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Review of the PhD dissertation entitled:

# "From Openness to Closure

# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on transnational identity at the Polish-German border"

submitted / authored by:

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The analysis concentrates on identity in the trans-national borderlands between Poland and Germany in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic-related closures of the border. In particular, the author intends to find out what can be learned about identity, specifically about trans-categorical ones such as a trans-national, European, or border-space identity, by analysing the accounts of persons who live and work across the Polish-German border and whose lives were directly impacted by the border closures.

The core questions, at the heart of the analysis were formulated in the following way:

1. In which ways have persons who lived at the Polish-German borderland experienced the pandemic-related border closure and how has it impacted their identity?
2. What is the impact of crisis on grassroot/bottom-up European identity? Does it foster or weaken it; or perhaps does it not have any impact at all?

Accordingly to the above-mentioned questions, this dissertation provides an analytical exploration of several salient facets of identity among individuals situated within a distinct context, specifically a highly delineated 'netdom.' The social networks of participants in the study are characterized not only by diversification across various social spheres, but also in terms of linguistic, cultural, and professional dimensions. The pandemic-induced border closures serve not merely as background, but constitute a significant disruption to these transnational networks, presenting a distinct challenge to established patterns of transnationalism, European identity, and borderland experiences. Such disruptions precipitated a loss of agency and an interruption in direct engagement with transnational identities over a considerable period.

The empirical focus of this dissertation is centered on the Polish-German border landscape, which is utilized as a comprehensive case study to explore the ways in which individuals negotiate and construct their multifaceted identities within a trans-categorical context, with a particular emphasis on transnational dynamics. This study investigates the processes through which people interpret, respond to, and ultimately assign meaning to episodes of profound and temporary disruption in their established patterns of daily life. The specific empirical context chosen for this exploration is the closure of the border between Poland and Germany during the spring of 2020—a direct consequence of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented event serves as a poignant example of how swiftly and dramatically the lives of borderland residents can be altered by decisions made at the national or regional government levels. Long accustomed to daily cross-border flows for work, education, shopping, medical care, and the maintenance of social and familial relationships, thousands of individuals in this region suddenly found these aspects of their lives rendered impossible overnight.

By focusing on the intense and extraordinary circumstances brought about by the pandemic-induced border closure, the author seeks to amplify and shed light on broader phenomena related to cross-border life that, under normal circumstances, might remain less visible, difficult to articulate, or taken for granted as a seamless part of everyday existence. These disruptions serve as a lens through which deeper understandings of identity construction, adaptation, and meaning-making in transnational spaces can be attained.

Bastian Küntzel's dissertation is a well-structured and balanced work consisting of six chapters. It starts with an introduction presenting the objectives, research questions (or as the author writes: the motivating questions), rationale and other elements of the research design. In the next chapter the concept of identity is approached from multiple vantage points. The diverse disciplinary angles include social psychology, linguistics, political science, or sociology. A very important part of this theoretical overview is the notion of narrative identity, which allows the author to examine how identity manifests as a systemic actualisation of identity potentials. The third chapter defines the special dimension of the study. Withing this chapter, the author explores the significance of concepts such as borders, borderlands, and borderscapes. The Polish-German context is presented in detail, looking at its specific historical development and exploring the emergence of Euro-regions, shedding light on the dynamics of transborder interactions. The chapter also investigates the role of metropolitan areas and suburban regions in shaping identities within this borderscape. The forth part of the dissertation explains the methodology employed in the research. It emphasizes the ethical considerations of qualitative research and outlines the methodological approach, the process for conducting interviews, the recruitment process for the research sample, and the data interpretation methods. Chapter five analyzes the empirical data gathered during the research. At its core, the chapter introduces four distinct types of border-dwellers found in the Polish-German border region, categorizing participants by their benefits from, and ideological commitments to, the open border. It examines how people interact with the border, the consequences of its closure on their lives, and the coping strategies they use in response. In-depth case studies offer further insight into the lived experiences of individuals representing these various transborder types. The concluding chapter highlights two significant findings that emerged from the comprehensive analysis conducted in this work. The author thoroughly explains the importance of these findings, elaborating on how they advance the current knowledge within this particular subfield. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the implications of these results, identifying potential directions for future research that could further contribute to the discipline. The document concludes with an extensive bibliography, carefully compiled by the author. This annotated list reflects the author's independent and thoughtful selection from the vast array of existing literature, showcasing both foundational texts and recent advancements that informed the study.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach, comprising 32 in-depth interviews with individuals residing and working along the Polish-German border. Of the participants, 21 were Polish citizens, 8 were German citizens, and 3 possessed dual citizenship,

having been socialized in both countries. Fourteen interviewees resided in Poland, while 18 lived in Germany; 9 participants were employed in Poland and 23 in Germany. The sample included 15 women and 17 men. The research design prioritized subjective self-descriptions and narrative accounts. Participants were invited to share their experiences in adopting transnational lifestyles and to recount their perceptions of the border closures. They reflected upon and responded to the question, 'Who are you?', offering nuanced perspectives on the implications of living across a national border. Rather than testing binary hypotheses regarding transborder identity, the study aimed to collect detailed and personal accounts, privileging the participants' subjective interpretations and analysis.

