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The Metapolitics of Identity: Identitarianism and its Critics

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This paper situates Mithu Sanyal’s recent novel Identitti in the context of ongoing public debates in Germany about identity politics, including the inroads made into these debates by the New Right under the banner of “identitarianism.” It argues that the disparagement of “left identitarians” by liberal critics is a sign of the New Right’s success in shifting the discourse on identity away from emancipatory aspirations for recognition and social justice, and toward a völkisch nationalism.

Die entscheidende Frage lautet also nicht “wo kommst du her?” sondern “Wo wollen wir zusammen hin?”
—Mithu Sanyal

In der repressiven Gesellschaft ist der Begriff des Menschen selber die Parodie der Ebenbildlichkeit. Es liegt im Mechanismus der “pathischen Projektion,” dass die Gewalthaber als Menschen nur ihr eigenes Spiegelbild wahrnehmen, anstatt das Menschliche gerade als das Verschiedene zurückzuspiegeln.
—Theodor W. Adorno

Identitti

“Identity politics were big. And Nivedita’s understanding of identity politics was small.” To remedy this situation, the protagonist of Mithu Sanyal’s novel Identitti decides to take up intercultural studies and postcolonial theory at the Heinrich-Heine University in Düsseldorf. Nivedita’s teacher is Saraswati, named after an Indian goddess, and revered by her students, whose lives she transforms by creating a space for the representation of People of Color, by challenging the invisibility of whiteness. The opening act in one of Saraswati’s seminars is to ask all white students to leave.
the room. If that sounds a lot like Audre Lorde, who did something similar at a lecture in Berlin (with the significant difference that she did so at its conclusion rather than at the outset), Saraswati also shares traits with Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, and Priyamvada Gopal—all of whom Sanyal gratefully acknowledges as models for her character. But it is Rachel Dolezal to whom Saraswati owes her most fateful trait. In 2015, Dolezal made headlines and caused an outrage by passing for Black as a white woman; in the book, it turns out, Saraswati is the self-given name of a certain Sarah Vera Thielmann, a white woman who changed her pigmentation to pass as a Person of Color.

This bombshell sets off the novel, unleashing a shitstorm in the many tweets that pepper the narrative. Nivedita finds herself caught up in the maelstrom, both on social media—where she tweets as the titular Identitti—and among the interlocking circles of her classmates, roommates, cousin, and boyfriend, who all weigh in on the scandal. Eventually, Nivedita decides to confront her teacher, more or less moving into her inner-city rooftop apartment in the Düsseldorf neighborhood of Oberbilk. Additional characters arrive: first Nivedita’s cousin Priti, and then Saraswati’s brother who, it turns out, was the one who spilled the beans on her white background. These two arrivals round out the central quartet that then turns the apartment into a veritable debate headquarters where they spend their days and nights discussing Saraswati’s case, airing their various feelings of betrayal, outrage, and intrigue. Eventually, a group of enraged students stages a protest in front of the apartment demanding Saraswati’s resignation, but she digs in, claiming her passing as a radical performative act. Tensions rise along with the sweltering heat, until a graveyard exorcism and a summer storm clear the air. Although the narrative proliferates rather than resolves the debates about identity, the characters are able to move on. At the end of the novel, Saraswati decamps for Oxford, where she will take up a position in critical whiteness studies, and Nivedita has worked through her feelings, which for her, too, amount to a crisis of identity: How will she, who identified with Saraswati as a teacher and mother figure, come to terms with her mentor’s betrayal?

In a real sense, the characters’ struggles over identity are this novel’s discursive object as well: Identitti rehearses the crisis of the very concept of identity at a moment when identity politics is big, but our understanding of identity politics arguably remains small. The novel landed in bookstores at a moment when debates about identity and its political uses had taken on new urgency in Germany. As one critic rightly observed, the book—which was longlisted for the German Book Prize—“fits to a T as a representation of the culture wars in our digitally escalated present.”

