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Identity Politics and Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order: The Case of Europe

by

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Introduction

Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European regional order remains a paragon of the liberal international order (LIO). Its constitutive regional organizations – most notably, the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Council of Europe (CoE) – have found new purpose and missions. Yet all is not well in this 'regional-LIO,' as there is contestation over its principles along multiple dimensions - from security, to economics, to community and identity. My chapter focuses on the latter, arguing that we are witnessing a period of identity contestation on the continent. This is playing out not just in East Europe (Hungary, Poland), but in the West as well (France, Germany, Netherlands).

If the past 50 years have seen the slow and uneven consolidation of an inclusive and post-national European identity, today this same identity is increasingly questioned and challenged by identity contestation at the national level. I make this case by considering the Federal Republic of Germany, showing how debates over German identity and national identity have acquired a more inward-looking edge in the period since 2014. During this same period, the EU - that supposed champion of European identity - has through its policies and practices facilitated this national-level hardening of identity.

The chapter develops this argument in four steps. First, I return to the volume's central concept of deep contestation (Lake and Weiner, 2023) and drill down to theorize the processes - causal mechanisms and social practices - through which such contestation occurs. Second, I survey the growth of identity politics across the EU since 2015 and provide a baseline – the Union's commitment to fostering a European identity – for understanding such politics. Third, I provide evidence of identity contestation in contemporary Germany, highlighting the role played by various mechanisms and practices. I conclude with a glass-

half-full/glass-half-empty assessment of identity contestation in contemporary Europe, and with a plea for pluralism as we theorize it.

Deep Contestations of the Liberal Order – Process & Practice

In this volume's opening pages, Lake and Wiener ask: 'when and why have deep contestations of the LIO arisen?' (Lake and Wiener, 2023: 5). This is an excellent question, answers to which are important for both theory-building and policy reasons. My chapter adds a processual dimension to it, exploring how and through what kinds of processes such contestation occurs. Indeed, as Lake and Weiner later argue, "deep contestation may occur over substantial periods of time and need not be resolved quickly" (Lake and Weiner, 2023: 9). How, though, to capture this temporal, processual dimension?

Meta-theoretically and philosophically, there is a by now widely held view – by both positivists/critical-realists and interpretivists - that a complete explanation in the social sciences must not only answer the why or sketch the structural preconditions for action, but also illuminate the how behind it (Johnson, 2006; Hedstroem and Ylikoski, 2010) or ways of doing things (Adler, 2019: chapter 4). Adequate explanations, in other words, require static snapshots and motion pictures. In terms of policy, if we wish to counter the inward-looking identity politics currently playing out in the LIO, we need a fine-grained understanding of how, exactly, it is happening.

By drilling down in this way, I shed light on the domestic politics of deep contestation. To date, we have left this job to our colleagues in comparative politics. Indeed, as Lake and Weiner argue (2023: 20-21), it is high time that our 'analysis should turn to the politics of global ordering.' Deep contestation, as it were, starts at home.

To add a process dimension – the motion picture - to deep contestations, we need to start with a definition. Deep contestation 'occurs when actors reject (not modify) foundational elements of an order. Contestation may lead to non-compliance but under deep contestation

non-compliance must be intentional, in that it is explicitly justified by discursive disagreement. Non-compliance occurs not by pleading an "exception" to a rule or norm but as a rejection of the rule or norm as normatively appropriate.' In other words, 'in deep contestation foundational elements are no longer accepted by significant members of the community and are "up for grabs"' (Lake and Weiner, 2023: 8-9).

This definition, while an excellent start, underspecifies the how of deep contestation. To explore this how question, I draw upon two research programmes – one on causal mechanisms and the other on social practices. Causal mechanisms are the pathway or process by which an effect is produced, or a purpose is accomplished (Gerring, 2008: 178). In lay terms, they are the cogs and wheels that connect A to B; they put causal effects into motion. Meta-theoretically, it is the move to scientific-critical realism that creates an opening for a processual understanding of cause based on unobservables – those mechanisms.

In the social sciences, causal mechanisms have been theorized by analytic sociologists (Hedstroem and Ylikoski, 2010), and a growing number of political scientists (Wendt, 1999; Hall, 2003; George and Bennett, 2005; Mahoney, 2010; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 2013). Most of these scholars have been concerned with the application of causal mechanisms in empirical research, which immediately raises issues of method. How do we see and measure a mechanism in action? The consensus answer is that we use process tracing (Bennett and Checkel, 2015) and, more recently, Bayesian process tracing (Fairfield and Charman, 2022) to collect data and look for the observable implications of our hypothesized causal mechanisms.[1] A variety of qualitative (interviews, document analysis, archival research, political ethnography) and quantitative methods (surveys, agent-based modelling) are used to collect the data.

