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**International Institutions and Domestic Politics: Rethinking the
Institutions–Identity Nexus**

by

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Abstract: Identity politics are back – and the international institutions of the liberal order are taking the heat. While much analysis of the rejection of liberal institutions focuses on economic disadvantage or the influence of powerful states, this paper proposes a different explanation. I move beyond economics and power to theorize identity among ‘ordinary citizens’ as well as elites, capturing the subtle interplay between local and national identities and the broader senses of community promoted by international institutions and regional organizations. I argue the latter can and do shape identity, but these effects are refracted through domestic politics, and that daily lived experiences and articulated beliefs interact in this process. Identity, in other words, is constructed by both what we do and what we say.

My argument draws upon concepts and methods from international relations theory and social anthropology, adding value greater than either could deliver alone. The goal is to theorize in new ways where and how identities are constructed, and the role of institutions in this process.

The paper has four parts. I first explore how IR theorists and students of global governance have studied the international institution / identity relation, arguing that a reliance on a nation-state analogy and political science methods has hindered the development of a more complete understanding of how institutions shape community and identity. Second, I develop the theoretical argument – inspired by social anthropology – that is the essay’s core. Methods and data are then discussed in a third section, as a central claim is that my inter-disciplinary move (to social anthropology) has methodological consequences for IR theorists.

Fourth, I introduce the German case. It is not a fully developed case study; instead, I use it to demonstrate that Germans – from youth movements, to political parties, to the Chancellor – are debating what it means to be German and the country’s relation to Europe and European identity. In other words, it shows that the raw material is there, data that will allow me, at a later point, to apply the theory and methods advocated in the essay.

Identity politics are back – and the international institutions (IIs) of the liberal order are taking the heat. Populist anger at the organizations that underpin it – from the World Trade Organization, to the UN, to the European Union (EU) – was evident in the 2016 UK Brexit vote, in Trump’s 2016 ‘America First’ election victory, the 2017 French presidential and German federal election campaigns, and the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Why? In part, it is the policies these institutions pursue; equally important, it is the values – liberal democracy, human rights, immigrant integration – that legitimate and uphold those policies. As a mobilized citizenry shows us, those very values have led to a diminished and diluted sense of national control, of sovereignty and of national identity (Zuern, 2018: Preface).

While much analysis of the rejection of liberal institutions focuses on economic disadvantage or the influence of powerful states, this paper proposes a different explanation. I move beyond economics and power to theorize identity among ‘ordinary citizens’ as well as elites, capturing the subtle interplay between local and national identities and the broader senses of community promoted by IIs and regional organizations (ROs). I argue that IIs and ROs can and do shape identity, but these effects are refracted through domestic politics, and that daily lived experiences and articulated beliefs interact in this process. Identity, in other words, is constructed by both what we do and what we say. This ‘both/and’ theory is needed if we are to understand and counter the populist-nativist turn against the liberal order.

My argument draws upon concepts and methods from both international relations theory and social anthropology, adding value greater than either could deliver alone. Specifically, I advance a novel argument – combining interviews and other textual data with micro-level ethnographies of daily practice – to explain how IIs/ROs interact with domestic politics to reshape senses of community. My goal is to theorize in new ways where and how identities are

constructed, and the role of institutions in this process. The (changing) content of these identities is recovered inductively and ethnographically. International-relations (IR) scholars will gain novel insights on the shaping of identity and the tools needed to study it, while social anthropologists will benefit from my advocacy of process-based methods that capture the meaning-making at the heart of their studies.

For IR scholars interested in inter-state cooperation and its limits in the 21st century, I reconsider a paradigmatic case – the European Union – and argue that it is not so much a series of crises (sovereign debt, refugees, Brexit) that has weakened the organization; rather, it is an inability to foresee and counter the populist backlash that is eroding the very values on which it was founded.¹ Theorists of global governance, who were caught off-guard by the nativist-nationalist turn against the institutions of the liberal order, will benefit from the way I bring identity back to our thinking on governance.

While the essay's main focus is theoretical, I do nonetheless provide an empirical illustration – not so much to test the argument but to demonstrate that the theory has methodological implications. Given the identity politics at work across the European continent, I focus on Europe and the EU, with the main case being contemporary Germany – often hailed as a model of post-national consciousness and champion of the Union. Yet, this carefully nurtured European identity is being reshaped by a new identity politics spurred by the arrival of over 1 million refugees in 2015-2016. Testing the theory – I argue – requires a turn to ethnography, in this case, constructing a political ethnography of identity change in Germany and the EU's role in it.

¹ As I write – August 2020 – it is too early to tell if the Union's response to Covid-19 has reversed or lessened this weakening. Significant and bold moves (by the ECB; the 7.20 coronavirus recovery package agreed by EU leaders) have been combined with a weakening of the EU's commitment to uphold the rule of law in member states such as Hungary.

