political spectrum, there is a tendency to unite behind a narrative that places blame on immigrants for a wide array of social and economic issues, ranging from problems like insufficient wage growth, lackluster jobs market, unaffordable housing prices, overburdened healthcare and education systems and rising crime rates. This part of the discourse is epitomized by slogans such as "build the wall," implying that restrictions in immigration will immediately address these challenges and bring back the times of great utopian prosperity. In a manner which distinctively follows Rene Girard's mimetic rivalry models (*Girard, 1965*), voices on the left side of the political spectrum, are quick to declare themselves as protectors and guardians of human rights, making it their mission to mirror their political rivals in a vehement and unbudging opposition, while conveniently or foolishly overlooking the root causes of societal dysfunction. The flames of this rivalry are consuming the whole society engaged in the debates, creating a political theater that, while emotionally engaging, fails to confront the underlying institutional failures that truly drive social and economic challenges. Particularly, the heated debates surrounding immigration's impact on wages and job availability become a smokescreen, concealing a far more insidious problem, which is the long-term economic stagnation that has plagued Western economies for nearly half a century. While the political right often portrays immigrants as job-stealers and wage-depressors, and the left counters with arguments about immigration's net positive economic impact, both sides miss the forest for the trees: the real issue at hand is the systemic failure of key institutions to drive meaningful economic growth and productivity improvements over the past five decades, in almost all sectors of economy. Let's look at the popular narrative that immigration is the primary factor influencing wage growth and

job market dynamics - a simplistic view that fails to account for the complex realities of modern economies. A study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that immigration has only a minor effect on the wages of native-born workers, with the most significant impact being on prior immigrants working in similar jobs (*National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017*). A comprehensive analysis by the OECD found that in most countries, immigrants contribute more in taxes and social contributions than they receive in individual benefits (*OECD, 2013*). Yet, the image of the "welfare-dependent immigrant" remains a powerful idea, fueling resentment and calling for punitive policies. This disconnect between perception and reality points to what cognitive psychologists call "confirmation bias" – our tendency to seek out information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence. In a society where immigrants have already been cast as scapegoats, individuals are more likely to remember and share stories that confirm this narrative, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of misinformation and prejudice (*Nickerson, 1998: 175-220*). Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" provides a useful framework for understanding how these biases are amplified and entrenched. In an ideal world, the public sphere would be a space for rational debate and the formation of public opinion based on facts and reasoned argument. However, in reality, our public sphere is increasingly fragmented and polarized, with social media algorithms and partisan news sources creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases (*Habermas, 1989*). Philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues in his work on the "transparency society," the overabundance of information in the digital age paradoxically leads to less understanding, not more (*Han, 2015*). In this context, complex issues like immigration are reduced to simplistic narratives and emotional appeals, making it easier to blame immigrants for systemic problems rather than engaging with the nuanced realities of institutional failure. The economical findings mentioned previously suggest, that the immigration debate is disproportionately focused on a factor that has, at best, a marginal influence on overall economic outcomes. The work of Rene Girard, particularly his mimetic theory and concept of the scapegoat mechanism provides a crucial framework for understanding the complex dynamics of the immigration discourse. Girard's fundamental argument that human desire is imitative, leading to rivalry and conflict, offers deep insights into the nature of immigration discourse and policy-making (*Girard, 1977*). At the heart of Girard's theory is the idea that societies unconsciously select scapegoats to quell internal strife, projecting communal tensions and failings onto a specific group or individual. In the context of modern western societies, immigrants frequently find themselves cast in this unenviable role. This scapegoating plays a dual role it provides a simple explanation for complex problems and, more insidiously, diverts attention from the true sources of societal dysfunction – namely, the failure of key institutions to adapt and effectively serve their intended purposes. The application of mimetic theory to