Yet, causal mechanisms are not the only game in town. Meta-theoretically, a second way to put the social world into motion is to theorize in terms of practices. Building on

[1] Bayesian process tracing formalizes the data analysis of the method through the application of Bayesian logic and math.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus by linking it to a theory of action, practice theorists define practices as 'socially meaningful patterned actions that […] simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.' Practices are 'meaning making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities' (Adler, 2019: 109; see also Lechner and Frost, 2018). In lay terms, they are ways of doing things. Meta-theoretically, it is a combination of continental social theory and American pragmatism that creates an opening for an interpretive processual understanding of social dynamics.

Practices become socially meaningful and make things happen when they are elevated to the group, to 'communities of practice' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 8). This translation from the individual to the collective occurs through diffusion processes and socialization. Adler (2019: 119), for example, views communities of practice as sites where their 'members socialize one another and learn from each other by and through practice.'

The invocation of such processes by practice theorists needs further thought. These scholars argue that theorizing socialization is not necessary or possible, as this is out-of-bounds meta-theoretically - getting inside heads, as it were (Pouliot, 2010: 14-22). This is odd, and it highlights a tension between ontology and empirical operationalization in practice theory: An approach that is processual to the core fails to theorize key parts of the process through which practices become socially meaningful.

I thus theorize this missing element by drawing upon earlier work on social learning (Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008) and socialization (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 2013; Checkel, 2017). Practices matter when they become embedded within communities of practice; socialization theory allows us to deconstruct and map such dynamics.

With practices now fully theorized, we need to consider how they will be observed. Specifically, what method(s) will allow us to collect data on social practices and then map and analyse the process through which such practices move from the individual to the

collective/group level? We can best do this by using ethnography, interviews and document analysis for the data collection and then standard process tracing to structure the data analysis. This combination has come to be called practice tracing (Pouliot, 2015; Pouliot, 2016; Mantilla, 2023).[2]

Deep Contestation and Identity/Identity-Politics. My processual thinking is not an exercise in abstract theorizing but done with the goal of applying it to contestations over identity. However, before proceeding with the analysis, I must first define the latter. Identities are collective beliefs about the definition of the group and its membership that are held by most members. They are rarely constructed in a single arena, which means they may be fostered by institutions, public debate and elite competition for power, while being shaped by everyday social practices (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009: 4). This operationalization is intentionally broad and justified on both inter-disciplinary grounds (having a definition that integrates understandings from political science and sociology) and empirical grounds (identities being shaped in multiple arenas).

Contestations over national identities do not play out in a vacuum; there is a global and - especially in Europe – regional context to consider. Regional identities are thus the identity concepts, statements and policies articulated – for my purposes – by regional organizations. The European Union, for example, has issued official statements on identity and has acquired competencies in many areas (migration, citizenship, fundamental rights) that intersect with national identities.

At the state level, I examine national identities. Like most contemporary students of nationalism, I do not view these identities in essentialist terms, but as outcomes of political and social processes. Their content can vary widely and may include ethnic, linguistic and cultural

[2] Some practice theorists would object to this mainstreaming of their methods, arguing that it does a disservice to the theory's relational ontology. My response is that practice scholars disagree on many issues (Drieschova, Brueger and Hopf, 2022; Hopf, 2022) and it is better at this point 'to let a thousand flowers bloom.'

dimensions, as well as shared commitments to values and rights. My understanding of national identities thus builds upon Anderson's pioneering work (2006 [1983]), viewing nations as 'imagined communities.'

These national identities – and this is key for the present chapter - are changing because of identity politics, which are a broad set of processes – regional-national, micro-macro, material-social, collective-individual – through which identities are formed. These processes, as argued above, should be viewed in two meta-theoretically distinct ways, as causal mechanisms and as social practices.

The Argument. My bet is that we will better understand deep contestation of the liberal order by drilling down and exploring how it occurs. I have made a principled argument that we get leverage on that how question by theorizing process in terms of causal mechanisms and social practices. But what mechanisms and what practices? The short answer is I do not know, as the larger project from which this chapter draws is built on an exploratory, inductive research design (Checkel, 2022).

Nonetheless, I have several hunches. Regarding the causal mechanisms promoting contestation over identity, the instrumentalization of it in recent years should bring to the fore a strategic, cost-benefit, what's-in-it-for-me mechanism. Political parties and political actors might shape their discourse on identity strategically, to capture more voters. A different, argumentative mechanism (persuasion? social influence?) could play out as academics and public intellectuals debate the boundaries and content of national identities in a de-globalizing liberal order.

On social practices, a number come to mind that might be behind contestations over identity. At the regional and national levels, we are witnessing a proliferation of new bordering practices that are quite literally re-defining who is and is not part of a community (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012). One example of such dynamics is the pushback practices of the

EU's Frontex Border and Coast Guard Agency; another example, would be the proliferating practice of states establishing immigrant detention centres as extra-territorial spaces where migrants have no rights (Australia, Italy, and others).

