

Identity beyond Othering: Crisis and the Politics of Decision in the EU's Involvement in Libya

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Abstract

Constructivist scholarship established long ago that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive and that difference and othering are key for the production of identities. Consequently, constructivist literature on EU foreign policy has so far focused on the role of specific Others and explored how interaction with them shapes up the EU's identity. Our paper turns the attention back inside and analyses the hegemonic struggles around the purpose and meaning of the European project. By analysing the EU's reaction to the Libyan events in 2011, we demonstrate how a major international crisis dislocates all the identities involved and unleashes a struggle for hegemony between conflicting discursive articulations. Eventually this conflict is resolved through a political decision, whose significance, importantly, is not limited to fixing a particular Self-Other relationship. The decision affects the way all signifying chains are clustered around key nodal points and reconfigures the entire 'global' outlook on Europe and its role in the world.

Introduction

The concept of identity has been one of the focal points for the discipline of International Relations (IR) for no less than a quarter of a century. Ever since David Campbell's landmark study established that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive, IR scholars have predominantly viewed identity as 'constituted in relation to difference' (Campbell, 1992: 8). Campbell argues that foreign policy is 'one of the boundary-producing practices central to the production and reproduction of the identity in whose name it operates' (1992: 75). This has been a key point of departure for a whole range of post-positivist scholarship in IR, from liberal (or 'soft') constructivism to radical poststructuralist accounts. Most studies follow the pattern established by Campbell, as well as by Iver Neumann's (1999) influential book on othering, by looking at how discourses shape identities by articulating relations between the Self and multiple significant Others and at the various forms that othering may take. There is also

significant interest in foreign policy as a practice that produces the boundaries of the Self and thus brings the latter into political existence.

As we show in the next section, this general framework has laid ground for remarkable progress in the field of identity studies. Our intention in this article is to build upon this achievement and make a step further by looking at how exactly particular articulations of Self–Other relations become dominant. To put it differently, we are interested in what happens before the identity of the Self is temporarily fixed and becomes stable enough to enable an observer to examine the patterns of othering and bordering. The ‘before’ here does not imply something analogous to Alexander Wendt’s (1999: 328) fictitious ‘First Encounter, a world without shared ideas’, in which no social identity exists. Rather, it refers to the poststructuralist assertion that all identities are produced hegemonically, which means they are always only partially sedimented, being open to contestation (Laclau, 1990: 33–35). What we highlight is that this openness is not a constant: at some moments identity change is more probable than at others.

Any hegemony is unstable; *inter alia*, it can be dislocated by an event.¹ The latter produces an excess of meaning that cannot be immediately accommodated in the hegemonic articulation. Hegemony is thus prone to crises, which lay bare the undecidable character of any particular Self–Other relationship. In a crisis, it becomes especially obvious that bordering never fully succeeds: the outside can never be fully excluded and is in fact always present within, at least as a trace (Staten, 1984; Laclau, 1990: 5–41). Eliminating dislocation and achieving some degree of certainty required for the maintenance of social order does not happen by itself: it requires a political act which we, following Jacques Derrida (1988) and Ernesto Laclau (1990), call a decision.

We illustrate the importance of decision for the constitution of identity by looking at the European Union’s reaction to the outbreak of popular unrest in Libya in 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring. We argue that the existing constructivist literature on EU foreign policy has overly concentrated on the role of othering. This article shifts the focus inside and demonstrates how the events of the Arab Spring, and in particular the Libyan crisis, produced dislocation of the Union’s identity, generated ontological insecurity and opened up the space for a hegemonic struggle around the meaning of ‘Europe’. We then examine the decision through which a new

¹ Our understanding of event is inspired most of all by the philosophy of Alain Badiou (see Badiou 2005: 178–183). For the reasons of space, however, we cannot go into the discussion of this concept here.

hegemonic articulation was established – an articulation that was based on a much more radical othering of the Libyan regime and thus enabled individual member states to intervene in Libya on the EU's behalf. The decision thus was not limited to the level of discourse, narrowly defined: the EU was only able to cope with the crisis by undertaking a foreign policy action with long-term consequences.

In order to achieve our goals, we apply poststructuralist discourse analysis to the official statements and media materials issued during the most acute phase of the crisis in February–April 2011. Our sample included statements by European leaders and institutions, European Parliament debates, as well as all newspaper articles, opinion pieces and editorials from eight European newspapers with 'Libya' in the title. Obviously, only a small number of sources could be possibly quoted below. Still, we believe our findings to be valid and replicable, since the same discursive patterns are repeated in the entire body of texts that we analysed.

By focusing on the EU's involvement in Libya, we deliberately chose an 'easy' case of a relatively deep but short-lived identity crisis, which was promptly fixed through a number of formal institutional measures. Libya was the only country where EU member states were involved in a direct military action. This was not unproblematic, given the commonsense view of the EU as a normative power. Our case thus provides a graphic illustration of our contribution to the existing literature on identity politics. Firstly, it shows that event-generated crises are a key mechanism of identity politics, which account for how identities evolve and adapt to new circumstances. Secondly, it exhibits a way in which the concept of political decision, which plays a crucial role in post-foundationalist political theory, can be employed in empirical analysis. By doing that, it highlights an important conceptual difference between the literature on foreign policy decision-making and post-foundationalist approaches. While the former focuses on individual institutional acts which might or might not involve the establishment of a new hegemony, the latter defines decision through its main function: to eliminate dislocation, provide cognitive certainty and enable political action on the basis of clear differentiation between 'Us' and 'Them'.

Thirdly, our article reveals that any political decision does not just fix a certain Self–Other relationship, but provides a certain holistic view of the entire 'global' situation. In order to make sense of the event that sparked the crisis, it has to be inscribed in the pre-existing narratives, which requires an adjustment of multiple signifying chains and not just of those

directly focused on a particular relationship. This finding is fully in line with the poststructuralist view of hegemony as an operation involving universalisation of a particular identity: an adjustment in the meaning of the universal by definition affects the discursive field in its entirety.