My theorizing will thus shed crucial light on the extent to which the norms and values of the liberal international order – specifically embodied in the EU – are weakening in an era defined by a new and deeply national identity politics. This matters for Europe and beyond. A ‘clearer European identity is not just a romantic goal; it is the only way to make [the EU] sustainable in the longer term’ (*Economist*, 2018b). If we see a lessening of the EU’s ability to shape German identity – as I suspect may be the case – this will be bad news for other global institutions. They too are under attack, identity politics loom large, yet – compared to the EU – their ability to counter such politics is limited and weak.

In the remainder of the paper, I first explore how IR theorists and students of global governance have studied the international institution / identity relation, arguing that a reliance on a nation-state analogy and political science methods has hindered the development of a more complete understanding of how institutions shape community and identity. Second, I develop the theoretical argument – inspired by social anthropology – that is the essay’s core. Methods and data are then discussed in a third section, as a central claim is that my inter-disciplinary move (to social anthropology) has methodological consequences for IR theorists.

Fourth, I introduce the German case. It is not a fully developed case study; instead, I use it to demonstrate that Germans – from youth movements, to political parties, to the Chancellor – are debating what it means to be German and the country’s relation to Europe and European identity. In other words, it shows that the raw material is there, data that will allow me, at a later point, to apply the theory and methods advocated in the essay. In the concluding section, I take a step back, arguing that a move to a more inter-disciplinary IR requires a hard-headed assessment of what we lose as well as what we gain.

I. International Institutions, Global Governance and Identity

To begin, I define identities as 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 simultaneously being shaped by everyday social practices (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009: 4).

IR theorists studying the RO–identity relation mostly focus on institutions, formal as well as informal (norms), and elites acting within or through them. These agents seek actively to construct an identity from the top down, as it were; one might call this the engineering view of identity (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Johnston, 2008). Related political science arguments build on Deutsch’s (1957) pioneering insight that community and shared identity can emerge through transactions and information flows (Kuhn, 2015). Here, identity is shaped through security communities (Adler and Barnett, 1998), communities of communication (Bruter, 2005) or public spheres (Risse, 2010, 2014) – all of which are facilitated by ROs.

Such research – not surprisingly – employs theory and methods favored by political scientists. Theoretically, a nation-state analogy looms large, where identity construction at the regional level follows a script like that seen in nation states, with elites playing a leading role, seeking to shape identity through institutions, discourses or the media. Identity is essentially measured by what we ‘say,’ as captured through surveys, structured interviews or discourses evident in public spheres – a methodological preference evident even in state-of-the-art IR theory applications (Hopf and Allan, 2016).

This top–down, institutional picture of ROs shaping identity is an important starting point. Yet, this political-science/IR scholarship misses other key arenas of identity construction, where individuals navigate multiple social environments and groups (schools, online communities, professional associations, political parties) and identity is shaped from the bottom

up, as social anthropologists have long argued (Holmes, 2000; Bellier and Wilson, 2000: ch.1). Their work on the RO–identity relation has described organizational culture and identity formation within a very specific arena – EU institutions (Shore, 2013; Abélès et al., 1993; Abélès, 2000; Zabusky, 2000; McDonald, 2012) – and generally shares the political science focus on just one-half of the relation: RO/supranational arenas → identities. More recent studies do pay attention to meaning making in local arenas and at the individual level (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Karakayali, 2018) – but fail to link it back to ROs.

If theory on international institutions has captured identity in an incomplete way – my argument above – then for students of global governance the problem is more one of neglect, as identity has not figured prominently in their thinking on institutions. Indeed, while the global governance literature accords ROs and international institutions a central place, it largely ignores their identity-shaping effects.

The state of the art for theorizing governance is arguably Michael Zuern’s *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy and Contestation*. This is a rigorously developed, conceptually tight, and empirically rich theory built on three pillars: general normative principles, (international) institutions, and the interaction of those institutions (Zuern, 2018: 249). Zuern situates his work within an emerging global politics paradigm in IR theory – one that moves beyond anarchy and views global politics as a ‘normative order that contains elements of institutional authority’ (Zuern, 2018: 253).²

Perhaps most important – especially for IR and global governance literatures that still fail to take domestic politics seriously – Zuern’s model allows for and expects contestation by social actors. This may take the form of a ‘populist backlash against open borders and public

² The theory I advance here – with its stress on identity and community as one element of this institutional authority – sits comfortably within such a paradigm.

authorities beyond the nation state,' where domestic actors question the transfer of authority to the international level (Zuern, 2018: 11, 253).

