

THE COSTLY AND DEMANDING— EXPLORING SOLUTION-BASED OTHERING OF ‘NON-EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS’ IN NORWEGIAN POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract: *This article examines the Norwegian scholarly report titled NOU 2017:2—Integration and Trust: Long-Term Consequences of High Immigration (English translation; chapter 1.1) to unpack how ‘non-European immigrants’ are constructed as an economic and social challenge for the welfare state. Principles from discourse theory (DT) and the conceptual framework of othering are applied to discuss how the designation of this category of people as objects of qualification/integration may serve to reify racialized relations of inferiorized difference between white Norwegian majorities and societal newcomers from the Global South. The author tracks this dynamic to a discourse in which the relationship between the Norwegian state and immigrants from countries outside of Europe is organized as a binary opposition between a vulnerable self and an overwhelming, inherently faceless ‘other’. It is suggested that the othering enabled in the NOU (Norges Offentlige Utredninger) report can be viewed as a specific production of monstrosity: a horror-vision of a failing, unintegrated welfare state that needs safeguarding against abnormal, ‘huge waves’ of immigrants from ‘further south’. The argument is finally presented that the report’s vision of integration, by being coded with the logic of presenting a necessary response to an existential threat to welfare state structures, engenders a precarious form of social distancing that is theorized as solution-based othering.*

Keywords: *immigrants; immigration; othering; integration; solution models; NOU.*


Introduction

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based [...]. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy (Foucault 2000 [1981]: 456).

That a social democratic government has succeeded, after the whole of the last century, in making ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ into monster words is almost unbelievable (Cohen 2000: 43).

In 2015, unprecedented numbers of people sought refuge from violent conflicts and applied for asylum in Norway (NOU 2017:2: 11). The so-called refugee crisis sparked heated political debate regarding the extent to which ‘cultural differences’ and rising public expenses associated with integrative processes of qualification would jeopardize welfare state institutions. These political discussions led to a government commissioned report titled *Integration and Trust: Long-Term Consequences of High Immigration*,

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published on February 1, 2017. With special emphasis on refugees, this report was mandated to assess “to what extent a persistent high level of immigration may influence solidarity and trust in Norway and the importance of differences in terms of culture and values” (ibid.: 3). The report thus raises questions about causal relations between complex social phenomena such as public trust and ‘cultural differences’. More importantly, it brings up questions about how othering may emerge as a byproduct of the very discursive processes used to designate refugees and ‘non-European immigrants’ as objects of integration, qualification, and so-called safeguarding mechanisms deemed crucial for the continued existence of the Norwegian model.

With these considerations in mind this article examines how ‘non-European immigrants’¹ (henceforth abbreviated and referred to as ‘NEIs’) and their relation to the Norwegian welfare state are constructed in the *NOU 2017:2* report. I concentrate on three analytical trajectories. Firstly, I contextualize my enquiry with existing bodies of research concerned with the political operationalization of the concept of ‘integration’. This is done to situate the report’s key concept in a wider Scandinavian context and to elaborate on how it may function as a central discursive instrument to render NEIs governable. Likewise, it is discussed how the concept of integration represents a hegemonic pattern of racialized reasoning influential in structuring the “universe of the undiscussed and undisputed” (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]: 170) about NEI identities.

Secondly, I analyze textual representations of the relationship between the NEI category and the Norwegian state in the report. In doing so I apply discourse theory (DT) based on the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001 [1985]) to examine specifically how the use of metaphors and chains of equivalence and difference gradually structure a discourse of (dis)qualification in which the inclusion of NEIs is presented as contingent on costly and demanding processes of ‘qualification’. As a means to unpack the discourse of (dis)qualification, and the socio-cultural position it reflects, I then examine how two mutually exclusive subject positions of vulnerable self/overwhelming ‘other’ configure a network of relations between the Norwegian state, its white majorities, and NEIs. I argue here that the report’s vision of integration may reproduce a racialized hierarchy between white Norwegian majorities and NEIs by being coded as a key condition for inclusion, societal cohesion, and thus a solution to a pressing, societal problem. I conceptualize this dynamic as ‘solution-based othering’.

Finally, I discuss how the discourse of (dis)qualification may be understood as a securitization move by framing NEIs, and the challenge of integration, as an existential threat to welfare state structures. By constructing NEIs as risk objects of qualification, the *NOU 2017:2* report may consequently invite problematic forms of subordinated inclusion insofar as the latter are manufactured as a culturally/professionally inferior, costly, and inherently abnormal element in the welfare state.

Methodological and Analytical Trajectories

As of yet, no study has drawn attention to how the *NOU 2017:2* report constructs NEIs and how the emergence of a discourse about ‘qualification’ may function as a

¹ The report often uses the cover term ‘immigrant’ to refer to refugees as well as migrants “from conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries further south” (*NOU 2017:2*: 1). I use the abbreviation ‘NEIs’ to refer to these categories of people, refugees and immigrants from countries outside of Europe, that are grouped together and designated as an object of integration/qualification in the report.

racialized² technology of representation. From this standpoint, structural racism and discrimination may work not only through direct processes of exclusion and systemic (re)productions of marginalized subject positions. Structural racism³ may also occur through less obvious mechanisms of subordinated inclusion in which people designated as objects of integration have to aspire to a number of (perhaps unachievable) regulatory ideals to be worthy of egalitarian belonging in the Norwegian welfare state.