We begin our analysis by briefly reviewing the existing identity-based approaches to European foreign policy in order to clearly identify the added value of our approach. The third section introduces our key concepts by discussing the poststructuralist view of identity as resulting from a hegemonic articulation and highlighting the role of decision as part of this mechanism. The fourth section focuses on the Libyan crisis. It shows how the events produced dislocation of the EU's identity by putting in question its relationship with 'Europe', and how political decision, which involved several distinct institutional measures, sutured this gap by producing a new hegemonic articulation that enabled foreign policy action.

Identity and European foreign policy

The field of EU studies, as nearly all others, has been profoundly affected by the burgeoning literature on identity. This concept is now widely used to address the key problem arguably defining the field: how integration is possible despite the multiplicity of interests and 'deep diversity' (Eriksen, 2007: 21). As Anthony Smith points out, one of the fundamental reasons for the unabated interest in 'European unification' is, undoubtedly, 'the problem of identity itself. ... At issue [among others] has been the possibility and legitimacy of a "European identity", as opposed to the existing national identities' (Smith, 1992: 56).

EU foreign policy has figured prominently in the debates about European identity. This is hardly surprising given the fundamental constructivist premise that foreign policy and identity issues are closely related. The Union's foreign policy is part and parcel of a process of identity construction, which involves both promotion of European values abroad and consolidation of identity on the inner side. Efforts to conceptualise the specificity of the Union as an actor in world politics date back to François Duchêne's (1972) characterisation of the European Union as a 'civilian power' and have been boosted by the introduction of the idea of 'normative power Europe' by Ian Manners (2002, see also Orbie, 2006).

Given the emphasis that the concept of ‘normative power Europe’ puts on the relational aspects of power as well as on the unique features of the EU as a global actor, it is hardly surprising that it has taken a prominent place in the constructivist rethinking of European integration. Growing popularity of constructivism in IR, *inter alia*, has led to the EU being seen no longer as ontological presence, but as constructed through social and discursive practices (Wiener and Diez, 2009: 9–11). Most characteristically in this context, Thomas Diez (2005) argues that ‘normative power’ should be seen as a discursive self-construction establishing a particular EU identity against Others, rather than as an objective analytical concept. This calls for a more reflexive approach in discussing Europe’s international actorness, wherein normative power identity is just part of the EU’s complex and multifaceted Self.

In a related development, the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences has resulted in growing awareness of the importance of discourse for the creation of identities. As early as in the 1990s, seminal work of Campbell, R. B. J. Walker (1993), Andrew Linklater (1998) and Neumann (1999), among others, established that ‘the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an “inside” from an “outside”, a “self” from an “other”, a “domestic” from a “foreign”’ (Campbell, 1992: 8). As applied to the EU, in particular, this approach draws on the long tradition of the study of European Orientalism: as argued very early on in the debate by Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, Europe has always positioned itself in opposition to the ‘non-European barbarian or savage’ (Neumann and Welsh, 1991: 329; cf. Said, 1979; Wolf, 1994). Over the past decades, researchers have explored discursive construction of identities and analysed how specific identity discourses condition and constrain knowledge and action with regard to various issues, such as conflict transformation (Diez, Stetter and Albert, 2006; Chandler, 2007; Pace, 2007; Rumelili, 2007; Cooley, 2013), the enlargement (Maresceau, 2003; Sedelmeier, 2003) and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP; see Joenniemi, 2008; Browning and Joenniemi, 2008; Dimitrova 2012).

The Others that are commonly viewed as instrumental in European identity constructions are the United States, Russia, and more recently also Islam and the Middle East (Diez, 2004; Balch, 2005; Strasser, 2008). In a related fashion, James Rogers argues that the EU constructs its inside as stable and peaceful, as opposed to the crisis-ridden outside (Rogers, 2009: 846). The southern neighbourhood, in particular, has been consistently securitised in the

EU's discourses (Pace, 2010; Schumacher, 2015: 387). There are studies showing that Eastern and Western Europe can be seen as engaged in mutual othering (Neumann, 1999; Kuus, 2004), while the role of external Others is not limited to mere presence: on the contrary, they take an active part in shaping the identity of the EU (Morozov and Rumelili, 2012). Another twist to the argument is added by viewing European nation states as socially constructed partly in opposition to Europe, and vice versa, Europe in opposition to national parochialism (Carey, 2002). There is literature that provides insights in how the EU constructs its norms as universal, thereby asserting superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the world (Chouliaraki, 2005: 6). Last but not least, there is a crucially important debate about the significance of spatial othering for EU identity. While Ole Wæver insists that the dominant trend in the EU discourse is to portray as Europe's Other its own past of fragmented sovereign nation-states which should not be allowed to become its future (Wæver, 1998; see also Joenniemi, 2008), Sergei Prozorov objects that othering that is exclusively spatial or temporal is theoretically inconceivable and therefore 'all othering is inevitably spatiotemporal' (Prozorov, 2011: 1292).

To summarise, the existing literature has established that identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive, that all identities are contested, and that any political articulation draws boundaries and thus delineates the Self in opposition to Others. The Other can be defined spatially as well as temporally, and the relative prominence of temporal othering is a distinctive feature of EU identity construction. European identity literature has traced the dominant EU foreign policy discourses and representations of Europe's significant Others, worked out a theoretical language and used it extensively in the empirical analysis of the EU's external relations.

At the same time, the bulk of this literature concentrates on Europe's construction against a singular and obvious anti-Self. We still lack a comprehensive understanding of how the EU's identity is constructed in relation to multiple Others and with due regard to the various modes that Othering can take (Hansen, 2006; Rumelili, 2004). Similarly, it has been acknowledged that there exist mutually constitutive social relationships and competing norms at various levels of EU governance (Wæver, 2005: 39; Diez, 2013b; Carta and Morin, 2014b). As Diez (2013a: 202) argues, the interaction between the European and national levels of foreign policy-making is more adequately described in terms of contestation rather than coordination. The Union is not a coherent actor with a unified foreign policy discourse: there

are diverse understandings of what integration means and what role the EU should play (Carta and Morin, 2014a). However, there has been little effort in the IR literature to look at the interplay between different discursive levels in the making of Europe: at best, the existing studies look at selected member states (Larsen, 1997, 2014) or institutional discourses (De Ville and Orbie, 2014).

