

# National Identity and the Construction of Enemies: Constructivism and Populism

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The rise of populist movements and parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been observed in many European countries. While a common narrative focuses on the refugee crisis as the basis of the populists' appeal, other scholars dismiss this one-dimensional explanation in favour of an account that centralizes anti-globalization tendencies. As illiberal tendencies within populist movements have been deemed a threat to the current liberal world order, many scholars argue the importance of understanding its roots and strategies (Mouffe, 2005, p. 51). Using a constructivist theory of International Relations to understand the strategy of the AfD, this essay argues that populist parties use an approach of identity construction and interest creation that portrays their own policies as necessary protection of the national identity, independent of concrete current political issues. First, the theoretical framework will be discussed, followed by an explanation of how populists use the refugee crisis to attract support. However, this essay focuses primarily on the establishment of a general strategy of populist parties, instead of analysing particular applications. Second, the link between populism and anti-globalization tendencies is investigated. Third, the commonalities between the competing explanations of the populist appeal are elucidated. Lastly, I consider what additional insights can be won from a realist perspective of the problem statement.

### Theoretical Framework

Whereas the study of International Relations had been traditionally dominated by the theories of liberalism and realism, constructivism began its rise in the late 1980s. During this time, authors challenged the materialism and individualism foundational to realist theory and were well equipped to consider the developments surrounding the end of the cold war. Other contributions were able to further establish how identity and norms shape state interests and thus contribute to generating explanations for issues relevant to realism, such as military interventions and great power transformation (Barnett, 2013).

Constructivists question the individualist notions underlying mainstream ontologies of the state, and instead focus on a social ontology, emphasizing that states cannot be detached from a context of meaning that shapes their identity and interests (Fierke, 2016, p. 166). Whereas mainstream theories assume states to follow lasting interests such as power and wealth, constructivists emphasize that essential aspects of IR are constructed in line with their historical and social context. Furthermore, constructivists have offered additional insights in the forces behind state power, by adding that they go beyond material capacities as stressed by realism and also encompass ideational dimensions (Fierke, 2016).

While constructivism cannot be classified as a homogenous theory, all forms share a commitment to "human consciousness and its role in international life" (Ruggie as cited in Barnett, 2013, p. 158). One relevant distinction is to be made between conventional and critical constructivism. The latter opposes the positivism and rationalism of mainstream theories and is more closely affiliated with critical social theory, while conventional constructivism distances itself from critical theory (Reus-Smit, 2005). Conventional constructivism furthermore maintains its accordance with rationalism in epistemological or methodological questions. Furthermore, critical constructivists emphasize the social construction of knowledge as based on temporal and cultural contexts and are more likely to engage with analysis of language to uncover how we recognize the world as "already categorized and formed by

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certain categorical and theoretical elements” (Kratochwil as cited in Fierke, p. 168).

As Fierke notes, constructivism is sometimes understood as rooted in the linguistic turn, which constitutes a common ground between constructivism and poststructuralism, which focuses on identities as being constituted in language (Hansen, 2013, p. 169). A constructivist epistemology thus emphasizes that it is not possible to “get behind our language to compare it with that which it describes” (Fierke, 2016, p. 168), as it is deeply immersed in the world rather than a mirror of it. Within constructivism, the use of language is seen as fundamentally social, where speech acts do not only give humans the possibility to communicate, but also teach them how to act in the world. Language is essential to the creation of norms and meaning and therefore provides the basis for the construction of identity (Fierke, 2016).

The construction of identity as a social practice in which intersubjective processes shape how actors see themselves and others, is a crucial element of inquiry for constructivist theorists. Identities are further intimately tied to cultural, historical, political and social contexts (Hopf, 1998, p. 165). Constructivism emphasizes the structural character of shared ideas, values and beliefs as constituting ideational and normative structures, which give meaning to material structures (Reus-Smit, 2009, p. 220). Constructivists hold that, in the absence of ideational structures, exercises of power fail in acquiring meaning. Norms specify actions that will cause others to recognize the actor’s identity and helps them react accordingly. Furthermore, actors are produced by their cultural environment, instead of existing outside and previous to their society (Barnett, 2013). Such structures, however, are mutually constructed by the identities of the actors they serve to create, as Reus-Smit notes, since the maintaining and transforming of ideational structures is dependent on practices of individuals within them (2009). Critical constructivism further acknowledges alienation as “driving the need for identity” and thus emphasizes the need of an “other” to construct one’s own identity (Hopf, 1998, p. 184). Lastly, in contrast with assumptions made by mainstream approaches, actor’s interests are not predetermined but instead informed by identities. In telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a certain set of interests with respect to certain actors (Hopf, 1998).