As such, Identitti is at times a bit on the nose, no doubt. And yet it would be difficult to fault the novel on this count since it wears its on-the-nose-ness so knowingly. Relentlessly mixing narrative and discursive registers, Sanyal transposes the Dolezal case into a German academic setting, creates fictional characters composit
real-life models, and lets them riff on contemporary debates (one critic described the unceasing, smart, snappy and admittedly academic debate among the different characters as “rhetoric porn”). The novel comes complete with notes and a bibliography; it features tweets and threads with hashtags like #Saraswati and #transracial that Sanyal solicited from well-known public figures, intellectuals, and Feuilleton writers like Patrick Bahners (FAZ) and Ijoma Mangold (Die Zeit); for good measure, she also cobbles together some tweets from Narendra Modi and the now famously defunct @realDonaldTrump. Within the novel, such reality effects sit happily alongside the magical realist presence of Kali, a goddess with whom Nivedita converses in cursive.

Inspired in equal parts by Anthony Appiah and Zadie Smith, Rogers Brubaker and Salman Rushdie, Identitti has been described aptly as a “coming-of-age and campus novel in which theory collages shade into fairy tales.”

Sanyal’s novel, in other words, is characterized by an oscillation between registers—an oscillation that I consider key to its function both as a literary text and as a refracting mirror for contemporary debates around identity. As I suggest below, in today’s Germany, those debates can cross ideological lines in ways that resonate with the rapid shifts between textual features and aesthetic devices in the novel—by which I mean not only the alternating narrative registers from magical realism to ripped-from-the-headlines reality effects. In addition, even as the scandal around Saraswati (#saraswatigate) is focalized through the central character of Nivedita, Sanyal’s novel achieves a polyphonous feel by the sheer range of contributors to the debate, from Nivedita’s diverse circle of friends to anonymous right-wing media accounts, from scholars to journalists, and from bloggers to politicians. The novel’s narrative voice, in other words, happily oscillates along with these characters across different inflections, from zany to earnest. These fluctuations account for the gentle irony thatbuffets the characters—without ever disavowing them. They also account for the fun many reviewers clearly had with the novel, attesting to their own laughter.

At the same time, such formal considerations might also map out a substantive intervention that this novel makes in contemporary discourses around identity. More than any single ideological position taken up by characters in the diegesis, it is arguably the novel’s concern with the oscillations among those positions that best articulates the stakes of identity in the present. In the repartee between Nivedita and Saraswati, but also in the exchanges with and between other characters or among the Twitterati, any one claim about the performativity of identity, about essentialism, or about the relation between race and gender is sure to be contradicted from one page to the next; what stays constant and is indeed nurtured through these exchanges is the recognition that identity matters—even where it is disavowed or critiqued.

Identity is political and it is consequential—this, too, is a reality effect that connects the novel to ongoing public debate. As Sanyal puts it in her afterword: “Identity wars are wars over fictions that take place in reality.”
That these are indeed taking place in reality is hard to overlook these days, especially if under “reality” you include that uniquely German public space, the Feuilleton. Hardly a day seems to go by without a new contribution to debates about identity politics—especially since the FAZ opened the most recent round with a contribution by Wolfgang Thierse to which I’ll return. “Wieviel Identität verträgt die Gesellschaft?” was the not-so-open question, to which the NZZ promptly supplied the answer: “Identitätspolitik ist Gift.” Geschichte der Gegenwart countered: “Ohne geht es auch nicht,” and in its September issue, the usually more mandarin Merkur waded into the fray with a special issue on the politics of identity. As the sociologist Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky, one of the sharpest commentators on these debates, rightly asked: “Worum geht es eigentlich bei diesem Raunen im Feuilleton, das vor den Auswüchsen eines postmodernen Kulturrelativismus im Gewand identitärer Fixierungen warmt?”

What prompts these debates are usually not the concerns with underrepresentation or emancipation that first prompted Black feminists in the 1970s to speak of a politics of identity. Nor is it the focus on intersectional approaches to identity as it is practiced and proposed by, among others, Sasha-Marianna Salzmann, Max Czollek, Fatima El-Tayeb, the speakers featured at the forty-fifth annual conference of the GSA. Instead, the German Feuilleton these days tends to engage in handwringing about the allegedly divisive effects of any politics based in identity. The litany is becoming increasingly familiar: identity politics is blamed for fragmenting society in the name of ever more particular subgroup identities; identity politics replaces material struggles for social progress with a pseudo-politics of recognition; identity politics centers victimhood over citizenship; identity politics rejects Enlightenment universals in the name of individualist politics; identity politics is hedonistic and plays into the hands of neoliberalism.