In our view, a key reason for the persistence of this lacuna is the excessive focus on othering at the expense of other aspects of identity construction. In order to overcome it, however, it is not enough to acknowledge the complex and contested nature of European identity construction. As suggested in the next section and illustrated in the remaining part of the article, it is imperative to shift the focus back inside and to look at how, despite never-ending contestation and the push and pull of multiple significant Others, the EU's identity still manages to consolidate up to a point where it can empower political action.

In order to do that, it is first necessary to duly take into account the significance of hegemony as an operation which 'selects' particular Self–Other relationships among the endless variety of discursive elements and endows them with identity-constituting significance. While the hegemonic character of political identities is absolutely essential for poststructuralism, too little work has been done on the mechanisms of hegemonic fixation of signifying chains. To eliminate this blind spot, we foreground the concept of decision, which has been explored in poststructuralist philosophy, but never systematically used in the empirical study of identity construction.

Another mechanism that allows to move away from the conception of identity as homogeneous is the concept of ontological security. As argued by Mitzen (2006b), uncertainty or fear of chaos threatens the unity of state's identity, which is why states in addition to physical security, seek the security of the Self. Our approach to identity construction shows how ontological security actually works by developing a dialogue between poststructuralist understanding of identity and ontological security. Ontological security provides a framework that captures the uncertainty of identity. When a polity is confronted with a crisis, the hegemonic construction of the Self is dislocated, which puts into motion a contestation of stable meanings and produces a political struggle for filling the meaning of the Self.

Hegemonic struggles in the study of EU foreign policy identity

Poststructuralist theory of hegemony starts with the ontological assertion that the social is defined by excess: no particular articulation establishing a social order can ever match the infinite richness of potentially available meaning (Laclau, 1990: 90–91; Howarth, 2013: 12). There is an unlimited play of discursive differences that ultimately undermine any attempt at totalisation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 95–96). Constituting a community and differentiating it from the outside world thus involves somehow rising above the immediately given realm of differences and postulating equivalence between all individual elements that belong on the inside. This is only possible if there is a difference of a higher order: ‘what is beyond the frontier of exclusion is reduced to pure negativity – that is to the pure threat that what is beyond poses to the system (constituting it in this way)’ (Laclau 1996: 38). *Mutatis mutandis*, this is how the constructivist concept of othering can be reinterpreted in poststructuralist terms.

Since constitutive outside is indispensable, any identity is marked by non-closure (Staten 1984; Laclau 1990: 5–41). As distinct from the constructivist logic of multiple Others, resulting in multifaceted identities, poststructuralism insists that a hegemonic move provides some degree of stability, even though relative, temporary and contested. It might be said, again as a matter of transition from constructivism to poststructuralism, that a key aspect of hegemony consists in ‘choosing’ a particular Other to negate, simultaneously the presence of the Self. This, in turn, implies that hegemony is always about producing universality out of an infinitude of particularities: one particular articulation of ‘society’ (and its outside) establishes itself as universally valid, even though alternative articulations continue to contest it, with varying degree of success.

Discursive referents of this flawed and elusive universality are empty signifiers, which provide the symbolic means to represent essentially incomplete orders that can hold together multiple and even contradictory demands in a precarious unity (Howarth, 2013: 82). A signifier has to be empty to be able to signify the universal, because, as Laclau explains, in this case ‘we are trying to signify the limits of signification – the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense’. Any differentially defined sign by definition refers only to the part of the whole, so

it is only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the

role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being – that such signification is possible. (Laclau, 1996: 39)

Typical examples of empty signifiers include ‘Europe’ and ‘democracy’. Their meaning in political discourse is always situational: for instance, ‘Europe’ can be articulated as a closed community based on the Christian tradition or as one structured around the values of openness and tolerance.

Such ‘privileged sign[s] around which the other signs are ordered’ are called nodal points: ‘the other signs acquire their meaning through the relationship to the nodal point’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 26), by being slotted into chains of equivalence, thus momentarily fixing the common identity (Norval, Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Nodal points as differentially defined privileged signs that arrest the free flow of discourse and organise it into an articulation. In contrast, in an empty signifier the differential aspect is subverted and subsumed under the function of signifying the universal. It should also perhaps be noted that empty signifiers are always rooted in a particular historical context. The adjective ‘empty’ must not therefore be taken literally: it indicates a tendency rather than an empirical fact. The meaning of ‘Europe’ is never a matter of voluntaristic choice: under normal circumstances, its meaning is relatively fixed, although always contested.

The fact of contestation demonstrates that even in stable periods full suture is out of reach: there is always dislocation inherent in any social order, regardless of how stable and sedimented it is. Dislocation becomes particularly visible at the moments of crisis, when hegemonic articulation ‘is confronted by new events that it cannot explain, represent, or in other ways domesticate’ (Howarth and Torfing, 2005: 16). The deficiency of meaning resulting from a crisis undermines the previous pattern of identification and creates the need for a re-articulation (Nabers, 2015: 122).

The interplay between dislocation and coherence can also be seen in terms of ontological security. Ontological security has been used in the IR literature to account for the identity-related aspects of security. The concept of ontological security was first developed around individualist ontology, which, according to Anthony Giddens, should be seen as ‘a sense of continuity and order in events’ (1991: 234). Catarina Kinnvall sums it up by saying that ‘ontological security is a security of being – a sense of confidence that the world is what is appears to be’ (2004: 746). Drawing on Kierkegaard, Giddens conceptualises ontological

insecurity as ‘the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of “being in the world”’ (1991: 37). In other words, ontological insecurity is a fear of losing the sense of the Self, i.e. a stable set of signifying chain defining one’s identity. The construction of the Self is contingent and always shadowed by uncertainty and inability to achieve full suture, but it must be emphasised that the degree of dislocation varies with time. This is the point where our interpretation of crisis differs from that developed by Dirk Nabers (2015), who essentially equates crisis with dislocation as a defining feature of the social. In our view, dislocation is there at any moment, whereas crisis is generated by an event.

