



Anti-Capitalism in the Climate Movement?: How Organizations Frame the Problem of Climate Change

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Abstract

The climate movement, like other movements, shapes and is shaped by its context. With decades of attempts to accelerate a transition to green growth and failing to see positive results in terms of greenhouse gas emission reductions, organizations within the climate movement must consider how to address the problem. At the same time, there has been a growing use of anti-capitalist discourse in the wider cultural sphere regarding climate change. This paper seeks to understand the role the climate movement has played in that growth or if it has been affected by it. In particular, the research focuses on the growth of the use of anti-capitalist framing. Drawing on a mixed-methods frame analysis of documents published by four major climate movement organizations (CMOs) - Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Friends of the Earth, and Greenpeace - this study traces changes in the diagnostic and prognostic framing of capitalism in publicly available website content between 2012 and the first half of 2023. Quantitative analysis reveals that explicitly anti-capitalist frames remain marginal overall, but have grown in use since 2018, particularly through voices in the Global South. This suggests that these CMOs did not play a role in contributing to the development of this broader anti-capitalist discourse in the public sphere. However, the findings provide some evidence that the climate movement was affected by this discourse. Qualitative analysis further shows a shift from conditional critiques of capitalism to explicit calls for systemic transformation and post-capitalist alternatives, particularly degrowth. Furthermore, anti-capitalism was often coupled with other systemic issues of injustice, such as patriarchy and neocolonialism. While none of the CMOs examined adopted the anti-capitalist frame as its central diagnosis, this paper suggests that between 2018 and 2023 the frame generally grew in use and become more direct and stronger in tone. Movement organizations operate in movement ecosystems in which they may carve out niches when it comes to forms of actions, targets, or frames used. While theoretically movement ecosystems could explain why some CMOs may adopt certain frames while others do not, this study did not find strong evidence of movement ecosystems having an effect on framing practices.

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Introduction

Movements are shaped by their context. They respond to the political opportunities and the actions taken by states and other actors. They are attentive to how problems they are seeking to address can change in nature, scale, or pace. They are informed by political debates and discourses within wider society. Yet, movements can also actively shape their context. They strive to create their own opportunities, and they influence debates and discourses that animate public life.

The context that the climate movement has long found itself in is this: While the ‘wicked problems’ of climate change and the loss of biodiversity (see Posocco & Conversi, 2025) have been decades in the making and pose an existential threat to human life on Earth (Kumar et al., 2021), political responses have been muted relative to the scale of the problem. A series of weak international agreements with either low emissions reduction targets or non-binding commitments despite annual international negotiations has been the policy context for the last 30 years. The mainstream vision of dealing with climate change has been to shift energy sources of economic growth and production to renewable ones, improve energy efficiency through technological advancements, and innovate ways to capture carbon already in or making its way into the atmosphere and store it securely.

While the political response to the problem of climate change has been tepid, the greenhouse gases that are causing the problem are continuing to rise, while ‘natural’ disasters that are associated with a warming planet (e.g., fires, droughts, heat waves, poor harvests, rising sea levels, and hurricanes) are increasing in intensity or frequency. The public framing around these events has also increasingly been linked to the issue of climate change and they are no longer viewed merely as independent occurrences.

Though these climate events are already occurring and causing great harm, the worst effects of climate change are in the future and in fact often perceived to be far into the future. Nevertheless, the perceived span of time between the present and the distant future is relative. Younger people today will still be alive in that “distant” timeframe. This brings the problem of climate change much closer temporally for some. With the problem already appearing more severe than had previously been predicted, the perception of the problem and its urgency have grown among many (especially younger) climate activists.

As dynamic social actors, many climate movement organizations (CMOs) and activists have shifted their positions in response to these contexts. Notably, the movement has largely transitioned from critically supporting the process of international climate policy facilitated by the UNFCCC to one of opposition to it (Pellizzoni et al., 2022). As the international policy negotiations proved to be unable to respond to the climate issue with the speed and force deemed necessary by the movement, the climate movement increasingly shifted in two ways. First, they began to focus more attention on attacking the large corporations profiting most from the continuation of

greenhouse gas emissions, namely fossil fuel companies (e.g., Shell, Chevron, BP). Second, many CMOs have prioritized confrontational tactics as a means of pushing for stronger commitments by states and corporations. These confrontational tactics include school strikes, road blockades, and other forms of arrestable action.

In response to these changes, the public discourse about climate activism also shifted. Increasingly, journalists, commentators, and public figures have referred to climate activists – typically those using confrontational tactics – as ‘radical’, ‘radicalized’ and even ‘climate anarchists’ (e.g., Schumacher, 2022; Walsh, 2022; Davis, 2022; Artsy, 2023). The academic literature has also increasingly used such terminology (e.g., Badullovich et al., 2024), including referring to the “radicalization of the climate justice movements” (Joshi, 2023) and visions that are “revolutionary” (Jones & Youngs, 2024). This kind of framing is also increasingly evidenced in popular cultural representations of the climate movement as seen in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2022), a film that follows a group of young environmental activists who come together to sabotage an oil pipeline in Texas as an act of climate protest.

The Anti-Capitalist Framing of Climate Change

Perhaps as a consequence of the highly public frames around the radicalization of the climate movement, movement actors themselves have embraced the label. One CMO has described itself as “a new hub to coordinate the creation of *radical*, nonviolent projects” (Actionnetwork.org n.d., emphasis mine). At a climate protest, Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said “We must be too big and too radical to ignore” as thousands cheered (Artsy, 2023). However, it is worth investigating what this ‘radical’ frame within the climate movement is about. Is it more than a reference to the types of repertoires of contention (see Tarrow, 1996) that the movement feels are necessary to win its objectives or are the objectives in themselves “radical”?

Indeed, radical *objectives* are also increasingly becoming part of the framing of the issue of climate change. The title, theme, and direct inspiration of the film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* is from a nonfiction book by the academic Andreas Malm (2021). In the book, Malm speaks to the idea of radicalism not just in relation to the tactics that he argues ought to be used (i.e., strategic property destruction) to deal with the problem of climate change, but the very nature of the problem itself. Using Marxist analysis, Malm discusses the ways in which fossil fuels are productive forces that serve as the backbone of the economic system, requiring certain tactical and strategic approaches. “Business-as-usual”, he writes (ibid., 55), “is not a sideshow to bourgeois democracy, a relic from an authoritarian age that requires correction – it is the material form of contemporary capitalism, neither more nor less.” His book is openly anti-capitalist and yet became widely reviewed in major newspapers and within the activist press.