Bastian Küntzel sought to understand the degree to which a sudden crisis, like the pandemic itself and pandemic-related shutdowns, allows for a sharper view onto the phenomena of trans-categorical identity and what that sharper view can illuminate concerning who and under what conditions can find sources of identity in the liminality of the trans-categorical.
Theoretically, the author introduces the notion of 'identity potentials' as situationally contextualized and temporally accessed categories and narratives that facilitate the construction of a socially situated iteration of the self. These categories may originate from diverse sources, including political, generational, geographical, social, professional, and historical contexts, among others. The extent to which individuals utilize identity potentials can be differentiated along several dimensions: temporality (whether such potentials are persistent or ephemeral), visibility (whether they are behaviorally manifested or merely present at the attitudinal level), relationality (whether they foster proximity to desirable groups or create distinction from less desirable groups), and situational salience (the extent to which a given context amplifies the relevance of a particular identity potential). In the analysis, the doctoral candidate identifies four transborder phenotypes, distinguished by the advantages or disadvantages they experience from their transborder lives on one axis, and by their ideological and emotional engagement with transnationalism on the other. He proposes: Transborder Actualizers (those who enjoy high benefits and strong emotional and ideological ties to the transnational aspect of life); Transborder Believers (individuals who face hardships due to their transborder experience, but still have a strong emotional and ideological connection to transnationalism); Transborder Workers (people who encounter many difficulties except for financial gain, with greater emotional attachment to their local environment than to transnationalism); and Transborder

Harvesters (those who gain significant benefits from transborder living, yet remain emotionally focused on their immediate surroundings rather than the transnational dimension).

The second finding touches upon the fragility of the transborder and European identity potential in times of crisis.

Over the past several decades, the concept of 'Europe' has been continually redefined and debated within political, cultural, and social spheres. Not only is Europe understood as a physical and geographical entity, but it also represents a set of values, political ambitions, and historical narratives that bind its diverse nations together. The European project, notably embodied by the European Union, has often been presented as a beacon of peace, stability, and unity on a continent previously marked by conflict and division.

Against this backdrop, fostering a distinct European identity has become an explicit goal for policymakers, educators, and civil society organisations. Policymakers have pursued this through legislation and strategic initiatives; educators and cultural groups have supported it via exchange programmes such as Erasmus and grassroots collaborations aimed at bringing Europeans closer to one another. These efforts seek to cultivate not only a shared sense of destiny but also a mutual understanding and respect that transcends national borders and cultural differences.

Quantitatively, sociologists and political scientists have sought to understand the progress of this endeavour through empirical research. Extensive surveys, especially those conducted through the Eurobarometer, attempt to capture the public's sense of belonging to Europe. These surveys probe whether citizens primarily identify with their nation-states or also perceive themselves as 'European'. The findings are nuanced and illustrate significant variation across countries and demographic groups. While some Europeans express strong attachment to a European identity, many remain sceptical or indifferent, grounded in their national or regional roots. This mixed picture suggests that the development of a collective European Identity is an ongoing, dynamic process. It is influenced by political events, economic developments, and cultural exchanges. The challenge lies in transforming the idea of European identity from an abstract concept or political ideal into a lived, everyday reality for individuals across the continent. This requires not only institutional support but also meaningful opportunities for interpersonal engagement and dialogue among Europe's diverse populations.

Surprisingly, the border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic may have strengthened more people's connection to the idea of Europe as part of their identity than many initiatives designed to bring people together. Of course, this would not have happened if people hadn't already become accustomed to open borders and crossed them frequently. For several study participants, the dramatic shift from frequent border crossings to suddenly being unable to do so heightened their awareness of how essential this freedom of movement was to their lives, their sense of self, and their identity as border-dwellers, border-crossers, or simply as Europeans.

Apart from a general positive evaluation of the dissertation, there are several elements in which some room for improvement can be identified. The author frequently interjects personal remarks throughout the dissertation, starting from the opening pages and continuing until the conclusion (closing remarks). On one hand, this approach imparts a unique, personal character to the work, making it more engaging and allowing readers to connect with the author's individual perspective. However, such a style also prompts concerns regarding the degree of objectivity and critical distance typically expected in academic research. Scientific inquiry generally demands a certain level of detachment to ensure impartiality and credibility. Despite these concerns, the author's candid expression of personal motivations offers valuable insight into the driving forces behind the research, enabling readers to better understand the context and inspiration underpinning the study.

Another example of some room for improvement is the recommendation to reach out to the original works that are mentioned in the text. For illustration, when the author tracks the origins of relational sociology, it would be recommended to refer directly to the works of Harrison White, "Identity and Control" from 1992, instead of its interpretations (from 2008) and critics.

This research adds to identity theory by developing the concept of identity potentials, which is notably significant in the context of liminality in border regions. In this study, identity is defined as an individual's use of various identity potentials that shift according to situation, context, and time. These potentials are accessed through interaction with cultural scripts and expressed in social practices, resulting in a coherent and meaningful sense of self. This perspective provides a nuanced and flexible framework for understanding identity, capturing both its systemic underpinnings and dynamic construction in an accessible way.

The conceptual category of 'identity potentials' enhances borderland studies by providing a dynamic, culturally aware, and context-sensitive way to understand the complex nature of identity development in these areas. It offers a broader, more inclusive perspective that fits the ever-changing and diverse character of borderland identities, serving as a valuable resource for researchers studying identity in multicultural and transnational contexts.

I propose the following note: "passed" by the grading system at the University of Wrocław, and "very good" (Magna cum laude) by the grading system at the Chemnitz University of Technology.

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