Dislocation and crisis can be seen as the root of ontological insecurity and unstable identities (Hay, 1996: 253, Mitzen 2006a, Roe 2008). It is argued that ontological security is achieved by maintaining ‘routinized’ relationships with others in which the ability to tolerate uncertainty or change is dependent on the ability to trust (Giddens, 1991: 38; Mitzen, 2006b: 342; Mitzen, 2006a: 274). The need to seek ontological security and sustain a coherent identity is a reason why some states choose to perpetuate conflicts (Mitzen, 2006b: 342). Michal Naturski (2015) has taken a different approach by arguing that during crisis actors seek to recover the sense of order around a recognised institutional epistemic standard shared by the community. His approach helps to explain why political systems can be resistant to political and institutional change even in times of crisis. Crisis is also seen as a chance to re-articulate Self/Other relations by engaging in the processes of securitisation and desecuritisation (Rumelili 2014, Rumelili 2015). The showcased example here is the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 (Croft 2006, Nabers 2009, Holland 2014, Mitzen, 2006a). An event, such as 9/11 or the Arab Spring, makes visible the ontological uncertainty of the Self, which in ordinary times is occluded by common sense (cf. Hopf 2010). This opens up a terrain for competing hegemonic moves striving to locate the cause of the crisis and eliminate it, while renegotiating identity of the Self. It is at crisis times that the emptiness of empty signifiers becomes particularly visible, as catastrophic dislocation creates opportunities for a radical redefinition of the universalia.

The relationship between stability and change is best seen as a dialectical one: from Laclau’s perspective, a political project is more likely to succeed if it is articulated in accordance with the ‘ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society’ (Laclau, 2000: 82). Thus, a crisis, or even a revolution, can never wipe out

the old order completely, but it does create a moment of openness in which the fragmentation and vulnerability of the Self becomes visible and thus necessitates some more or less radical rearrangement of the signifying chains.

Following the established tradition in the poststructuralist literature (see, in particular, Derrida, 1988; Laclau, 1990), we call the act of such rearrangement a decision. The meaning of the term in poststructuralism is significantly different from more conventional usage, such as, for instance, in the literature on political decision-making. A decision can involve an act of formal authority, but cannot be reduced to the latter. Instead, what defines a decision is its function of fixing chains of signification around nodal points in a certain way, thus eliminating dislocation and reducing undecidability. An undecidable situation with no clear rules differentiating between right and wrong becomes 'readable', starts to make sense again. From a certain viewpoint, it might be argued that the function of decision is to provide ontological security by eliminating or at least reducing uncertainty (cf. Mitzen, 2006b).²

At the same time, decision has foundational significance: it does not just eliminate dislocation, but serves as the only possible ground for the social order as such. In the final analysis, any hegemony is instituted in an act of decision (Norval, 2004: 145–6), or, speaking empirically, through a sequence of decisions of varying scale. A hegemonic act is therefore an act of radical construction in which alternative articulations are repressed (Laclau, 1990: 3–85). By (re)establishing hegemonic order, the decision (re)creates a universal system of coordinates enabling the actors to distinguish between right and wrong. It is thus the fundamental precondition for the emergence of such notions as common good, common (e.g. national, European etc.) interest, which delineate political boundaries by identifying spatial and temporal Others, thus effectively creating the identity of the Self and enabling political action.

It must be stressed that the dislocatory impact of any major crisis is not limited to the communities directly affected. Crises tend to generate strong emotions, which are difficult to rationalise due to the lack of a pre-existing frame of reference in which the event could be inscribed. In other words, even if direct destruction is usually limited to particular localities, discursive dislocation has a much wider reach, sparking demands for action everywhere. In a situation of undecidability, however, the specific course of action cannot be immediately clear,

²The connection between decision and ontological security is a fascinating theme to explore, but we have to leave it until later lest our argument become unnecessarily complex.

which gives rise to multiple discourses that compete to heal the wound. None of them offers just an isolated solution to the crisis: the solution must be based on a claim to universality, start by defining what ‘we’ as a community believe to be right. The whole global dynamic of othering, bordering and normative reasoning is thus put in motion. Therefore, when a formal choice on how to react to the crisis is made, it actually always is based on a much more far-reaching political decision establishing a new version of hegemonic order, adjusted to the change in the external circumstances.

In the empirical section below, we illustrate this point by examining the way in which the EU dealt with the Libyan crisis. We analyse the conflicting interpretations of the events and show how a reconstructed identity consolidates up to a point where political action can be taken. We do this through by tracing the evolution of EU foreign policy discourses, which is intended to demonstrate how different articulations of the Union’s identity play out in the hegemonic contestation opened up by the event and how undecidability is eliminated in a decision (or a sequence of those), leading to a relative stabilisation of the identity.

EU’s involvement in the Libyan crisis

The eruption of unrest throughout the Arab world in the early months of 2011 caught the world by surprise. Even though it was the population of these countries that was most directly affected, the events also had immediate consequences for the entire international community. Everywhere, including in the EU, there was a feeling of urgency and calls for immediate reaction. The crisis opened up a gap between public expectations and the EU’s policy, thus calling into question Europe’s moral standing in its past policies towards the southern neighbourhood and generating ontological insecurity.