Identity Politics and the European Regional Order

As I write in late-2023, the European regional order remains a mini-paragon of the liberal international order. The institutions undergirding it – the EU, NATO, the CoE - are robust and, in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, refining and expanding their missions and competencies. The EU and NATO have moved the fastest in this regard. Yet, by mid-2023, even Europe's IO laggard - the CoE – had moved to redefine and expand its mission, convening its fourth ever summit in May of that year. The purpose of the summit was clear: 'to refocus its mission, in the light of new threats to democracy and human rights, and to support Ukraine.'[3]

More important, these regional institutions remain committed in theory if not always in practice – to the four basic principles of the LIO: (1) all humans are equal; (2) a commitment to free and open markets, premised on the free movement of goods and capital; (3) democracy; and (4) assessing claims by facts established through scientific knowledge (Lake and Weiner, 2023: 13-15).

Despite these developments, the European order – like the LIO (Lake, Martin, Risse, 2021) – is under stress. In this volume's vocabulary, Europe is witnessing contestation over its constitutive principals. In this chapter, I focus on one – especially important – principle: the commitment to human equality. Across contemporary Europe, a broad range of ethnonationalist critics – political leaders, political parties, social movement organizations, ordinary citizens - directly challenge this principle, implying a racial or national hierarchy that

[3] At the summit – held in Iceland - Council members issued the Reykjavik Declaration, which re-committed the CoE to its core missions of democracy promotion and human rights, while also broadening its mandate to include the environment and climate change, and a 'future international comprehensive compensation mechanism' for Ukraine in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of the country. Council of Europe, 2023.

treats ‘others’ or ‘outsiders’ as inferior (see also Lake and Weiner, 2023: 13). This critique links a core principle of the LIO to the identity politics playing out across Europe.

The baseline for these new identity politics is that the European regional order - since at least the 1970s – has had a constitutive identity dimension. In 1973, the then European Community issued a ‘Declaration on European Identity’ (Bulletin, 1973), and we now have 50 years of survey data and research on it. What do we know about European identity? It is compatible with and secondary to national identities; it is held most strongly among the middle and upper classes; it is stronger in the original West-European core than in East-European EU member states; and it appears stronger when measured with surveys and other quantitative methods as opposed to immersive and ethnographic techniques.[4]

More specifically and in terms of content, European identity today has both cultural and political components: Europe as a cultural community of shared values; and Europe as a political community of shared democratic practices. Its core values include human dignity, freedom of movement, democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights (e-Medine, 2021; see also *Economist*, 2023b).

We also know a good deal about the processes through which a European identity is being formed. These include member-state nationals being posted to the EU Commission, whereby some are socialized into the norms and values of the European project (Hooghe, 2005); Europeanized public spheres shaping identity (Diez Medrano, 2009; Risse, 2010); and interactions among students (Stoeckel, 2016) or ordinary citizens, enabled by the internal market’s four freedoms, fostering a European identity (Favell, 2008; Fligstein, 2009; Kuhn, 2015).

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the key question is whether we are witnessing deep contestation over this emerging/nascent European identity. My answer has two parts. At

[4] I summarize a vast literature here. See, especially, Holmes (2000); Bruter (2005); Hooghe (2005); Favell (2008); Checkel and Katzenstein (2009); Diez Medrano (2009); Holmes (2009); Fligstein (2009); Risse (2010); and Kuhn (2015).

the regional level, we see actors like the EU engaging in practices that may be setting the stage for subsequent contestation. At the national level, contestation over identity is already occurring but connects only indirectly to debates over identity and community that are constitutive of the European regional order.

Is there identity contestation at the regional level? In terms of discourse, during 2017-2019, a transnational European movement – the Identitarian Movement / Generation Identity – began to promote contestation over issues of identity. However, for a number of reasons, this movement lost force. If it ever was, it is no longer a mover and shaker when it comes to identity contestation (Gattinara, 2022; see also Bennhold, 2018).

What about the EU? As one of the prime drivers and creators of European identity, one might expect a reaction from it, if there was emerging identity contestation. In terms of discourse, one sees EU leaders and bodies (the Commission) invoking an identity discourse in recent years, but it is only indirectly about European identity and comes in reaction to external shocks and not endogenous identity contestation.

In this regard, the EU's response to the emergence of Covid in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is telling. In the early months of the pandemic, the Union repeatedly expressed its solidarity with Italy as it became Europe's Covid hotspot. In the wake of Russian aggression, the EU has both condemned the act and justified its response in terms of European values and norms. While this discourse is far more than 'cheap talk' – statements and EU Council declarations on Covid solidarity have been followed with a highly distributional, supra-national pandemic recovery fund – it does nothing to change the secondary nature of European identity.