The aim here is to unpack how the project of qualification outlined in the *NOU 2017:2* report may constitute othering of NEIs and contribute to construct them as part of what is outside the discourse about the ‘ideal’ welfare state and what we may term ‘legitimate Norwegianess’. This serves to show how the process of designating NEIs as objects of qualification can indeed be seen as a form of ‘monstering’ precisely because they are created as a monolithic, border-breaching figure from the margin⁴ that above all poses the threat of instability and the blurring/pollution of boundaries between a vulnerable, qualified, ‘European’ inside and a chaotic, unqualified, ‘non-European’ outside. And this, one could argue, is what monsters and their manufacture are all about.

Specifically, I approach these issues by examining how discursive ‘closure’ in the reading of NEIs is enabled in the report, i.e. how the text gradually narrows down the possible and plausible interpretations of the relationship between NEIs and the welfare state. This is also why I see it as relevant to study the report with the discourse theoretical tools provided by Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]). Within their reading, discourse is defined as a “structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice” and “an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a center. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*” (ibid.: 112–113). Consequently, discourse is understood as an attempt to give meaning to a social formation, for example identities, by arranging a particular network of relations between descriptive concepts (termed ‘elements’) and thus arrest the ever-present “flow of differences” around particular privileged discursive points (ibid.: 115; Laclau 1990: 99–100). While nodal points often represent ‘empty signifiers’ (terms that mean very little in and by themselves), they are made meaningful through chains of equivalence and difference that link different elements and weave together specific conceptual spaces and establish identities relationally (Johansson 2011: 199).

Hence, a particular discourse on immigration is an attempt to stabilize the horizon of plausibility for what can be expressed and thought about the phenomenon by situating it within an enclosed field of other signifiers, such as integration, qualification, and structural upheaval. This outlook, in which identities are temporarily fixed configurations of inherently unstable meaning, invites analysis of how discursive ‘closure’ actually work, i.e. how language practices serve to narrow down the realm of possible and plausible interpretations of identities and their probable social performances (Laclau 2005: 130–131).

Analysis is based on the summary of the report’s findings and recommendations segment which has been made available in English. This segment is a translation of the

² Defined here as a categorization of people on the basis of what appears to be innate and ‘under the skin’.

³ I refer here to Teun A. van Dijk’s (2002) understanding of racism as a system of social inequality characterized by ethnic dominance, power relations between dominant white and ethnic minority groups, and the presence of everyday discriminatory discourses and other social practices (93).

⁴ More precisely: “Conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries” (*NOU 2017:2*: 1).

original report's chapter 1.1, which functions as an easily accessible version for media use and future legislative drafts. The analysis has been carried out, firstly, by locating nodal points in the text: signs that are given a 'privileged status', and by investigating "how they are defined in relation to other signs in the discourse" (Jørgensen/Phillips 1999: 30). Drawing on the insights provided by especially Mikkel Rytter (2018) and Marianne Gullestad (2002; 2004), the concept of integration and its orbiting elements have then been used as a primary data tracer to locate chains of equivalence and difference stabilizing the meaning of two primary nodal points and the relation between them, namely the NEI category and the Norwegian welfare state. In doing so, I have looked specifically for reoccurring rhetorical frames signaling a logic of difference and/or equivalence in the relation between the state and NEIs. For example, the systematic use of the notions 'risk' and 'lacking qualification' of NEIs in relation to their 'integration' into a 'Norwegian model under pressure' have been identified as a coherent chain of equivalence. This chain facilitates a specific conceptual separation in which white Norwegian majorities and the NEI category are positioned as mutually exclusive social configurations.

As a means to consider more precisely how textual mechanisms of 'closure' in the *NOU 2017:2* report work and are empowered by a distinct problem/solution framing, this article outlines a new conceptual approach termed 'solution-based othering' by fusing Steffen Jöhncke's (2004) concept of 'solution models' with Ruth Lister's (2004) definition of othering. Finally, Barry Buzan et al.'s (1998 [1997]) perspective on securitization is applied to discuss how chains of equivalence developed around the concept of 'risk' represent a central component of monsterization. As a securitization move, I argue, the report may invite an understanding of NEIs, and the process of integrating them, as an imminent existential threat to Norwegian welfare state structures.

The NOU Institution and the *NOU 2017:2* Report

Reports from Norges Offentlige Utredninger (NOU) are scientifically backed recommendations made by a committee, panel, or expert group designated by the Norwegian government or parliament, in order to establish knowledge and consider solutions in relation to a wide range of societal issues (*Regjeringen 2017b*). A NOU document often provides specific recommendations for how issues are to be dealt with and regularly represents the first step in the political process of policy making. Following publication, a wide range of institutions and organizations seen to be significant stakeholders in the object of knowledge are usually invited to debate and comment on NOU reports through a process of public hearings ('Høring[er]').⁵

The object for the following inquiry, the *NOU 2017:2* report, has been produced by a committee of eleven scholars, advisors, and directors (the Brochmann II committee⁶) designated by the Norwegian government in 2015. Following its publication and presentation on February 1, 2017, more than 100 actors were invited to comment, and 68 responses were received (for detailed overview, see *Regjeringen 2017c*). However, even though written opinion is indeed invited, the report is not subsequently revised. As a consequence, the report remains in and of itself a highly influential body of

⁵ This is, however, also an open process so that everyone in principle is able to submit comments.