the immigration debate reveals several interconnected dynamics. In the realm of policy-making, we observe what could be termed "mimetic desire in action." Political figures, driven by the pursuit of public approval, often imitate each other's stances on immigration. This creates a feedback loop where increasingly extreme positions are adopted, not necessarily based on evidence or effective policy, but on the perceived success of rivals in capturing public attention. This mimetic rivalry in the political sphere echoes Girard's observations on the escalating nature of mimetic conflict (*Girard, 1986*). Immigrants themselves face what can be described as a "double bind of integration," a concept in line with Gregory Bateson's theory of double bind (*Bateson et al., 1956: 251-264*). They are simultaneously expected to integrate into society while being perpetually marked as "other." This paradoxical demand creates a situation where any action taken by immigrants can be interpreted negatively, reinforcing their scapegoat status and creating a no-win scenario that perpetuates their challenges. In ancient societies, Girard explains, the order was maintained through sacrificial rituals (*Girard, 1977*). In our modern context, the vilification of immigrants serves a similar function, providing an outlet for societal frustrations. However, unlike ancient rituals, this modern "sacrifice" never reaches a cathartic conclusion, leading to a perpetual state of crisis. As immigrant communities establish themselves, they may begin to rival the host community in certain aspects, such as economic success or cultural influence. This rivalry, born out of imitation, can intensify hostilities and reinforce scapegoating mechanisms. The scapegoating of immigrants serves several psychological and social functions. Psychologically, it provides a sense of control and understanding in the face of complex, systemic issues. By attributing problems to a visible, external group, societies avoid confronting the more challenging task of internal reform. Socially, scapegoating can create a form of cohesion among the majority group, achieving what might be called "negative unity" by defining the in-group in opposition to the scapegoated out-group. This reasoning is also aligned with the social identity theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner (*Tajfel and Turner, 1979*). The cyclical nature of scapegoating becomes evident as one wave of immigrants integrates and new arrivals take their place as scapegoats. This cycle reveals the arbitrary nature of scapegoat selection and the persistent need for the "other" in societies struggling with internal contradictions. In the modern media landscape, especially social media, these scapegoating mechanisms can be rapidly amplified, creating echo chambers that reinforce these beliefs. Girard's work not only explains the mechanism of scapegoating but also suggests ways to transcend it. By becoming consciously aware of the mimetic nature of desire and the scapegoat mechanism, societies can begin to critically examine their attitudes towards immigrants and look beyond the veil of discourse fueled by mimetic rivalry, to the root causes of fundamental economic and societal problems. Girard pointed to the Christian concept of universal love as

a potential antidote to mimetic rivalry. In a secular context, this translates to emphasizing the shared humanity of all individuals, regardless of origin. We can further elaborate that Girard's theories suggest that true societal progress comes not from finding better scapegoats, but from institutions capable of self-reflection and reform. (*Girard, 1986*). By applying Girard's insights more deeply, we can begin to unravel the complex dynamics at work in the immigration debate. This understanding paves the way for a more constructive dialogue that addresses the root causes of societal tensions rather than perpetuating cycles of blame and division. It challenges us to confront the uncomfortable truths about our institutions and societal structures, and to work towards genuine solutions that benefit all members of society, regardless of their origin. The analysis we've made above constitutes a reason to explore the hypothesis that the true source of economic and social malaise in western societies lies not in immigration, but in the profound failure of both public and private institutions to adapt, innovate, and drive productivity growth. This institutional stagnation manifests across multiple sectors, creating a complex web of inefficiencies that hinder economic and societal progress. National government inefficiencies stand at the forefront, with OECD data revealing a steady increase in government spending as a percentage of GDP in most developed countries over the recent decades (*OECD, 2021*). However, this increased expenditure hasn't yielded proportional improvements in public services or economic growth, instead fostering bureaucratic bloat and resource misallocation. The private sector, particularly outside the technology industry, has not fared much better. McKinsey Global Institute's research paints a stark picture of corporate stagnation, with U.S. productivity growth plummeting to a mere 1.4% annually between 2005 and 2019, less than half the rate observed in the preceding decade (*McKinsey Global Institute, 2020*). This decline is especially profound in traditional industries that have been slow to embrace technological innovation. The education sector, despite increased funding, has failed to adapt to the needs of a modern, knowledge-based economy, as evidenced by stagnant or declining performance in international assessments like PISA (*OECD, 2018*), all while creating record breaking student debt levels, accumulated both in US and UK. Further complicating these issues is a regulatory environment characterized by complexity and outdated frameworks, which stifle innovation and entrepreneurship, particularly among small businesses and startups – often the very entities driving growth, innovation and job creation (World Bank, 2020). In light of these facts, we can argue that by fixating on immigrants, societies engage in what Slavoj Žižek might term an "ideological displacement," where the complex systemic causes of social ills are replaced by a concrete, identifiable "other." Žižek's framework of ideological critique provides a valuable tool for understanding this phenomenon, even if Žižek himself doesn't apply it in quite the same way to the immigration discourse. In Žižek's view, ideology shifts focus away from what he considers the core

