

CHAPTER TWO

The Uncertainty of Belonging

Narratives of Difference and Exclusion in Germany and the United States

American sociologists have presented a variety of hypotheses about the relationship between structure, culture, and social action (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Small 2004; Swidler 1986). At the same time, US-based researchers have rarely looked beyond American society to understand the meaning-making processes of disadvantaged populations.¹ In my first book, *A Dream Denied* (2016), for example, I observed that teenagers in Chicago and Boston developed an exaggerated sense of agency while they were held in juvenile detention centers. I interpreted their narratives as a reflection of the myth of the “American Dream” that emphasizes equal access to opportunities. Lacking a counterfactual, however, my argument couldn’t definitively connect the teenagers’ utterances to the culturally specific environment they grew up in. William Julius Wilson’s (1990) hypothesis about cultural values prevailing in inner-city communities is exposed to a similar criticism. Without comparative examples of poor populations living in different social settings, we have to take at face value that cultural isolation and

systematic structural disadvantage perpetuate self-sabotaging cultural frames.

This chapter expands the debate about the relationship between culture, inequality, and identity beyond the United States. Setting narratives of incarcerated young men in the United States in relation to a similar group of respondents in Germany allows for a more comprehensive understanding of culture as “webs of significance” (Geertz 2017) that shape the young men’s identity and understanding of their role in society.

Given the cultural contingencies of both societies, it is fair to say that the young men in Germany and the United States experience their outsider status very differently. American and German respondents, however, align in describing their marginalization as an individual rather than a social problem (Crewe 2009). The young men’s interpretation of their environment testifies to subtle but significant forms of discrimination and marginalization prevalent in both countries. Rather than recollecting dramatic incidents of racism, they relate a more elusive but constant experience of marginalization. In aggregate these microprocesses significantly influence the respondents’ self-understanding. Lamont and others have termed these cultural processes of stratification “symbolic inequality.” These scripts operate open-endedly and are constructed intersubjectively. They manifest subconsciously but nonetheless entrench the material and ecological aspects of stratification (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014, 581). As result, the young men do not perceive themselves as being discriminated against or treated unfairly. They interpret their social position as an unfortunate combination of self-defeating choices and tragic events beyond their control.

In order to analyze the data I collected comparatively, I needed to contextualize the young men's identity constructions in the historical and cultural environment they grew up in. The construction of the self, as George Herbert Mead (1967) argued, develops in relation to society—the generalized other—and the benchmark for exclusion from or inclusion in the mainstream is very different in Germany than it is in the United States. Before I delve into the young men's narratives, I will briefly summarize the cultural assumptions and structural realities that impact the young men's perception of difference, exclusion, and belonging in both countries.

AN AMERICAN DILEMMA

Acts of police violence against African Americans are only the latest iteration of what Gunnar Myrdal (1995) referred to as the "American Dilemma." Published in 1944, Myrdal's work of the same name described the United States as torn between the rhetoric of opportunity and the brutal reality of Jim Crow laws in the South. As an outsider (Myrdal was from Sweden), Myrdal saw clearly what white Americans were reluctant to admit: Even after the practice of slavery had ended, a majority of African Americans continued to exist in a state of indentured servitude on former plantations in the South. The "Freedman Bureau" failed to make good on the promise of "forty acres and a mule"; and, as W. E. B. Du Bois aptly observed, an African American who became a landowner and achieved upward mobility did so "by the grace of his thrift rather than the bounty of the government" (1994, 20).

Fleeing Southern Jim Crow laws and economic devastation after World War II, the "great migration" of African Americans

led to a massive increase of the Black population in Northern industrial cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia. As has been extensively documented elsewhere, moving north did not bring prosperity but led to the creation of segregated and resource deprived inner-city communities (Satter 2009; Conley 2009; Venkatesh 2002; Massey and Denton 1994). Today, segregation remains a social problem that also affects middle-class African American families. In *Black Picket Fences*, Mary Pattillo showed that Black middle-class families are likely to live adjacent to poor neighborhoods. Their children inadvertently share resources with poor families. They attend failing schools and are exposed to crime and violence. Middle-class white children, on the other hand, live far removed from these social ills of poverty (1999).

