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Demands as the black box of discourse theory: the German integration debate, demanding a 'leading culture' and the mainstreaming of the far-right

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ABSTRACT

The recent rise of the far-right '*Alternative für Deutschland*' (AfD) in Germany has puzzled researchers. How did demands around cultural homogeneity and the need to be protected from 'dangerous' immigrants become acceptable in the mainstream when previously they were not? Crucially, understanding political change is paramount for discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau, who considers 'demands' as pivotal for the construction of political identities. Yet, the notion is underdeveloped in his writings. I discuss the aporias in Laclau's understanding of demands and probe how far we can take Laclau in theoretically accounting for the emergence of demands. The concepts of horizon and dislocation are most helpful in this regard. I then utilise those concepts to analyse demand emergence in the '*Leitkultur*' (leading culture) debate. I show how the horizon on which these demands are inscripted changed over the years, with a culturalistic discourse becoming dominant. There, following a dislocatory public debate of a non-fiction bestseller by career bureaucrat Thilo Sarrazin, integration was increasingly framed as problematic and foreigners needing to shed unintegratable parts of their own culture to assimilate to a German *Leitkultur*. I argue that acts of mainstreaming like these allowed the AfD to make their formerly radical demands seem credible.

Introduction

For a long time, Germany was considered an 'exceptional case' regarding the support of far-right political parties. While different parties with varying degrees of radicalism always existed in German post-war society, they never managed to make their demands socially acceptable or their minor successes lasting (Backes & Mudde, 2000). Besides a near-miss of the parliamentary threshold of 5% by the neo-Nazi NPD's 4.3% vote share in the federal elections of 1969, also the far-right 'DVU' and 'Republikaner' largely failed to translate their campaigning activities into votes in the 1990s and early 2000s apart from a few

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second-order elections. Even though there existed a historic 'attitude potential' due to Germans regularly scoring high regarding xenophobic and authoritarian attitudes, this did not translate into a 'voting potential' (Heitmeyer, 2018; Pfahl-Traughber, 1999). It follows, until recently a consensus seemed to exist in German civil society to not vote for far-right parties (Arzheimer, 2019) coupled with a 'silent agreement' within media outlets to not give them any exposure (Art, 2006; Ellinas, 2010).

This consensus vanished[1] when the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) entered the national parliament in 2017, aided by its metamorphosis from eurosceptical and fiscally conservative beginnings in 2013 – providing it easier discursive entry into the political arena – to a far-right party following multiple leadership struggles (Rensmann, 2018). The AfD became the strongest opposition party with a vote share of 12.6% following an electoral campaign based on demands for cultural homogeneity, the threat of foreign others for the cultural make-up of society, and a positively connotated, proud con-ception of what it means to be German (Art, 2018; Dilling, 2018). I argue that discursive changes in the early stages of the *Leitkultur* ('leading culture') debate resulted in the weak-ening of what was formerly considered radical and which contributed to the barrier of not voting for the far-right to break down. I investigate the emergence of demands around *Leitkultur* and the discursive struggles over its meaning via post-structuralist discourse theory, especially the Essex School (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005a; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/ 2014) and through the logic of mainstreaming, which inquires how the 'discursive centre' of society, like public elites, media outlets and mainstream parties can influence what counts as 'normal' and 'acceptable' (Brown et al., 2023; Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Moments of social change are a prime concern for Essex School theorists and their theor-etical apparatus provides ample resources for thinking about the emergence, contestations and acceptance of novel political projects (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), especially regarding the far-right (see Kim, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017) and their world-making practices. Cru-cially, Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b) puts the notion of the demand centre stage as the minimal unit of any investigation in social and political research. Yet, when he discusses pol-itical demands some contradictions with his other writings come to the fore. Especially the process of their emergence remains under-theorised (Zicman de Barros, 2021) and 'black-boxed', as highlighted by De Cleen and Glynos (2020, p. 8).

This is surprising, given that without it we will fail to come up with a proper under-standing of politics: '[t]he universe of politics (…) is a universe of articulated demands' (Marchart, 2018, p. 117). In short, the theoretical research questions this paper asks are: how has the notion of the demand been developed by Laclau and other Essex School thinkers? Which theoretical tools stand at our disposal to determine what makes the acceptance or rejection of demands more likely? And, empirically, how does the emer-gence of a set of demands look like in practice?

To answer these questions, the paper proceeds as follows. First, I present an overview of the constructed nature of political identities in discourse-theoretical research. Then, I draw out the aporias in Laclau's understanding of demands and probe, after detailing existing debates around demands in other Essex School writings, how far we can take the Laclauian framework in theoretically accounting for a set of demands emerging or not. I discuss the concepts of 'horizon' and 'dislocation' as the most helpful in this regard.