Also growing in importance within left circles and among activists was the idea of ‘degrowth’. Academics with increasingly greater public voice have argued that we cannot just swap fossil fuels with renewable energy sources into a model of economic growth. Instead, entire economies need to be cut in size, which - especially to be done justly - requires effort and organization. Most people who support calls for degrowth acknowledge that it is incompatible with capitalism, an economic system reliant on

economic growth to generate profit. As the degrowth discourse grows within discussions about addressing climate change, so too does anti-capitalism.

Joining this chorus is Kohei Saito, another academic whose “surprise hit” book (Goodfellow, 2023) *Capital in the Anthropocene* examines Karl Marx as an ecologist, connecting Marxist theory with the problem of climate change. The book was published in Japanese and quickly became a bestseller, gaining the author fame around the globe, including news coverage in Western media (e.g., McCurry, 2022). His more academic book on the subject was published in English, titled: *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (2023). In the book, he attempted to demonstrate the theoretical path Marx appeared to be drawing to issues that eventually led to ‘the climate crisis’: “Marx intended to analyze various practices of robbery closely tied to climate change, the exhaustion of natural resources (soil nutrients, fossil fuel and woods) as well as the extinction of species due to the capitalist system of industrial production” (ibid., 4). Saito’s work connects the anti-capitalist degrowth discourse with a Marxist critique of capitalism in the context of the issue of climate change.

It is also within this broader framing of the issue of climate change that the term Capitalocene has been utilized since being coined by Andreas Malm in 2009 (Moore, 2016a, xi). The term Capitalocene, at its basic level, signifies that “capitalism is the pivot of today’s biospheric crisis” (ibid.) rather than the more commonly accepted term ‘the Anthropocene’. The term Anthropocene was popularized by Crutzen (2002) in the journal *Nature* over 20 years ago (Lewis & Maslin, 2015) to indicate how “mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia” (Crutzen, 2002). Capitalocene rejects this claim for one that places capitalism, rather than mankind, at the center of the problem: “Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (Moore, 2016b, p. 6). The edited book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* was published in 2016 and had clearly and actively made the link between climate change and the system of capitalism. The book, published by a popular activist publishing house (PM Press) for mass circulation included contributions from a number of authors who are prominent names within activist circles including Donna J. Haraway, Andreas Malm, and Christian Parenti. Furthermore, a prominent climate activist – Greta Thunberg – gave a speech at the UN General Assembly which implicated capitalism for causing climate change (Thunberg, 2019) and in 2022 Thunberg edited *The Climate Book* which featured numerous chapters by different authors who make similar claims.

Despite the growth of a public discourse framing capitalism as the culprit for climate change, it remains unclear whether the climate movement has openly adopted more anti-capitalist positions as a consequence or helped to inform the positions of these academics and public intellectuals by having previously adopted such positions. It is this question regarding the dynamic relationship between popular discourse and social movements that this paper explores. The paper examines how much the movement informed this anti-capitalist discourse and how much the movement was impacted by the anti-capitalist discourse within the wider society. To achieve this objective, the initial steps are to evaluate the extent to which the climate movement

has used anti-capitalist collective action frames in its public communication and to see if and how that has fluctuated over time.

Framing refers to “the signifying work or meaning construction engaged in by social-movement activists and participants” (Snow, 2004). Core framing processes consist of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. Diagnostic frames refer to identifying the problem that is being addressed by an organization and the attribution of blame or responsibility for that problem, whereas prognostic frames refer to the plan of attack or proposed solution to the problem (Snow et al., 2019). Motivational frames refer to the “rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action” or the way in which the movements present their ‘call to action’ (Benford & Snow 2000, 617).

Movements are, by definition, “a loose, noninstitutionalized network of informal interactions that may include, as well as individuals and groups who have no organizational affiliation, organizations of varying degrees of formality, that are engaged in collective action motivated by shared identity or concern” (Rootes 2004). These different collections of individuals are likely to have differences across their framing practices both as an expression of how they view a problem and as a strategy to create niches through which they will mobilize resources including funding and activists. Despite the differences, most social movement organizations (SMOs) operate largely within the same cultural (and often same subcultural) context which shapes SMOs’ strategic choices for framing.

In this case, I am interested in how the movement chose to frame the diagnosis and prognosis of the climate crisis, specifically in relation to capitalism given the wider cultural context in which these movements were operating. As I have attempted to demonstrate above, there was a growth in discourse openly critical of capitalism and which questioned the idea that the climate crisis could be overcome within a global economic system of capitalism. How, then, did such a cultural shift affect the ways in which these CMOs presented themselves and the problem of climate change to their constituencies and the wider public?

Research Method

To understand the extent to and ways in which CMOs discussed the problem of climate change, its solutions, and calls to action in relation to economic questions and specifically critiquing capitalism required looking at different organizations within the movement. CMOs are the units within movements that are largely responsible for the presentation of frames through, for example, organizational websites.

The case selection needed to capture important organizations within the movement, and, since I was seeking to see how the cultural shift in discussion may have affected the movement framing, the organizations selected should not be predisposed to an anti-capitalist position, as this would undermine the results. Thus, two large, mainstream environmental organizations with a heavy emphasis on tackling climate change were selected: Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Friends of the Earth (FoE) is an environmental organization started in 1969 as a split from the Sierra Club. It has since become one of the biggest environmental organizations in the world.

Greenpeace started in 1971 and participated in passive resistance and bearing witness, obtaining celebrity endorsement and a level of professionalisation. Greenpeace is one of the most recognizable organizations within the climate movement.

Given that the climate movement experienced changes over the period under consideration, it is important to account for new organizations and how they chose to frame the issue of capitalism once they became established, how that impacted on other organizations' frames, and how those frames changed over time. Two quite important CMOs, both founded in 2018, were selected. These are Extinction Rebellion (XR), an organization focused on addressing climate change through the use of nonviolent civil disobedience, and Fridays for Future (FFF), a youth-led and youth-organized organization working to tackle climate change in part through their famous school strikes, which started with Greta Thunberg. Together, four organizations were selected for analysis.