⁶ Overview available at *Regjeringen 2017a*.

knowledge and a mechanism of legitimacy for future political discourse and decision making.

The Concept of Integration as Signifier for the ‘Immigrant Other’

According to Lister (2004), the production of ideas about the ‘other’ in difference to a collective self can be defined as a process of differentiation and demarcation by which “the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’—between the more and the less powerful—and through which social distance is established and maintained” (101). Othering thus implies a purgative process of separating the ‘good’ inside from the ‘bad’ outside as people and groups are classified in a negative way that forms an identity based upon a lack, deficiency, or contamination of the existing (Said 2003 [1978]: 72; Reinke de Buitrago 2012: xv). In the context of the *NOU 2017:2* report, I suggest that the tendency to (re)produce widely shared beliefs about those who ‘naturally’ belong within the nation and ‘others’ who do not, may be unpacked by examining how the concept of integration contributes to stabilize interpretive frames through which NEIs are constructed not only as costly and demanding ‘others’, but also as a figure constitutive of imaginaries about the Norwegian ‘us’. As shown by Per Mouritsen (2016: 17) and Mikkel Rytter (2018: 2–5), the concept of integration has thus been particularly effective in establishing social imaginaries about ‘genuine’ and ‘artificial’ members of the nation by merging ideas of what we may term ‘monstrous agency’, i.e. polluting behaviors of uncivicness, problematic traditions, low education, poor social conditions, and crime with public perceptions of NEIs (in particular: Islam and newcomers from North Africa and the Middle East).

It is also at this point that the function of discourse in the exercise of power, producing social realities by generating criteria for inclusion and exclusion, rights, and expectations for particular categories of people, becomes evident. An illustrative exemplar here is that when NEIs develop distinct communities or enclaves, they are in the main referred to as a disconnection from the majority of Norwegian society and come to resemble a disruption, or impurity, within the social order caused by ‘lacking integration’. It is seldom discussed, however, how these ‘parallel communities’ may have been constructed as outside- or out-of-order communities through discursive technologies (integration/qualification) that serve to isolate them as bubbles of problematic dissonance within mainstream society (Olwig/Pærregaard 2007: 18; see also Olwig 2012).

In light of these reflections, we may initially observe that the *NOU 2017:2* report systematically asserts that the continued existence of the Norwegian welfare state is at risk if future integration of NEIs fails, as the Norwegian societal model is

[...] dependent on high employment rates and a relatively equal income distribution to maintain today’s generous welfare institutions. These requirements are especially challenged when the composition of the population changes in terms of qualifications (13).

With this perspective, the report links to a dominant tendency within integration policies in Scandinavia that conceptualizes NEIs as a societal liability, and as negative factors of production whose unacceptability is linked to the perceived impediment they represent

to economic growth (Olwig/Pærregaard 2007: 10–11). As documented by a number of scholars, the prevailing idea of integration has, since it emerged in the 1980s in Scandinavian political and academic rhetoric, become increasingly entangled in a logic in which the national is constructed as positive and universal, and cultural differences are framed as treatable deficiencies (ibid.: 17–23). More precisely, the term integration has become politicized, normative, and imbued with a critical potential for exercising and reinforcing racialized boundaries between the national ‘us’ and the refugee/immigrant ‘them’ (Gullestad 2002: 36; Rugkåsa 2010: 10–15).

On a fundamental level then, ideas of integration serve to promote specific imaginaries of culture, race, and how the national community ideally should be ordered as an ‘integrated’ whole that habitually frame NEIs as socially and culturally inferior (Rytter 2018: 3). As Karen Fog Olwig also observes:

[...] [A] substantial reason for an imagined similarity-community based on an idea of cultural homogeneity has gained so vast an impact today is that it has been coupled to a political project of integration (Olwig 2008: 235).⁷

This points towards a central conceptual component in the contemporary political project of integration in Norway, namely the trope that the ‘unintegrated’ and ‘unqualified’ societal newcomer stands in contrast to stability, to order, to community, and safety (ibid.; Gullestad 2004: 192; Hervik 2004a: 150). This means that the societal project of integration advocated and reproduced by the *NOU 2017:2* report cannot simply be regarded as a mapping exercise of neutral arrangements which allow Norwegian society to manage immigration. On the contrary, the concept of integration can predispose what Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to as an ‘excluding mechanism of inclusion’, precisely because it defines this category of people in terms of that which ‘they’ are lacking in relation to ‘us’, and simultaneously works under the cover of being an innocent, positive-productive problem-solving instrument (65). Analysis of how NEIs and their integration are constructed as a societal challenge may thus contribute to our understanding of how such interpretative frames may not only reflect, but also (re)produce social stratification along a white majority/racialized immigrant boundary: a boundary which may trap the latter in Sisyphus-like struggles for non-subordinated belonging within Norwegian society.

Reader-Positioning Frames in the *NOU 2017:2* Report—Introductory Metaphors of Natural Disaster

With the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]), the *NOU 2017:2* report can be understood as the contingent alignment of meaning around particular privileged concepts from which a temporary stabilization of signification emerges (129–133). By anchoring privileged concepts such as ‘immigrants’ and ‘Norwegian model’ to particular meanings, the report thus articulates a discourse organized around nodal points, demarcates subject positions and limits the realm of possible interpretations.

⁷ As translated by the author. Original text in Danish: “en væsentlig grund til at et forstillet lighedsfællesskab baseret på en idé om kulturel homogenitet har fået så stor gennemslagskraft i dag, er, at det er blevet koblet til et politisk integrationsprojekt” (Olwig 2008: 235).