However, the emergence of demands cannot be determined in advance by theory alone but always depends on a specific context. Hence, I analyse the emergence of

demands around cultural homogeneity in the German *Leitkultur* or integration debate, where issues around multiculturalism, assimilation and integration are negotiated. I show how the horizon on which these demands are inscripted has changed from the beginning of the guest worker period in the 1960s (Chin, 2007). Once it became clear that the guest workers would stay long-term, integration was conceived through mutual responsibilities and seen as inevitable for a peaceful co-existence of Germans and foreigners. However, when calls for a *Leitkultur* emerged in the 2000s and received implicit and explicit support by mainstream political actors during a public debate following the scandalous publication of the nonfiction bestseller '*Germany Abolishes Itself*' by Thilo Sarrazin (2010), the focus was recalibrated towards what was *not* considered German via a culturalistic discourse and the previous taboo of calling for a positive emotional attachment to a proud German identity broken. I argue that this discursive change allowed the far-right to make their formerly radical demands seem credible to parts of the population.

Demands, subjectivity and identity in the Essex School

A corollary of Marchart's assertion that the universe of politics is made up of articulated demands is that also individuals' political identities are constituted by the content of their demands. Essex School theorists understand subjects as subjects of lack (Stavrakakis, 2001) because their (political) identities are never fixed and constantly under threat of being subverted. Following from post-Marxist considerations, we have to identify with *something* since there is no prior, privileged identity to begin with (Marchart, 2018). Such a conception of the subject differs from the autonomous, rational Cartesian subject, assumed to be a unified and coherent whole (Zienkowski, 2017). Due to the necessity to fill the lack in the subject with positive content, we can say that whenever 'demands are formed and expressed', this 'claim-making [is] constitutive of the identities of the individuals and groups involved in them' (Howarth & Norval, 2016, p. 311).

It follows, whenever a political actor claims something to be a problem requiring a solution, different elements, which stand in a non-necessary relation to each other, get tied together in a novel fashion. In other words, 'elements' are turned into 'moments' of discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). This process stands at the heart of the discourse theoretical approach, where it is known as the practice of articulation (Howarth & Norval, 2016; Zienkowski, 2017). In that way, hegemonic projects try to

> invoke alternatives to the existing political order. In doing so, they seek to project and inscribe new and unheard-of ways of being and acting, beyond the currently acceptable political languages and norms of our times, onto the political agenda (Norval, 2012, p. 810).

This concern is precisely shared with the mainstreaming approach, which also asks how (radical) political projects gain legitimacy and especially how far-right rhetoric becomes normalised through new and unheard-of articulations by elite politicians and the broadsheet media (Mondon & Winter, 2020).

The unravelling of these processes of change is of great concern for a discourse-theoretical approach to social research. Slavoj Žižek (1994) contends that.

> [d]iscourse analysis is perhaps at its strongest in answering this precise question: when a racist [German] says "There are too many [Turks] on our streets!", *how – from what place -*

> *does he "see" this* - that is, how is his symbolic space structured so that he can perceive the fact of a [Turk] strolling around a [Berlin] street as a disturbing surplus? (p. 11, original emphasis)[2]

However, I argue that the crucial point usually disregarded is: from what point onwards does someone conceive of foreigners as 'too many'? I agree with the importance of the task laid out by Howarth and Norval (2016) that '[d]emocratic theory should provide an account of the processes involved in the movement of senses of wrong, from inchoate expression to fully articulated political demand' (p. 310), but argue that more work needs to be done, both theoretically and empirically.

Demands in the writings of Ernesto Laclau

To drive home my point on the underdevelopment of the notion of the demand by Laclau, I have to go back to his original formulations. The following quote immediately brings to the fore my major points of critique:

> Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shantytowns. Problems of housing *arise*, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a demand which initially is perhaps only a request. If the demand is *satisfied*, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling and so on. (Laclau, 2005a, p. 73, emphasis added, original emphasis omitted)

However, the question I want to ask is how do demands emerge in the first place? Why is it that people come together and voice their dissatisfaction with, for example, schooling? At one point, their dissatisfaction with schooling, or health care, or the condition of roads did not meet the threshold of making up a request (or a demand). It might have been a nuisance, the object of chatter and people complained about it in private. But the intensity was below the level where there is widespread agreement that 'something must be done'. When does a nuisance turn into a request turn into a demand? In Valdivielso's (2017) words, '[h]ow can demands express themselves as demands and not, for instance, remain silent as an individual failure' (p. 305)?

Of course, given his post-Marxist commitments, Laclau would agree that there is no objective way to determine when a social condition automatically provokes a request and then flips into a demand. As he puts it, demands do not have a 'manifest destiny' (Laclau, 2005a, p. 127). The proletariat won't demand revolutionary change when the social structure is increasingly simplified into two camps due to the logic of capitalist accumulation and, similarly, globalisation doesn't automatically produce an identity crisis in middle-aged blue-collar workers that makes them susceptible to the far-right, as some political scientists assert (Ellinas, 2010). Instead, when there is no necessary connection between a social situation and a set of demands arising, we need to ask the Žižekian question why the presence of Muslim immigrants results in the demand to protect the cultural integrity of Germany?