Data was collected from these organizations' websites. Websites serve as an important platform for disseminating information about an organization and its positions even if they are perhaps a less useful tool for actual campaigning than social media platforms, for example. As the objective was to see how the discourse of these organizations changed over time, it was believed that websites were more useful for such an analysis. Social media typically offers fewer opportunities for presenting longer texts with greater explanation or analysis. Websites on the other hand enable a large amount of information to be displayed and read through. Even when longer texts are provided via social media, they are usually done so through hyperlinks to organizational webpages or documents. Data from websites included webpages, reports, and other documents.

For the purpose of this study, I wanted to track frames over time to see if the shift in cultural discourses to more anti-capitalist positions affected framing by CMOs over time. This requires taking a longer timeframe into account. Since Friends of the Earth's European site really took off in 2012, I used that as the starting point of analysis. Data was collected on webpages from 1 January 2012 until 1 May 2023.

Having selected the cases, the data sources, and the period of interest for which data should be gathered, a corpus needed to be constructed. To minimize extraneous data from being collected, the corpus was structured around the following four rules:

- 1) The content should be produced (at least in part) by the organization in question.

Some websites feature content of other organizations or of writers that are not affiliated to the organization under examination. Organizations may support the main themes of what are being said or post others' content in solidarity, but the framing used by others may not be adopted by the organization in question. Thus, having such content may undermine an effort to understand the organization's own framing. More frequently, reports or other documents can be produced by formal networks and posted on each individual organization's website because it is work that contributed to. Such co-authored texts were included in the corpus. Therefore, content pulled from the websites of the stated organizations were authored or co-signed by the organization or its members and were from their website.

2) The content should be limited to Europe.

Organizations like those selected often have local, national, or international levels as well as a diverse array of chapters representing different cities, countries, and/or groups of countries. The focus on Europe was intended to limit the analysis to a workable corpus, to avoid problems of intra-organizational framing conflicts across different levels or chapters, and to focus on framing at the highest possible level rather than more differentialized frames that may have been used more locally. Thus, I focused on the European level of these organizations. The frames generated at that level may be less particular to the concerns at the national level, enable it to have a more bird's-eye-view of the problem, and less likely to be influenced by specific individuals' frames rather than a more overarching organizational one as compared to highly localized groups.

To put the focus on the European level, three routes were utilized depending on the organization of data on the CMO's websites. First, one of the organizations – Friends of the Earth – had a dedicated European website associated with regional-level organizing, FoE Europe (<https://friendsoftheearth.eu/>)¹. Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion both started in Europe and, although not exclusively European, are predominantly so. For these organizations, data was collected and then manually removed where none of the content of a webpage was about European branches or actions. Some documents included a mixture of information across European and non-European branches and these were included in the analysis. Greenpeace, instead, is quite an international organization and thus its section of the corpus was composed of two separate parts: a search through its international-level website where pages included any of the following words: “European”, “Europe”, “EU”; and the European unit component of the website, which only started being used under the current URL in 2016. While this limits potential content that may concern a particular European locality without mentioning any of the aforementioned words, this should only affect the absolute rather than relative change in references of certain frames or discourse use.

3) The content should be limited to views on capitalism.

In order to understand whether discourse has increased and/or changed regarding views of capitalism among CMOs, we want to narrow in on such references. It is no doubt that movements and organizations concerned with climate change will in part blame “greedy corporations” (Extinction Rebellion 2023) for raising greenhouse gas emissions and slow decarbonization efforts, but we are interested in a more systemic critique posed by these organizations. We are looking for statements that demonstrate that they are in opposition to the economic system rather than, for example, opposing an individual corporation or practice. Alternatively, if they are talking about the system of capitalism but they refuse to take an anti-capitalist stance, this can also be

¹ Friends of the Earth's website largely excludes countries such as England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland which are part of Europe. Friends of the Earth has separate websites for England Wales and Northern Ireland as well as for Scotland. These were not included.

important for our purposes. However, simply the word ‘capitalism’ may be insufficient for capturing a systemic position on the economy. Thus, the corpus was composed of documents that included any one of the following words:

- “capitalism”
- “anticapitalism”
- “capitalist”
- “profit motive”
- “market economy”
- “free market”
- “private enterprise”
- “laissez-faire economics”
- “free enterprise”

4) Only data in the English language should be analysed.

Given the nuanced nature of frame analysis and the international scope of these organizations, only English language data was included in the corpus. Data were found across a range of languages some known to different extents by the author and some completely foreign. Any attempt to analyse these could lead to negative impacts on the rest of the data or simply not be accurate enough to be of value.

Once the corpus was generated through search terms, each document was manually examined. Where the documents did not contain the term in the way intended, these pages were manually removed from the corpus. For example, some documents cited articles or books which included ‘capitalism’ in its title, but there were no other mentions of any of the keywords in the remainder of the text. In addition, not all four of the rules indicated above could be automated. Authorship, for example, could not be easily automated to the specifications indicated above. Thus, following the initial capture of data, a manual selection process was required. The breakdown by organization of manually-adjusted number of webpages that made up the corpus can be found in Table 1.

As stated above, items must have been published between 1 January 2012 and end of 1 May 2023. However, as we were interested in shifts over time in the framing and content of how these organizations discussed capitalism, it was important to have a chronology of the discourse. Thus, the labelling and organizing of the data by date was important. For the most part, the date of the item was present within the text itself, typically under the title or subtitle. In these cases, each item was labelled with a date based on publication or modification date. However, in other cases, the dates were not as readily available. In these cases, the date was retrieved in one of the fol-

Table 1 Number of documents in the corpus, by organization

ORGANIZATION	NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS
Friends of the Earth	30
Greenpeace	21
Extinction Rebellion	23
Fridays for Future	9
TOTAL	83

lowing ways: (1) the date contained in the URL; (2) the date contained in the Google entry for the link; or (3) the date contained in the source code for when the page was last updated. These methods were only used to obtain the date in the limited cases where it was not readily available.