Recent data confirm that past discriminatory practices continue to impact the net worth of African American families. In 2016, the average African American family had a median net worth of \$17,150 compared to a median net worth of \$171,150 for white families. Among other factors, white families disproportionately profit from inheritance tax law. Income is taxed at seven times the rate than inherited wealth (Batchelder 2007). The low taxes on inheritances have therefore contributed to sustaining the African American–white wealth gap across generations (Hamilton and Darity 2010).

Mass incarceration has dealt another blow to already embattled minority communities (Alexander 2010). By the mid-2000s African American men under the age of forty were incarcerated at a rate of 11.5 percent. In fact, incarceration had become so common among poorly educated African American men, that the likelihood of experiencing incarceration was twice as high as their probability of receiving government support or joining

the army (Western 2006). Most recent data show a narrowing gap of between black and white incarceration rates, while class inequality has increased (Muller and Roehrkasse 2022). Between 2008 and 2018, Black incarceration rates declined by 28 percent. Over the same time frame incarceration rates dropped 2 percent for whites. Despite these encouraging trends, Black men remain 5.8 percent more likely to be incarcerated than white men (Carson 2020). Overall, mass incarceration has increased the economic pressure on already-struggling African American families and has caused irreparable damage to the social fabric of disadvantaged inner-city communities (Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Wacquant 2009).

In addition to facing structural disadvantages, African Americans have to navigate a rather complex field of subtly racist interactions and stereotyping in their daily lives. “Stereotype threat”—awareness that others expect certain behaviors based on one’s race, ethnicity, or gender, has a measurable impact on aspirations and performance (Steele and Aronson 1995). The negative stereotypes circulating about underachievement of African Americans in the United States, for example, significantly impact their test results. Walton and others found that 17 percent to 19 percent of the white/Black gap on the SAT exams can be accounted for by stereotype threat (2013).

The structural and cultural aspects of discrimination in the United States are empirically well-established (Pager 2003). Individual experience with racism and the extent to which race is relevant for one’s identity, on the other hand, differs significantly between people. For instance, highly educated African Americans are less likely to have contact with the criminal justice system than those who have not finished high school (Western 2006). At the same time, middle-class African Americans

are more likely to occupy the “sole person” role in a predominantly white social setting and therefore experience their race very differently than a teenager living in a segregated inner-city neighborhood (Bobo 2012; Coates 2015).

Finally, like any ethnic group in the United States, African Americans are a heterogeneous crowd. For a number of African Americans their race and culture may not play a prominent role in their identity constructions at all. Others connect to their African American cultural heritage in moderate ways, and some may experience their race and, by extension, being discriminated against as an important aspect of their lives (Cross 1991; Strauss and Cross 2005). As this chapter delves further into the analysis of the interview data, it is important to keep the range of possible identity constructions in mind. The data focus on the identity development of an extremely disadvantaged subset of young men, and the results should not be treated as representative for a population as diverse as African Americans are in the United States.

“It’s a fucked-up predicament”

Jeremiah’s family was more firmly situated in the middle class than other families I interviewed in Pennsylvania. His grandmother owned a beautiful house on a tree-lined street in West Philadelphia. She had been a foster-mother for two decades when I met her. Money was never there in abundance but she had always found ways to offer her children and grand-children the semblance of a middle-class life. She was especially proud of her daughter—Jeremiah’s aunt—who had graduated from an elite college and lived with her husband and two children in a wealthy suburb close to Chicago. Jeremiah’s mother was in many

ways the exact opposite of her successful sister. She became hooked on drugs and Jeremiah suffered immensely from seeing his mother succumbing to addiction again and again.