Right from page one, it is clear that the concepts of integration and integration capacity have a privileged status as they appear systematically and serve to gradually fix the two nodal points ‘immigrants from outside of Europe’ and ‘Norwegian model’ in relation to one another. The report’s specific operationalization of integration highlights the supposed effects of various competence increasing programs, specifically relating to general education and qualification for the job market (2–10). The report recommends a heavy focus on integration, implicitly understood as: “activation, qualification and adaptation: participation requirements relating to different welfare benefits, i.e. basic education, training and qualification adapted to the immigrants’ starting points” (4–5). Indeed, integration is articulated as critically important as it is “about safeguarding the mechanisms and cohesive forces that form the basis for the society’s democracy, the state based on the rule of law and welfare for its citizens” (20).

The reference to ‘safeguarding the mechanisms’ is important to note because it implies that integration represents a critical process to ensure the very continuation of the welfare society. This effectively entails a polarization of the discursive space in which the figure of the ‘immigrant’, implicitly destabilizing the ‘cohesive forces’ of society, comes to resemble what Laclau (2007 [1996]) terms a common enemy (38–41). The ‘common enemy’, a designated monster to fear, suggests a morally justified friend–enemy relation and can represent a powerful instrument to corral public opinion about policy options dealing with ‘others’ in so far as it makes mutual understanding/peaceful forms of contact⁸ appear unlikely.

This mechanism of discursive polarization may be examined further by zooming in on the opening sequence of the report and the structuring textual frames that depict the arrival of NEIs. Here, the meaning of NEIs is immediately stabilized as their arrival are defined in terms of an ominous boundary event. That is, the moment of migratory movement from outside of national territory to the inside is conceptualized in terms of natural disaster and malevolent penetration. This is illustrated in the following examples from the report’s introductory section:

The huge wave of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the summer and autumn of 2015 placed severe pressure on the Norwegian immigration regime (1);

[...] the huge and largely uncontrolled influx of people from conflict-ravaged and maladministered countries further south (ibid.);

[...] the refugee crisis became an explosive force that few had foreseen [...] an influx of people with little ability to provide for themselves, will represent an additional challenge and increase the pressure on public finances (ibid.).

⁸ According to Mouffe (2000), this is also why democratic politics should seek to *prevent*, or transform, antagonistic social configurations as they make it less obvious to perceive ‘others’ in terms of shared humanity and common interest (101–103). Political struggles, she suggests, should rather generate relations of ‘agonism’ between ‘adversaries’ and ‘legitimate enemies’ who are enabled to hold and defend valued ideas, positions, and identities (ibid.).

As a central identity constructed in the *NOU 2017:2* report, NEIs are in the opening (virtually tabloid) gambits conceptually tied to an objectivized force promising economic and social fragmentation of welfare society and its institutions. This frame is enabled specifically by the drawing of a chain of equivalence (the huge wave/huge and largely uncontrolled influx/explosive force/pressure on public finances) that organizes the meaning of migratory movement and creates clear-cut categorical boundaries from which an idea of NEIs as a homogenous, destabilizing ‘force’ emerges (Laclau/Mouffe 2001 [1985]: 121–126; Laclau 2005: 82–86).

The most powerful, persuasive discourses have shown to be those attempting to ground themselves in the ‘scientific’, the ‘true’, and the ‘natural’. One might add to this that hyperbolic discourses about ‘others’ that attempt to configure categorical identities by referring to embodied forms of knowledge and emotionally supercharged experiences (the experience of drowning in this case), also belong within this category. By establishing blurred, yet symbolically and emotionally effective analogies between two ideas, metaphors play a particularly salient role in providing interpretive ‘closure’ to the chains of equivalence presented above, domesticating the otherwise polyvalent process of association, as well as reinforcing specific readings of NEIs as objective and self-evident. With the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe, metaphorical substitutions thus produce meaning precisely by enforcing an equivalence that suspends the differential features of identities (2001 [1985]: 110). They assert that

[...] metaphors are not forms of thought that add a secondary sense to a primary constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted (ibid.).

The wave metaphor (seen in the initial example) is critical to focus on here for two reasons. Firstly, it is important because it is placed in the introductory lines of the report and thus frames the process of reception and conditions a specific understanding of the entailing text. Secondly, it touches on a shared, embodied form of knowledge of vulnerability and fear. Equating NEIs with an uncontrollable, liquidized force, the report may thus trigger experiences of danger, i.e. the feeling that ‘we’ are overwhelmed/drowning in immigrants. It is in their seemingly natural, objective, and subconscious application that metaphors become the most powerful and persuasive, and it is from such fixations of meaning, I maintain, that perceptions of monstrous otherness and ideas of NEIs as less-than-human are enabled.

By activating an ecology of tabloid/sensationalized metaphors such as ‘huge wave’ and ‘explosive force’ the report also positions its readers within a very specific frame of interpretation that limits the possibility to think about the NEI category in terms of shared humanity and individuality as they are merged into a faceless, insurmountable, and inherently ‘dead’ locomotion. This, of course, establishes and legitimizes a context for conflict. Objectivized phenomena such as huge waves have a panic-inducing quality and make certain actions appear ‘obvious’, such as the construction of defensive measures: dams, security checkpoints, or walls. In this sense the implicit notion that ‘they’ are flooding ‘us’ and our society also predisposes phobic perceptions of NEIs as responsible for, and representatives of, monstrous agency. That is, behaviors which are

seen as boundary-defying, polluting the normative social order, and thus potentially disruptive to cohesion in society (Ngeh 2011: 147).