Website content was chosen in part because, unlike specific social media accounts, websites are universally used. However, different organizations publish at different rates and use different types of media to broadcast information. Thus, even if we find an increase in anti-capitalist discourse, this could simply represent a larger amount of content produced in that year. Thus, it is more important to understand the relative distribution of frames, rather than the absolute levels of it. This required finding the total number of webpages/documents for each organization so as to use them as a basis of comparison. As we are interested in changes over time, these were compiled annually using an advanced Google search. In total across the years, FoE had 627 webpages, Greenpeace had 1370, XR had 820, and FFF had 146 (see Table 2).

Following the construction of the corpus, frames were manually and inductively developed and used for coding. Coding occurred on a sentence-by-sentence basis, with each sentence making up a 'reference'. As sentences could include more than one frame, multiple codes could be attributed to a single sentence. Not all sentences had a relevant frame for our purposes. In such cases, these sentences were skipped. Frames were coded initially using a relatively fine-grained perspective, resulting in 101 different frames collectively referenced 1,744 times across the whole corpus and across all organizations. Only a small number of these 101 frames related to anti-capitalism, specifically. The wider anti-capitalist frame was made up of the following 'codes', which highlight critiques of capitalism. These were added together for the purposes of the analysis below:

- anti-capitalism.
- capitalism can't solve problem.
- capitalism caused climate change.
- capitalism subjugates nature.
- fighting against capitalism.

Results

If CMOs adopted the position that was gaining momentum within the broader culture – a critique of capitalism – then we should see a shift over time toward adopting such frames. Since we can see the rise of this anti-capitalist discourse growing from 2016, taking into account some kind of time lag for movements to demonstrate that frame, we should see an onset or increase in the use of the anti-capitalist frame by 2017. This would suggest that the newer CMOs (i.e., XR and FFF) may already come into the movement with these ideas in mind or incorporate them shortly after forming. If, instead, we detect the use of such discourse in the other two CMOs (i.e., FoE and Greenpeace) prior to 2016, we may investigate whether this itself had an impact on the wider cultural dialogue.

Table 2 Number of webpages by organization and year

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Friends of the Earth	33	30	43	24	24	25	60	45	62	160	81	40
Greenpeace	38	10	18	83	63	93	162	155	200	167	289	92
Extinction Rebellion							0	153	437	68	62	100
Fridays for Future							3	17	40	62	5	20

A quick overview of the raw numbers shows that there is little evidence to suggest that the CMOs were influencing the wider cultural dialogue on an anti-capitalist framing of the climate issue as few documents appeared using that frame prior to 2017, and none at all for Greenpeace. While there is some growth in the use of an anti-capitalist frame over time which might suggest the influence of this broader cultural discourse, there is enough inconsistency to question the influence that the growth of such discourse had on movement frames (see Table 3).

More specifically, after not using the frame for the prior four years, FoE began to use it in 2017 accounting for three documents in which the frame appeared for a total of five attributed references of its use. This was stable for one year and began a small decline in 2019 and 2020 where the frame showed up in only one document in each year. In both 2021 and the first half of 2023, FoE did not appear to use the frame at all, while in 2022 many more documents used the frame (10), with the total number of references of the frame adding up to 16. It is worth pointing out that in 2012, FoE used the frame four times across three documents – predating the increase of the frame's public salience.

A similar story is seen for the other legacy CMO, Greenpeace. There were no prior uses of the anti-capitalist frame until 2018. In 2018, Greenpeace had two documents with such frames, whereas in 2019 and 2021, they used the frame in only one document each year and with only one reference in each of those documents. In 2020 and 2022, no such frames appeared. Then, in 2023, Greenpeace used the frame in two documents a total of three times, perhaps a significant increase particularly noting that data from 2023 spanned only up to May 1st. Here again, we see a growth occurring roughly at the time of the frame's wider public popularization, but its use is rather small and inconsistent over time.

It is interesting that we see some similarities across the two legacy CMOs and the two newer CMOs. In the latter case, both XR and FFF do not show any use of anti-capitalist frames in both 2018 and 2019. They begin to use the frame from 2020 with each CMOs publishing one document with one use of the frame. This increases in 2021 to four and three documents by XR and FFF, respectively. In 2022 these remain nearly equal for XR who published a further four documents (four references) while FFF used the frame in substantially more references (21) across three very similar documents. There is a slight dip in the number of documents containing anti-capitalist frames in 2023, but this may be due to the May 1st data collection cut-off. While there were no FFF documents that fit the criteria out of the 20 published in 2023, XR experienced a significant uptick in references (7) even if the number of documents went down to two. The number of references was higher than in any other year.

While the raw data suggest there is something to the story regarding the cultural discourse being adapted into movement organizational frames, it is not a perfect fit, and the rate of the frame's use is still somewhat low. This gets further elaboration when looking at the number of documents which contain such a frame as a percentage of the overall number of publication across these years (Table 4).

Against the stated hypotheses, the year with the greatest level of anti-capitalist framing across these groups was 2012, in which over 4% of all documents included such frames. This percentage is somewhat distorted, however, as it only refers to the three references by FoE, and both of the new organizations did not exist at that

Table 3 Documents with anti-capitalist frames (and number of references) by CMO and by year

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Friends of the Earth	3(4)	0	0	0	0	3(5)	2(7)	1(1)	1(1)	0	10 (16)	0
Greenpeace	0	0	0	0	0	0	2(2)	1(1)	0	1(1)	0	2(3)
Extinction Rebellion							0	0	1(1)	4(5)	4(4)	2(7)
Fridays for Future							0	0	1(2)	3(4)	3(21)	0

Table 4 Percentage of documents with anti-capitalist frames by year across all CMOs

	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23	Total
Total number of documents	71	40	61	107	87	118	225	370	739	457	437	252	2964
Documents with anti-capitalist frames	3	0	0	0	0	3	4	2	3	8	17	4	44
% of anti-capitalist documents	4.2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2.5%	1.8%	0.5%	0.4%	1.7%	3.9%	1.6%	1.5%

time. Aside from the outlier of 2012, we do see a trend toward the use of such anti-capitalist framing starting in 2017 (2.5% of documents), but this dips down until it reached 0.4% of documents in 2020, going up again in subsequent years.