In school Jeremiah struggled with ADHD. The Catholic private school he attended was unwilling to accommodate his needs and he ended up attending an underresourced local public school. As a teenager, Jeremiah became involved with a neighborhood gang. During our interviews his enduring fascination with the gang lifestyle was obvious. He recounted a detailed history of the Crips and Bloods and pointed out the different ways his tattoos paid tribute to his involvement in an East Coast offshoot of the Bloods. His grandmother believed that his demeanor was at odds with that of the quiet child she had raised. She also assumed that he embellished his involvement in the gang.

Even though Jeremiah had the unwavering support of his family, he fell behind in school because of his learning disability. He began acting out to compensate for his deficiencies and was labeled a troublemaker. As he grew older, his involvement with the streets continued to escalate and he embraced being a gang member (Soyer 2018). When I spoke to him at SCI Pine Grove, he blamed himself for ending up in prison. Not only did he believe that it was his fault; he had also convinced himself that discrimination had played no role in his trajectory. He made clear that he did not want to “blame it on white people” that he was incarcerated. From his perspective “Black on Black” crime was the problem that haunted inner-city neighborhoods.

He insisted on the irrelevance of racism, even though he had experienced first-hand that his family expanded an extraordinary effort to hold onto their middle-class status. When he spent a summer in the wealthy suburb where his aunt and her

family lived, he noticed that his relatives were the only Black family around. He felt “out of place.” Being the only Black child at the pool, he was not comfortable jumping in: “My skin get darker while I’m in the sun like right now, and it was just like no.”

After being exposed to white upper-middle-class culture he had never experienced before, Jeremiah was not able to code switch effectively (Anderson 1999). It was also difficult for him to perceive the racial disparity as the result of institutionalized discrimination and systematic disadvantage. After all, his aunt and uncle had made it and were accepted members of this white suburban community. After a brief stay in Illinois, he went back to Philadelphia. He felt at home there and being in a gang allowed him to bracket his identity in meaningful ways.

Blake, who was sentenced to one to five years in prison for selling drugs, also tried to make sense of the discrepancy in wealth he noticed in his hometown Harrisburg. He argued that “white people . . . take advantage of going to school.” He also insisted that successful white people are not necessarily born into wealth: “I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of white people that’s out there that [are] CEOs now, that came from nothing. Just like there’s a lot of black people out there right now that came from nothing.” Trying to ensure that Blake did not simply provide answers he deemed socially desirable, I pointed out the intergenerational wealth white Americans had been able to transmit over centuries. He responded bluntly: “All white people don’t got stuff to fall back on. . . . like the trailer park. That’s, that’s the white version of the hood. That’s still the ghetto at the end of the day. That’s low income. For real.” In the end, Blake believed that white people simply made more realistic plans for their future. As he put it: “See me, black people and Spanish people, . . . they would go to college, say that don’t work, their back-up plan be like, oh I wanna get my barber

license. . . . That's not the next best thing, that's everybody, everybody in the hood all over America cutting hair. So, why would you [choose that]?"

While Blake knew that his community was in a "fucked-up predicament," he did not want to make excuses for himself. At the beginning of his time in prison he recalled blaming not having a father in his life, or needing money for his actions. Now he believed that he should have found other ways to make ends meet: "You don't always gotta resort to shooting somebody with a gun. You don't gotta always resort to selling drugs. You get a job. You go fight with your hands."

For Jeremiah and Blake taking responsibility for their actions translated into negating structural racism, though they still intuitively understood their disadvantage. The good neighborhoods, they remarked casually—that's where the white people live. Blake knew that white people never found their way to the part of Harrisburg he grew up in, unless they were police or wanted to buy drugs. Jeremiah also noticed that his sister was one of the very few Black girls at her private school located in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He knew that her classmates did not have to struggle like she did:

"My sister have to earn everything that she has, every single thing. . . . Their [the white classmates'] parents pay for that, here you go. Give you \$100. Go to school, get lunch money. My sister has to work at a daycare at a young age, manage homework, and getting money for her phone bill."