Discourse theory should provide the tools to answer these questions but they have remained in the background. Instead, very unlike the basic premises of discourse theory, Laclau (2005b) writes that 'a *social need* adopts the form of a request' and once the request is rejected 'a situation of *social frustration will, no doubt, derive* from that decision' (p. 36) so that 'some kind of solidarity *will arise* between them all' (p. 37, all

emphases mine). But can we say *a priori*, independent of the context and content of a rejected request, that a feeling of frustration arises automatically, turning into a demand, which enters into equivalential relations with other demands? We can imagine a situation where, say, a refugee shelter is located in an area with large unemployment. Will a feeling of solidarity automatically arise between refugees, who demand not to be cramped together in small rooms and the unemployed, who demand higher social benefits? It may, but certainly not always.

We can find further tensions when comparing the process described above with Laclau's writings on political representation, which conflict with his discussion on demands. There, we find a clear *bottom-up* process regarding the emergence of demands and identity construction. However, when discussing political representation, Laclau (1996) argues in favour of a *top-down* movement. Here, interests are actively constructed by political actors and both the identities of represented and representative are not fixed prior to their articulation. It follows, that every political project has to construct the interests and demands it claims to represent in a process of naming and constructing the people (Laclau, 2005a).[3]

These two clashing conceptions call for a clarification. On the one hand, we find an unintended essentialism of demands in Laclau, because they appear to arise automatically out of objective conditions (Zicman de Barros, 2021). On the other hand, the meaning of demands emerges from the articulations of different actors that try to institute their own contingent representations as 'normal'. But this results in the 'difficulty to see why certain "constructions" of interests, rather than others take root', as Peter Dews (quoted in Laclau, 1990, p. 216) puts it. But before resolving this dilemma, we first look at how other writers in the tradition of the Essex School utilise the concept of the demand.

Demands in other Essex School writings

The notion of the demand certainly figures in the works of discourse theorists. But, crucially, discussions concerning their emergence and take-up are missing. Discourse theorists ask important questions, like how one particular demand stands in for a whole set of demands vis-à-vis the power bloc (Szkudlarek, 2011). For Žižek (2008), '[t]his is politics proper: the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more (…) the global restructuring of the entire social space' (p. 248). This is also a central concern for Laclau, who describes how a logic of difference prevails when demands remain in their pure differentiality or how they sacrifice some part of their differentiality to enter equivalential relations with other demands (Laclau, 2005a).

Another set of concerns relates to the responses to already articulated demands such as by civil society groups in post-Apartheid South Africa (Norval, 2009) or how policy makers have responded to novel alliances challenging airport expansions (Griggs & Howarth, 2019). Relatedly, scholars ask how those who are not properly represented, like refugees or the LGBTQ + community, have the possibility of gaining political voice, or what kind of political ethos is needed to make such developments more likely (Norval, 2012).

Psychoanalytically informed approaches rightfully point out how every demand is inherently related with a desire for recognition; a desire to be desired by the Other

(Ronderos, 2021; Zicman de Barros, 2021) following out of the subjects' insertion in the symbolic world of language and lost mother–child unity (Stavrakakis, 2006). However, I consider this mainly an ontological argument and contend that it doesn't help in answering the question of why a particular (set of) demand(s) emerges as being in need for recognition, like the demand for a less visible presence of foreigners on German streets. But Zicman de Barros (2021) correctly argues that 'demands should be interpreted as contingent discursive constructions and not as the basic unit of analysis' (p. 9), highlighting that Laclau's formalism is unwarranted.

Emmy Eklundh (2019) also cautioned against putting demands centre stage, because '[p]olitical subjectivity is not constructed around well-defined demands: the demands are plural, change over time, or are not recognised as demands in the first place' (p. 148). However, I fail to see why plural and unrecognised demands can't make up political subjectivities? Indeed, I would even argue that this calls for the importance of understanding the emergence of demands, especially with a focus on the role of affect – something Eklundh highlights. If it is the case that demands are plural and not explicitly recognised – to which I agree – but still manage to provide rather stable political identifications or at the very least 'grip' subjects (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), and go hand-in-hand with unquestioned interpretations of what is right and wrong in society, we need to understand why some sets of demands are taken up, while others are rejected.

Accounting for the emergence and take-up of demands

I now sketch an analytical framework that allows us to better theoretically account for and empirically analyse the emergence and take-up of articulated demands. Two crucial notions aid us in the analysis of social change: 'dislocation' and 'horizon'. First, the concept of dislocation provides one way to think productively about the negativity inherent in social relations, the possibility of change, and the emergence of novel demands. It points to a specific situation where an element of rupture or crisis threatens the field of social objectivity (Stavrakakis, 2001); when the 'normal order of things' is shaken to the ground (Stavrakakis, 2001). In those moments, subjects are confronted with the contingency of social relations more directly than at others and face the realisation that their ideological fullness is merely ideological (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This makes possible the rearticulation and reconstruction of political reality, from which follows a novel constitution of political identities (Laclau, 1990). But, of course, dislocations do not occur objectively but have to be constructed as dislocations. The way identities are threatened is not given but also follows articulatory acts.