## Populism and the Refugee Crisis

To reach their voter base, it can be argued that the AfD is following a three-fold approach; firstly, in constructing a German identity, they derive certain national interests. Secondly, the party constructs an image of refugees that renders them not only undeserving of help and protection, but that further brands them a threat to said German identity. Lastly, they contrast both identities and proclaim their own policies as solution to the alleged conflict between them.

Firstly, as argued by constructivists, identity construction is an intersubjective phenomenon that takes place in a mutual creation of ideational and normative structures and individual’s identities (Hopf, 1998). By characterizing belonging to a nation as dependent on ethnic ties, the AfD lays out ground rules for who can be considered German. To further qualify their view, they stress the importance of a historically grown, homogenic nation that prescribes to a traditional value system centred around the Christian family (AfD, 2017, p. 46). A German identity is furthermore based on “German cultural heritage, as democracy and freedom are vested in our common cultural values and historical tradition” and takes the German language as focal point of the national character (AfD, 2017, p. 46). In line with this characterization, certain national interests come to the fore that drive the party’s politics and that, in their view, must lie at the heart of each citizen. As such, they commit themselves to retaining “western Christian culture, and [maintaining] our language and traditions in a peaceful, democratic, and sovereign nation state for the German people” (AfD, 2017, p. 46). In concrete terms, this focuses on the expansion of support for traditional families, a reduction in involvement with EU politics and a general protection of German citizens, also by reducing immigration as necessary steps to defend German interests (AfD, 2017).

Secondly, in constructing the identity of refugees, special consideration must be given to the changing terms used for the asylum seekers entering Germany, ranging from “Asylanten”, used as a denunciation of the refugee’s character, to “Geflüchtete”, as underscoring their helplessness and victimhood (Geisel, 2015). This corresponds to Leach’s account of the refugee crisis in Australia in 2001-2002, who uncovers that multiple aspects constituted an overall picture of the asylum seekers as undeserving (2003). In spreading a false narrative of asylum seekers throwing

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children overboard when trying to enter Australia, politicians constructed an image of the refugees that seemed to threaten Australian values. This fed into a larger frame of constructing the refugees' identity not only in a way that deemed them unworthy of help, but that further clearly contrasted them with the traditional Australian identity. This is paralleled by the AfD's approach to the content of their campaign as centred around xenophobic depictions of refugees as a lazy, threatening group of people that seeks to undermine the foundations of the German identity. Basing this claim on cultural and religious differences, the party emphasizes a homogenized image of "the refugee" that suppresses women and generally has little respect for values inherent to a German identity (AfD, 2017, p. 47). Evidence for this approach can clearly be found in the various AfD posters, that often stress the alleged cultural differences and in the discourse the party has brought to the fore, centred around questions such as "Does Islam belong to Germany?" or the claim of the "Islamisierung des Abendlandes", an asserted suppression of Western culture by immigrant infiltration (Geiges, 2015). As such the construction of both identities, the "German" and the "refugee", is based on the contrast between them. This constitutes an illustration of the concept of othering, as described by Fierke (2016, p. 175). In this way, both identities mutually construct each other, giving rise to norms as standards of behaviour that guide not only expectations of the other's behaviour, but that further colours mutual understanding (Barnett, 2013, p. 164).

Thirdly, the AfD, in denouncing the mainstream parties' approach to governing, declares itself and its policies as laid out in their party programme as only viable solution to the conflict between the two constructed identities and commits itself to securing German interests and identity (AfD, 2017).