The Discourse of (Dis)Qualification

As the report goes on to articulate the possible consequences of high levels of immigration for the ‘unity and trust’ in the Norwegian model, a logic of equivalence serves to gradually link the NEI category with costly processes of qualification and social challenges for white Norwegian majorities. Samples include, but are not limited to:⁹

The [Norwegian] model is vulnerable to the immigration of a high number of adults with low qualifications (1);

[...] requirements are put under particular strain when the composition of the population changes, in terms of the qualifications of the individuals (4);

[...] a challenge for the continuation of the model, particularly if the proportions of people with low qualifications increases (ibid.).

A high number of newcomers with weak or unrecognized labour market qualifications [...] represents an additional challenge (12).

The examples serve to show specifically how the ‘flow of difference’ is arrested as meaning is gradually organized around the two nodal points, NEIs and the welfare state. As relational objects of knowledge, NEIs are constructed through the combination of elements such as ‘low qualifications’, ‘strain’ and ‘challenge’, which, at the same time, is the very characteristic that defines them in terms of problematic difference to an already vulnerable Norwegian model. On the one hand the weakness of the welfare state is thus repeatedly emphasized, on the other hand the threatening nature of NEIs is systematically accentuated in terms of lacking qualifications.

This framing places NEIs within what Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) term a ‘myth’ that the nodal points draw upon and reinforce: the age-old myth of a dangerous and uneducated, animalistic and barbaric outside threatening to ‘flood’ and destroy the civilized inside of the Norwegian model (74). According to Laclau (1990), the function of the myth is precisely to enable an inherently contingent representation to appear like a natural, stable, objective condition (60–62). More specifically, the virtually timeless myth of civilized ‘us’/barbaric ‘other’, synergizing with the discourse of (dis)qualification, enable what Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) term an ‘antagonistic space’ in which the existence of one identity effectively prevents the full constitution of the other (127–130). As a consequence, the qualifying of NEIs from public expenses into a functional part of the labour market appears to be virtually mission impossible: it is resource demanding, costly and characterized by the possibility of “value conflicts and cultural clashes” (*NOU 2017:2*: 20), as well as a declining standard of living for ‘us’.

⁹ Similar applications of the term ‘qualification’ are found on the pages 1, 4, 7, 11–15, 19, and 20.

An application of Laclau's theorization (2005) furthermore implies that the designation of NEIs as objects for qualification can be understood in terms of a hegemonic intervention that serves to stabilize a specific frontier in relation to white Norwegian majorities (131). I argue here that such hegemonic interventions and the hegemonizing property of 'integration' are indeed fundamental to any understanding of the constitution of NEI identification and struggles for belonging in present day Norway. Thus, through the systematic application of elements such as 'lacking qualification', the pre-emptive political project of integration positions a particular agenda as the only reasonable and as incarnating the general interest. It effectively fixates a particular pattern of support and restraint for understanding the NEI category and what it means in relation to Norwegian majorities and the welfare state.

As a hegemonic configuration of NEI identification, the tropes of integration/qualification enable discursive 'closure' precisely by (re)enforcing a dichotomizing frontier-narrative of relative inferiority. Here, the idea of newcomers as unqualified/burdensome acts as a quasi-natural universality that undergirds a specific horror-vision of a declining and vulnerable self/welfare state under attack/pressure from an overwhelming, faceless force of immigration. It offers a fluent, legitimate and highly racially biased vocabulary to define NEIs negatively insofar as it consolidates racialized connections between notions of ethnicity, religion, and the type of societal problems (such as 'cultural differences') they create for white Norwegian majorities. This dynamic is particularly evident in the parts where the report elaborates on the societal consequences if 'integration' is unsuccessful, for example:

If [the] Norwegian society does not improve its ability to integrate immigrants and refugees from countries outside of Europe, there is a risk that increasing economic inequality could combine with cultural differences to weaken the foundation of unity and trust and the legitimacy of the social model (1).

How can cultural differences be acknowledged without also weakening the bonds that hold society together? (8).

The quotations can be read as harmless statements to the government of a small country seeking to protect and develop its fund of 'unity and trust'. At the same time, the idea is presented that equality as cultural and economic sameness is imperative for social cohesion, and that cultural differences per definition are problematic. In this sense the report links cultural difference to foundational weakening and potential collapse and assumes that homogeneity is the primary key to stability. This interpretation is supported as the report elaborates:

If they are seen as representatives of cultural differences [...] they can also contribute to challenging both the function of the welfare state and the basis for the legitimacy of the common good (8–9).

This mode of reasoning is important to highlight because it reflects what Mouritsen (2016) terms an 'undertheorized assumption' in the literature on immigration and social cohesion that presumes a direct causal relation between sociocultural homogeneity and

increasing societal solidarity and trust (6). The argument that cultural differences cause a weakening of the ‘bonds that holds society together’ is thus problematic not only because it blurs the fact that the causal mechanisms underlying such macro-scale social processes are extremely complex, but also because the central causal mechanism (increasing cultural differences = decreasing trust) is intensely disputed (ibid.: 2). The point is here that when the myth of cultural difference, as an element within the discourse of (dis)qualification, is framed as a causal mechanism hindering peaceful coexistence/mutual trust, it positions its audience to think about NEIs in terms of monstrous otherness. That is, as incarnating a (cultural) difference that threatens to confuse and displace the boundaries of the existing and in doing so unleashes uncertainty and danger for Norwegian white majorities (Douglas 2002 [1966]: 140).