Here, but without invoking the term, Zuern hints at the power of identity politics to re-shape patterns of global governance. In this paper, I make those identity politics explicit and theorize them via a two-step argument where domestic discourse and practice are central. My argument thus speaks directly to a challenge Zuern issues to students of global governance: 'A closer analysis of this link between domestic structures and the global governance system is vital. It will tell us a lot about the future of national borders and the future of the global governance system' (Zuern, 2018: 265-266).

II. Institutions and Identity: Expanding the Theoretical Toolkit

To address these gaps in the institutions and governance literatures, I theorize the RO–identity relation via a two-step argument that captures top-down and bottom-up dynamics, and their interaction. First, I consider the tools through which the EU promotes a sense of shared community. These may be social – framing arguments in certain ways or fostering deliberative fora. Equally, they may be material – creating symbols (flags, coins, Eurovision song contest) or financing policies that blur pre-existing boundaries between identities (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). On the latter, consider the EU's Erasmus university exchange program, where we have evidence of its identity-shaping effects (Stoeckel, 2016).

Here, then, a RO promotes certain policies and practices among national agents. For a number of reasons – education levels, professional mobility – the latter are receptive to thinking of identity and community in multiple ways (Risse, 2010). This captures the political science insight of top-down identity construction through institutions. As students of identity within both states and ROs have argued (Inkeles, 1966; Johnston, 2008), it is useful to conceptualize this top-

down process as socialization, or the induction of actors into the norms and rules of a given community (Long and Hadden, 1985: 42–44).

Yet, to date, IR theorists studying ROs have invoked socialization in a way that does not do justice to its rich conceptual development in sociology and anthropology (Checkel, 2017). As socialization is about how the group/organizational setting shapes the individual, it is all too easy to ignore the agency of the latter (Epstein, 2012). In addition, socialization arguments often fail to recognize that any individual is simultaneously subject to multiple socializing environments; we thus need to conceptualize it as layered and multiple, as anthropologists would argue (Rodgers, 2017; see also Checkel, 2014). Consider again those Erasmus exchange students. They are likely subject to socializing influences from other arenas (families, social-media networks), in addition to their university exchange.

Second, and addressing these critiques, I explore individuals' daily lived experiences. Social anthropologists would argue that it is 'what people do' in the many socialization arenas – political parties, NGOs, professional and recreational associations or the military – that has a powerful effect in shaping identity (Favell, 2008; Holmes, 2009). The important theoretical point is that such domestic dynamics must be captured to understand fully any new sense of community promoted by regional organizations.

Identity is now being constructed from the bottom up and not necessarily overtly expressed. As such, it is best detected using insights from social anthropology, where it is measured through micro studies and ethnographic exploration (Draper, 1974; Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009). Ethnographically, one looks for several indicators of identity: boundaries (what is inside and outside; their permeability); changes in and contestation over boundaries; and narratives expressing the implicit or explicit content of identity (Adams, 2009: 319).

Given the level on which the theory operates and its social-constructivist ontology, its operationalization requires that I address two challenges. First, one needs to scale up, as my analysis explores at the micro level how individuals navigate a changing identity terrain. However, is there a micro–macro link, where the changes I study are detectible in policy and debates over a country’s sense of identity and community? Establishing such a connection will require examining whether and how the micro data resonates with – for example – changes in cultural representations, social discourse, laws, or party platforms.

Second, the argument is grounded in a constructivist ontology (Adler, 2013), where identities are shaped by social dynamics and (largely) non-strategic behaviour. Yet, identities can also be the focus of instrumental action, as political scientists remind us. It is quite possible that – say – an Alexander Gauland, co-leader of the Alternative for Germany political party during 2017-19, will shape the discourse about identity or the EU strategically, in ways that serve his interests or constituents’ concerns. Earlier research linking ROs to domestic politics (Solingen, 1998; Wilson, 2000) analyzes this type of strategic behaviour.

Drawing on such research will help delimit and better specify my central claims. The standard way to deal with such a control is to view it as an alternative explanation, where it is considered second, after the data collection for the main argument. My approach is different. I will consider RO–socialization–identity and the RO–politics–identity side by side, which means that I will be looking for evidence of both from the beginning. I thus take seriously the inferential challenge of so-called equifinality, where different processes/mechanisms can lead to the same outcome (Bennett and Checkel, 2015: ch.1).

Summary. My theory thus explores the how and where of identity change – and the role of ROs in it. It is quite explicitly inter-disciplinary. I theorize identity change – induced by

international institutions and ROs – as a two-step process. It begins with national elites and policymakers – those ‘closest’ to an RO, as it were – reconsidering or making more inclusive/exclusive national conceptions of who we are. The concepts (norm-driven change, socialization) and methods (interviews, surveys, process tracing) of political science and IR measure a possible change in identity by looking at what people say – in interviews or public/political discourse.