These aggregate figures may mask some important differences across these CMOs. This would not be surprising, as movement organizations may develop an ecosystem of framing in which different SMOs offer the public a different perspective on the same issue, appealing to and attracting different demographics and orientations of members. It may be the case that if one organization strongly adopts the anti-capitalist frame, the other SMOs may no longer be interested in competing against them in how they frame the issue. In particular, given that Greta Thunberg has both made anti-capitalist statements in public speeches, edited a book with such perspectives, and was the inspiration and driver of FFF, we could hypothesize that FFF would take on that role of “owning” the anti-capitalist discourse. To test the framing niche hypothesis, we can disaggregate the percentage of anti-capitalist frame use by year and see if one particular organization adopts this frame as (part of) their niche.

Based on Fig. 1, we see no clear sign of an anti-capitalist frame being used by a single organization consistently. We see growth in the use of the frame by FFF, but this shows up in a small percentage of documents until 2022, when it surged to 60%

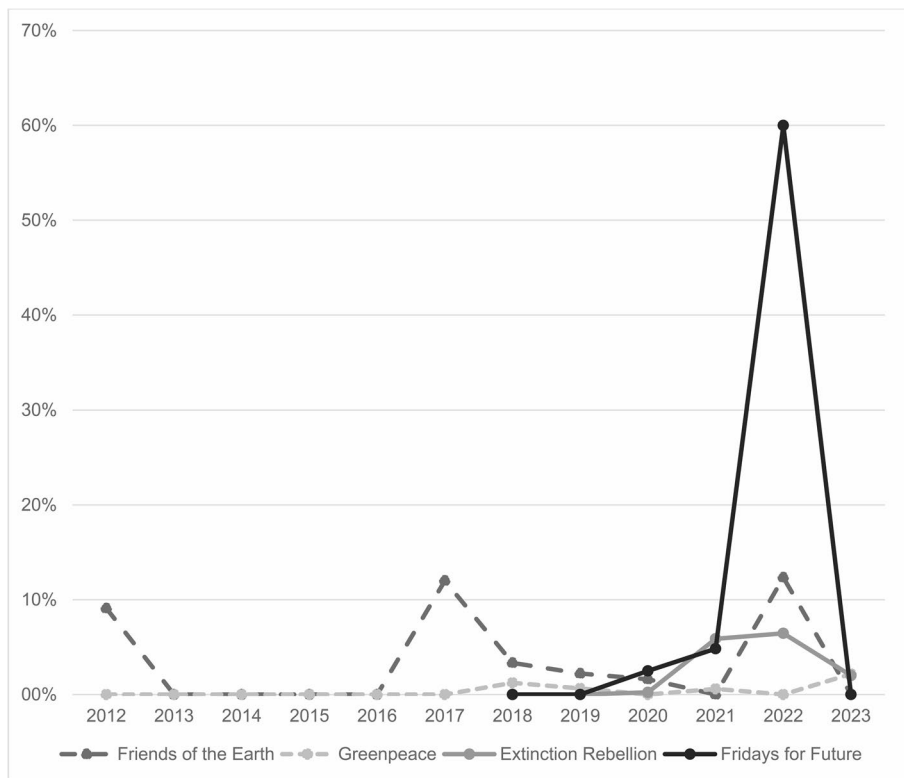


Fig. 1 Percentage of documents with anti-capitalist frames by CMO and by year

of the rather few published pages. It decreases again in 2023. One thing we do see is that at no point was this a frame of much interest to Greenpeace. As a percentage, the frame never appeared in over even 2.5% of their website publications, with the highest being in 2023 (2.2%).

Overall, these findings suggest that anti-capitalism was not a reliable and consistent frame used by these four prominent CMOs. It is nevertheless worth exploring what these frames were in reference to when they were used. The next part of the results section concerns a qualitative examination of the anti-capitalist frame used by these four CMOs from 2012 to 2023.

Friends of the Earth was the only CMO examined to include anti-capitalist frames in any of their documents between 2012 and 2016, all of which occurred in 2012. Two of the four references of the frame occur in the context of an interview with the documentary filmmaker of the climate activism documentary *Just Do It*. While the interview had been conducted by FoE after they had organized a screening of the documentary – thus falling within the bounds of the choices for data collection – the actual references to anti-capitalism came from the interviewee, who was not a representative of FoE. The remaining two references were, however, from FoE representatives. One concerned their position on biodiversity, stating:

“The market economy, coupled with lax regulation of corporations’ behavior and liability, too often leads to the destruction of habitats and a failure to prioritize the protection of ecosystems – the very basis of our existence in the first place.” (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2012a).

This critique is somewhat conditional, noting that it says “too often” rather than describing it as an inherent feature. The authors also highlighted the role of particular policies and decisions by economic actors as part of the problem.

The last reference to the anti-capitalist frame that year was in relation to a campaign critical of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio, stating:

“Speculation on food, energy, creation of carbon markets would soon expand to create a market economy which includes ecosystems and the atmosphere, allowing banks and corporations to make profits, while the climate crisis continues to worsen” (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2012b).

This reference also places a condition on its anti-capitalism, discussing a future possibility as a result of a lack of regulations prohibiting such behavior.

It was only in 2017 that FoE published something again with an anti-capitalist frame. If we take a qualitative look at the three documents that contained such frames, we can find that all instances of anti-capitalist framing seem to align with another issue, namely the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. Two references were in regard to International Women’s Day. The document quoted a member of a FoE chapter in Uganda discussing how the “capitalistic and patriarchal systems reinforce land grabbing, forest degradation, water & air pollution” (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2017a). The connection between the environment and feminism was perhaps not sur-

prising for an article on Women's Day, although a critique of capitalism would have been surprising considering the silence on the issue in the years prior. Months later, however, a similar interconnection is found in a Friends of the Earth Europe webpage entitled "Why we're marching for reproductive rights" (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2017b). Here an activist is quoted as saying: "I am an ecofeminist, not because I believe women have some essentialist, natural link to the environment, but because under the oppressive system of capitalist patriarchy women and nature are exploited, subjugated, and objectified in the same way." (ibid.). Although the growth of feminism within these movement organizations was not being researched here, I hypothesize that this 2017 growth of anti-capitalism intersecting with feminism may have been influenced by the appointment of Karin Nansen, a founder of REDES/Friends of the Earth Uruguay, to chair Friends of the Earth International starting in 2017. This was reported by FoE Europe in January of that year and included the following:

"The Uruguayan activist becomes chair of Friends of the Earth International at a very important moment, with key challenges ahead. The Friends of the Earth International federation has started a system change process, which focuses on analyzing and challenging the power and privilege granted by capitalism and patriarchy to global elites that endanger life on the planet as we know it." (Friends of the Earth International 2017).