Second, if dislocations are those moments in which political identities are put into question, the horizon refers to the sedimented character of social relations. '[I]t is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object' (Laclau, 1990, p. 64). As is the case with many Laclauian concepts, the horizon plays a role in representing the imaginary unity of society where some concrete content aspires to represent a fully achieved identity, a promised land (Laclau, 1990), a Germany for the Germans. The horizon is that space of inscription upon which all multifarious demands are placed, interpreted and understood. Hence, I argue that to understand the emergence (or not) of particular demands, we need to understand on what kind of horizon they interact with other

possible demands struggling for hegemony. Because '[h]orizons make possible and limit what may appear as relevant subjects and objects of politics' (Norval, 2012, p. 810), they influence the intelligibility of demands, and, hence, their emergence.

An example of a horizon regards the role of the American army and America itself in international relations through the 'war on terror'. This horizon fixes the understanding of certain dangerous others that threaten American society, legitimises military acts abroad, and considers a certain kind of (drone-based) warfare as necessary. If the horizon was structured differently, discussions on the (army) budget, humanitarian concerns around modern warfare, or the role of the US in international relations would change in turn. The architects of the 'war on terror' articulate it as the only possible response in a hostile world, but there is no guarantee that the horizon won't be replaced by a different one.

This leads us to an interesting point regarding the interplay of dislocation and horizon. It seems that for Laclau, the horizon is somewhat primary and moments of dislocation take place on it. Regarding the moment of change, Laclau (1990) writes: 'insofar as a mythical space begins to absorb less social demands, and an increasing number of dislocations that cannot be integrated into that representation coexist, the space is, so to speak, re-literalised; its power of metaphorisation is reduced, and its dimension of horizon is thus lost' (p. 65). Similarly, he says that horizons 'are located beyond the precariousness and dislocations typical of the world of objects' (Laclau, 1990, p. 64). But it isn't clear how a horizon either 'absorbs less social demands' or does so successfully. Here, Laclau's formalism and disregard for empirical analysis again shines through.

But, crucially, we can pose the same question of which elements will win out in the hegemonic struggle for meaning to make sense of an event also to the change in the horizon. How does one particular horizon replace or change the make-up of the previous one? One fairly straightforward reply points to the availability of alternative projects. 'To break out from the common way presupposes not only a sense of dislocation, of dispute and dissatisfaction, but also the *availability* of an alternative imaginary horizon' (Norval, 2012, p. 821, original emphasis). But this still does not help us understand how a *specific* configuration of the horizon replaces another.

Laclau even argues that sometimes it is enough to provide *any* alternative to a failing order. He uses the example of the rise of the Nazis in Germany in the 1920s, which did not automatically result out of an economic crisis, but 'was the only one in the circumstances that addressed *the problems experienced by the middle classes* as a whole and offered a principle for their interpretation', because 'no other discourse presented itself as a real hegemonic alternative' (Laclau, 1990, p. 66, my emphasis). But such a line of argumentation seems to go against the basic convictions of discourse theory and introduces again unwanted elements of determinism. Here the snake bites its own tail – was the concept of the horizon not introduced to make sense of the way an economic crisis can be understood, who is suffering from that crisis, and how to solve the problem? Isn't it the case that political projects generally try to present themselves as the only 'viable alternative'?

To summarise: two processes are especially important for the emergence and take-up of demands. They are always formulated on a horizon of intelligibility, where they struggle for meaning with other demands and the particular interpretations of the social order they entail. Here, basic claims about the state and direction of, as well as threats to the social order are negotiated and settle in sedimented form. Crucially, during moments

of dislocation, sedimented meanings get challenged, the ideological fullness of identities exposed, and new ways to identify emerge while with every de-sedimentation an immediate re-sedimentation and struggle for hegemony ensues.

Illustrative case – demanding a *Leitkultur*

I turn now to an illustrative case to show how demands – in their interplay on the horizon and via dislocatory moments – can either remain in the background and are discredited or can gain credibility. The case is the 'integration debate' in Germany, where I analyse how particular demands around cultural homogeneity and the need to be protected from dangerous, foreign others are constructed and emerge. I argue that a change in the horizon, especially through discussions around the concept of *Leitkultur*, was largely responsible for making far-right demands that were previously seen as extreme and outrageous become legitimate and credible representations of social reality. This overview cannot aspire to be exhaustive in this space and the developments in the integration debate are not the sole reason why the AfD became successful, but I argue that it functioned as one crucial aspect of the conditions of possibility of its success (see Kim, 2017). I therefore simply want to indicate how we can productively use the concepts of demand, horizon, and dislocation as under-utilised parts of the tool box of discourse theorists.