The list could be continued, but the proliferation of contributions also bespeaks a certain belatedness to these debates—not in the sense of catching up with American identity politics by importing them wholesale to Germany, as the anti-Americanist insinuation would have it, but in the sense that the real debate has peaked and the German Feuilleton is lagging behind. Meanwhile, social, political, and cultural practices have shifted beyond identity into some post-identity politics moment where newly empowered participants and actors self-confidently adopt postmigrant platforms that no longer lend themselves to “representation fracking,” to adopt Czollek’s memorable term. In her aptly titled Undeutsch, El-Tayeb consequently seeks “an alternative model of German identity” that would criss-cross “nations, identities, genders, communities, politics and art, present and past.” While I want to acknowledge the power and promise of such self-positionings, as well as the long-standing, principled critiques of identity politics by scholars from Judith Butler (whose influential Gender Trouble announced its interest in the “subversion of identity” already in the subtitle)
to Asad Haider, there are at least two reasons why I think we should linger on the question of identity.

One reason might be formulated in terms suggested by Anthony Appiah, Patricia Purtschert, and others who argue that there is no outside of identity politics. Even if identity is always a construction—or, in Appiah’s terms, a “lie”—it remains, as he puts it, a “lie that binds.” This is very much the point of Identiti: We cannot outrun the ascription of identity categories—at least not so long as we fail to recognize how those politics not only structure marginalized positions struggling for inclusion but also lie at the heart of exclusionary structures perpetuated by a patriarchal, white Dominanzkultur. However, such recognition alone is not enough, since it does not protect against the abuse of that very insight for reactionary ends—as we have witnessed with the rise of the new radical Right. Across Europe and beyond, that Right has mobilized a politics of identity stripped of its emancipatory aims, turning it on its head to shore up white supremacy, völkisch nationalism, xenophobia, and fantasies of racial purity. The fact that this occurs under the mantle of identity is the second reason why we cannot afford to abandon our critical engagement with identity politics.

Identitarianism: Identity Politics of the Far Right

The appropriation of the language of identity by the Right is hardly subtle. Indeed, in a characteristic provocation, the Right ratcheted up the rhetoric by fashioning itself under the new notion of “identitarianism,” a move of linguistic/conceptual inflation that turns identity into a metaconcept of itself. As such, it borders on the tautological—as becomes apparent in the definition provided by the Duden: “sich in Übereinstimmung mit dem eigenen Selbstbild, der eigenen Identität befindend.” In other words: an identitarian is one who is identical with his identity. Identity squared.

If this sounds almost nonsensical, the concept of identitarianism has nonetheless accrued specifiable ideological meanings in contemporary politics, culture, and society. Although the OED documents a few, isolated historical usages of the term upon including it for the first time in 2018, it acquired its present meaning with the formation of an identitarian movement in Europe. Growing out of the French nouvelle droite, but also seeking to distinguish itself from the latter as a younger, hipper, and if anything more combative formation, a “Génération Identitaire” announced itself in 2012 with a viral video titled “Déclaration de guerre.” The branding caught on and the black-and-yellow lambda logo now identifies adherents of the identitarian movement (IB) across Europe.

My point here, however, is less about the movement than about the concept. As such, I want to suggest, identitarianism has become a key plank in the platform of the European New Right. Although it rails against leftist identity politics at every turn, this New Right has carved out its own politics of identity under identitarian premises—even where it does not invoke “identitarian” as a label. In this sense, identitarianism
has found a home in Germany not only in the IB Deutschland, but also in think tanks like the Institut für Staatspolitik and its biennial “Akademien,” in publishing houses like Antaios and its bibliophile book series, and in right-wing journals like Sezession and its online blog, Sezession im Netz. All of these operations are run out of a small town in Sachsen-Anhalt, Schnellroda, that has become all but synonymous with the radical New Right in Germany. Having grown continuously over the past two decades, its activities extend well beyond book publishing and conferences, amounting to a veritable right-wing media ecology with podcasts, social media networks, and its own YouTube channel, the Kanal Schnellroda. Although few, if any, of the ideologues and content producers in this space would self-identify as identitarians, their output serves as well as any texts produced by the contemporary European Far Right to illustrate its brand of identity politics.