Overall, there is little evidence of discursive deep contestation over European identity – largely because it matters only at the margins and is held only by a minority of Europeans (Fligstein, Polyakova and Sandholtz, 2012). As I argue below, there is identity contestation in

Europe, but the action is elsewhere (nation states), and the target is the equality principles constitutive of the LIO.

Before leaving the regional/EU-level, it is important to note one area – social practices - where the Union has enabled identity contestation on the continent. Here, a series of EU bordering practices – all enacted since the 2015-16 refugee crisis – are key. This crisis and the fear of migrants, migration and outsiders that stand behind it, is the central trigger for the identity contestation we see in contemporary Europe.

Regarding these practices of re-bordering, what has the EU done? At its external borders, the Commission and Council have enabled a new practice of 'pushback,' at times by the EU's own Frontex Border and Coast Guard Agency (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022) and many more times by the coast guards of members states (Smith, 2023). In a more bottom-up manner, twelve member states have asked the Commission to update the Schengen Border Code to allow for the building of new physical barriers at the EU's external frontiers (Brzozowski, 2021; see also Simmons, this volume).[5]

In other cases, the EU simply ignores new rebordering practices in member states. Consider Italy, where the government has set up migrant detention facilities as extra-territorial spaces where international refugee law does not apply (because the Italian state border has been 'moved' from the Mediterranean coast to the walls of the detention centre).[6]

To sum up, at the European regional level, there is a mixed picture on how and whether the discourse and practices of regional actors are spurring identity contestation. As for discourse about or practices relating to European identity, there is no contestation – which is really no surprise. There is for sure a new and stronger solidarity discourse coming from the

[5] A question beyond this chapter's scope is whether such practices by the EU are enabled and made possible by their proliferation across the developed world in recent years: Australia detaining migrants on offshore islands; the US Border Patrol engaging in its own pushback along the southern border with Mexico; and migrants seeking to enter a post-Brexit United Kingdom possibly ending up in Rwanda. The EU, in other words, is not a first mover in this area.
[6] For discussions on the Italian case, I thank Maxine Both.

EU, the Commission and Council. And 'solidarity talk' always has some connection to identity and community (Jones, 2013; Kaplan, 2022). At the same time, the new solidarity discourse has sparked little contestation.

EU and member state practices, in contrast, have linked to nation-state identity dynamics. Indeed, there ***is*** contestation over identity in Europe today, but it is playing out at the national level. The EU is a bit player in this drama and the identity being contested is bound up with the LIO and its principle of human equality, where all members of a community are equal.

The New Politics of Identity in Germany

Germany is an excellent illustrative case for exploring these LIO/EU/nation-state identity dynamics. Indeed, since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, the country has had multiple rounds of debate over the contours and content of its national identity. Is its identity defined by what it is not ('never again' to the horrors perpetrated by national socialism)? How European is the country? What is the proper balance between civic and ethnic conceptions of identity? Is Germany a country of immigration? (Habermas, 1990; Brubaker, 1998; Blank and Schmidt, 2003; Baban, 2006; Sayner, Hertner and Colvin, 2015; Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck, 2019; Perron, 2021).

These earlier debates, while crucial for Germany and its development as a modern, fit-for-the-21st-century nation state, occurred disconnected from the core norms and principles of the LIO or any contestation over them. However, the current debates over identity/national-identity are different, as we are witnessing identity contestation, much of which links back to one or more principles of the LIO.

My telling of the German case proceeds in four parts. First, I discuss my data and methods; second, I contextualize the German Case. Third, I recount the state of play on German national identity circa 2014-16, establishing a baseline for the current period of identity

contestation. Fourth, I drill down and explore in more detail the German identity debates of recent years.

Data and Methods. The data come from a larger project on how countries construct their identities in different regional settings, in an era defined by 'de-globalization' and inward-looking nationalism (Checkel, 2022). Eventually, a full set of qualitative and quantitative methods will be employed to see how Germans talk about (document analysis; discourse methods; surveys; survey experiments) and enact and negotiate their identities (relational interviews; political ethnography; ethnography). However, at this point, the data is mainly textual, surveying leading German newspapers - *Bild am Sonntag*, *Die Zeit*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (the three with the highest circulation in Germany) - as well as party programmes, in two years: 2014 and 2019. We coded a total of 236 articles for the two years, working inductively to capture themes in terms of how Germans talk about their national identity (Kropp and Minatti, 2023: Appendix).

This textual data provides a (static) snapshot of how Germans spoke about their identity, in two different years. Yet, I am interested in the motion picture, as it were, exploring what causal mechanisms and social practices stand behind and are producing the identity contestation that emerges between 2014 and 2019. I need interview and ethnographic data to capture these processual dynamics, which I do not yet have. Therefore, in the analysis below, my presentation of the causal mechanisms and social processes driving identity contestation in Germany is preliminary.