The integration debate generally deals with the question of how to organise the peaceful co-existence of Germans and foreigners. The latter migrated to Germany during its post-war 'Economic Miracle' after the rebuilding of a destroyed country. Germany entered guest worker agreements first with countries like Italy or Romania and in 1961 also with Turkey (Chin, 2007). Eventually, the cooperation with Turkey increased and nowadays the signifier 'guest worker' almost always invokes images of Turkish immigrants.

At first, the conception of a 'guest' was understood literally, with work permits limited to two years after which new guest workers would replace the previous ones. Indeed, it was the implicit goal of policy makers at the time to keep Germans and foreigners separate to uphold the foreigners' cultural identity and thereby increase the likelihood that they would return to their place of origin once their work period ended (Ohlert, 2015).[4]

During the 1960s and 70s, therefore, the notion of integration is not entirely absent from the debate, but is not yet articulated as a moment of discourse and stays on the level of the element (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). Instead of a fully fleshed out concept of integration, the need to organise the co-existence of different cultures was mostly understood in a legalistic way, e.g. through pathways to citizenship or voting rights, without undertones regarding the compatibility (or not) of those cultures. However, when employers successfully lobbied to scrap the two-year work permit, it increasingly dawned upon policy makers that the 'guests' were there to stay long-term (Ewing, 2008).

The second phase of the integration debate is connected to this 'myth of return' slowly crumbling and guest workers increasingly brought their families into the country (Herbert, 2001). This led to multicultural policies contrary to the previous attempts of trying to keep the different communities separate. While there has never been a fully fleshed out and embraced concept of multiculturalism at work in Germany (Ohlert, 2015), this period is shaped by a vaguely multiculturalist understanding of integration

as a two-way street. As opposed to the third phase, here the onus to integrate is not solely placed on the foreigner who has to assimilate into a normatively desirable dominant culture, but also the host society has a duty to facilitate integration (Windel et al., 2022). Of course, this did not mean an enthusiastic understanding of integration and indeed a fear of rising immigration numbers already existed back then, but the culturalistic understanding of integration had not become dominant yet and, relatedly, Islam wasn't primarily identified as the obstacle that makes integration impossible (Lucassen, 2005).[5]

Within the second phase, we also find the origin of the notorious debate of whether 'Germany is a country of immigration' or not. It was further fuelled by previously unseen numbers of asylum applications at the beginning of the 1990s following the upheavals in Yugoslavia and the Balkan Wars. Shocking acts of violence by neo-fascists against refugees seemingly forced the hand of the conservative government in limiting access to asylum in 1992, even though the then-oppositional SPD also agreed to the constitutional changes (Krell et al., 1996). Notwithstanding these developments, 'a *de facto* structural integration policy has developed and (…) the mantra of successive German governments that 'Germany is not an immigration country' was necessary to divert attention of the German public from what was really happening on the ground' (Lucassen, 2005, p. 155). We can summarise the second phase with the long-time conservative chancellor Helmut Kohl who posited integration as a necessary goal and that integration does not mean the loss of one's own identity, but the peaceful side-by-side living between Germans and foreigners (Ohlert, 2015).

This understanding was dislocated and changed during the third phase when essential cultural differences are asserted and supposed cultural incompatibilities stand in the way of integration. This is not to say that the debate changed immediately and, indeed, developments are more complex than I can account for here, but the understanding of what it means to be German, what constitutes the immutable part of its society and the foundation of its communality changed slowly (Rohgalf, 2016).

This turn kicked off via a newspaper interview (die Welt, 2000) on October 10th, 2000, where Friedrich Merz from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – its current party-head – called for an active avowal of a German *Leitkultur* from immigrants. This was needed, because integration supposedly can only work when there is a shared value system between the host society and the integrating element. Merz claimed that the existence of 'parallel societies' where Germans are the minority in parts of cities or the different attitudes towards women by immigrants stand in the way of integration – and that *Leitkultur* would be a solution to that.

Importantly, at the beginning, *Leitkultur* was frowned upon. After his impactful interjection into the integration debate, Merz was heavily criticised from all quarters immediately, including his own party (Pautz, 2005). The long-time party secretary Heiner Geißler (cited in Manz, 2004) opined that a distinct *Leitkultur* could 'serve as a justification for every skinhead, if somebody does not fit into his notion of Germany and he thinks he can beat him up for no reason' (p. 493). The social-democratic then-Chancellor Schröder (cited in Ohlert, 2015) warned that the usage of such terms indicated a '*march to the right*' (p. 3), and Volker Beck (Ohlert, 2015) of the Green party called it a '*firework of racism*'.

Even though the term *Leitkultur* was not used by the Nazis themselves, it nevertheless invokes connotations of the superiority of one culture over another. Previously, a

positively connotated, strong avowal of essential German traits could not be uttered in public discourse after World War II (Art, 2006); it wasn't part of the horizon. Merz' contribution was not very impactful in terms of changing the integration debate at the time but was crucial when another event picked up its framing and, I argue, resulted in a dislocation that enabled the major shift in the horizon upon which the AfD later formulated its claims.