Mother of Exiles

A self-described country of immigrants, the United States not only has to reckon with their legacy of slavery, but also with its history of discrimination against newcomers. While anyone

who is born on American soil is considered a citizen, immigrants and their descendants are not created equal. After initial discrimination against the Irish, Jews, or Italians, the third and fourth generation of European immigrants now reside in integrated neighborhoods. For the most part they also do not present as a distinctive ethnic group anymore (Alba, Logan and Crowder 1997; Bonnett 1998; Alba, Lutz and Vesselinov 2001).

Immigrants from Latin America have not been afforded the same route to assimilation. A recent study by the Pew Research Center (2018) shows that only 45 percent of Americans know that most immigrants reside in the United States legally. A significant number of respondents (also 45 percent) were still under the impression that there is a connection between immigrants and criminal behavior. Even though citizenship does not predict involvement in criminal behavior, men who identify as Latino are overrepresented in the state prison system in comparison to white men. Recent work on sentencing emphasizes that immigrant status may be an even more salient factor than race when it comes to the severity of punishment. Light, Massoglia, and King (2014) show that citizenship has a stronger impact on sentencing than race and ethnicity in federal court. Controlling for citizenship also obliterates the difference in sentencing between Hispanics and whites.

Being a citizen, however, does not protect Latinos from experiencing exclusion. Based on ninety-eight in-depth interviews with Puerto Ricans, Ariana Valle (2019) argues that the legal status of Puerto Ricans in the United States is questioned regularly. They are lumped together with other immigrants from Latin America, especially immigrants from Mexico. Being seen as a “illegitimate,” despite their citizenship status, emphasizes the powerful narrative of Latino immigration as qualitatively

different from earlier waves of immigrants entering the United States from Europe.

Like African Americans, Latinos continue to live in segregated neighborhoods that afford very little opportunities for advancement (Bourgois 2002; Contreras 2013). Latino men are stigmatized and labeled intensely. Victor Rios describes a “Youth Control Complex” that encompasses the lives of the Latino youths he observed—regardless of their actual involvement in crime (2011). Like African American incarceration rates, Latino incarceration rates have declined. Between 2008 and 2018 the number of Latino inmates in state prison decreased by 21 percent. Nevertheless, the fact that Latinos constitute 23 percent of the state prison population means that they are still overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Carson 2020).²

We should again keep in mind that Latinos are a heterogeneous group. When it comes to upward mobility, trajectories differ widely depending on the immigrants’ country of origin. Second-generation Central or South Americans, as well as Peruvians, Cubans, and Colombians, even surpass their white peers when it comes to occupational success. The great majority of Latino immigrants, however, stem from Mexico. The lives of the children of Mexican immigrants are still shaped by the stigma of “illegality” and segregation (Gonzales 2015). First-generation Mexican immigrants’ legal status, the comparatively low level of their education, and a negative reception environment in the United States contribute to the comparative lack of upward mobility of their children and grandchildren (Van Tran 2016).

Similar to the African American respondents, the Latino young men I interviewed are not a representative sample of the Latino population in the United States. Instead, their narratives

offer a specific perspective on the identity development of young Latino men who grew up in segregated inner-city communities.

“Americans can do no wrong”

When I interviewed Jesus in prison, he was twenty years old. He had been raised by his grandmother, who came from Puerto Rico to the continental United States when she was a child. The family first settled in New Jersey but then quickly moved to Philadelphia, where all his grandmother’s children and grandchildren were born. Jesus is keenly aware of how his life has been defined by poverty and segregation. For him, being in a prison is not a lot different from living in his neighborhood: “You’re really confined in the hood to your own environment. . . . Me being in prison in my cell is no different than being out there because I felt like I was confined out there,” he explained.