Adopting a self-styled Gramscianism, this New Right has sought to define itself in terms of its “metapolitical” ambitions: its avowed goal is to occupy new ground in a discursive war of position, to “move the overton window,” as they put it. Whatever you call it, the aim is to normalize far-right concepts previously considered politically out of bounds and thereby to redefine what counts as the political middle, moving it rightward. As the New Right’s own identity politics, identitarianism is key to this process, and it is all the more effective in that it is sold by ideologues as a mere reaction to progressive positions. In the words of Martin Lichtmesz, one of the principal purveyors of New Right ideology and a frequent author for both Antaios and Sezession, “‘identity politics’ works like all wars: once it has been declared, you can no longer ‘not go.’” Conveniently forgetting that the “déclaration de guerre” came from the Right itself, Lichtmesz attacks a familiar set of ostensible political foes to reveal what is ultimately at stake in the New Right’s politics of identity: white supremacy.


This short passage reads like a gloss on identitarianism. It appears in the leading journal of the self-styled intellectuals of the German Far Right. Founded in 2003, Sezession already devoted its 2004 October issue to the notion of “identity,” and the concept has remained a touchstone in the intervening decades and across massive political shifts. For the Right, identity is a bulwark against globalism, multiculturalism, and what they label the “great replacement” (an anti-immigrant conspiracy theory). They mobilize identity in defense against pluralism, difference, and ambiguity. Despite all efforts to ensure plausible deniability, the Right’s notion of identity is
essentialist and völkisch. It is also apocalyptic: at stake are ostensibly not just some abstract, more or less traditionalist Western values, but the survival of a people whose identity is posited—also abstractly—in terms of ethnic homogeneity. “Angesichts der dramatischen demographischen Lage,” writes one contributor to a Sezession special issue on the concept of Volk, “sprechen wir vom Bestand und von der Existenz unseres kulturell und—man fürchtet sich fast, es zu sagen—ethnisch bereits nicht mehr homogenen Volkes.”

Such statements are perforce performative, designed to conjure the impossible homogeneous, völkisch essence whose absence they bemoan. As such, they draw heavily on the language of inclusion and exclusion to police rigid concepts of identity, prompting right-wing pundits such as Caroline Sommerfeld, a prominent Sezession author, to devote her contribution for the Volk issue to the question “who belongs to us?” In her article by that title, Sommerfeld draws clear lines in the sand between inauthentic, even if naturalized Germans on the one hand—what she calls “Paßdeutsche,” not to mention “Fremdkörperdeutsche”—and the true German identities of “Abstammungsdeutsche” on the other, whom she at one point even terms “Volksseelendeutsche.” Echoes of such ethn nationalist language games then reverberate further in Alexander Gauland’s contribution to the theme issue, where the head of the AfD identifies identity as “the central political theme of the future.” In his article on “Populismus und Demokratie,” Gauland reserves inclusion and belonging for the “somewheres” holding out against the cosmopolitan “anywheres,” whose global movement threatens the persistence of the homogeneous Volk. Only true Germans, the “somewheres” who transport the Volksseele, can be recruited into the preservation of the people. With a rhetorical flourish, Gauland uses Heideggerian language to formulate the identitarian axiom of the ethn nationalist Right: “Das elementare Bedürfnis eines Volkes besteht darin, sich im Dasein zu erhalten.” Lest we think that such flights of rhetorical fancy remain consigned to the small-town circles of Schnellroda and the 2019 Winter Academy at which Gauland delivered these remarks, it is worth noting that the chair of the AfD explicitly considers the fight for the preservation of the Volk in Dasein a distillation of his party’s platform “into a single sentence. We are exclusively concerned with preserving our way of life.”

Although I have drawn here primarily on one issue of Sezession to parse some examples of right-wing identitarian language, the analysis could be (and has been) expanded, but would only lead further down the rabbit hole of völkisch nationalism. As such, the New Right offers old wine in new bottles, as the historian of the New Right Volker Weiβ has noted, tracing it back to the conservative revolution of the interwar years. But the distillation into new forms is itself significant, particularly as the media landscape shifts and right-wing hate finds new, fertile ground on social media. In this sense, the Far Right, while ideologically beholden to old patterns, is indeed a new Right in the vein of the post-1968 French nouvelle droite.
Among its distinguishing characteristics has been what we might call cultural mimicry: the brazen appropriation and resignification of cultural forms originally developed by progressive social movements, and their mobilization toward reactionary ends. The very notion of a “Gramscianism of the Right,” which is often used to describe the New Right’s “metapolitical” project, encapsulates this form of borrowing. The cultural mimicry it denotes can take both concrete and more abstractly ideological shape: new collective living projects (most famously the Italian Casa Pound, but also offshoots and imitations in Germany and Austria) take their cue from 1960s communes; “conservative subversive actions” in public space adopt strategies from the 1960s subversive Aktion to Greenpeace; the recently founded online, right-wing “counter-university” (“Gegenuni”) draws inspiration at least partially from a project of the same name launched in the wake of 1968 by the leftist “Institute for Comparative Irrelevance” (Institut für vergleichende Irrelevanz). Even concepts such as pluralism and diversity lend themselves to this sort of right-wing mimicry, where they are repackaged as “ethnopluralism” and “human biodiversity”—in other words, as mere words that now denote separatist, supremacist, and deeply reactionary concepts. As I have sought to argue, the right-wing discourse on identity pivots on precisely this sort of ideological détournement. Identitarianism dons the cloak of identity politics, right down to its antiracist premise, to advance the Right’s völkisch agenda.