problems of society (such as inequality or exploitation) and displaces them onto more superficial or less threatening issues. This displacement allows people to feel like they are addressing problems while avoiding the root causes. However, it's important to note that Žižek's own analysis, while insightful, may not fully penetrate the veil of immigration discourse as a distraction from systemic institutional failures. Žižek tends to focus on issues like inequality and exploitation as the fundamental problems of society. While these are indeed significant issues, our analysis suggests that they too may be symptomatic of a deeper, more pervasive problem: the failure of social institutions to drive growth and innovation. In this light, even the issues that Žižek identifies as core problems could be seen as superficial manifestations of this more fundamental institutional stagnation. (Žižek, 2010; Žižek 2014). Hannah Arendt's work is also helpful in understanding these complex phenomena. Her writing on the nature of evil and the "banality" of systemic failures offers a sobering view on the problem, suggesting that the scapegoating of immigrants is not necessarily the result of malicious intent but often emerges from a collective failure to critically examine our institutions. It is, in many ways, a path of least resistance—a means of maintaining the status quo without confronting the more challenging task of institutional reform (Arendt, 1963). These dynamics are further complicated by what Jürgen Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld", the phenomenon where bureaucratic rationalities and overreach increasingly dominate social institutions and our capacity for meaningful democratic discourse on complex issues like immigration is diminished (Habermas, 1987). Instead, societies retreat into simplistic narratives and tribal affiliations, further entrenching the scapegoating mechanism. There is a significant both direct cost and opportunity costs to this collective delusion. Beyond the obvious ethical concerns of unjustly vilifying vulnerable populations, societies that engage in immigrant scapegoating and simultaneously exacerbating mimetic rivalries, rob themselves of the opportunity for genuine introspection and reform. By fixating on the perceived threats posed by the "other," we neglect the very real threats posed by our own failing institutions, and at the same time creating a self-reinforcing cycle of mimetic rivalry: as segments of society increasingly define themselves in opposition to immigrants, and others in defense of them, the actual issues at hand become secondary to the conflict itself. This mimetic rivalry, amplified by social media and partisan news sources, further polarizes society and makes rational discourse on immigration and institutional reform increasingly difficult (Girard, 1965). Amidst the landscape of low institutional inertia, the technology sector emerges as a striking anomaly. Giants like Apple, Google, and Amazon have achieved remarkable productivity gains and economic growth, standing in stark contrast to the stagnation plaguing other industries. This disparity raises a critical question: why have other sectors failed to replicate the tech industry's dynamism? The answer lies, at least partially, in the institutional structures governing these industries. Tech companies, operating in relatively new and less regulated