Subject Positions of Self/Other

The particular process of othering implied by the designation of NEIs as objects of integration may be further unpacked by examining the subject positions developed within the discourse of (dis)qualification identified in the previous section. I here follow Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) who suggest that processes of identification involve the creation of a structure of rights with particular status positions for people to occupy and ascribe to each other (46–48). The main point is that each subject position not only offers a sense of who I am/you are, but also a tight grid of possibilities for, and limitations on, agency (ibid.).

In the *NOU 2017:2* report, NEI identification is organized discursively as this category is gradually anchored to elements orbiting the privileged notions of qualification/integration, and the expected socio-economic impact of immigration on Norwegian society. NEIs, integration, and immigration in general, are for example represented systematically in terms of a “severe pressure on the Norwegian integration regime” (1), an “increased burden on the welfare state” (5), and “an additional challenge” (12). Similarly, the report states that “the challenges have simply been too great in terms of the labour market’s capacity to absorb these immigrants” (14) and “to significantly increase employment [...] will be costly and demanding” (18).

Within a discourse theory (DT) perspective, what the mosaic of semantically cross-fertilizing identifications does is precisely to block and streamline the flow of meaning around the concepts of ‘non-European immigrants’ and ‘immigration’. Hereby, what we may term a transporter-position is created in which ideas of NEIs as bringing a kind of ‘unqualified, chaotic outside’ in contact with the ‘qualified, homogenous inside’ of the Norwegian model are made possible and plausible. What may be generated from such a position is more specifically the self-evidence of the reductionist idea that evil, enemies, and ‘others’, are (always) coming from elsewhere (Trinh 2010: 2). It profoundly distracts us from understanding tensions connected to the incorporation of an inherently heterogeneous range of newcomers as multifaceted and dialectic processes occurring *within*. For example, how dominant sets of “symbolic resources and interpretive frames that circulate [society]” (Gullestad 2006: 24) may give rise to subordinated forms of inclusion and belonging.

Importantly, the subject position developed toward NEIs is created by, and granted meaning through, a correspondent social mapping of a Norwegian self. Thus, a complimentary subject position is made available in the *NOU 2017:2* report which

primarily relates to an idea of the Norwegian welfare state as vulnerable and in need of political safeguard. Again, a salient chain of equivalence is found on page one (but see also page 20). Here, Norwegian society is described as

[...] facing a period of structural upheaval. An increased dependency burden and increased uncertainty [...] will require the reprioritization of economic and welfare policies. High levels of immigration [...] represent an additional challenge and increase the pressure on public finances [...]. The huge wave of asylum seekers and refugees [...] placed severe pressure on the Norwegian immigration regime [...] (1).

The main point is to notice how the two subject positions developed in the discourse of (dis)qualification place NEIs within a binary, polarized relationship with an exposed welfare state and, implicitly, its unity, trust and white majority of non-immigrant citizens. In such a system of setting up order through opposition discursive closure occurs as NEIs are positioned as an antagonistic outside of the discourse about the welfare state. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001 [1985]) have observed, two identities are thus antagonistic insofar as they negate each other's existence—but this is so because they are always also mutually constitutive (127). In this sense, immigrants from “further south” (ibid.: 1) (i.e. the Global South) are produced as threats to the partial stability and reproduction of the welfare state but are also part of the condition of possibility for the constitution of a seemingly homogenous, ‘integrated’ population. Importantly, the ‘constitutive outside’ is often envisioned in terms of a uniform, faceless ‘other’, and this is precisely what happens within the discourse of (dis)qualification and its mutually exclusive subject positions where the incomprehensible ‘huge wave’ of NEIs promises social and economic insecurity/downfall for an already vulnerable and pressured self.

Of course, the relation between individual consciousness, subject positions, and hegemonic ideologies that are present in society at a given time should not be understood as a one-to-one relation. As Peter Hervik (2004b) points out “public messages and discourses are not simply xeroxed or faxed into private minds” (249). As a communicative event the *NOU 2017:2* report does not necessarily generate subjectivity or political decisions. However, there is what Jutta Weldes (2003)¹⁰ terms a dominant “background of meaning” (7) with a profound capacity to invite certain interpretations of the NEI category and the state, which, like the assigned voice of a skilled ventriloquist, may translate into rather direct practices of exclusion and tiered inclusion.

Solution-Based Othering

The previous sections discussed how the *NOU 2017:2* report organizes relations of problematic difference through the use of panic-inducing metaphors and by accentuating the lacking qualifications of NEIs in relation to white Norwegian majorities and a welfare system under pressure. It was shown how a discourse of (dis)qualification, coupled with an idea of ‘cultural differences’ as fundamentally

¹⁰ Weldes (2003) writes about the impact of popular culture. However, her notion is useful to describe how various existing meaning structures—also political discourses—may transcend into individual attitudes and social practices.

destabilizing, positions NEIs as an element of danger in relation to a fragile welfare state. Here, the hegemonic project of integration can be understood as a ‘solution model’ for these challenges that may infuse social boundaries with normalcy and material reality in terms of institutionalized programs, public attitudes, and behaviors.¹¹ Building on these insights, the present section links to Jöhncke’s (2004) writings on ‘solution models’ to conceptualize how the report’s problem/solution framing becomes a critical component of the othering that occurs when NEIs are designated as objects of qualification.