“Left Identitarianism”—A Contradiction in Terms?
Given the right-wing investment in identity politics, it is hardly surprising to see references to the AfD crop up within the permeable fictional world of Mithu Sanyal’s recent novel. “Der Islam gehört nicht zu Deutschland” is among the mildest, though most-repeated right-wing tweets prompted by the Saraswati case; more to the point, Twitter users such as “Die AfD echte Werte” fire off posts such as “So weit ist es bereits gekommen: Deutsche Professorin verkleidet sich als N . . . , um Gendergaga unterrichten zu dürfen #KündigtSaraswati.” The next tweet is from a certain “Bernd” Höcke.

Snippets like these reference the ways in which right-wing pundits routinely skewer the constructivism of left-wing identity politics, and how they gleefully pounce on any perceived excesses of said politics—which is both predictable and ironic: predictable in the sense of the way social media function and the tit-for-tat politics they foster; at the same time, the AfD’s feigned outrage is also ironic in the sense that, as we have seen, the New Right espouses the very identity politics it criticizes.

These kinds of boomerang effects have worked their way into the discourse beyond Sanyal’s novel as well, and to troubling effect. For the cultural mimicry is not limited to the appropriation of identity politics in Schnellroda and beyond; rather, in an increasingly illegible and dizzying political landscape, it has meanwhile also spawned the next reversal, another turn of the ideological screw. Even as the Far Right has
strategically embraced identity politics and rebranded them as identitarianism, liberal critics have in turn taken up the label to impugn the political mobilization of identity more generally—including and especially on the left.

To illustrate this process, we need only return to the German Feuilleton where, right around the time Identitti was published by Hanser and reviewed in the pages of the FAZ and Die Zeit, the former president of the German Bundestag, Wolfgang Thierse, fired off the latest volley in the debate on identity politics. Also writing in the FAZ Feuilleton, Thierse asked “how much identity society [could] take” and warned of a looming new identity-based culture war every bit as destructive as the Kulturkampf that raged in Prussia during the 1870s. In an argument also advanced by critics ranging from Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama in the US to Caroline Fourest in France, Thierse saw in the turn to identity a dangerous displacement of political priorities: social conflicts and questions of distribution and justice, he argued, are being displaced by an emphasis on ethnic, gender, and sexual identity as “debates about racism, postcolonialism, and gender become more violent [heftiger] and aggressive.” The language is telling here, putting the blame on the debates and those who insist on their relevance rather than on the enduring oppressive force of racism, colonialism, and misogyny.

Thierse’s contribution sounded familiar themes, including many that have been the object of serious, searching debate: How do we balance a politics of recognition with one of redistribution? What happens when liberal democracies are held accountable to substantive and transformative notions of diversity rather than bland appeals to pluralism? How do democratic societies foster equality and protect minoritarian voices? However well-intentioned, though, Thierse’s article ultimately foreclosed any real discussion by what I would call a rhetorical or ideological short circuit. For rather than open up questions of unequal access and recognition in German society, he more or less explicitly laid the blame for the looming culture wars around identity not at the feet of the identitarian Right. Instead, Thierse all but blamed the Left for the “radicalness of [its] identitarian demands.”