Identity Politics – Beyond Germany and Beyond Europe. Germany is not alone in debating its national identity, the role and place of outsiders and migrants in shaping its national community. The 2015-16 European refugee crisis has spurred similar identity debates in a number of EU member states (France, Denmark, Sweden) and other European states such as Switzerland (Hehli, 2023; Henley, 2023). At almost the same time, the United Kingdom was

holding its June 2016 Brexit referendum, where similar debates over UK national identity were playing out (Ford and Sobolewska, 2018; Makarychev, 2018; Manners, 2018).

And, of course, the issue is bigger than Europe. In North America, Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in 2016 triggered a new and different debate over American national identity, with terms like white nationalism and white protectionism entering the national discourse for the first time (Smith and King, 2021). In Asia, since his election in 2014, Narendra Modi has launched a new round of debate over and reconstruction of Indian identity, where Hindu nationalism is becoming dominant, at the expense of the country's previous secular values (Jaffrelot, 2021).

German National Identity, Circa 2014-16. I begin with an identity snapshot, in this case, German identity circa 2014-16. Nearly 15 years into the new millennium, Germans were increasingly at ease feeling 'German' and in seeing that identity in a positive way (Gehring, 2016). For many years after World War II, it had been defined by a negative and by collective guilt: never again to be what Germans had become during the era of national socialism (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017). Now – by 2014 – it was seen in more positive terms as a national community that (mostly) accepted external others (the EU, migrants) and values (human rights) in a broad conception of Germanness (Nedelsky, 2023).

For sure, Germany did not have the reputation of, say, Canada as a classic country of immigration and multi-culturalism. Yet, it had come a long way from the identity embodied in the Nazi era or even what Brubaker (1998) had described as its ethnic conception of identity. One saw this more expansive sense of community in various ways. As already noted, surveys – especially the EU's Eurobarometer – continued to show Germans as a people comfortable with being both German and European (Eurobarometer, 2015: Part II). In addition, college-age Germans had become enthusiastic participants in the EU's Erasmus university exchange

program, where they not only studied, but also strengthened their self-identification as Europeans (Stoeckel, 2016).

This snapshot suggests that the initial German response to the European refugee crisis of 2015-2016 – one largely defined by welcome and openness – was no fluke (Funk, 2016). This was seen in political acts and statements. There is Merkel's well-known August 2015 'we can manage this' / 'Wir schaffen das' speech (Delcker, 2015). Equally important, however, was Merkel's appearance at a press conference in Austria in mid-September, where a journalist asks if her welcoming gestures might not serve to motivate even more refugees to head for Germany. Her reaction is emotional and emphatic: 'Honestly, if from now on we have to start apologizing for showing a friendly face in emergency situations, then this is not my country' (Seibt, 2015).

For Germany, the refugee crisis began in August 2015, when the federal government opened the country's borders to refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war and, to a lesser extent, from North Africa. By December 2016, Germany had accepted nearly 1.3 million asylum seekers – by far the largest number in the EU. In the early months of the crisis – August to December 2015 – the Germans did 'manage this,' to paraphrase Merkel. At a policy/practical level, the federal and state governments moved quickly to set up processing centres across the country. These mostly worked well – Berlin being an unfortunate exception[7] – and especially so in Bavaria, which was experiencing the highest direct inflow of refugees (across the shared border with Austria).

These same months (September–December 2015), saw many Germans enact - at the level of practice – a welcoming, inclusive sense of community. This was most clearly seen at train stations around the country, where many Germans – citizens, not local government

[7] I say unfortunate as Berlin is the federal capital and more multi-cultural than anywhere in Germany. I was living in Berlin at this time (late 2015), and witnessed the refugees being warmly welcomed, but then dispatched into a bureaucratic morass, which led to many less-than-ideal outcomes – large numbers being housed in hangars at the old Tempelhof airfield, for example.

officials – warmly greeted and offered clothing and other practical necessities to arriving refugees. At Munich central station in early September, for example, Syrian refugees arriving from Austria were greeted with handwritten signs reading 'welcome to Germany' in English and Arabic, and volunteers handed them bottled water and chocolate bars; families with babies even got baby packs with 'nappies, baby cream, wet wipes and a jar of baby food' (Connolly, 2015).

However, already in the fall of 2015, signs emerged that all was not well in terms of accepting and incorporating the refugees. Partly, this was a personnel and infrastructure issue; so many refugees had been let in so fast that the system could not cope. Stories began to emerge of exhausted volunteers and undelivered services, and many local governments found themselves lacking the means to process and – especially – house the refugees they had been allocated (Smale, 2016). Much more important and contributing to what analysts have called a 'Stimmungswechsel' (change of mood), were events in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015.[8] During the celebrations, a number of German women were assaulted and sexually harassed outside the city's main train station. The perpetrators were largely foreigners, immigrants of Arab and North African origin, including some recently admitted refugees (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017: 123-125).