This sets out a clear and publicized strategy of questioning capitalism while also pairing it with patriarchy. It suggests that, at least during Nansen's tenure as chair, anti-capitalism was a likely discourse. It is particularly interesting to see that such a frame was being discussed through the FoE Europe channels but was actually developed by activists from the Global South. We might suggest that a Global South standpoint (see e.g., Harding, 1991) made such an anti-capitalist and intersectional analysis easier to arrive at, accept, and utilize in public messaging. (It is worth noting that in 2017, Greenpeace had still made no reference using the anti-capitalist frame.)

A qualitative shift could be seen in 2018. That year, FoE had published two articles with anti-capitalist frames but the nature of one of these articles was different from the past. The first article in March 2018 was very much in keeping with the framing of the previous year, honoring International Women's Day through an intersectional reflection that blamed the "patriarchal capitalist system" for the subordination of "both women and nature" (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2018a). However, the second article did not just make a passing reference to capitalism in its wider discussion. Instead, it was focused on the issue of capitalism and made its position quite clear. Published in September, the article was titled "Abandoning capitalism is a necessity, not a utopia". Written by a member of FoE Slovenia who had participated in the Post-Growth 2018 Conference that was co-organized by Friends of the Earth and held in the European Parliament, the article highlights the importance of degrowth.

For Greenpeace, it made its first use of the anti-capitalist frame in the period under consideration with two documents using the frame. One document was about the Sámi – the indigenous community of the northern parts of the Nordic countries and a part of Russia. The document quoted an indigenous rights activist saying "Across Mother Earth, Indigenous Peoples are leading the fight against capitalism." (Green-

peace International, 2018). The other document used the frame within a much wider discussion of a paper entitled “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene” which was published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. Within this discussion, Greenpeace quoted financial analyst and former Royal Dutch Shell economist Jeremy Grantham who stated: “by the time we’ve fully decarbonized our economy, the world will have heated up by 2.5°C to 3 °C, and a great deal of damage will have been done ... capitalism and mainstream economics simply cannot deal with these problems” (Weyler, 2018). This anti-capitalist frame was incorporated in a document perhaps precisely because it comes from someone deeply embedded in the capitalist economy. These sentiments by Grantham were also widely published in the mainstream news media for similar reasons (e.g. Imbert, 2018).

A similar document was published by Greenpeace the following year, the only document in 2019 to include anti-capitalist frames for the CMO. However, in that document Greenpeace was more directly in agreement with an anti-growth and anti-capitalist position and it was central to the document. Entitled “EU report warns pursuit of ‘growth’ is incompatible with environmental protection”, the webpage quotes a Greenpeace EU spokesperson saying: “The European Environment Agency rightfully recognizes that economic growth won’t get us out of the crisis that capitalism has helped create, as well as the need to fundamentally change our systems of production and consumption” (Greenpeace European Unit, 2019). It then calls on the European Commission to “rethink the economic system”. Although there is only one such document published by Greenpeace in that year, it is a qualitative step-change in how the CMO had previously framed the problem of the climate crisis.

In 2019, FoE’s only anti-capitalist frame was found in their annual review for the year 2018 where they mentioned their work for the post-growth conference. They wrote: “Inspired by civil society and confronted with the limits of a capitalist system, politicians are finally starting to shift the focus from infinite growth to well-being, equity and sustainability” (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2019). Despite their efforts in co-organizing the conference, it is somewhat surprising that more was not present that fit the search criteria in this study. In any case, FoE brought these ideas forward in their 2020 critique of the European Green Deal. The plans for a European Green Deal were presented in late 2019 by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. The plans included making the EU climate-neutral by 2050, among other targets and measures. In response, FoE wrote that “A Green Deal must... End the exportation of consumerist and capitalist models of production and consumption – simply bringing them under a ‘circular economy’ umbrella doesn’t fix the problem” (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2020). Here again, although not frequently mentioned, these references suggest a desire to actually get rid of the capitalist economic system as the only means of solving the climate crisis.

While Greenpeace had nothing to say about capitalism in 2020, it was then that both FFF and XR had presented arguments to the public using an anti-capitalist frame. In October, XR’s global newsletter discussed the Switzerland chapter’s September Rebellion wave which was the chapter’s first mass action and included roughly 400 protestors setting up a camp in an urban square in Bern. They went on to occupy the square for roughly 48 hours until the police dragged the protestors off. Not much in terms of diagnostic or prognostic frames were mentioned, but the discussion was

prefaced by the caption accompanying a picture of a colorful demonstrator in a face mask with a ball for a nose and a big neon wig: “XR Switzerland brings out the secret weapon - clowns! Capitalism doesn’t stand a chance.” (Extinction Rebellion, 2020) Clearly this indicts capitalism, and it is rather interesting that no explanation is provided. Here it is assumed that capitalism’s harm to the environment is already well understood. However, given that it was the only mention in the only document by XR that year, it is hard to say that they really adopted the frame.

The single instance of FFF using the anti-capitalist frame was in the form of a petition to Sir David Attenborough, the public intellectual behind many natural history documentaries, some of which discuss the impacts of climate change. The petition praises the work of Attenborough and asked him to “hand over your Instagram account, and therefore audience, to those who have been campaigning for the natural world like their lives depend on it”. In the petition, they write,

“Passing the mic will enable climate change to be tackled from the inside out – to exhibit the role of neo-colonialism and capitalism in warming the planet. Shifting the conversation to lay bare the root causes of climate change will achieve climate and social justice for all” (Fridays for Future, 2020).