In the ensuing debate—declared a “shitstorm” by some for its virality—Thierse dug in, seeking to defend his position as not only compatible with his party’s social democratic values but as the last line of defense for democracy itself. Granting, and even advocating, the need for plurality (“Pluralität”) and diversity (“Vielfalt”) for a democratic polity, he was nonetheless adamant about the need to maintain a center, a common ground around which such diversity might cohere. In his FAZ article, he defined that center in terms of key democratic values such as freedom, justice, solidarity, human dignity, and the notoriously slippery notion of tolerance. However, in the aftermath, he doubled down and arguably derailed the conversation further by shifting to the substantially different terminology of “normalcy” to define the (eroding) center. Critics took Thierse to task for reaffirming dominant culture as that
center, for refusing to engage the antiracist arguments about structural racism, and for subsuming distinct left- and right-wing positions under his indictment of identity politics. Rather than seeking to debate these terms, Thierse adopted the populist strategy of speaking on behalf of “normal people” and giving voice to what everyone feels but nobody feels allowed to say. He felt empowered to do so, he claimed, by the numerous letters and calls of support he received in the wake of the “shitstorm” and by the critical response of his party leadership, in particular.

A few weeks after his hotly debated intervention, Thierse received support from the prominent art historian Horst Bredekamp. Writing about the embattled Humboldt Forum that he and Thierse helped to conceptualize at the turn of the millennium, Bredekamp took a stance against the “identitarian craze” (identitäre Wahn) that threatens not only the future of the forum but German society at large. Here, again, the term “identitarian” bore both conceptual and ideological weight—not, however, to refer to the reactionary (youth) movement that created it, but also to a left-wing politics of identity that Bredekamp deliberately and knowingly moves into the proximity of the “Kulturvernichter der Nationalsozialisten.” “Wie naiv muss man sein, um nicht zu erkennen,” he asked, “dass am Ende einer identitären Politik, wie [Thierse] sie kritisiert, nicht etwa eine aufgeklärte multikulturelle Realität steht, sondern die Reinheit einer so sauberen wie menschenverachtenden Orientierung.” Righly critiquing identitarianism as ethnonationalist and white supremacist, Bredekamp attributed identitarian strategies not to the völkisch ideologues of Schnellroda, but to those fighting for greater diversity.

Thierse’s and Bredekamp’s arguments landed in a specific way within German discourses on identity, but they are neither new nor unique. Already in The Once and Future Liberal, a diatribe against what he calls the “pseudo-politics” of identity, Mark Lilla referenced identitarianism to lend weight to his condescension: “left identitarians who think of themselves as radical creatures, contesting this and transgressing that, have become like buttoned-up Protestant schoolmarms when it comes to the English language, parsing every conversation for immodest locutions and rapping the knuckles of those who inadvertently use them.”

Lilla’s description of left identitarians smacks of caricature, as though he knew such “radical creatures” to be mainly a figment of his imagination. Far more earnest and alarmist is one of the more recent instantiations of the “left identitarian” trope—this one from the country of the nouvelle droite and the génération identitaire itself. In her book Génération offensée (Offended generation), the French feminist Caroline Fourest sounds alarm bells over a new form of quasi-totalitarian censorship, attributing the policing of language and thought to a millennial generation that not only fails to critique the supremacist Right’s ethnicizing categories but ostensibly adopts them for the “identitarian Left.”

Although Fourest manifestly overreaches in her diatribe, which inflates the impor-
tance of isolated events to paint an apocalyptic picture of left identitarian doom, my point is not to caricature her position in turn. In other words, the liberal discourse on left identitarianism certainly has its kernel of truth. No matter how progressive or emancipatory their aims, left-wing politics can fall into the trap of confusing social group formation with identity, and of reifying social positioning.\textsuperscript{44} Liberal critique responds to the fact that, like other political terms, identity can be turned to illiberal ends. If identitarianism is one manifestation of that possibility on the right, the Left is not immune to illiberal tendencies. Already in 1967, Jürgen Habermas pinpointed a certain tendency among the militant student Left that he labeled “left-wing fascism,” a term that arguably still resonates in the notion of “left identitarianism” today.\textsuperscript{45}

However, as Herbert Marcuse argued in response to the term \textit{Linksfaschismus}, which gained currency as a \textit{Kampfbegriff} in the late 1960s, we should remain attentive to the inherent contradiction of a concept that yokes together the left and right ends of the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{46} I would say the same about “left identitarianism,” and offer three reasons.