In the theory’s second step, I then place these individuals in the ‘thick’ domestic institutional-normative-discursive environments in which they enact their (possibly changed) identities. Key concepts (social practice) are now drawn from social anthropology, while the methods are a combination of political science (process tracing) and anthropological (interpretive interviewing, ethnography). The focus is now on what people do, in an ethnographic sense. This second part of the theory brings domestic politics ‘back in’ to our stories on identity change, but in a way much richer than standard political-science/IR accounts.

There are two things this set-up does not do. First, it does not pre-theorize the (changing) content of any identities; rather, I have chosen an ethnographic approach to recover them inductively (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007; see also Hopf, 2002). Put differently, I theorize process, not outcome – although the former is of course helping to shape the latter. Second, the theory does not operate at a macro-societal level. Additional process tracing is required to move the analysis to the level of (possibly) changing political discourse, policy or laws touching upon identity.

III. Methodological Implications of Inter-Disciplinarity

To make my inter-disciplinary argument operational – that is, to test it – requires data and methods, and not just any (political science) methods. In some cases, adding a new discipline to

the IR mix has only minor methodological implications. This would be the case, say, if the second discipline were sociology, as the latter shares many methods – and indeed a positivist epistemological core – with IR.

However, in my case, where the disciplinary turn is to social anthropology, there are methodological implications of an entirely different sort. In part, this has to do with the different – interpretive – basis of social anthropology. Yet, even when an IR theorist and a social anthropologist would seem to be on the same ground, both ‘doing interviews,’ say, the actual method employed is quite different. Transparency about my methods is thus essential, not so much because of debates in the broader discipline over ‘data access and research transparency’ (Symposium, 2016; Monroe 2018); rather, I want my theory to be applied by others and not just be the basis for illustrative examples.

Given my concern with measuring interactions among organizations and actors, process tracing is the most appropriate analytic approach for capturing the observable implications of the socialization, social practice and instrumental mechanisms sketched earlier. Put more formally, it is a positivist or (to nit-pick) a scientific-realist version of process tracing (Bennett and Checkel, 2015; see also Beach and Pedersen, 2019). In less philosophical language, I employ process tracing to uncover and track my mechanisms and how they lead to certain outcomes. The causal logic – for there is one – is processual and mechanism-based, not correlational.

The methods for collecting data on those observable implications – will be document analysis, interviewing and political ethnography. At the EU level, key documents will be those that implicate identity directly (Bulletin, 1973) or indirectly (for example, policy statements on student exchange). Also relevant will be the EU’s own efforts to gauge citizen identification with it: Eurobarometer surveys have included identity questions since 1982. At the national level, I

will analyze German documents that address identity issues (citizenship, immigration and integration, Europe's borders); these will be collected from the media, government, NGOs, foundations and think tanks.

With the interviewing, I need to say more, as my approach is both main stream and positivist, and interpretive. On the former, I will interview elites – mainly in the first part of the study – in way designed to minimize interaction and maximize data extraction. I am interested in what they say about their identity. This is a standard and quite popular approach to interviewing (Mosley, 2013: chs.1, 3, 9; Bryman and Bell, 2016: ch.11).

However, given the challenge of inferring anything – about identity, in this case – in such a decontextualized, one-off setting, I turn to a more interpretive type of interviewing as well. In this case, I use a protocol, but the interviews are not designed as a one-way interrogation seeking specific answers. My technique will instead be ethnographic, which means remaining open to moments when I do not know what to make of the exchange. This will keep the focus on 'verification of perceptions' rather than on 'authorization of results' (Borneman, 2014: 443). It is what the late Lee Ann Fujii has called relational interviewing (Fujii, 2017). The goal is to understand how people identify with the EU, but also and crucially how their daily lived experience – what they do – and socialization in various arenas may amplify, weaken or simply complicate that identification (Favell, 2008). This kind of interviewing can also reveal if an individual wears his/her identity like a skin, or like a sweater, with the latter suggestive of a strategic use of it.

My goal for the German case is 60–70 interviews with a broad cross-section of German elites and citizens. These will include: officials in the foreign and interior ministries, those dealing with refugees, as well as officials tasked specifically to interact with the EU; key actors

in the main political parties, as well as in their challengers on the right (Alternative for Germany) and left (die Linke, Greens); academics; journalists; NGO leaders; or German citizens with mixed identity (first- and second-generation offspring of Turkish and other labour migrants). In building the sample, I will use snowballing techniques – widely endorsed by ethnographers (Gusterson, 2008) – and draw on contacts from earlier projects and on my German scholarly networks. The sample will include both those comfortable with European identity and those who reject such external influences on Germany’s sense of community.