The event was the public debate around the 2010 book publication of '*Germany Abolishes Itself*' by Thilo Sarrazin (2010), a Social Democrat with governing experience and back-then member of the Board of the Federal Bank. The book ended up being one of the best-selling non-fiction titles in German post-war history. In it, Sarrazin challenges common-sense assumptions regarding immigration, properties of migrants, and the role of Islam in Germany.[6] He discerned a bleak future for Germany with '*threats and decaying processes*' lurking in the '*inner realm of society*' (Sarrazin, 2010, p. 7). While Germany has for a long time made very good use of its productive and human labour capacities, now it enters a period of decline. This is because intelligence is supposedly largely hereditary and, unfortunately, the more able Germans produce less offspring than the less able immigrants (Sarrazin, 2010). However, Sarrazin not only makes biological arguments, but also culturalistic ones. He produces strong, essential dichotomies, where 'Muslims are characterized as religious, traditional, antidemocratic, patriarchal, inefficient, and intolerant, while Germans come off as secular, modern, democratic, productive, and tolerant' (Meng, 2015, p. 109).

Although widespread condemnation of Sarrazin's theses by all political parties followed the publication (Meng, 2015), one major move within the debate was to denounce his more extreme statements and then quickly draw attention to the fact that he had 'spoken out a hurtful truth' about some 'problems' that were ignored for too long. In other words, with regards to the 'problems' Sarrazin talked about many agreed he was right, only his rhetoric was despicable (Meng, 2015), indicating the dislocatory nature of the debate making the emergence of new subject positions and problem diagnoses possible.

We find here an interesting parallel to recent research less focussed on mainstreaming but rather on the AfD itself and the growing literature discerning conscious taboo breaking as a political strategy by the far-right (see Grönegräs & De Cleen, 2023; Rensmann, 2018). However, I would argue that discursive changes can be even more pronounced when mainstream actors themselves shift the 'boundaries of the sayable', thereby affecting the intelligibility of demands by lending legitimacy to viewpoints found previously mainly on the fringes of society. Following the Laclauian idea that dislocations and their resolutions do not happen mechanically and the horizon of meaning needs to be (re)constructed, I conjecture that articulations by mainstream actors are particularly powerful in re-suturing the lack and providing new ways to identify. What is clear is that the discursive strategies deployed by mainstream actors during the Sarrazin debate mirror those discerned in AfD taboo breaking, such as to denounce the word choice of an actor but support the statement itself, to provide a justification as 'to be brave enough to talk about things as they are' or to claim to know 'what the people want' (Grönegräs & De Cleen, 2023), as we will see below. It may also have contributed to AfD's taboo breaking statements no longer producing appalment in parts of the population with differences between mainstream and far-right discourse narrowing.

I contend that through the acts of mainstreaming described below, Sarrazin's ideas became recycled and the problem incorporated by other political actors. That problem was failed integration; a failed integration where homogenised foreign others were to blame for not having picked up the opportunities offered by a pure German society. Discourse theory allows us to trace the success of a counter-discourse 'with reference to the extent to which it manages to be articulated with and within competing discourses in the public realm' (Zienkowski, 2017, p. VI). The efficacy of Sarrazin's contribution and the change in the horizon shows especially when politicians lend legitimacy to his theses of whom we wouldn't expect it. While conservative politicians have attempted at different times in the past to politicise the 'foreigner' and 'integration issues' (see Lucassen, 2005; Pautz, 2005), now the topic was also seized upon by politicians of the left. From now onwards, also mainstream politicians outside the right fringes of the CDU discerned essential differences between Germans and foreigners and prophesised doom if the 'failure of integration' were to go on unchecked.

Thus, a public figure who defended Sarrazin was Joachim Gauck. In 2010, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Greens jointly proposed Gauck as candidate for the German presidency who narrowly lost to CDU candidate Christian Wulff. Gauck (cited in Tagesspiegel, 2010) called Sarrazin's work '*courageous*' for speaking more '*openly about **a problem that exists in society** than the political class does*' (para. 6, bold emphasis mine). Former SPD chancellor Helmut Schmitt (cited in Meng, 2015) pointed out that while Sarrazin made some mistakes in his presentation, overall he '*addressed many problems correctly* and triggered a discussion that was *urgently needed*' (p. 117, my emphasis).

Another example that lets us infer how the horizon has changed drastically is the comparison of the reaction to two very similar statements made a few years apart. On October 3rd, 2010, during the height of the Sarrazin debate, President Wulff (cited in der Bundespräsident, 2010) said publicly: 'Christianity is undoubtedly part of Germany. Judaism is undoubtedly part of Germany. That is our Judaeo-Christian heritage. But by now Islam is also part of Germany' (para. 28).