As the only US respondent who had been enrolled in a four-year college, he observed that underresourced neighborhoods can sap aspirations. Instead of becoming doctors or lawyers, “people just get fucked by their environment.” Even though he knew that poverty warped the life courses of those around him, he rejected describing himself as a victim of these circumstances: “I can’t blame it [his life course] on the environment. We [people in his neighborhood] fucked each other over. Instead of bringing each other up, we was just encouraging and motivating each other to continue doing the same old bullshit.” When he was a child, Jesus was captivated by the self-destruction of heroin addicts around him and he began stashing heroin for his cousins. For him, the essence of drug dealing is “You making money and watching somebody fuck up their life.”

Even though Jesus enjoyed going to elementary school, his grandmother encouraged him to act like he had ADHD. She told him to misbehave so that he could become eligible for social security payments. According to Jesus it worked out and his grandmother was able to use his SSI checks to supplement the household income until he was sent to juvenile placement in his mid-teens. Jesus was convinced that many other families in his neighborhood received social security payments illegitimately as well: “You just see it with a lot of minorities for real. Cause you don’t see that with um, with a white family. I don’t know, [with] minorities you see that shit all the time.”

While he believed his grandmother’s choices were wrong, he acknowledged the limited agency she had vis-à-vis the government agencies that intervened in his life. Jesus recalled that she never questioned the different therapeutic interventions that he was exposed to. In his grandmother’s eyes, “Americans can do no wrong . . . if they would have told her like yeah, like make him jump off a bridge, she probably would have went along with it because somebody else told her it was good for me.”

During our final interview, it became evident that his narrative of individual responsibility was connected to his fear of not being able to live an independent life away from the streets. Emphasizing that he and others in his neighborhood were responsible for their actions implied that he had control over his fate. Jesus knew it would be difficult for him to find a job quickly after his release. He speculated that failing to secure employment might draw him back to the streets, and he was uncertain what the future might hold for him. Jesus explained that he had always wanted to run his own business. But now he was not so sure anymore. Half-jokingly, he added at the end of our interview, “I’m having a mid-life crisis.”

While Jesus was born on the mainland, Mateo's family moved from Puerto Rico to Allentown, Pennsylvania when he was twelve years old. "My mom—she was trying to get a better life," he explained. From his perspective moving to Allentown had been a net benefit for his family. He considered Puerto Rico his home, but remembered the neighborhood he lived in as a violent and drug-infested place. Mateo believed that people in Puerto Rico "don't got a lot of benefits and hope . . ." Mateo did not speak English when he arrived but, by his own account, he picked the language up quickly. He also recalled that his family was poor even though both his parents worked. While he understood his family's disadvantage, he mostly blamed himself for ending up in prison: "I started hanging out with wrong people, start[ed] getting locked up, fighting in school, getting kicked out of school." Like his uncle, who was a member of the Latin Kings, Mateo became a gang member. He joined "for the loyalty. For the love they show you. . . . They help you with anything you need. Help your family."

When Mateo reflected on why he ended up being sentenced to two to five years for aggravated assault, he did not feel resentment toward the system that had adjudicated him. Instead, he talked about feeling angry with his father who started out as a "big drug dealer in Puerto Rico," but ended up getting hooked on dope himself. From Mateo's perspective his father never raised him or gave him anything. He and his mother had violent fights. Mateo remembered that everyone in his family always argued about money. When his father found out that Mateo had been sent to prison, he returned to Puerto Rico. Mateo sent him a letter from prison but never received a reply. In the end, Mateo believed his father did not want to confront his son's incarceration.

In his recollections Mateo's challenging family dynamic overshadowed any other structural difficulties he might have encountered as he tried to integrate into life in his new hometown. His families' ties to the Latin Kings also made it easy for him to turn to the gang for recognition and support. His gang involvement not only compensated for difficulties at home but also allowed him to feel connected to a place whose language and customs he was not familiar with.