The ethnographic component of my methods toolkit is, again, quite a departure for IR in methodological terms.³ For the German case, I will follow up interviews by attending 30 meetings or events involving interviewees – for example, a journalist giving a public talk. This will allow me to observe how she navigates Germany’s identity terrain, accessing her self-understanding of identity in different contexts and through practical expression. Put simply, I will see how she both ‘talks about and enacts’ identity (Adams, 2009: 318). This ethnography, and the self-understandings of identity that I reconstruct from it, will serve as a cross-check on the interviews (triangulation in the methods jargon). It expands what can be inferred from texts (interviews, discourse) by allowing me to put identity talk into a larger framework that includes contingency and conflict, and what an individual considers and discards as she practices her identity (Adams, 2009: 341).

However, parting company with many anthropologists, I will use the interviews and observation to reconstruct the causal chain linking the EU to changes in German identity; they provide further data for my process tracing. In formal terms, this is political ethnography, a form of immersion that has been developed by political scientists who see field work as more than

³ Surprisingly, this even holds for interpretive IR, where scholars who require the method shy from using it (Pouliot, 2010; Hopf and Allan, 2016).

simply recording what people say (Wood, 2003: ch.2; Schatz, 2009; Autesserre, 2010; Simmons, 2017).

A final point on my political ethnography, one that it shares with anthropology, is the centrality of ethics. This means giving operational content to the principle of ‘do no harm’ in my German study and being attentive to my own role – positionality in the jargon – in the research process. The easy part, in relative terms, is getting IRB/university approval of my research; much more challenging is the recognition that those ethics and positionality will need updating once I am immersed in the field (Wood, 2006; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018).

Data from documents, interviews and the ethnography will be analyzed in three ways. First, I will construct thematic analyses, cross-referencing across different subjects, and across the same person in different settings. What was being said about identity/community, by whom and when, and before what audiences? Which events seem to be experienced collectively as revealing sharp borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Alba, 2005), or aligning individual and public moods (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017)? The purpose here is to locate sources of change – more formally, the observable implications of my causal mechanisms – in an individual’s sense of, and expression of, identity.

Second, to complement my own notetaking, I will use NVivo software. It facilitates the classification and arrangement of unstructured data in ways that reveal patterns and relationships and can guide further data collection and analysis. I will use it principally to generate a concept map of identity meanings implied by specific rhetoric or actions, to catalog mechanisms such as socializing venues, and to explore new ways to capture and depict changes in identity and community membership.

Third, the data will be organized in a structured narrative, exploring how identity was and is changing; section IV below is this narrative's forerunner. The result is an account of identity politics and identity change in Germany – and the EU's role in it – that reads well while still showing my theory in action and my methods clearly and transparently applied. This means that I show and describe my mechanisms of identity change – socialization, instrumental, social practice – 'in action' and explain how different methods are used to infer the precise role they are playing, while embedding these analytic moves in a narrative/case-study of Germans' changing sense of community and identity and the EU's role in it. This is the heart of the process-tracing method (Bennett and Checkel, 2015: ch.1); rigorous scholarship based on it offers compelling accounts, where theory and method are integrated with narrative accounts (Schimmelfennig, 2003; Bakke, 2013; Schwartz and Straus, 2018; Skagerlind, 2019).

IV. Europe's Refugee Crisis and German Identity

Germany is an excellent choice for testing my argument, as it is a country where we have prior and strong expectations of the EU, as a regional organization, interacting with and reshaping identity. The mechanisms of identity change I hypothesize should leave a clear trail in the empirical data, which is invaluable for elaborating and extending the theory.⁴

Since the early 1970s, the EU has sought to foster a greater sense of community and shared identity among its member states – through summit statements, specific instruments and policies (Charter of Fundamental Rights; Erasmus student exchange) and symbolic politics (creation of a European flag and anthem). A member of the Union since 1958, Germany is one of the states where these efforts have paid off. According to Eurobarometer surveys, its citizens are among the most comfortable identifying themselves as both German and European

⁴ More formally, the argument advanced here is embedded in a theory-building, single-case design.

(Eurobarometer, 2015: Part II).⁵ Beyond surveys, research using a range of theory and methods – media studies (Risse, 2010), the Europeanization literature (Cowles, Caporaso, Risse, 2001; Ares, Ceka and Kriesi, 2017), security studies (Wallander, 1999), and country studies (Katzenstein, 1998) – confirms that Germany is a country where European identity hits home. In a similar vein, anthropologists studying German identity argue that a history of collective guilt and practices of public atonement have amplified Germans’ identification with universal humanitarian aims (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017: 120–122).