As maintained by the constructivist literature reviewed above, the hegemonically established identity of the EU as ‘normative power’ was grounded in a strong equivalence between the Union’s Self and the idea of Europe. At the same time, it was to a large extent based on the othering and securitisation of the southern neighbourhood and did not envisage any possibility for a democratic breakthrough (Pace, 2010; Schumacher 2015). It thus could not be reconciled with the new perspectives opened up by the popular movements against the authoritarian regimes. As a result, the Union came to be accused of having failed to stand up to

its own ethical standard by backing authoritarian regimes as a trade-off for stability in the region and for a better control of immigration flows across the Mediterranean. Consider, for instance, this quote from *The Guardian*:

Europeans did not investigate Arab suffering because they did not believe they had a democratic duty to help it end. ... Nothing can shake Europe's racism of low expectations, which holds that for an undefined reason – Arab culture, Islam, something in the water – hundreds of millions of people do not want the same rights as us. (Cohen, 2011)

Or, as Paul Betts (2011) put it in *The Financial Times*: ‘Support granted for years by European leaders to corrupt and authoritarian regimes showed that “ethical Europe” had no clothes’.

As explained in the introduction, it is the events in and around Libya that are of particular interest for us in this article. The uprising against Muammar Gaddafi's regime, which began in 15 February 2011, was a major event that did not let itself to be immediately inscribed in the pre-existing hegemonic discourse on the meaning of Europe. As a result, it was widely felt that the EU did not live up to its mission of defending European values. Disparate discontents, which had been simmering on the margins, suddenly burst into the mainstream debate and eventually consolidated into an alternative hegemonic move that produced dislocation at the core of the EU's identity and incited calls for action which was supposed, in our terms, to restore ontological security. Given the depth of the dislocation, these calls were impossible to ignore. At the same time, it was not immediately clear which particular course of action would be most appropriate to re-assemble the Union's identity at a new level. Thus, in order to understand how the new hegemonic articulation came about, it is necessary to examine the state in-between, where no decision is yet taken. Our account follows the timeline of formal institutional measures adopted by Brussels. However, as the events in Libya unfolded at extraordinary speed, the entire debate was taking place almost at the same point in time. Our narrative is to some extent an artificial reconstruction needed for the sake of clarity: it follows the internal logic of the competing hegemonic moves rather than their daily chronology.

Discursive struggles over the meaning of Europe

As the initial reaction to the outbreak of the crisis, two hegemonic moves became discernible in February 2011. They articulated contrasting visions of EU identity and demanded different lines of action. We call these discourses ‘new partnership’ and ‘let’s not disturb’.

New Partnership. The discourse on the ‘new partnership’ constructed the Libyan crisis in terms of transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The discourse drew a frontier between the people of Libya and the repressive regime of Gaddafi, which stood not only against the peaceful protesters but also against Europe and its values. Differences between Libyans and Europeans were played down, emphasising the allegedly universal craving for democracy, freedom of expression, justice and human rights – all values which represent the ‘silver thread’ of the European project (Ashton quoted in European Commission, 2011). Moreover, their demands were presented as being ‘free of Islamist and anti-imperialist ideology’ (Charlemagne, 2011). On the other hand, Gaddafi’s otherness was emphasised by labelling the regime as ‘brutal’, ‘violent’ and ‘illegitimate’. This helped to articulate shared European norms and re-establish unity.

The previously prevailing understanding which associated Europe’s security with regime stability and the belief that only gradual transition to democracy was possible in the Arab world was obviously incompatible with the ‘new partnership’ discourse. In the new chain of equivalence security was linked with democratisation, while the Arab Spring was presented as reincarnation of the East European democratic revolutions: ‘The events unfolding in our southern neighbourhood are a rendezvous with history. Europe will rise to this challenge and support the current transformation processes’ (Barroso, 2011b).

The ‘new partnership’ discourse thus constructs the EU’s identity as an example for the neighbours and the guarantor of liberal norms. It assumes that the European normative model is not just superior but universal and transferable. As expressed by Barroso (2011a): ‘Ultimately this is about people’s deep quest for freedom, justice, dignity, social and economic opportunities, and democracy. These are indeed universal values’. The representation of the Libyans as essentially sharing Europe’s values also had a strong legitimising function, as it was a confirmation for the EU’s political elite that its own norms had a global appeal. Presenting norms as universal thus simultaneously established them as constitutive of the EU’s identity

and implied the need for their promotion beyond the Union's borders. Taken together, these factors created a powerful incentive for external action.

At the same time, this discourse also limited the means available to the EU by reproducing its identity as a normative power. As High Representative Catherine Ashton (2011a) insisted,

The EU is not a state or a traditional military power. It cannot deploy gunboats or bombers. It cannot invade or colonise. It can sign free trade agreements or impose sanctions only when all 27 states agree. The strength of the EU lies, paradoxically, in its inability to throw its weight around.

Cooperation with international partners, such as the United Nations, the Arab League, the African Union, NATO, the International Criminal Court and the 'relevant member states', in the resolution of the crisis held a central place in the discourse, which reflected the EU's self-image as a multilateral actor. The Union was to encourage political and economic reform, support civil society and offer enhanced economic cooperation (European Council, 2011c). No military solution was envisaged as of yet.

'Let's not disturb'. On the other end of the spectrum, there was a discourse that presented the crisis as Libya's internal issue. Drawing on the pre-crisis defaults, it postulated an antagonistic border between the EU and the Libyan people by constructing the anti-government protests as dangerous. Democracy promotion in Libya was envisaged as a gradual process that should not be imposed in a top-down manner but rather be built upon the 'existing institutional and financial tools' and co-ownership (Frattini, 2011z). The discourse prioritised sovereignty by emphasising dialogue with the Libyan government and warning against attempting to undermine the regime. For instance, Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg said that an intervention would only serve 'to prove our own importance'. 'If Gaddafi falls, then there will be bigger catastrophes in the world', he added (Philips, 2011). The most vividly depicted among other threats was mass uncontrolled migration, which, in the words of Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, could amount to 'a Biblical exodus' (Squires, 2011). Another heavily securitised element was the Islamic identity of the protesters, which was linked with the threat of religious radicalism and terrorism.