Solution models can, in this context, be defined as distinct clusters of thought and practice (often institutionalized and made into policy) that are designed for the management of irregularities within society (ibid.: 385). The important point to make with this concept is that there is a level of ontological interaction between the solutions that are applied to deal with societal issues and the way these phenomena come to be understood as being problematic in the first place. Thus, when the hegemonic discourse of integration as qualification is activated in the *NOU 2017:2* report, a critical feature of its function is that it on the surface appears simply as a neutral, necessary, and non-biased intervention towards the ‘immigration problem’. Considering the previous discussion, and the fact that the concept of ‘othering’ is by itself somewhat unprecise, I suggest that it is relevant to introduce a concept that may capture this particular mode of social distancing often found in problem-solution framings.

What I term ‘solution-based othering’ can here be defined as a double bind process of categorization which constructs a specific solution strategy to a problem, but by doing so also normalizes antagonistic social distance between groups or individuals and sediments their identities. More specifically, solution-based othering naturalizes certain interpretive frames rooted in ideas of abnormality, malfunction, and an imperative of transformation by producing a social imaginary of threatening ‘problem bearers’. In the present context, solution-based othering also highlights the way that the consensual basis of power may be produced and perpetuated at the intersection between the construction of a collective threat/risk and discourses of solvation with a certain ‘persuasive capacity’ (van Dijk 1989: 23).

Having established the specific boundary making quality and automated ‘naturalness’ inherent in solution-based othering, we may go on to observe that a particularly potent example for reflection is found within the report’s brief description of ‘new strategies’ if the “more short term reforms [...] within the existing integration system have not produced satisfactory results” (19). Here, the following solution to the immigration problem is suggested:

If significant cuts in benefits become necessary in the future, political decisions will also be necessary as to whether these shall apply to all citizens or whether newcomers and foreigners should have limited or full access to benefits (ibid.).

As a type of solution-based othering, the system of segregated access to welfare benefits proposed in the report, distinguishing between the belonging and juridical rights of

¹¹ For example, legislation was passed in 2018 criminalizing face-concealing forms of dress, i.e. burqas and niqaps in kindergartens, schools, and universities in Norway to ‘promote positive communication’ and to improve the conditions for integration (Zander et al. 2018).

‘citizens’ and ‘newcomers and foreigners’, may be regarded as a strong, hierarchical symbolic/legal demarcation of social boundaries of belonging between descent-based Norwegians and newcomers. Embedded in the metaphorical context in which migratory movement is described in terms of the violently penetrating “explosive force [...] largely uncontrolled influx of people” (ibid.: 1) requiring “emergency measures” (ibid.), the model is granted validity precisely by being layered with the appealing logic of representing a *solution* designed by experts, i.e. an active, conscientious, necessary response to a problem which comes to appear as critical for the wellbeing, even survival, of ‘us’. Thus, by invoking a logic that equates economic rights with natural/ethnic belonging, the report creates a sphere of argumentation in which an antagonistic us/them dichotomy is reasonable and normal to the extent that it may allow for direct economic exclusion and social marginalization—if necessary—of societal newcomers.

This discussion serves to highlight a contradiction insofar as the report’s declared goal is to act as a guide towards better ‘integration’ and societal cohesion. However, by (re)producing a discourse of (dis)qualification and dynamics of solution-based othering, it may also fuel socially disintegrating attitudes and practices by solidifying group boundaries and a hierarchical, polarized, competitive environment in which some (vulnerable) citizens may legitimately claim welfare resources and belonging more than the designated ‘others’. In the following and final section, I explore this perspective further by applying Buzan et al.’s (1998 [1997]) concept of securitization to the report. The argument is presented that the construction of NEIs as an existential risk factor to the welfare model is a key mechanism in the report by which solution-based othering and politics of exclusion are established as potential, yet reasonable actions.

Securitization of the Welfare State—The ‘Severe Pressure and Explosive Force’ of ‘Non-European Immigrants’

Research shows that contemporary integration policies and programs in Scandinavia are increasingly designed to sustain the structure of the welfare system rather than the requirements of its target groups (Gullestad 2002: 19; 2006: 197). Rytter (2018) points out that perceptions of integration in Scandinavia appear to have changed in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration’s War on Terror, and the so-called refugee crisis (6). As part of this contemporary situation, in which strategies of integration have become fused with concerns for national safety in a series of ‘security/integration responses’ (Bleich 2009: 355), the *NOU 2017:2* report may in itself be conceptualized as what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) describe as a ‘securitization move’ in relation to the phenomenon of immigration. Within this perspective, ‘security’ is defined broadly as “an existential threat to a referent object” (Buzan et al. 1998 [1997]: 21), and securitization is understood as “the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects” (ibid.: 25). Thus, securitization is about when and how an argument is constructed and presented in a manner that makes an audience accept the need for extraordinary measures beyond normal political logic (ibid.). The *NOU 2017:2* report can be regarded as a securitization move that presents the challenge of ‘integrating’ NEIs as an existential crisis/hazard to the unity and trust on which the Norwegian nation supposedly is built, as well as its economic structures. Here, the discourse of (dis)qualification plays an important role in effectively

establishing the condition of the welfare state as that of the survival of a fragile self in an inherently hostile environment of immigration. Central for establishing this dynamic is the configuration of a rather explicit conceptual template of immigration as a risk factor associated with structural upheaval. For example:

[...] [T]here is a risk that increasing economic inequality could combine with cultural differences to weaken the foundation of unity (1).