First, the notion of “left identitarianism” sets up the kind of false analogies that litter social media; in this case, such analogies help sustain a horseshoe theory of extremism, according to which the outer ends of the political spectrum bend toward each other.\textsuperscript{47} In our eagerness to discover echoes of fascism on the left, we fail to trace the vastly different genealogies and teleologies that distinguish progressive from reactionary positions. Just as importantly, we leave unaddressed the ostensibly neutral middle, the bottom of the horseshoe, when one of the effects of equating left and right has been to shift that middle itself rightward. Talk of left identitarianism is a symptom of that shift.

The second reason that I consider the notion of an “identitarian Left” to be misleading at best and politically dangerous at worst is that in borrowing a right-wing coinage, it obfuscates the substance and indeed the emancipatory promise of identity politics as such. It is a promise that can remain unredeemed, to be sure, but it has been articulated over and over again—not least in the document often considered the founding statement of identity politics, the Black Feminist Combahee River Statement of 1977. The sentence that often is quoted, including by detractors of identity politics such as Lilla, reads: “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.”\textsuperscript{48} But it is worth rereading the statement in its entirety—not only for its clear rejection of essentialism, its emphasis on coalition-building, and its notion of intersectionality \textit{avant la lettre}, but also for its radically humanist, emancipatory perspective.\textsuperscript{49} In this regard, the key sentence is not the one just quoted, but a conditional phrase that contains the full utopian realization the statement seeks: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”
To rank such utopian thinking alongside the white separatist dystopias imagined by identitarians is gross in the dictionary sense of inexcusably bad and coarse. What we need instead are distinctions.

Third and finally, in adopting the language of identitarianism to impugn the politics of identity across the political spectrum, liberal critics do the Right’s bidding. Thierse’s appeal to the voices of “normal” people echoes the rhetoric of “normalization” in Schnellroda and obscures the discursive normalization of right-wing discourse to which he (unwittingly) contributes. As Fabian Wolff noted at the conclusion of a searching essay in _Die Zeit_, in which he sought to think through the kinds of solidarity that might be possible across identity groups, “Diese weiße Mehrheitsgesellschaft ist nämlich schon seit Jahren damit beschäftigt, rechtes, ja völkisches Gedankengut in die Mitte zu holen, auf links zu zeigen, um über rechts zu schweigen, und sich lieber von Schnellroda-Chic anfixen zu lassen, statt ihn zu bekämpfen.”

Conclusion
One of Identitti’s last tweets in Sanyal’s novel responds to a question by Adrienne Maree Brown about possibilities for “transformative justice” for Saraswati. Nivedita replies: “Identity is a spectrum. Identity politics is a spectrum. Cultural Appropriation is a spectrum.”51 This sentiment is in keeping with the conciliatory ending of the novel which, while unafraid to leave many questions open, concludes on a note of love, vulnerability, solidarity, and identity unbound. But as Nivedita goes on to admit, on the spectrum of identity there comes a point “where approximation tips into appropriation, help into manipulation, solidarity into egotism.”52

Formulated in the novel as a critique of a white woman’s passing for a Person of Color, this notion of a tipping point structures the debate about identity politics as well, and one is tempted to read Nivedita’s point also in terms of the admittedly somewhat reductive _political_ spectrum that I have sought to map in my remarks. As we have seen, liberal critiques of left-leaning identity politics all tend to invoke some notion of a tipping point in their claim that calling out identity drives a wedge into society and undermines unexamined ideas of solidarity and universalities. These critiques, I argue, play into the hands of the Right, whose language of identitarianism they adopt and normalize while directing it against the Left. Meanwhile, we have long reached a different tipping point on the spectrum of identity politics, which I describe above as an ideological “détournement”: appropriating the notion of identity politics for reactionary ends, identitarianism has effectively emptied the concept of its content, divorced it from any emancipatory struggle for recognition, and yoked it instead to a politics of violence and hate, the genteel façade of right-wing bibliophilia notwithstanding. _Identitti_ registers this tipping point decisively. In the most jarring of all its reality effects, toward the close of the novel, the recent historical record of deadly violence erupts into the fiction in the form of the murders of nine people of
color by right-wing extremists in Hanau, close to Frankfurt, in February of 2020. But as Sanyal’s novel suggests, the answer to identitarian violence cannot be to abandon the notion of identity to the Right, let alone to use its definitions to tar progressive causes with the brush of identitarianism. Instead, the task lies in continuing to engage critically with identity as an ineluctable ascription that shapes our lives in different and uneven ways, and continually reinvesting the politics of identity with the emancipatory promise of recognition and social justice.