This event received extensive media attention and marked a clear inflection point. From the early months of 2016, while the discussion was still about refugees, it was now increasingly linked to a larger debate over the impact of foreigners on German society, with the latter explicitly tied to Germans' own sense of identity. One sees precisely this change in the policies and views advocated by the Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party. Founded in 2013

[8] The stage for this change of mood was set a few weeks earlier, when Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer issued a very pointed – and public – rebuke of Merkel's refugee policy at the CSU party congress in Munich. Reuters (2015); and Brady (2015).

as a populist, right-wing, Euro-sceptic party, by mid-2016 it was increasingly viewed as anti-foreigner and nativist.

This shift was very clear in a March 2016 interview by then AfD head Frauke Petry with *Der Spiegel*, the most widely read German news magazine. In it, she argued that 'the immigration of Muslims will change our culture,' linked immigration to a need to rethink (and take pride in) German identity, and explicitly warned of the danger of merging that identity 'into a larger Europe so as to forever prevent the resurrection of German nationalism.' (Beyer and Fleischhauer, 2016). Put differently, according to the AfD, Germany identity was now under threat both from European integration and from the presence and accommodation of foreigners within the country.

Identity Contestation in Contemporary Germany. By 2019, a broad, multi-level debate was underway over the content of German identity; it was playing out among political parties; youth movements like Generation Identity; and NGOs such as the Expert Council of German Foundations and its 'Integration Barometer.'[9] Compared to earlier years, the identity talk had taken on a harder edge and leading politicians – Chancellor Angela Merkel, most notably – had pulled back on their initial embrace of refugees and what this implied for Germans' sense of community (Calamur, 2018; Vonberg, 2018).

In this section, I drill down and examine more closely the contours and dynamics of this German debate over identity and national identity. The purpose is to look for evidence of deep contestations, the actors and processes behind them, and whether and how they link back to core principles of the European regional order / LIO.

To start, recall that deep contestation 'occurs when actors reject (not modify) foundational elements of an order. … [I]n deep contestation foundational elements are no longer accepted by significant members of the community and are "up for grabs"' (Lake and

[9] The Integration Barometer, a survey of more than 5,000 people randomly selected and interviewed by phone, has been conducted every two years since 2010, with the most recent one held in 2022 (https://www.svr-migration.de/en/barometer/).

Weiner, 2023: 8-9). My analysis above already hints at how this will be operationalized for Germany and its debates over identity. The 'significant members' are political parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a part of the population in the former East. On the latter, support for the AfD, with its anti-foreigner, nationalist identity discourse is double in the eastern Laender (26%) compared to the former West (13%) (Economist, 2023a).

Has the AfD rejected 'foundational elements' of the European regional order / LIO? For the LIO, they have explicitly modified the core principle of equality, arguing that (some) foreigners within Germany's borders should be treated differently. For Europe, their inward-looking and nativist take on German identity makes it less compatible with the (more) inclusive European identity promoted by the European Union. But do these discursive moves constitute rejection, or modification? At this point (late 2023), the evidence points to the latter.

If the discourse was targeting *all* foreigners in Germany and was also targeting the EU/European identity, then this might constitute a rejection of the principle of equality, as some large fraction of the German national community would no longer be treated as equals. But this is not the case. On the former, the 'targeted' foreigners constitute a much smaller entity – the refugees who arrived in 2015-16 and, more recently, numerically-small groups of asylum-seekers. Indeed, it is telling that – in 2022-23 – this anti-foreigner discourse was not extended to a large new group of foreigners entering Germany: Ukrainians fleeing the February 2022 invasion of their country.

On the EU and European identity, while the AfD started life – in 2012 - as a Euro-sceptic movement, this focus was displaced - by 2017-18 – with an anti-migrant discourse, where the Union certainly is targeted as a source for all the unwanted migrants (Lees, 2018). However, this is an argument and discourse against EU policy, not against European identity.[10]

[10] More recently, the AfD has again sharpened its critique of the EU, deriding it as a 'failed project.' However, this failure continues to be linked to policy, especially on migrants. Deutsche Welle (2023).

Moreover, if one looks on the ground, at what the AfD does – its practices - the picture on the degree/level of contestation is even less clear. It is a right-wing nationalist party that for sure has some principled disagreement with norms of both the LIO and European regional order. But it otherwise plays the game of German politics, competing in elections and cooperating with other parties – mainly the Christian Democrats in the East – to get politics done at the local level (Schultheis, 2023). In other words, it does not contest – deeply or otherwise - the core democratic principles embedded in both the LIO and European regional order.