Mateo and Jesus focused on their individual challenges over larger socioeconomic mechanisms disadvantaging Latino families in the United States. They mostly remembered their families' struggles from a microlevel perspective, and framed their current situation as a result of their own actions, or the failings of adults in their life.

Personal Responsibility and Structural Disadvantage

It is tempting to frame the narratives of the US respondents' as a sign of alienation and false consciousness (Gaventa 1982). This simplified Marxian interpretation, however, *does not* do justice to the complex reality the respondents had to navigate. Jeremiah and Blake understood that their neighborhoods were deprived of resources. Jesus also realized that his Puerto Rican grandmother was not able to read "American" society correctly. She couldn't advocate as effectively for him as a white middle-class mother or grandmother would have been able to. Likewise, Mateo observed that his parents worked hard but still struggled financially.

Jesus's, Mateo's, Blake's, and Jeremiah's denial of systemic racism simply allowed them to uphold their illusion of agency.

Imagining themselves as uninhibited by discrimination also enabled them to retain a modicum of dignity and optimism.

Their perspective on American society was also impacted by their individual traumatic experiences (Soyer 2018). As children they had witnessed repeatedly that adults' drug use and violence made their family's situation worse. Jeremiah, for example, could not possibly understand his mother's drug use in terms of his country's history of slavery and racism. From a child's perspective, she simply let him down, while his aunt and grandmother were proof that she could have chosen differently. The individual, visceral experience of trauma and disappointment therefore obfuscated the undercurrent of systemic racism that undeniably impacted their communities.

THE GERMAN QUESTION

In Germany, the history of racism predates the founding of the United State by centuries.³ Historically, Germans have defined belonging to the Volk (the people) by ancestry and culture rather than territory (Anderson 1991). The predecessor of the German Reich, the Holy Roman Empire, consisted of a multitude of quasi-sovereign chiefdoms, lordships, and kingdoms. Germany—a “delayed nation” (Plessner 2001)—became a coherent territory long after France, Great Britain, or the United States.⁴ To compensate for the absence of a nation state, Germans, Hannah Arendt (1944) argued, developed a specific “race-thinking.” Instead of territorial unity, they emphasized their racial unity.

When Bismarck succeeded in creating a unified Germany under the hegemony of Prussia, he did so with the significant support of his Jewish banker Gerson Bleichroeder (Stern 1977).

At the same time, however, the Jewish population was never considered an integral part of Germany. Jews remained “strangers,” even though Germans and Jews had shared the same territory for centuries and Jewish artists and philosophers had embodied German culture (Stern 1977; Elon 2002; Simmel 1971).⁵ Historians and social scientists agree that Nazi ideology did not emerge suddenly in 1933, and that it did not suddenly end with the surrender of the German army on May 8, 1945. Hitler’s antisemitism in many ways seamlessly connected to a specific kind of exclusive messianic nationalism that had been simmering at least since the nineteenth century and was embraced by the highest echelons of German society during the Weimar Republic (Karlauf 2020; Adorno 2019; Korn 1999; Kracauer 1984).

During the 1940s, when Gunnar Myrdal was traveling through the United States recording the hypocrisy of American society, the Nazi leadership relentlessly pursued its goal of the complete destruction of European Jewry (Hilberg 1999). During the height of the killings in Eastern Europe, between July 1942 and November 1942, more than one million people died in the gas chambers of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka alone (Stone 2019). The Holocaust was a crime of such massive proportions that the German language developed a specific term capturing the process of coming to terms with the collective guilt of the German people: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Under the leadership of the first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, German society defined itself mostly through its efforts to rebuild the country and the desire to enter the international political stage once again. Germany at once distanced itself from the Third Reich, while relentlessly reintegrating former Nazis at the familial, social, and political levels of society (Perels 2004; Welzer 2002; Mommsen 1991).⁶ As part of the German

efforts to present the country as a peaceful and trustworthy nation, race as a category was erased from the German vocabulary. Instead of racial unity, Germans emphasized a set of cultural norms and values that defined their society. Replacing race with the notion of culture (including democracy and liberalism) was supposed to imply tolerance. However, insisting on assimilation to German culture has continued to ostracize those who seem not share this particular Western European, Christian perspective (Yurdakul and Korteweg 2013; Korteweg 2014; Oers 2021).