spaces, have enjoyed greater freedom to innovate. On the opposite side, more established industries find themselves constrained by outdated regulations, entrenched interests, and a dearth of incentives for disruptive innovation, as well being burdened by the rigidity of their own internal organizational structures. This contrast between the tech sector's success and the broader economy's stagnation serves to highlight the needs for comprehensive institutional reforms and underscores the fact that the path to economic revitalization lies not in divisive debates about immigration, but in addressing the fundamental institutional failures that have allowed inefficiency and complacency to take root across swathes of corporate and governmental institutions, whose functioning is essential for societal well-being. Although after being overlooked the long periods of time, this discourse slowly starts to surface, for example in the 2024 Mario Draghi report on the future of European competitiveness (Draghi, 2024), it's still overshadowed by the more heated political debates, like those about immigration. The housing crisis and the aging infrastructure strain, also frequently attributed to immigration, serve as yet another smokescreen obscuring more fundamental shortcomings of the western social institutions. The prevailing narrative that immigrants are the primary cause of rising housing prices and overburdened infrastructure systems is a myopic view that fails to address the core issue: why does our society lack the capacity to provide abundant, affordable housing and robust infrastructure to accommodate population growth, regardless of its source? This question reveals a profound failure of institutions to innovate and adapt to increased urbanization and changing demographic needs, a failure that affects both immigrant and native-born populations alike. Instead of engaging in divisive debates about immigration's impact on housing, a more productive discourse would focus on creating an abundance in housing through technological innovation, regulatory reform, and a concerted effort to build cities and infrastructure of the future, and building a highly advanced society where the ultimate goal is not just adequate housing, but an unprecedented abundance of living space for urban populations. This vision could be realized through a symphony of efforts spearheaded by innovative private enterprises and backed by bold deregulation at local and national levels. The aim would be to dramatically lower housing and infrastructure costs, potentially bringing them down to be in line with global benchmarks for prices on raw materials, energy, and competitive labor costs. This approach stands in stark contrast to the current reality in many urban centers, exemplified by the exorbitantly expensive yet often inadequate social housing, such as the rat-infested public housing complexes in New York City (Fochios, 2024: 489-516). This shift in focus from immigration to innovation and institutional reform is not merely academic; it has profound practical implications. Even the research by the McKinsey Global Institute, which could be hardly called a benchmark in technological progress estimates, suggests that adopting new construction technologies and modernizing building codes could reduce the cost of housing by up to 30 percent (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017).

By reframing the discourse away from immigration and towards these transformative possibilities, we open up new avenues for addressing the housing crisis and infrastructure challenges. This approach would benefit not only immigrants but also young native-born citizens struggling with prohibitive housing costs. The real challenge, therefore, lies not in managing immigration, but in cultivating the institutional courage and vision necessary to embrace radical innovation and reform in our approach to housing, infrastructure, and urban development. Another popular narrative, about immigrants overburdening the healthcare system also serves as a convenient distraction from the profound systemic inefficiencies plaguing healthcare delivery in major Western countries. This misdirection of focus obscures the core issue: the opaque and increasingly costly nature of healthcare systems, regardless of their funding model. Whether primarily publicly funded, as in Europe, or a public-private mix, as in the United States, healthcare costs are continuously spiraling out of control (*Papanicolas et al., 2018: 1024-1039*). The marginal increase in the number of people served due to immigration is negligible compared to the magnitude of this cost crisis. A more constructive debate would examine why healthcare has become prohibitively expensive and increasingly inaccessible, even in countries with universal coverage. This discussion necessitates a critical examination of the closed feedback loop within the healthcare sector, where reform efforts are often stymied by the very experts who are part of the system that they are tasked with improving (*Herzlinger, 2006: 58-66*). The healthcare system has become a hostage to this negative feedback loop, evolving into an ever-growing, gargantuan machine where individual role is reduced to mere cogs in the healthcare system machine, and meaningful change seems impossible to conceive or implement. This impasse stems from a multifaceted problem: a lack of acknowledgment of the systemic issues, an absence of grandiose, courageous vision, insufficient amount of the honest debates, and a pervasive lack of political will, compounded by internal resistance to change. The complexity of this problem raises questions about the balance between human factors and technological limitations in healthcare reform. By shifting our attention to immigration as a scapegoat, we lose sight of the urgent need for radical rethinking and restructuring of healthcare systems to ensure affordability, efficiency, and accessibility for people regardless of their residence and origin (*Berwick et al., 2008: 759-769*). As mentioned in the introduction, crime and public safety are undoubtedly crucial issues in modern societies, often intertwined with the immigration discourse. The relationship between immigration and crime rates is a topic of ongoing debate, but in light of our analysis important to recognize that crime persists as a significant challenge in many communities, regardless of immigration patterns. An in-depth analysis of crime and its causes is beyond the scope of this article, so we can only hypothesize that problematic issues of institutional character mentioned above