In the larger project of which this paper is a part, I examine two periods when German identity is in flux and the EU is an active player on such issues. The first period, the late 1990s and early 2000s, saw the EU’s creation of a European citizenship and debates in Germany over the nature of citizenship – civic vs. ethnic, single vs. dual nationality (Brubaker, 1998; Neveu, 2000; Checkel, 2001a, 2001b). The second period – the focus here – is contemporary and starts with the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, where EU policies along with Merkel’s decision to open German borders have spurred identity debates in the country (*Economist*, 2018a).

If the first period is marked by lower levels of politicization and modest EU ambitions regarding identity and community (Hedetoft, 1999), the second measures higher on both dimensions. In the intervening 15 years, the Union gained competencies (on immigration, home affairs, human rights) that extend its reach to areas inextricably tied to national conceptions of community. At the same time, the politicization and identity politics surrounding the EU are arguably now at an historic high (Risse, 2014; Kriesi, 2016).

⁵ For the Eurobarometer question, ‘Do you see yourself as...?’ with answers (Nationality) only / (Nationality) + European / European + (Nationality), etc., Germans have consistently outscored the EU average in combining their own nationality with European. Eurobarometer Interactive, n.d. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/41/groupKy/206> (accessed 2 August 2020).

To measure a possible change in identity, I need to establish a clear baseline, that is, the markers and expression of German identity at the start of each case period. Consistent with how I conceptualize it, this baseline will be two snapshots (1997, 2014) of German identity, as measured through institutions and laws (on citizenship and immigration), surveys (answers to the Eurobarometer question on national identity), and social practice (discourse and symbolic acts around the annual Day of German Unity).

Refugees and German Identity, 2015–2019. I begin with an identity snapshot, in this case, German identity circa 2014. 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 accepted external others (the EU, migrants) and values (human rights) in a broad conception of Germanness.

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 (very) long way from the identity embodied in the Nazi era or even what Brubaker (1998) had described in the late 1990s 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 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). More important for my argument, however, is 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).

By late 2015, however, this snapshot – and its suggestion of inclusion, stasis and stability in German identity – was under stress. Put differently, that snapshot had become a motion picture, indicative of a process of change over time. Public discussions and articulations about identity became more frequent, and daily practice and enactments of identity began to change. The trigger was largely external: the refugee crisis of 2015-2016.

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 a number of North African countries. By December 2016, Germany had accepted nearly 1.3 million asylum seekers – by far and away the largest number in the EU (BBC, 2018). In the early months of the crisis and immigrant/refugee inflow – 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 exception⁶ – 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 ordinary Germans – citizens, not local government 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 capacity issue. So many refugees had been let in so fast that the system could not cope. Stories began to emerge of exhausted volunteers (see discussion of the train stations above) and undelivered services, and many local governments found themselves lacking the means to process and – especially – house the refugees they had been allocated (Wang, 2015; 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. 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).

⁶ I say unfortunate as Berlin is the federal capital and more multi-cultural than probably 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.

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 immigration's impact 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 political party (AfD, in German). Founded in 2013 as a populist, right-wing, Euro-sceptic party, by mid-2016 it was increasingly viewed as anti-immigrant 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 immigrants and refugees within the country. Such new-for-Germany identity talk clearly resonated among some part of the population: In the September 2017 federal elections, the AfD became the third-largest party in Germany. This gave it 94 seats in the Bundestag – and a new platform for speaking out on German identity.

It was not just German elected officials that were debating identity. A new right-wing youth movement called Generation Identity – one active in several European countries – has appeared as well.⁷ While not particularly large – 500 German members as of early 2019 – the movement has gotten significant attention because of its anti-immigration views ('we don't want

⁷ The Austrian branch, led by Martin Sellner, has garnered the most attention, in part because of Sellner's apparent ties to the individual responsible for the March 2019 Christchurch shooting massacre (Associated Press, 2019).

to become minorities in our own countries’), and desire for a patriotic and ethno-cultural German identity. Yet, at the same time, they do not reject Europe or the EU, and their daily practice suggests they buy into some part of being European. Indeed, they study abroad (the EU’s Erasmus student exchange) and date across European borders; the co-founder of the Halle chapter of Generation Identity has a French girlfriend (Bennhold, 2018).⁸

Summary. By late 2019, a spirited, multi-level debate was underway – among political parties (AfD, Social Democrats); youth movements like Generation Identity; the Expert Council of German Foundations and their ‘Integration Barometer’⁹ – over the content of German identity, and its relation to European identity. Compared to earlier years, the identity talk had taken on a harder edge and leading politicians – Chancellor Angela Merkel, most notably – have pulled back on their initial embrace of refugees and what this implied for Germans’ sense of community (Calamur, 2018; Vonberg, 2018).