The first immigrants who entered postwar Germany were the so-called *Gastarbeiter*, who came to the newly established Federal Republic to address the shortage of laborers during the postwar economic boom. Recruited from Southern European countries and Turkey, these workers were not supposed to settle in Germany. Chartered trains delivered these men, who were treated as a commodity, directly from their home country to the German companies desperate for a cheap labor force. Their initial living quarters were provisional barracks provided by the companies that had recruited them. In 1973, when labor recruitment officially ended, those who were supposed to be temporary “guests” had turned into permanent immigrants. Despite these “guests” having experienced an unfriendly reception environment, their families had followed them, and Germany had to come to terms with a significant immigrant population. Over time, the status of “foreigners” who had settled permanently in Germany was tackled legislatively. The political establishment abandoned the idea of forcibly resettling workers to their country of origin. After all, the German constitution granted civil and individual rights to everyone irrespective of nationality (Joppke 1999, 63–85).

It took much longer to dispose of the traditional notion that the German nation was bound by blood and not territory. Until January 1, 2000, when a reformed citizenship law went into effect, the children of those workers who were born and raised in Germany did not have a clear path to German citizenship. Access to German citizenship was defined by the principles of *ius sanguinis* (Brubaker 1992). Having German ancestors guaranteed citizenship irrespective of where a person resided. Although immigrants from Turkey, Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia fulfilled an important economic function, their grandchildren born on German soil were still considered foreigners (*Ausländer*) (Partridge 2012). Children born in Germany to immigrant parents prior to the reform of the citizenship law received the citizenship of their parent's country of origin.

Even though the new citizenship law moved in the direction of *ius soli*, the outsider status of many German respondents continued to be defined by the old concept of *ius sanguinis*. A majority of the young men I interviewed were born just before the legal changes took effect. Their extensive criminal history prevented other paths to naturalization and minimized their chances of becoming citizens in the future. Those who had a long history of criminal behavior were at risk of being deported to the country their parents or even grandparents came from decades ago (Narimani 2017).

In contrast to the United States, the German census does not record ethnicity. Instead, the census bureau collects information on the diffuse category of "migration background." This rubric also includes German citizens born in Germany whose families immigrated to Germany generations ago. About 21.3 million people fall into this category.⁷ Given the homogeneity of German society, it is not a surprise that the citizenship reform

did not change the narrow definition of what it means to truly belong to German society. In the early 2000s, a female teacher in Baden-Württemberg insisted on wearing the headscarf in public school, which put her at odds with the school administrators and the ministry of education. The now infamous “headscarf debate” revealed that wearing a headscarf as a sign of being Muslim was still irreconcilable with being German (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2013).

“But I am German”

Arslan spent a total of six years in various locked facilities in Baden-Württemberg. His latest charge was for an attempted second-degree murder. He fractured the skull of another person incarcerated at JVA Adelsheim because he had called Arslan a “son of a whore.”

Arslan’s mother immigrated from Turkey with her parents when she was thirteen years old. His father was born in Germany as a son of guest workers who came in the 1960s. Arslan was twelve years old when his father died of lung cancer. Since his family had lived in Germany for two generations, he felt removed from his Turkish heritage: “When I have children there will not be a lot of Turk left in them,” he joked.