in this paper are also present in the security and justice systems.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the intense focus on immigration in Western societies serves as a significant distraction from more fundamental institutional failures across various sectors. By examining the rhetoric surrounding immigration and its purported impacts, we have uncovered how this discourse diverts attention from deeper systemic issues and hinders meaningful reform. The application of critical discourse analysis, comparative institutional analysis, and philosophical inquiry has revealed that the immigration debate often functions as a smokescreen, obscuring the true sources of economic stagnation, housing crises, healthcare inefficiencies, and educational shortcomings. Our findings suggest that the scapegoating of immigrants is not merely a matter of prejudice or misinformation, but a complex societal mechanism that allows for the displacement of anxieties stemming from institutional dysfunction. The contrast between the stagnation in traditional sectors and the dynamism of the technology industry further underscores the need for comprehensive institutional reform. By reframing the immigration discourse within the context of these broader institutional failures, we can redirect public attention and policy efforts towards addressing the root causes of social and economic challenges. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary societal issues and calls for a shift in focus from divisive immigration debates to meaningful institutional reform. Future research should explore specific strategies for institutional innovation and adaptation, examine successful models of reform from various sectors and countries, and investigate ways to foster public discourse that engages with the complexities of institutional failure rather than resorting to simplistic scapegoating narratives. By moving beyond the distractions of futile debates, societies can work towards creating more efficient institutions capable of addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

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Імміграційний дискурс як відволікання від інституційних дисфункцій

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У статті досліджується, як інтенсивна увага до імміграції в західних суспільствах відволікає спільноти від більш фундаментальних інституційних дисфункцій у різних секторах. За допомогою багатогранного якісного аналізу, що поєднує критичний дискурс-аналіз, порівняльний інституційний аналіз та філософське дослідження, ми вивчаємо риторику навколо імміграції та її вплив. Наші висновки показують, що дискурс про імміграцію часто функціонує як димова завіса, приховуючи системні проблеми, такі як економічна стагнація, криза доступності житла, неефективність систем охорони здоров'я та освіти. Застосовуючи теоретичні парадигми таких філософів як Жирар, Габермас і Жижек, автор демонструє, що перекладання провин на іммігрантів є складним соціальним механізмом, що дозволяє заміщувати стрес та тривоги, що виникли внаслідок дисфункції соціальних інституцій. Дослідження підкреслює контраст між стагнацією в традиційних секторах та динамізмом технологічної індустрії і акцентує увагу на необхідності всебічних інституційних реформ. Автор виступає за зміну у публічному дискурсі та перехід від конфліктних дебатів про імміграцію до вирішення корінних причин соціальних та економічних негараздів. Це дослідження сприяє більш детальному розумінню сучасних суспільних проблем і закликає до зміщення фокусу в бік змістовної інституційної реформи для створення ефективніших інституцій, здатних відповідати на виклики двадцятого першого століття.

Ключові слова: Імміграція, інституційна дисфункція, механізм «цапа відбувайла», міметична теорія, економічна стагнація, соціальна стагнація, інституційні інновації, соціальна філософія.

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