Yet, Eurobarometer surveys show that Germans – throughout the period of the refugee crisis – continued to hold a strong sense of attachment to the European project and still felt comfortable articulating a sense of European identity. For the question ‘You feel you are a citizen of the EU ...’ (answers: Yes, definitely / Yes, to some extent / No, not really / No, definitely not / Don’t know), Germans showed no lessening of their strong identification with EU citizenship between 2014 and 2019.¹⁰ In addition, German answers to the question ‘In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly

⁸ This new right-wing identity talk is not limited to youth groups. A more dangerous – and less visible – manifestation of such populist activism is groups like Nordkreuz (Northern Cross), which brings together army reservists, police, local politicians and lawyers to debate – and take action on? – a collapsing German social order (Bennhold, 2020).

⁹ The Integration Barometer, a survey of more than 5,000 people randomly selected and interviewed by phone, is conducted every two years (Available at: <https://www.svr-migration.de/en/barometer/>; accessed 2 August 2020).

¹⁰ In this period, the top two German trend lines remained “Yes to some extent” (35% to 44%) and “Yes definitely” (36% to 53%). Eurobarometer Interactive, n.d. Available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart/themeKy/50/groupKy/263/savFile/3> (accessed 2 August 2020).

negative or very negative image’ – while showing some volatility between April 2015 and October 2017 – had returned to their very positive 2009-2010 levels by 2019.¹¹

Of course, these latter findings are derived from Eurobarometer data, with all the attendant limitations surveys have in measuring identity (Hopf and Allan, 2016: 12, 28-29). This is precisely why the broader set of methods on which my theory is built is needed to study and dissect further the German case. If nothing else, the narrative here establishes that Germans were debating their identity and both top-down (EU to Germany) and bottom up (German youth associations, right-wing groups, and citizens) change processes were at work. The raw material is thus present for applying my two-part theory and the ethnographic methods behind it.

V. Inter-Disciplinarity and IR: What You Get and What You Lose

In this final section, I begin by interrogating my argument, asking how it might generalize to other countries and regional organizations, and how it can help restore identity to a more central role in our theorizing on global governance. I then turn to the broader theme of inter-disciplinarity in IR, with the admonition that there will be ‘no such thing as a free lunch.’

For Germany and the EU, Yes ... but Anywhere Else? Here, the question is whether the theory travels. Specifically, does my argument about regional organizations and national-level identity dynamics play out in other parts of the world, with differently constituted member states and RO’s lacking the EU’s identity-shaping policies and instruments? In part, the answer is: We do not know. The rapidly growing literatures on ROs (Acharya and Johnston, 2007; Prieto, 2013; Closa and Palestini, 2018) and comparative regionalism (Boerzel and Risse, 2016) would be good bets for explorations of this sort; yet, to date, these studies have either had other analytic

¹¹ By late 2019, the ‘Fairly positive’ response was back to 41%, and ‘Very positive’ was back to 9%. Eurobarometer Interactive, n.d. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/19/groupKy/102> (accessed 2 August 2020).

foci, or – when they do examine the RO-identity relation – the results are difficult to assess, due to problems in both research design and methods (Checkel, 2016).

Beyond these comparisons, consider one of my central findings. Even a regional organization like the EU, with tools and policies explicitly designed to shape senses of community, has had limited national impact. And national here was Germany, a most-likely case for external influences to shape identity. So, the argument (barely) works even in a situation when both the ‘independent’ and ‘dependent’ variables are most likely cases.

However, at a deeper level, the theory does provide a roadmap for studying the RO-identity relation, and where to look for arenas of identity construction and practice outside and beyond institutions. It is a template that captures *both* top-down and bottom-up dynamics. In the early years of the new millennium, Ted Hopf brilliantly argued that constructivist work on identity too often focused on the system level, while ignoring powerful identity dynamics at ‘home’ (Hopf, 2002: ch.1). Hopf was right – but his argument was incomplete. My theory incorporates his bottom-up and interpretive exploration of identity, with a first step that recognizes the key, top-down role played by institutions and elites.

Another dimension on which to judge the argument is whether it helps address important gaps in other literatures – global governance, in this case. Much of the best governance literature is built on rationalist social theory. There is nothing wrong with such a choice, but it does typically lead to a neglect of identity as a causal variable. For example, Zuern’s (2018) excellent – and rationalist – study hints at the power of identity politics to reshape, through societal contestation, patterns of global governance. The argument here makes those identity politics explicit and theorizes them.

IR Theory and Inter-Disciplinarity. IR would appear to have lost its theoretical mojo. A normal-science approach to theory too often prevails (take existing theory off the shelf and tweak) and ‘think big’ theorizing is notable by its absence in the subfield’s leading journals. This depressing assessment is shared by many, be they realists (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013) or rationalists and constructivists (Snidal and Wendt, 2009; Checkel, 2015).