The trend towards permanent low incomes and unstable employment among refugees [...] increases the risk of residential segregation along ethnic lines (7);

[...] the risk that continued high immigration will create increased inequality with regard to income, standard of living and employment. High immigration also entails a risk of value conflicts and cultural clashes (20).

Risk is practically always associated with negative effects which people are expected to fear. According to Alan Hunt (2003), “risk discourse transposes anxieties into an objectivist problematic” (174). Consequently, risk, fear, and precaution may shape an ontological position for newcomers which “expands beyond a specific referent and is used instead as a more general orientation” (ibid.: 42). Specifically, the merging of integration with risk-issues of national and international (in)stability, is solidified in the report through a logic of equivalence in which the concept of immigration gradually is made correspondent to conceptual frames of emerging conflict. Immigration and its impact on the state is for example discussed in terms of:

How can relatively homogeneous welfare states, with ambitious goals regarding material comfort, participation and social equality, handle the challenges associated with cultural diversity? To what extent is it *reasonable* to set demands for cultural adjustment [...]? [...] In other words: How can cultural differences be acknowledged without also weakening the bonds that hold society together? (8; emphasis in original).

As a securitization move, most clearly relating to what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) term ‘societal security’, the *NOU 2017:2* report constructs the phenomenon of immigration as a type of ‘identity/welfare dissolvent’ and an objectivist risk-problematic for the state’s constitutive fundament of unity and trust (121). Certain emergency measures are suggested in this context, such as the proposal to establish welfare segregation to ensure the survival of the welfare state outlined in the previous section. This idea of welfare segregation is clearly beyond what Buzan et al. (1998 [1997]) describe as the “normal political logic” (22) in Norway, where, until now, a social and political ideology of egalitarian social/economical security and even an emphasis on “multidimensional majority cultures” (*NOU 1995:12*: 26) have been salient. In this sense, the theory on securitization is useful as a conceptual linchpin to solution-based othering insofar as it emphasizes how experiences of security and threat runs in tandem with socially constructed perceptions of potential risks, their causes and the ‘logical’ means by which to address them (Buzan et al. 1998 [1997]: 22–24). Likewise, the representation of NEIs

as existential threats to the societal system and the possible solution of economic mass exclusion may be regarded as a potent dimension of the solution-based othering of NEIs. It inscribes onto newcomers, and entwines into public debate, a stigmatizing definition of these identities and their possible and probable behavior as virtually parasitic, destabilizing, welfare receiving individuals. Indeed, trajectories of solution-based othering and securitization may combine and enforce one another in an intersectional production of racialized relations of problematic difference between immigrant minorities and national majorities in ways which are not yet examined: a perspective, it seems, that warrants further scholarly attention.

Conclusion

This article has examined how NEI identities and their relation to the Norwegian welfare state are conceptualized in the *NOU 2017:2* report. In this document, NEIs are made equivalent to ‘lacking qualifications’, a risk of structural upheaval, and thus a significant challenge for an already pressured welfare system through a discourse of (dis)qualification. Discursive closure of this reading is facilitated, firstly, by opening gambits in which the moment of migratory movement to the national territory is framed in tabloid metaphors of natural disaster. Secondly, through two mutually exclusive subject positions in the discourse of (dis)qualification in which the relationship between the Norwegian state and NEIs is organized as a binary opposition between a vulnerable self and an overwhelming ‘other’. Thirdly, through the specific problem/solution framing inherent in the report’s vision of integration that serves to narrow down the zone of possible and plausible interpretations of NEI identities and their social performances as costly and demanding ‘problem bearers’.

Finally, by connecting to securitization theory, reflections were presented as to how the representation of immigration as a severe risk to a fragile welfare society might result in a normalization of shared understanding of NEIs as an existential threat to the established order, as well as a legitimization of emergency measures (ethnic/economic segregation).

In light of the present analysis, it seems that the *NOU 2017:2* report could work more appropriately towards ambitions of ‘societal coherence’ if an increased reflexivity of constitutive concepts such as ‘integration’ as a particular contributor to solution-based othering were to be achieved. Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek may provide some guidance here. Mouffe (2000) thus observes that democratic politics are always concerned—and should be concerned—with the creation of unity in a context of diversity and conflict and is thus always concerned with some kind of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ construction (101–102). Creating the cohesion of any *demos* should not be understood as a task that is to be achieved through the total overcoming of such oppositions. The crucial issue is rather to create ‘legitimate enemies’ by manufacturing the us/them divide so that ‘they’ cannot be perceived as monstrous figures, parasites, or mutually exclusive enemies to be feared, excluded, and even destroyed in order to secure ‘our’ safety and wellbeing (ibid.). Similarly, Žižek (2016) argues for the manufacture of chains of equivalence crossing national and cultural boundaries that invite us to perceive all oppressed and excluded peoples not in terms of threat, danger or evil, but in terms of the shared substance of our social being (107). Maybe such “global solidarity of the exploited and oppressed” is a dreamscape (ibid.: 110). However, as

Žižek cautions, if we do *not* engage in it, then we are really lost: and we will deserve to be lost (ibid.).

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