This explicitly places capitalism as one of the “root causes of climate change”, which is a significant statement to make even if it is not often repeated explicitly.

Although FoE had been the most reliable in using the anti-capitalist frame at that point, in 2021 the CMO did not publish any documents that could be included in the analysis. However, the remaining three CMOs all had something to say that involved the frame, particularly the newer organizations. Of the three sources that used the frame for FFF, one quoted a climate justice activist:

The revolution will not be led by us privileged people. We won’t be the ones to end imperialism or capitalism or colonialism or racism. This revolution is being led actively by the most marginalized sectors of society — our workers and peasants and others who are exploited...our true liberation will only come with the liberation of all led by the most marginalized.

Here again we have another explicit endorsement to ending capitalism. Similarly, another reference by FFF was quoting and endorsing another activist who said: “... to change the system we have to tackle it from the roots, from the beginning and those roots are capitalism, imperialism and more” (Fridays for Future, 2021a). The last reference regarded reading recommendations by FFF, including Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. The book, according to the webpage, “will help [you] understand systemic economic problems correlating with the climate crisis”. While these references draw on the statements by others, they call for a direct challenge to and the overthrowing of capitalism (alongside other oppressive systems).

Greenpeace made one reference to capitalism in 2021 in relation to activists in Africa who were resisting “the reckless postcolonial capitalist destruction of their countries” (Laurette et al., 2021). XR had the most to say about capitalism in 2021

across the four CMOs. One concerned a Greenpeace action with the caption “Exxon Admits Capitalism Caused the Climate Crisis.” Another reference regarded the reporting of a protest by the group Stop Pollution in Tunisia. “They also called for an end to the greed of the capitalist system, which they see as driving pollution in the region at the expense of the Tunisian people” (McAdam & ben Mohamed 2021). Here too, both are effectively reporting the work of others. However, the other two references suggest that perhaps 2021 may have seen the rise of XR’s direct application of the intersectional lens in the fight against climate change.

Reporting on the call to action of XR Aotearoa (New Zealand) in their own words, they write:

“Join us in Te Whanganui a Tara (Wellington) in the week leading up to COP26 for our Spring Rebellion. We will draw attention to the intersecting systems of colonization, capitalism, and patriarchy, and the ways in which these systems create the conditions for the exploitation of the natural world to the detriment of all life on this planet.” (Extinction Rebellion, 2021a).

Another report on an XR action, this time in the Netherlands, covered the story of a peaceful blockage that was met with arrests. However, the protests did not end there.

“150 brave rebels returned to occupy the same intersection the next day. This time the center of the blockade was made up of FLINTA (Female, Lesbian, Intersex, Non-binary, Trans and Agender) rebels, and the police violence was instant. A FLINTA temple with a ‘toxic system’ roof propped up by columns representing patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism was immediately confiscated, while rebels were subject to brutal police intimidation, including being pulled to the ground by their hair.” (Extinction Rebellion, 2021b).

In 2022, XR had four mentions of the anti-capitalist frame, one of which directly talked about “fighting...the very cogs of capitalism itself” and another talking about placards at a XR protest reading “yes to degrowth, no to corporate growth” and “ecology ON, capitalism off”. They discussed trainings and workshops on “anti-colonialism, post-capitalism, and climate justice” as well as an article stating: “Nothing less than total economic transformation is necessary now, meaning a move beyond the infinite growth model of capitalism to the sustainable model of degrowth” (Extinction Rebellion 2022).

We can see here how the degrowth discourse has become much more prevalent, with capitalism in its crosshairs. Likewise, the three similar documents for FFF present more radical ideas. Indeed, the frame showed up 7 times in each of the three almost duplicate documents on FFF’s webpage dedicated to their global day of action – the Global Climate Strike - which took place on the 25th of March of that year, and again on September 23rd using the same rationale. The pages were calls to action which framed the problem of climate change in the following way (Fridays for Future, 2022):

Climate struggle is class struggle, for years, the ruling class, primarily through corporations and governments from the Global North dominated by affluent, white, heterosexual cis-males, have exercised their power, gained through colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and exploitation, to destroy the earth and its occupants with no remorse.

They deliberately sacrifice the Global South's ecosystems and peoples for the sake of their so-called 'development' and everlasting 'economic growth'. Meanwhile, the working class is used as tools to build the very system that is destroying them.

The quote above was contained in the section entitled "The Problem". Here is where the solution ("What we must do") is presented:

"Colonizers and capitalists are at the core of every system of oppression that has caused the climate crisis, and decolonization, using the tool of climate reparations, is the best kind of climate action.

The richest capitalist 1%, must be held responsible for their actions and willful ignorance. Their profit is our death. Their profit is our suffering.

Together with different sectors of society across the world, led by the most marginalized, let's bring back the power to the people whose power has been stolen. Together, let's build a system and home where we prioritize #PeopleNotProfit."

While the number of documents with such frames are few, we can see from the quotations above that the instances of anti-capitalist framing are more central and stronger in tone. This is perhaps particularly the case with FoE, which recorded the highest number of documents for any CMO in one year. Across the ten documents most focused on a report titled '7 Sparks to Light a New Economy'. In this report they write:

"The economy is designed, and we can redesign it! We want to inspire action to wholly transform the current dominant growth-based, capitalist, neoliberal economy, which is at the root of the destruction of our shared planet and of people. (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2022)

Across webpages this basic message was reproduced in different ways, such as "The dominant economic system is failing most people and the planet, BUT the economy is designed, and we can redesign it!" or "This economic system is at the root of the destruction of our shared planet and of people." Although the same quotes were often used across documents, this indicates the level of importance it had for the CMO.

Though Greenpeace had not made a public statement with an anti-capitalist frame in 2022, they did so in the first few months of 2023. They talked about alternative futures and a "food revolution" that would "counter the neoliberal, capitalist system"

(Greenpeace International, 2023a). Another article about solutions presented by the World Economic Forum in Davos that year made a reference to the frame:

“Seemingly oblivious to the irony, attendees’ lofty pursuit will be to look for innovative ways to use capitalism to solve the problems caused by capitalism, which continues to rampantly exacerbate inequality and mercilessly exploit our natural world” (Greenpeace International, 2023b).