Crucially, this attitude was rooted in the understanding of European values as having limited validity outside of the Union's borders, which were thus constructed as cultural and

political and not just geographical. Thus, arguing against hot-headed action, Frattini warned: ‘We should not give the wrong impression of wanting to interfere, of wanting to export our democracy’ (Spiegel, 2011). The alternative long-term solution – the so-called ‘Marshall Plan for the Arab world’ – was supposed to prevent escalation by removing trade and economic barriers, granting Mediterranean countries association status and eventually integrating them into the EU’s internal market (Frattini, 2011z).

It must be emphasised that the most radical difference between the two discourses was on the level of premises rather than prescriptions. While the ‘new partnership’ discourse described the European values as universal, the Libyan people as part of the European Self and thus saw democratisation as a guarantee for security, the ‘let’s not disturb’ discourse insisted on the difference between the Libyans and the Europeans and thus portrayed the former as not ready to embrace democracy. Hence, security was to be achieved by piecemeal democratisation, while the anti-government rebels were suspected of being dangerous radicals and even potential terrorists. The transition from difference to antagonism in the attitude to the insurgents became particularly visible after the government lost control of Benghazi, which prompted Frattini to exclaim: ‘I’m extremely concerned about the self-proclamation of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Benghazi. Would you imagine to have an Islamic Arab Emirate at the borders of Europe? This would be a really serious threat’ (BBC News, 2011).

The emergence of the hegemonic discourse

On 23 February 2011, in response to the escalating crisis in Libya, the High Representative issued a declaration on behalf of the EU (European Union, 2011). This was the first formal institutional act adopted in response to the crisis that provided a concrete reading of the entire situation and partially fixed the ‘new partnership’ discourse as hegemonic. It offered an interpretation of the crisis establishing a new set of signifying chains around the empty signifier of Europe. In doing that, it relied on some key elements of the pre-crisis articulation, in particular, by affirming the universality of European values. Accordingly, this was a major step towards inscribing the event (the Libyan uprising) into the pre-existing narrative of ‘Europe’, which enabled the Europeans to make sense of something that was previously to some extent incomprehensible, did not match their common sense. The declaration was also a move towards defining what a ‘European’ response to the crisis should be. As we shall see below, the

construction of the EU as a guarantor of universal norms became a reference point for concrete political demands.

At the moment of adoption, the principles fixed in the declaration were far from self-evident. It emerged from a series of hegemonic struggles around the meaning of ‘Europe’, which had to be related to the key nodal points, such as ‘democracy’, ‘stability’ and ‘sovereignty’, in a way that would produce a meaningful account of the events. The ‘let’s not disturb’ discourse provided a conflicting reading of the situation, centred around the belief in continuity, stability and the mistrust towards the popular movements in the Arab world. However, the European identity that it defended – a Europe sealed off from the dangerous outside world – at that time failed to provide a convincing connection with such nodal points as democracy and responsibility. Already a day before the EU joint communiqué, the head of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso dismissed the alternative articulation by saying: ‘This question of migration, or of illegal migration, or even of refugees, is sometimes used as a way of not supporting democracy and I do not agree with that’ (Pop, 2011).

The concrete proposals were clearly rooted in the new hegemonic reading of the ‘global’ situation that conceived of Libya as a country in transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The policy based on the ‘new partnership’ would consist in adapting the ENP so that it would ‘develop and strengthen democratic institutions, giving civil society every opportunity to strengthen the economy, reduce poverty, and address social injustices’ (European Council, 2011d). The European Self envisaged in the declaration was open to the Libyan people, whereas the role of constitutive outside was played by the oppressive regime.

Calls for sanctions. The approach outlined in the 23 February declaration was partly successful in eliminating the dislocation of EU identity, while stopping short of endorsing a direct intervention. However, the escalation of violence in Libya produced ever more dislocation: the Union’s actions were seen by some member states as well as by the wider public as inadequate and thus its identity as the embodiment of European values continued to be strongly contested. ‘With bodies piling up on the streets of Libya, the EU and the international community must not stay silent on this pernicious moral hypocrisy,’ urged UN Watch (2011). It was argued that the EU was standing ‘on the wrong side of history’ and that ‘too many European countries are still more worried about stability in the Middle East than about

democracy' (Charlemagne, 2011). This criticism was accompanied by demands for a more forceful action in the form of sanctions.

Advocates of sanctions re-articulated the situation in which the EU found itself by describing the actions of the Libyan regime as 'brutal and bloody repressions' and 'massive violations of human rights'. This representation called for a more decisive and immediate action in order to protect the Libyan people and to preserve the Union's self-image as the protector of universal norms. For instance, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, while acknowledging that '[i]t's not our job to change the leader of Libya', still insisted: 'it is the job of the leadership of Libya to listen to its people. And to be quite honest, listening to people doesn't involve using a machine gun'. (Spiegel, 2011)

The new hegemonic move did not stop at redefining the meaning of the Libyan developments, but envisaged a new role for the international community. It called on the UNSC and the Arab League to adopt concrete measures 'to prevent further bloodshed' (European Parliament, 2011a). In this context, the future role for Europe was described in terms of acting at the frontline by enforcing UNSC decisions and introducing effective sanctions against Gaddafi. The demands for sanctions became even more vocal when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1970, imposing a range of international sanctions and referring the Libyan case to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity (UNSC, 2011a).

As previously, the new hegemonic move was not left unopposed. In the debate on the dangers of mass immigration and rising oil prices, there were still echoes of the 'let's not disturb' discourse. Some member states were against any EU interference, including restrictive measures against the Libyan regime, with Italy protesting most vehemently. Frattini warned that '[b]etween 200,000 and 300,000 migrants from Libya could flee the country if the regime collapses, 10 times the Albanian refugee phenomenon of the 1990s' (Euractiv, 2011).

In the end, the EU decided to impose sanctions on Libya on 28 February (European Council, 2011a). The demand for sanctions was successful exactly because it provided a solution to the dislocation problem. Firstly, while it was possible to argue against the interpretation of the Libyan events as a 'transition from authoritarianism to democracy', depicting the regime's response as 'brutal repression' raised the stakes to the level where ignoring the calls for solidarity would amount to a patent repudiation of core European values.