## Populism and Anti-Globalization Backlash

While this constructivist approach to the construction of the refugee crisis sheds light on the popularity of the populists' xenophobic statements and helps to understand the party's commitment to using them, it can only partially account for the party's existence. As many have noted, the AfD first campaigned in the 2011 election, years before the dimensions of the migration crisis were visible to the majority in 2015/2016 (Hruban, 2016). This begs the question as to what agenda the party had followed prior to using the refugee crisis and whether this original issue might have been masked by a focus on the discourse around the crisis. Worth (2017), as well as Mughan, Bean and McAllister (2002) have argued that the reason for an emergence of populist movements around Europe is to be found in their opposition towards globalization.

Mughan et al (2002) emphasize that the support for populist parties can be explained by the job insecurity that party leaders have attributed to economic globalization and criticize existing literature for not extending their view to explanations other than xenophobia. In explaining the popularity of populism, Swenk and Betz focus on an analysis of the main voter basis of such parties and find that "groups that currently face ostensible insecurities and risks to material well-being" disproportionately often support right-wing populist parties (2002, p. 218). Wendt however argues, that "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded" (as cited in Reus-Smit, 2009, p. 220). This constructivist view on the role of ideational structures in determining actor's perception of the importance of material resources illustrates the way in which populists' construction of identity helps them frame situations as threats to voters' interests. As such, the AfD formerly stressed the deficiencies of the Eurozone and began its rise to power shortly after the Euro-crisis, drawing on the same fears of job insecurity that still underlie many of their policies (AfD, 2017). In drawing on the constructed "German identity" that gives rise to the national interest of protecting the domestic job market, the AfD was able to attract voters before their focus shifted towards a more accessible issue when the refugee crisis picked up in 2015 (Hruban, 2016). The construction of the perceived threats of globalization is especially evident in Swenk and Betz's assessment that often, "perceptions of burdens actually exceed costs of globalization" (2002, p. 221). So instead of being guided by a deep understanding of costs and benefits economic globalization holds for them, voters tend to support parties that offer clear solutions to difficult problems (Betz & Swenk, 2002), as outlined before.

A further important aspect in the view of anti-globalization sentiments as fuelling the AfD's rise is the perceived decline in sovereign state power, and the populists' commitment to reclaiming it (AfD, 2017, p. 16). In depicting the current leadership as either unable or unwilling to assure the ability to provide protection against threatening influences of globalization, the AfD has tried to incite distrust of established parties and was able to draw on voters'

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dissatisfaction with various policies to broaden their base of support (Grimm, 2015). Again, it becomes evident how the party uses contrasting identities to align themselves with the purported uncared-for German people (Grimm, 2015). Here, the German identity is juxtaposed with the elite, or political class, that has alienated itself from their promise to further German national interests while the AfD presents itself as the only alternative to protecting the German identity from outside threats (AfD, 2017, p. 5).

## The Constructivist Elements in Both Explanations

Even though differing explanations for the sudden rise of populist parties have been investigated by scholars, mainly centred around the refugee crisis and anti-globalization sentiments, common elements in both can be found. A constructivist analysis of the party's approach to both issues focuses on the way voters' identities are constructed as contrasting with alleged enemies' identities. Furthermore, this identity is also shaped in a way that informs interests appealing to a need for security and the general protection of the national identity. Not only asylum seekers are thus portrayed as a threat to national interests, but also German nationals that go against one or more parts of the constructed German identity. So is the AfD for example also committed to reducing the representation of LGBT+ people in school curriculums and wants to curtail multiple policies aimed at increasing the equality of women, such as gender-neutral language and a "women quota" (AfD, 2017, p. 54). Interestingly, such efforts could be seen to contradict the party's claim that the asylum seeker's treatment of women threatens German values supporting the equality of the genders. However, as the rollback of said policies is explained by a focus on the core of the constructed German identity, the Christian family, internal inconsistencies within the AfD's party program go unnoticed by many of their supporters or are even in line with their perceived interests (Hruban, 2015).