Especially Wulff's own party, the CDU and the wider media were outraged. Four days later, his party colleague and long-time Prime Minister of Hesse, Volker Bouffier (cited in Deutscher Bundestag, 2010), said in parliament that '*we have a Leitkultur. To this **Leitkultur** belongs especially a separation of state and church. This **is the antithesis to the Islamic Sharia**. It follows necessarily, that the Sharia cannot be the basis of successful integration in this country* (p. 6803, bold emphasis mine).

With Bouffier (and others), we have mainstream politicians who, following the publication of '*Deutschland schafft sich ab*', created an antagonistic frontier between a pure German society and a Muslim threat on the verge of subverting it. In the same vein, the media – tabloid and broadsheet – also jumped onto the statement by Wulff. One of the editors of the broadsheet *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* drew a connection between both events, the Sarrazin debate and the Wulff speech. Namely, Berthold Kohler (FAZ, 2010, bold emphasis mine) complained that the President did not mention '*the many-voiced outcry of the Germans – against the witch-hunt against a man* [Sarrazin], *who **clearly speaks from the inner soul of the people***' and said instead that the President seems to have no idea '*how much the long-established population is **feeling threatened by the advancing Islam**, rightly so or not*'. It follows, three years

before the AfD was founded and five years before it radicalised, there already was talk about the 'threat' Muslim immigrants posed for the make-up of German society.

What makes these statements especially interesting for the discourse analysts is that another conservative politician uttered the almost exact same words four years earlier without there being a large outcry. In 2006, Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) gave the opening speech of the first ever 'Islam Conference' (see Hernandez Aguilar, 2018). There, he welcomed the faith by stating that '*Islam is a part of Germany and a part of Europe, it is part of our present and our future*' (Bulletin der Bundesregierung, 2006, para. 1). Crucially, those voices which lashed out at Wulff four years later stayed silent.[7]

It follows the change in the horizon following the dislocatory Sarrazin debate changed the intelligibility of *Leitkultur*. As we saw, the initial reactions towards the concept were rejection and appalment. But in the months after the publication of Sarrazin's book, politicians of the major parties now agreed that, indeed, there was something like a *Leitkultur*. Now they only differed on its content with their more conservative peers. But using the term no longer invoked a 'firework of racism'. The dislocation enabled the emergence of new ways to identify. All the talk about failed integration, immutable characteristics of migrants such as laziness or stupidity or following Sharia threw a wedge between pure, Christian Germans and non-Christian non-Germans. This made possible the articulation of the German way of life as under threat and in need of saving; a 'fear' the far-right successfully mobilises on.

Indeed, even though political actors from all major parties at one point or another argued in favour of a *Leitkultur*, the AfD is the only party that officially affirms the concept in their communication. The AfD calls for '*German Leitkultur instead of "Multiculturalism"*' and claims, like Sarrazin seven years earlier, that this is necessary because civil societies '*are called upon to protect their cultures und develop them on their own*' and the only hope to win the '*cultural fight between occident and Islam as doctrine of salvation and carrier of non-integratable cultural traditions*'. The responsibility for integration, like for Sarrazin, lies solely on the immigrant. Everyone '*who receives a permanent right of residence has a duty to adapt to one's new homeland and the German Leitkultur, not the other way round*' (AfD, 2017, p. 47; 32).

We can clearly say that these articulations belong to the horrific dimension of fantasy (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) – if the danger is not averted, doom will follow. As Sarrazin (2010) puts it,

> I don't want the country of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to be majority Muslim, that people speak mainly Turkish and Arabic, that women wear a headscarf, and that the daily rhythm is regulated by the shouts of the muezzins. If I want to experience that, I can book a holiday in the Orient. (p. 308)

The demand for cultural homogeneity as put forward in the *Leitkultur* debate then figures as the beatific dimension of fantasy – if all immigrants were to subscribe to a proper German *Leitkultur* or do not and leave the territory, the country would finally be reconciled and the fullness-to-come no longer a utopia. This is the mythical function of demands for Laclau, where *Leitkultur* aspires to guarantee a fully achieved identity, a Germany for the Germans, that the AfD successfully campaigns on, years after the beginning of the *Leitkultur* debate.

Conclusion

This paper took as its starting point the curious observation that even though Ernesto Laclau names the 'demand' as the 'minimal unit of investigation' of social and political research (Laclau, 2005a, 2005b), there is a noticeable absence in his work about the concrete process of their emergence and take-up. Indeed, some discussions suggest clear incompatibilities with his other writings, especially on political representation (Laclau, 1996). I claimed that the seemingly bottom-up emergence of demands is misguided and an unfortunate result of Laclau's formalism. It conflicts with his otherwise clear focus on the non-essential character of political identities where identities are constructed by political actors. What is more, also other Essex School scholars which utilise the notion of the demand do not discuss their conditions of emergence (Norval, 2009, 2012; Ronderos, 2021).