While it is thus unclear whether groups such as the AfD are engaged in deep contestations – defined as rejection of core norms – their modification of those same norms has been politically consequential. Indeed, by 2019, the place of foreigners and outsiders in the German national community had – compared to 2014 – become a political hot potato, with the number of articles portraying German identity as being anti-migrant more than tripling across the two years, going from 10 to 35 (Kropp and Minatti, 2023:10-11).[11]

Not surprisingly, much of this discourse was generated by the AfD. The party leadership now linked an increase in crime in Germany to migrants and the 2015-16 'refugee wave' (Janker, 2019; Wagner, 2019). The party, moreover, criticised the right of asylum as a whole, a theme one sees being picked up by other political parties as well.

More recently, the AfD has merged its concerns about refugees and migrants into a more general anti-foreigner discourse. However, it is – again - a discourse targeting only smaller groups of foreigners. For example, after a scuffle at a high-school graduation party in Görlitz (eastern Germany) during the summer of 2023, the AfD seized on the event to argue that 'rising immigration is threatening the German way of life'; the aggressors, in this case, 'were quite clearly foreigners' (Chazan, 2023a). In the fall of 2023, the AfD capitalized on this

[11] Kropp and Minatti identified and coded 111 articles from German media in 2019 where identity discourse was present.

anti-foreigner discourse, to make its best showing ever in two *western* Laender elections, polling 14.6% of the vote in Bavaria and 18.4% in Hesse (Chazan, 2023b).

It is this spread – beyond the AfD and beyond the former East - of identity contestation over foreigners and, especially, migrants that is most telling. Indeed, leading figures in both the Christian Social Union (CSU) and in some cases even the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) now also articulate an anti-migrant discourse (Wefing, 2019). In one case, the former President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Hans-Georg Maaßen (CDU), argued that Germany had too many refugees (Bittner and Lau, 2019). In another, Ralph Brinkhaus, then CDU fraction leader in the Bundestag, argued that the 'number of deportations is too low', calling for tougher laws (Hollstein and Eichinger, 2019).

As for social practices, the German government during 2019 articulated a discourse favoring the implementation of tougher measures against refugees who did not integrate and assume a 'German identity.' As a result, one new practice was to strip people of their asylum status if they went on holidays in their country of origin (*BILD am Sonntag*, 2019). Commentators also debated whether foreigners needed German citizenship and German language skills as indicators for German identity.

To sum up this snapshot of 2019 – with updating to 2023 - the discourse of Germany as an immigration country – seen in 2014 - had lost its dominance and instead had given way to more fragmented self-understandings. The latter included representations of Germany as anti-immigrant and, in some cases, anti-foreigner. These changing German identity discourse and practices were targeting core principles of the LIO – that all humans are created equal; they also indirectly challenged the outward looking identity discourse bound up with European identity.

These contestations have been consequential for broader public views on the role of immigrants, refugees and foreigners in Germany's national community. A May 2023 survey of

1,360 eligible voters found that 54% believed the disadvantages of immigration outweighed the advantages for Germany, while only 33% said the benefits canceled out the disadvantages (Kinkartz, 2023).

So, there has been identity contestation in Germany. While it has not been deep contestation, it has nonetheless linked to several core norms of the LIO and of the European order. But how did it happen – through what causal mechanisms and social practices? Starting with the latter, at the EU level, we have witnessed the growth of new and more exclusionary bordering practices that, at a minimum, helped set the stage for identity contestation in Germany. At the national level in Germany, new practices of (re-) defining the category migrant and foreigner also contributed to the contestation dynamics.

Regarding mechanisms, there is unmistakable evidence that a strategic, party competition mechanism has propelled identity contestation in important ways. Mainstream parties – especially the CSU but increasingly also the CDU – have adopted their positions and discourse over migrants and foreigners for fear of losing voters to the far right and to stay competitive in the former East. There may also be a diffusion mechanism at work, where German political actors and broader public look abroad and learn from how other countries are dealing with migrants and refugees in a de-globalising world.

Conclusions

I conclude with several reflections on identity contestation in contemporary Europe - its extent and how to measure it better; and then briefly assess the implications of my analysis for a long-running debate in political science – the need (or not) for pluralism.

Deep Identity Contestation – It Depends / A Near-Miss. Is there deep identity contestation in Europe today – at the level of the European regional order and within a core EU member state such as Germany? My two-part answer is ‘yes, but’ and ‘probably not.’ At the European level, we do see deep identity contestation, *but* not where I expected it – over the discourses

and practices constituting a European identity. Indeed, contestation over European identity is notable by its absence. European discourse and, especially, practices are certainly heightening contestation over core LIO norms such as human equality, where the role and place of migrants and refugees ('outsiders') in national communities in increasingly called into question. This is an important and consequential debate, but it is not one about the contours and limits of any European identity constitutive of the regional order.