Language also plays an important role in both explanations, as by using specific terms for both juxtaposed identities, the refugees' and the political class', the party evokes the feeling of a threat to German interests. As Leach describes in his investigation into the calling of asylum seekers "boat people", "Queue Jumpers" and "Rejectees" played an important role in the attempts of Australian politicians to win over voters by inciting fear of the Other (2003, p. 30). On the other hand, as Kriesi et al point out during their inquiry into the transformation of the national political space as response to globalization, "structural opposition between globalization 'winners' and 'losers' is expected to constitute potentials for political mobilization within national political contexts" (2006, p. 921). These two assessments not only exemplify the similarities in populists' approaches towards refugee crises as well as anti-globalization sentiments, they also illustrate the international applicability of a constructivist analysis of this development.

## A Realist Critique

As one of the mainstream theories of International Relations, realism focuses on a state-centric account that stresses "the imperatives states face to pursue a power politics of the national interest" (Burchill et al, 2005, p. 29). Realism comprises multiple sub-theories that are mainly centred around certain basic propositions, such as the importance of egoism as guiding motive for actors, and anarchy in the international system. The assumption that states as rational actors pursue self-interests is based on an account of human nature that stresses selfishness and the strive for power (Burchill et al, 2005). As such, a realist account focuses on the concepts of security, state sovereignty, state capacity and material resources. In this view, the rise of populism can be understood as an attempt to strengthen national interest against the threat of globalization and international pressure to accept refugees (Worth, 2013).

Firstly, realism stresses the importance of national security. Terrorism as a global phenomenon poses a threat to Germany's security that the AfD is concerned about, especially in the context of an increase in the intake of refugees from areas that are associated with terrorist groups such as ISIL (AfD, 2018, p. 63). By wanting to limit immigration from these countries, the party thus follows the realist emphasis on national security. Similarly, globalization as associated with both, terrorism and the refugee crisis, anti-globalization tendencies are also in line with a general attempt to increase security.

Secondly, an account of the state's capability to take in large amounts of refugees must be connected to its (material) capacities to care for its inhabitants. The AfD has often claimed that in considerations of whether the intake of

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refugees should be stopped, the securing of welfare provision for German nationals must take precedence over aspirations of opening the borders for immigration. In assessing that the “political class” has not done enough to privilege Germans over immigrants (AfD, 2017, p. 5), the party follows a logic resembling egoism and self-interest.

Thirdly, realists would strongly oppose the view that globalization has undermined state sovereignty and might view the rise of populists as a reflection of their fight to re-establish the state as most important actor on the international scale (Schmid, 2016). The AfD can be seen to follow this reasoning by supporting policies that would reduce the influence of international institutions on domestic politics (AfD, 2017).

However, even though these realist notions can account for varying populist incentives, they do not contradict constructivist insights into the way the AfD is able to motivate its voters. As Wendt argues, material structures only acquire meaning within the ideational structure they are embedded in (as cited in Reus-Smit, 1998). By framing their opposition to the intake of refugees as an attempt of establishing national security, the AfD incites fears in their voters that stresses the alleged threat to their identities the party draws on. Similarly, in framing globalization as a threat to German interests, meaning is given to the voter’s financial situation, which is then attributed to forces of economic globalization.

## Conclusion

A constructivist approach to the way populist parties can attract voters has yielded insights into the common ground of two differing explanations for the rise of populism, a critique of increased immigration due to the refugee crisis and anti-globalization sentiment. In both cases, the AfD followed a three-fold approach by drawing on the construction of a German identity from which it derives certain national interests. The identity of the Other, whether found in refugees or the “political class”, is constructed as posing a threat to those national interests. Lastly, the party presents itself as only viable protection of the German identity. Considering a realist perspective has sensitized this analysis to possible alternative reasons behind the AfD’s policies. However, the constructivist notion of ideational structures as giving meaning to materialist concerns helps integrate these insights into the larger analysis of this essay. Illiberal claims of populist parties aimed at undermining traditional structures of power in many European countries are viewed with concern by many scholars and have been grouped into a larger scheme of threats to the current liberal world order (Mousse, 2005). The insights won from this analysis help broaden the understanding of populist strategies and might be used for further research into this area.

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