Notes
This article is based on a talk delivered as the Presidential Address at the forty-fifth meeting of the German Studies Association in Indianapolis in 2021. It grows out of some preliminary research for a book on the New Right; more importantly, however, it grows out of ongoing conversations with several colleagues in different contexts—above all with Susanne Komfort-Hein (Frankfurt), with whom I recently cowrote a closely related, unpublished paper on the relation between identity politics and the notion of Gemeinsinn, or common sense. Our continuing exchanges on these topics have led to a series of online colloquia in which we plan to explore these matters further—and they resonate directly in some of the arguments and formulations of this paper as well (see https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/common-sense-colloquia-public). I have also benefited greatly from somewhat more intermittent but equally wide-ranging and thought-provoking conversations with Johanna Schuster-Craig (Michigan State), with whom I also cowrote an earlier piece about the power of (facile) analogy that I reference gratefully below. Closer to home, I have had the good fortune to be able to debate many of these issues with my colleagues Julia Hell and Alex Stern, as well as with Andreas Gailus—and with Kerstin Barndt, who has had to countenance more talk about alt-right politics in our house than she probably bargained for, but whose insights, questions, and critiques have also encouraged me to keep on digging into this often difficult topic.

1. Mithu Sanyal, “Zuhause,” in Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum, ed. Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (Berlin: Ullstein, 2020), 121. All essays in this volume, including Aydemir’s, are newly available in English translation at https://transit.berkeley.edu/archives/your-homeland-is-our-nightmare/.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 134.
6. Teutsch, “Hautfarbe?”
7. E.g., Teutsch, “Hautfarbe?”
8. Not coincidentally, these are also the stakes of learning, of studying, of intellectual discourse and debate. One of the most compelling aspects of the novel is its reminder of the sheer excitement and transformative power of learning, of studying, of finding one’s world illuminated in new ways by the encounter with a field of study (even if one feels betrayed by their mentor).


17. The notion of a “dominant culture / culture of dominance” has been introduced into the debate to call out the power hierarchies inherent in the widely used term “Leitkultur” (leading culture), which denotes a majoritarian identity politics in its own right, even where it is mobilized against the assertion of other, ostensibly not “leading” voices in a postmigratory society.

18. https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/identitaer

19. Among the historical references for the adjective “identitarian,” the OED lists examples from 1943 (“Extraordinary people, i.e. those who . . . refused to bow to the furious demand of the masses to become ‘regular,’ have no place in identitarian society.”) Intriguingly, the second historical example cites a 1980 sociological article about Theodor W. Adorno’s fight against “the totalitarian tendencies of identitarian logic.” See “identitarian: B. adj.” Oxford English Dictionary online, www.oed.com.


22. Some, of course, do—most prominently Martin Sellner, who heads up the Austrian Identitarian Movement and at the same time participates regularly in the activities in Schnellroda, giving talks and publishing widely both in book form (Gelassen in den Widerstand [Schnittroda: Antaios, 2015]) and on the Sezession blog, which currently lists eighty-nine articles under his name (https://sezession.de/author/martin-sellner).

23. Martin Lichtmesz, “Jordan Peterson: Porträt eines Torwächters,” Sezession 16, no. 87 (2018): 7. Although some far-right thinkers are at pains to distinguish their identity politics from those on

On the New Right’s fear of ambiguity, see especially Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2019).


Caroline Sommerfeld, “Wer gehört zu uns?,” *Sezession* 17, no. 88 (2019): 33–37. The terminology extends beyond the German-speaking sphere, the repurposed *Blut und Boden* rhetorics having been adopted, for example, by the French magazine *Terre et Peuple*. As quoted by Pedro Zúquete in his rather sympathetic account of the identitarians, the French identitarian Pierre Vial writes in that magazine, “the German word völkisch describes perfectly the doctrine of *Terre et Peuple*.”


For an excellent rhetorical analysis of the parliamentary Right in Germany, see Heinrich Detering, *Was heißt hier “wir”? Zur Rhetorik der parlamentarischen Rechten* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2019).


44. “Soziale Positioniertheit ergibt nicht zwangsläufig eine ‘Identitätsposition.’ Das wird nicht selten verkannt, und darum ergibt die Kritik an ‘identity politics’ an dieser Stelle durchaus Sinn” (Villa Braslavsky, “Identitätspolitik,” 74).