Therefore, I reformulated the conditions of possibility for the emergence and take-up of demands. First, I argued that via the Laclauian concept of horizon – the space where demands are inscripted and can be understood – we can infer that either a demand 'matches' with reality or does not. For a demand to 'make sense', it relies on a specific configuration of the horizon that cannot be determined in advance by theory but needs to be specified during every act of research. Second, dislocations – privileged moments in discourse that make the contingent and un-necessary character of social relations visible and thereby enable new identifications – also influence the ability for demands to become new common sense.

I then utilised this discourse theoretical vocabulary to illustrate the process of demand emergence in the political field, specifically concerning the mainstreaming of far-right thought in Germany. I showed how demands around cultural homogeneity were debated in the German discourse on integration. This was necessary as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) managed to rally many voters quickly after its formation around claims of and threats by 'failed integration'. I ascertained that, without having been provoked by a far-right challenger, the established political parties and especially the conservative CDU changed the horizon upon which the AfD then later formulated its more radical claims by increasingly subscribing and campaigning for a *Leitkultur* ('leading culture'). The publication of a best-selling non-fiction book, '*Germany Abolishes Itself*' (Sarrazin, 2010) sparked a public debate that functioned as a dislocation in reversing the previous understanding of integration. While before integration was mainly debated through rights and laws, with the calls for a *Leitkultur* emerges a culturalistic discourse (Windel et al., 2022) – which in later years would only deepen.

In short, during the debate, conceptions of essential differences between Germans and immigrants were constructed and the failure of multiculturalism enunciated. Claims, that were made in the past by other far-right parties yet disregarded in the population (Art, 2007). But receiving support from elite actors across the political spectrum, we can infer via the bi-directional understanding of political representation by the Essex School where politicians partially create the interests they are representing (Laclau, 1996), how the threat of Islam and the dangers of failed integration entered public consciousness. These instances of mainstreaming resulted further in the narrowing of the gap between claims of established parties and those of the AfD when previously that gap helped distinguish the NPD's or *Republikaner's* claims as radical. Therefore, it contributed

to AfD's demands not being seen as outrageous but instead genuine solutions to 'real' problems. This, I argue, is a fundamental but clearly not sufficient process if we want to understand the mainstream appeal that the far-right is currently experiencing in Germany and elsewhere (see Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Future research along the lines I have suggested here would need to show how at least one additional dislocation contributed to the mainstreaming of the far-right in Germany and to demands for *Leitkultur*. Namely, how mainstream politicians and the broadsheet media contributed to a moral panic around the events of the New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne where over the course of the night many crimes, often against women, were committed from within large groups of people, often by immigrants. This ensuing debate was the nail in the coffin of the previously widely-supported 'culture of welcoming' (see Windel et al., 2022) during the summer of 2015, which was superseded in public discourse by a racist discourse of fear of immigrants and again essential differences between foreign cultures and German culture ascertained, especially around gender roles.[8] More theoretically oriented research into demand formulation can contribute to map and understand the curious trend of actively not demanding like practiced by the Indignados movement or Occupy Wall Street (see Millner-Larsen, 2013) and how this impacts identity constructions and bonds on the affective level (see Eklundh, 2019).

Notes

1. In some instances the AfD even copied slogans from former far-right parties directly, such as the *Republikaner's* creative figure of speech election poster 'We are leaving the church in the village and the mosque in Istanbul' or Gauland's usage of NPD's (rhyming) slogan 'Today we are tolerant and tomorrow foreign in our own country' (die Zeit, 2016). In this paper, fully italicised citations are my translation from the German.
2. In the original example Žižek uses Englishman, Pakistani, and London.
3. This constructivist understanding of political identities and the simultaneous bottom-up and top-down effects on 'public opinion' are also a core concern for the mainstreaming approach (see Mondon, 2022).
4. Whereas here there might be an essentially separate understanding of cultures at work, this separateness is normatively desired, while later culturalistic understandings of Islam are responsible for upholding separateness when unity according to *Leitkultur* is normatively desired. First the desired separateness and later the existence of 'parallel societies' as a threat further shows the difference in the two respective horizons.
5. We can identify the turn from a focus on migration towards criticism of Islam itself also within the AfD, who realised the former might be temporary but the latter could be exploited long-term. The influential Beatrix von Storch (quoted in Heitmeyer, 2018) wrote in a leaked email regarding the 2017 manifesto: *'Islam is the most explosive topic of the manifesto (…) The press will feast on our rejection of Islam like no other topic of the manifesto (asylum and Euro are wasted, don't bring anything new …). That is why we have to make the topic public with a bang'* (p. 216).
6. For a summary of the book in the English language, see der Spiegel International (2010).
7. The difference in reaction shows also through a LexisNexis keyword newspaper database search done by the author. Choosing a timeline of two weeks following both speeches, the search terms 'Schäuble AND Islam' and 'Wulff AND Islam' return 132 and 610 articles, respectively.
8. My own interpretation of the events comes closest to David Goeßmann's (2019) overview and analysis in his excellent book '*The Invention of the Threatened Nation*'. In the English language, see Boulila and Carri's (2017) article.

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