It was thus much needed and all to the good when leading IR journals – *European Journal of International Relations*, in this case - ask for innovations that can lead ‘to genuine renewal of the issues we cover across the subfields of IR and how we think about them’ and identify ‘thinking and methods, conceived in inter-disciplinary terms, that we might need to better understand and address these emerging questions and challenges’ (The Editors, 2018). In this spirit, I identified the populist/nationalist backlash against the institutions of the liberal order as one of these ‘emerging challenges’ and argued that, to understand it, we needed new ways to think about and measure identity.

IR theory – mainly constructivism – had developed an institutional-elite take on identity and identity change that privileged certain methods in its measurement: from document analysis to (positivist) interview techniques, to discourse analysis.¹² In response, I argued that IR needed to look to social anthropology and how it conceived (as a social practice) and measured (through ethnography) identity if it was to move beyond institutions and elites. And note how I did this – by supplementing existing theory. Indeed, my ‘two-step’ argument is essentially existing IR theory (step #1) and then social anthropology (step #2).

So, I have done as instructed, and made an inter-disciplinary move. But at what cost in terms of analytic clarity, meta-theoretical consistency, or simply the time needed to get it right?

¹² I know the devil of whom I speak. This characterization fits to a tee my own earlier work on identity – Checkel, 1999, 2007, for example.

Beginning with analytics, I took what were already complex constructivist arguments on identity and added more. While this does not amount to kitchen-sink argumentation, it is far from parsimonious.

In terms of meta-theory, my argument seems to be built on multiple ‘sleights of hand.’ I combine epistemological apples and oranges – positivist, mainstream constructivism (step #1), followed by interpretive ethnography (step #2). While there may be philosophical reasons to shy from such a combination, there is nothing preventing it at the level of a concrete, *staged* research design (Hopf, 2002, 2007). In terms of methods, I essentially define the problem away – turning (interpretive) ethnography into (mainstream, scientific realist) political ethnography. In my defence, I would only note that I am not alone in doing this – although, in most cases, it is in the work of comparativists, where political ethnography has been deployed to very good effect (Wood, 2003; Simmons, 2017). Finally, such epistemological tension may be an inevitable sign of a truly inter-disciplinary IR; if so, then its presence means I have done something right.

Finally, there is a personal cost to doing inter-disciplinary IR. Done right, it takes (lots of) time. The project sketched in this essay has been over three years in the making – and I have not yet completed the empirics. And the latter, with their ethnographic/immersive component, will take considerable time. I honestly have lost count of the number of occasions when a proposal version of the project was returned to me with one set of reviews – by social anthropologists – critiquing my thin literature review (‘Why isn’t the work of X cited?’) or my non-operational invocation of ethnography (‘How will his own positionality effect the attempts at participant observation?’). It may sound trite, but to reinvigorate IR theory by moving to inter-disciplinarity will for most of us mean immersion in a new literature and discipline, and this really does take time. As a result, publications will be delayed.

So, basically, the counsel would be to take more time for theory. However, this assumes IR is in a state of suspension – which it is not. In North America, demands for better theory compete with growing concerns for more transparency in the research enterprise – so called data access and research transparency or DA-RT (Symposium, 2015, 2016). While some have argued that DA-RT has serious, and deleterious, consequences for ethics (Parkinson and Wood, 2015) and others have noted that it diverts the discipline from addressing more pressing racial-gender issues (Fujii, 2016), my concern is it will incentivize younger scholars to spend even more time on methods. And more time on the latter means less for something else: theory, in this case. At a panel devoted to DA-RT at the 2018 Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, one scholar recounted how she/he had consciously scaled back his/her level of theoretical ambition to make sure he/she had enough intellectual space and word count to accommodate DA-RT concerns.

However, it is not just DA-RT and methods that are competing with theory. In many parts of Europe and especially for younger IR theorists, there is a significant incentive to ‘think small’ theoretically, as article dissertations replace manuscripts. Articles – assuming they are published in top IR outlets – are of course fine; writing such a dissertation also gets a young scholar all-important journal publications at an earlier point in her/his career. Yet, at the same time, this publishing format does not leave much intellectual space or word count for theory, especially of the innovative, creative sort. With article dissertations, it will thus not be easy, theoretically, to think boldly and in inter-disciplinary terms.

None of this is to argue that we do not need better, improved, more interdisciplinary IR theory. It is only to note that we should do it with eyes wide open. It will take time and additional training, all at a point when structural trends in the discipline are likely shrinking the

space for theory. In terms any IR theorist can understand, structure will likely limit and constrain agency. And this is not good news for a revitalized, inter-disciplinary IR.

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