At the national, German level, I have argued that while we do see contestation over elements of the country's identity since 2018-19, this does not constitute the deep form – so 'probably not.' The previous section presented evidence of such contestation over foreigners (migrants and refugees) and their place in the German national community, and why this does not equate to deep contestation.

My mixed bottom line is partly a function of how the volume defines deep contestation. Lake and Weiner (2023) theorize the why and who of such contestation, but this leaves unaddressed some key, second-order issues. In particular, *how encompassing must the contestation be, how much of it must occur* and by *how many significant groups* for things to tip into deep contestation? German national identity, like that for any nation-state, is a mosaic of different cultural and political elements. So, while Germans are clearly debating the role of outsiders in their community, there has been no wholesale shift in their sense of 'who we are.'

On the 'how much' and 'how many' dimensions, I do not know the right answer. For Germany, if you run a counterfactual and remove the AfD from its contemporary party-political, identity discourse, I suspect that we would not be talking about any identity contestation in the country. This thought experiment thus generates an (unsatisfying) answer to 'how many significant groups': More than one.

Methodologically, it may be useful to interpret my findings as a near miss for deep contestation in Germany today. With other concepts in the qualitative cannon, the addition of

near miss has led to better concept operationalization. In this regard, scholars of deep contestations might take a cue from work on critical junctures in historical institutionalism, where researchers have introduced 'near-miss critical junctures' to sharpen their conceptualizations and measurement (Capoccia, 2015: 165-66). To paraphrase Capoccia, the concept of near-miss deep contestation would add an important methodological tool to the theorizing of contestation scholars. Its addition would make space in their designs for potentially important negative cases in which deep contestation was possible but did not happen – the German case above - which improves analytical leverage.

Specifically, my German empirics suggest a two-fold, tipping point criteria for when contestation becomes deep contestation, thus operationalizing 'near miss.' First, we move from normal to deep contestation when the LIO's equality principle is questioned for all foreigners in a national community. For the AfD and Germany, this would mean adopting an identity discourse that also targeted EU nationals living in the country. Second, an *explicit* critique of European identity - linked to a need to keep foreigners out – would constitute a move to deep contestation.

Theorizing Contestation – A Need for Pluralism. As this volume is intended for a broader political science audience, it is fitting to conclude by linking my chapter to a long-running controversy in our discipline: the need for pluralism. This debate has waxed and waned for nearly a quarter of a century – with no clear conclusion or end point. Of course, there continue to be rumblings about the lack of pluralism. These can be found in discussions of meta-theory (Jackson, 2016; Katzenstein, 2022) and theory (Adler, 2013; Checkel, 2013; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013), but also at the more applied levels of research design and methods (della Porta and Keating, 2008; Simmons and Smith, 2021; Checkel, 2023) and ethics (Fujii, 2016; Kapiszewski and Wood, 2022).[12]

[12] The debate began with the perestroika movement in the early years of the new millennium, with perestroikans having some success at promoting institutional change within the American Political Science Association / APSA (Monroe, 2005;

My chapter is an addition to these rumblings. If this volume's central goal is to understand better the deep contestations that challenge the liberal international order, then I argued that we gain new knowledge on the *how* of such contestation by combining insights from interpretive Bourdieusian sociology and critical realist qualitative causal inference. Such pluralism will not magically fix the lack of it in our discipline. Instead, by contributing to the development of a rigorous *and* richer political science, it will add new currents to our conceptual debates, while producing a more complete empirical picture of the contestations playing out across the globe today.

McGovern, 2010; for critique, see Laitin, 2003). The Association got a new, more plural journal, *Perspectives on Politics*, and created a section dedicated to the study of qualitative methods. *Perspectives* has established a reputation for publishing a broad range of political science research; it has been led by editors with a strong commitment to pluralism (Isaac, 2015, for example). The new section - the Qualitative and Multi-Method Organized Section - has grown to be one of APSA's three largest organized sections, with over 1100 members; it also publishes a highly regarded, pluralist newsletter: Qualitative and Multi-Method Research.

Yet, despite these changes, pluralism remains a concept with little operational meaning. *APSR* has continued to oscillate around a neo-positivist/quantitative modal point, albeit with an important deviation during the 2020-24 period (Notes from the Editors, 2020; Notes from the Editors, 2022). More important, the past decade has witnessed an explosive growth in experiments and causal identification strategies, with causal inference - established experimentally and via advanced quantitative methods - the discipline's new gold standard (Thelen and Mahoney, 2015; Mize and Manago, 2022). This is clear evidence of a non-plural worldview in the discipline, one with little room for qualitative methods and no space at all for interpretive approaches.

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