Secondly, however, the proposals for sanctions were integrated in the wider hegemonic discourse: they were presented as the only way for the Union to uphold its norms by protecting human rights and bringing democracy to the Arab world. The universalist elements of the EU's identity were thus firmly linked with the idea of 'action' and even 'intervention'. The opponents of sanctions, on the contrary, did not manage to go beyond particularist security-related arguments. In 2011, the fear of mass migration and terrorism was not strong enough to justify the abandonment of the universalist agenda so closely linked with the European idea.

Calls for a no-fly zone (NFZ). The sanctions were not, however, effective enough in the eyes of some member states: Gaddafi ignored Resolution 1970 and continued to use violence against civilians. The unwillingness of the EU to secure its norms by using military means once again opened up a space for critical discourses, which presented the Union as weak, divided and irrelevant. While the early reactions to the Libyan uprising were full of optimistic reminiscences of 1989, a much more sombre historical analogy with Yugoslavia was now starting to inform interpretation of the events. Just as Yugoslavia had been seen as the first big test to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a test that the EU had failed due to internal squabbles and the lack of a vision, the Libyan conflict was now construed as the 'first big test on the EU's doorstep' (Black, Watt and Wintour, 2011) after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. The Union's powerfulness in the face of yet another major challenge in the neighbourhood was contrasted with the decisive attitude of the US, NATO and some individual member states. Consider, for instance, the following quote from *The Telegraph* blog:

[T]he European Union is an emperor with no clothes when it comes to global power. ... Yet again on a major international crisis, the EU is looking like a deer in the headlights. All of the real action at the moment on Libya is taking place in the major capitals of Europe at a nation state level. (Gardiner, 2011)

Similarly, *The Guardian* argued that 'Europeans live closer to Libya than Americans. Like Bosnia, it's on their patch. It's their problem. But without the US, it seems, they cannot help themselves' (Disdall, 2011). Moreover, the continuing escalation of the crisis made visible the tensions within the Union over the role and mechanisms of the CFSP.

As a result, the hegemonic field was open for yet another reconfiguration, and this time the question was about military intervention in Libya. It was argued that the Union should have a stronger and more independent defence and security policy to underpin its support for human

rights. Moreover, it adopted certain elements of the earlier particularist discourses by securitising Libya as a potential threat. Libya was presented as physically close, a potential source of instability in the energy sector, mass migration and terrorism, and an area of a humanitarian catastrophe. To quote just one example, UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (2011) argued:

North Africa is just 14 miles from Europe at its closest point, what happens to our near neighbours affects us deeply, at the level of human migration from North Africa to Europe, at the level of trade and investment between Europe and North Africa, and its importance to us in terms of energy, the environment and counter-terrorism.

Unlike the earlier securitising discourses, however, this one no longer advocated political continuity in Libya. On the contrary, it engaged in a radical othering of Gaddafi and envisaged his removal as the only feasible way to deal with the threat to Europe's security. Securitisation worked to reproduce the equivalence between the Libyans and the Europeans and thus to reconfirm the Union's universalist identity as a normative power. Thus, UK Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that 'the risk is again of a failed pariah state festering on Europe's southern border, threatening our security, pushing people across the Mediterranean and creating a more dangerous and uncertain world for Britain and for all our allies'. At the same time, he reminded that 'around the region people continue to campaign for change and their aspirations have not yet been met' (Cameron, 2011b). Inaction, in the words of Cameron (2011a) 'would send a chilling signal to others striving for democracy across the region'. The underlying assumption of European values as universal thus remained a foundation of the hegemonic discourse.

At first High Representative Ashton ruled out any immediate armed undertaking, arguing that it would not line up with the core values of the Union (Ashton, 2011a). This was perhaps the moment when the EU's long-established identity as a civilian, as opposed to military, power most explicitly played out in the debate. It was emphasised that the revolution belonged to the Libyans and consequently the Union could not force its values upon Libya. The opponents of the intervention, most prominently the German ones, insisted that it would risk expanding the conflict and strengthening Gaddafi by allowing him to insist that his country is again a victim of colonial aggression. This would undermine democratic transformations elsewhere:

The military solution [is] risky and dangerous. We are concerned about the effects on freedom movements in north Africa and the Arab world. We admired the jasmine revolution in Tunisia ... but we want these freedom movements to be strengthened, not weakened. (Guido Westerwelle quoted in Harding, 2011)

Lastly, in line with the EU's self-construction as a multilateral actor, it was argued that there was no clear legal basis for a no-fly zone in the shape of a UN mandate.

Characteristically, the proponents of intervention did not challenge the image of the EU as a multilateral actor. Instead, they stressed their commitment to international norms, as well as the support from the Libyan people and from the Arab League (Cameron, 2011a). In addition, the 'no-fly zone' discourse radicalised the othering of the regime by arguing that the situation might have amounted to a genocide. 'What do we do to avoid a second Srebrenica, Rwanda or a new Darfur?' asked MEP Guy Verhofstadt (European Parliament, 2011b). Similar parallels were drawn by the UK and French leaders at the emergency European Council meeting on 11 March (Rettman, 2011). This analogy invoked painful memories of a policy failure and was a powerful tool helping to articulate inaction as the opposite of Europeanness and to overcome the aversion to the use of force inherent in the idea of 'normative power Europe'.

At the 11 March summit the EU unanimously called on Gaddafi to step down and decided that a NFZ could only be imposed if three conditions were met: a demonstrable need, a clear legal basis in the form of a UNSC resolution and support from the region (European Council, 2011b). That said, the EU remained divided over the possibility of military intervention. The EU's identity as a civilian power was even strengthened by the outcome of the summit: it was agreed that it would be the member states which would decide whether the use of military means was justified and take the appropriate steps, while the Union's role would be 'to look together as 27 at the humanitarian, economic and political issues' (Ashton, 2011b). Although the declaration was based on a much more radical othering of Gaddafi, the Libyans were still envisaged as close to the European Self: all actions undertaken by the EU, either civilian or military, were supposed to ensure protection of civilians and, eventually, Libya's transition to democracy.