XR continued its assault on capitalism through the positive vision of degrowth in 2023. In a Global Newsletter entitled “F**K DAVOS, LOVE DEGROWTH!” (asterisks in original), the organization wrote:

“Under capitalism, economic growth must be exponential and eternal, and that has driven an ever-increasing plunder of the planet’s resources to produce profit. Now nature is unravelling, and the pollution of that plunder is altering our atmosphere. The demands of capitalism have directly led to the climate and ecological crisis.” (Extinction Rebellion 2023).

In the same document they later wrote: “One successor to capitalism that’s gaining mainstream attention is degrowth.” Additional statements to that effect were also present that year, including in another document.

Conclusion

There is some evidence that the climate movement framed the problem of climate change in anti-capitalist terms. In addition, I found evidence supporting the argument that broader anti-capitalist discourse influenced the framing adopted by the four climate movement organizations examined: Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Friends of the Earth, and Greenpeace. The proportion of documents employing the anti-capitalist frame generally increased over time. A similar trend appears when examining the *number of references* to this frame across organizations and over time, despite a noticeable decline in 2019 and 2020 (Fig. 2).

However, it is also clear that the anti-capitalist frame remained fairly marginal. Across all organizations and all years, the frame was present in less than 15% of published documents, except in one instance. In 2022, the frame was found across 60% of webpages published by FFF, but this represented only three of five pages, which were roughly duplicates.

From a purely quantitative standpoint it is difficult to suggest that the anti-capitalist frame was dominant. That being said, a qualitative look tells an important story. When the frame was used, it evolved from a marginal point to the central focus. The diagnostic framing started off discussing capitalism’s negative influence on climate change as conditional on certain types of capitalism or policies that prioritized capitalism over planetary concerns. This shifted beginning in 2018 with more explicit calls to end capitalism as a means of solving the climate crisis. This continued to grow as calls for degrowth became supported as an alternative. The rise of degrowth framing

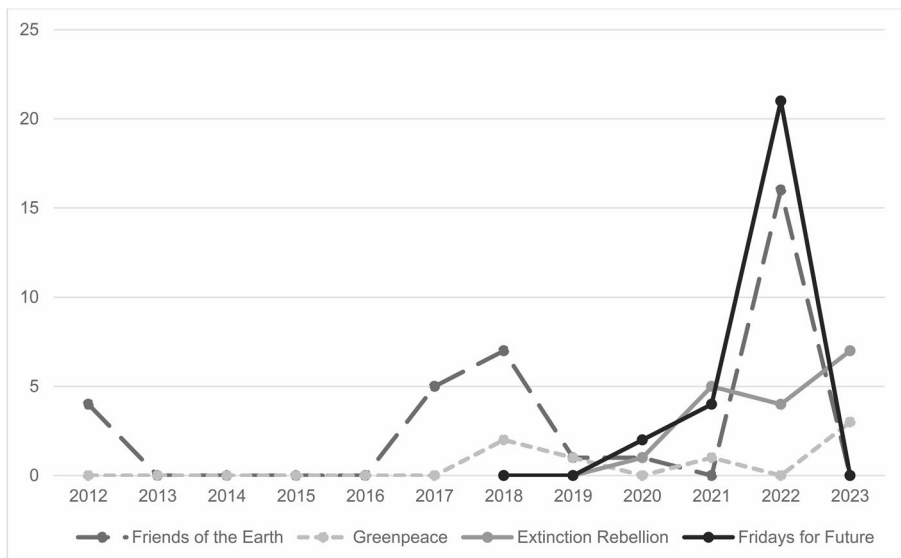


Fig. 2 Number of references of anti-capitalist frames by CMO and by year

is important to further explore in subsequent research as it may help to explain reductions to anti-capitalist framing in the first half of 2023. That is, rather than directly mentioning any of the keywords, these CMOs may be promoting the same message through a *positive* prognostic framing of degrowth rather than a *negative* diagnostic framing of capitalism. This hypothesis requires further empirical research.

It is worth noting that while the discussion of the cultural context and its influence on the framing of climate change by CMOs may be relevant, what has not been presented in the introduction but bears out quite clearly in the results is that this discourse appears to be driven by activists from the Global South. In case after case, we see that voices from the Global South have pinpointed capitalism as the fundamental problem. These voices get included in the frames by these CMOs and they may be the source of the later uses of anti-capitalist frames by those organizations.

The hypothesis of organizational niches for framing within the movement ecosystem was not directly supported by the data. Although Greta Thunberg became a prominent anti-capitalist voice in the movement and is directly tied to FFF, they only slowly adopted the anti-capitalist position, and it was not unique within the wider movement landscape. However, we might say that Greenpeace perhaps felt that they would benefit from not engaging much with the anti-capitalist frame even as other CMOs were adopting it. While this may be explained through the logic of the movement ecosystem, this may not involve framing as the independent variable. Instead, Greenpeace – as part of its place in the movement ecosystem, has tended to place particular emphasis on influencing corporate policies (see e.g. Crapa et al., 2025; Kapranov, 2024). By focusing their efforts here, Greenpeace preemptively negates much possibility of using the anti-capitalist diagnostic frame without risking logical inconsistency. If capitalism as an economic system is to blame for climate change

rather than the way individual businesses operate, their corporate responsibility strategy becomes contradictory to their messaging.

While this study focused on the ways in which CMOs framed the issue of climate change to the wider public, further qualitative research involving interviews with key decision-makers within these CMOs may provide further information about this apparent shift in blaming capitalism. Both the shifts observed in this study and described regarding the wider social context are likely influenced by material and historical factors. Previous attempts at shifting public opinion, political will, and policies have worked to some extent given some level of progress in the development of renewable energy and international climate policies. Even though CMOs have always stated these efforts were not enough, the world has crossed certain climate thresholds that suggest that these reformist approaches are not sufficient to address the issue, at the very least not in a timely manner. Furthermore, despite the changes that have taken place, emissions continue to rise, with market forces being the primary cause. Anti-capitalism may be increasingly seen as the more realistic solution because green growth has not been proven capable of decoupling emissions from growth (Haberl et al., 2020).

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