International consensus on the imposition of a no-fly zone was achieved on 17 March with the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1973, which legitimised military intervention in Libya (UNSC, 2011b). It took the Union less than a month to forge a new hegemony around the

decision to endorse a military intervention by its member states and allies, while stopping short of an EU-led military operation. Looking back at the intra-EU discursive struggles triggered by the crisis, one can see nearly the same pattern in operation at all stages. Each hegemonic move trying to eliminate dislocation and make sense of the crisis was making a universalising claim by trying to fill in the empty signifier of ‘Europe’. Each did it by re-articulating the signifying chains around key nodal points, such as ‘democracy’, ‘peace’, ‘security’ and the memory of both glorious and tragic European past (symbolised, in particular, by 1989 and Srebrenica). Each struggled to overcome the tension between the need for action – and thus for an intervention of some sort – and the EU’s entrenched identity of a normative actor, with a strong inherent component of civilian power and ensuing aversion to the use of military means.

Our case study confirms the constructivist view of bordering and othering as key identity-producing practices. In the Libyan case, the key question was where to draw the border between the European Self and the threatening Other. What our study highlights, however, is that the position of the line in crisis times is far from self-evident, while some certainty must be achieved before action becomes possible. Before the Union could authorise the NFZ, it had to make the choice in favour of securitising (and perhaps even demonising) Colonel Gaddafi and including the Libyans as (almost) part of the Self. This political decision took several institutional measures to achieve and quite a bit of struggle before the reconfigured identity settled down and President Herman Van Rompuy could proudly declare: ‘From the beginning of the crisis, the European Union was at the forefront ... Without Europe nothing would have been done at the global level or at the UN level’ (Rettman, 2011b).

Conclusion

Our analysis of the intra-EU discourses on the Libyan uprising demonstrates how a major event outside of the Union’s borders opened a void at the core of European identity. This confirms our assertion that any significant political crisis produces dislocation in all the identities that somehow relate to the event, even if they are not directly affected by the developments on the ground. Our empirical analysis further reveals that the hegemonic articulation that eliminates dislocation produced by the crisis cannot be limited in scope to a particular Self–Other relationship. Instead, it fixes a certain view of the entire ‘global’ situation – not in the

geographical sense, of course, but in terms of encompassing the entire system of signification. In the case of the EU's reaction to the events in Libya, this meant that any viable policy response to the crisis had to be coordinated with the Union's view of itself as the embodiment of European values.

Our analysis adds important insights into the workings of hegemony in the construction of political identities and in the workings of ontological security. Any identity is inscribed in a hegemonically established signifying system, in which every element is defined through its relations with all other elements. The logic of hegemony presupposes the presence of privileged sites that organise the system as such: these are empty signifiers, whose function consists in signifying the system as a whole, as opposed to any particular difference. By organising the signifying chains around nodal points, a hegemonic move fills empty signifiers with concrete meaning, while at the same time drawing a border around the Self, dividing the political space between the inside and the outside.

Othering plays an important role in this process, but, as our analysis confirms, the identity of the Self never fully depends on any particular Self–Other relationship. Conventional patterns of othering can be disturbed by an event, which lays bare the undecidability of the social and produces an identity crisis in which empty signifiers lose their established meaning. Thus, the Arab Spring had a profound unsettling effect on the European identity and security: it broke apart the equivalence between the EU and the notion of Europeanness, exposing the empty signifier of Europe to a range of competing hegemonic moves that struggled to fill it with specific content. An inevitable consequence of this crisis at the core of European identity was the blurring of boundaries between the Self and its constitutive outside. Some articulations attempted to make sense of the new situation by shifting the border between Europe and non-Europe, as it were, inside Libya: the Libyan people were included in the European Self, while the oppressive regime of Gaddafi took a central position as Europe's Other.

The dislocation produced by the external crisis thus necessitated a dramatic re-articulation of signifying chains, which could only be achieved through a political decision. In our empirical case, the decision involved several formal steps taken by the EU, beginning with the adoption of a political declaration providing a common assessment of the events and leading up to the introduction of sanctions and support for a no-fly zone. However, it is absolutely crucial not to reduce the concept of decision to formal measures taken by particular institutions.

While the content of these measures is important for characterising, in substantive terms, the new hegemony resulting from the decision, an institutional act is not a necessary element of the latter. Rather, the reverse is true: before any concrete action can be taken, there must be a decision in place that fixes, if only partially, the dislocated signifying chains and provides cognitive certainty which is an absolute precondition for action. At the same time, the decision and the ensuing action form, in some respects at least, an inseparable whole: the material consequences of the action consolidate the discursive certainty achieved in the decision and make it in some ways irreversible. The decision that interpellated Gaddafi's regime into a key threat to Europe's security logically involved authorising and enforcing a no-fly zone, while the air strikes that followed meant that the EU could no longer back down from its support of the rebels against the regime.

On a more theoretical note, what defines a decision is, firstly, the very fact that a new hegemonic order has been established: dislocation has been eliminated, identities fixed, and the events that upset the commonsense worldview have been inscribed in the mainstream historical narrative. Secondly, a political decision, as opposed to an institutional act, is self-grounded: its only ontological foundation is the decision itself. This must not be taken as saying that a political decision is arbitrary: as our case shows, all competing hegemonic moves generated by the Libyan crisis invoked elements of the pre-crisis hegemonic articulation and hence were grounded in the past. However, none of these moves was *in essence* 'better' or 'worse' than the others. They all offered a view of a European identity in which consistency could only be achieved by what Alain Badiou (2005: 400–409) would call 'forcing', i.e. by establishing problematic equivalencies and deciding the undecidable from the point of view of 'the situation to come', of the yet-uncertain future, which is a precondition for political action and the key attribute of subjectivity.

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