During our first interview in prison, I revealed my own biases and asked him: How was it to grow up Turkish in Stuttgart? Arslan was not faced by assumptions about his identity and he simply replied: “But I am German.” He added that people always thought he had a “migration background” because of his dark hair and darker skin. Apparently, I was not the only one who presumed that someone who looked like him could not possibly be a German citizen. Arslan also explained that people

often believed he was joking when he referred to himself as German. On the other hand, identifying as Turkish did not feel right to him either: “I have received everything from Germany. I was born in Germany. I can’t just say: I am Turkish.” Arslan therefore preferred to consider himself German-Turkish.

In the summer of 2019, when I conducted our final interview, Arslan was looking forward to a vacation in Izmir. He loved spending time there and jokingly posed the question: “Why would I live in Germany when I can go to Izmir?” Despite his enthusiasm about vacationing in Turkey, he remained uncertain about whether or not he could live there permanently. For him feeling at home was primarily connected to his mother. This also meant that if his family were to move to Turkey, he would likely leave as well: “I don’t have anything left here,” he said, adding, “They really fucked me with that five-year sentence.” Eventually Arslan settled on a compromise: He loved Germany as a country but hated everything connected to the German state that had locked him up.

Interactions with the police in particular had affirmed that his presence in Germany was considered problematic. Arslan recalled that a police officer claimed he had resisted arrest. From Arslan’s perspective the officer simply struggled with putting handcuffs on him. Although he insisted that he did not try to obstruct the officer, Arslan was convinced that nobody believed his version of the event: Come on,” he told me, “someone who looks like me and who has been in prison—[. . .] why would anybody believe me?”

Arslan’s hybrid identity epitomized the situation of young people born to immigrant families after the citizenship law reform. Children born in Germany after January 2000 are eligible for German citizenship similar to a child born on US soil.

Arslan not only held a German passport; he did not even have Turkish citizenship. His actual citizenship status, however, was irrelevant when it came to other people's perspective on his status as a "foreigner." His experience of exclusion had left him deeply ambivalent about the country of his birth. Especially after he experienced how correctional officers spoke to him and others in prisons, he concluded the following: "In every German is a little bit of a . . ." While he did not finish his sentence, we both knew the term that was left unspoken was *Nazi*.⁸

Carlo, whose father was of African descent, experienced being racially profiled on a regular basis in his hometown. Carlo grew up in Freiburg—a small university town in the Black Forest. Like Arslan, he was a German citizen. In his experience, the police never stopped those who looked ethnically German but always targeted him and his friends who had darker skin and appeared to have a "migration background." Carlo had been sentenced to three years for aggravated assault. He was ashamed of what he had done and did not want to talk about how he had ended up in prison. I asked him if the police had ever said anything discriminatory—for example, whether they had used racial slurs. He replied that he had never experienced that, but it was obvious to him that the police considered those who had darker skin to be more dangerous. He also believed that his older white half brothers were profiled because they socialized with a group of Roma, a population generally considered to be involved in organized crime.⁹ While the police never used racial slurs, strangers on the street did not hold back when they encountered him and called him "n . . . r."¹⁰ He did not want to paint himself as a victim: "When I was younger it really upset me, but now I don't care anymore," he explained.

Just like in Carlo's and Arslan's cases, Marko's dark skin meant that he was immediately identified as not being ethnically

German. Marko's parents are Roma; they came to Germany more than thirty years ago. The family first settled in Hannover, in northern Germany. Marko was born there, but when he was about five years old his parents decided to move to southern Germany. Marko described this relocation as an attempt to get away from family drama that had unfolded in Hannover. His parents were not German citizens, but they held the German equivalent of a Green Card. This allowed them to remain in the country indefinitely without any restrictions. Because of his criminal history Marko had been threatened with deportation to Serbia, the country that had issued his passport. He believed that a six-page letter he wrote to the judge overseeing his immigration case ultimately prevented his deportation. Although he was allowed to remain in Germany for now, Marko expected that he would never be able to receive the kind of unconditional residency permit his parents had.

As a Roma Marko is part of a minority that has faced discrimination all over Europe (McGarry 2014; Ciaian and Kancs 2018; Kende et al. 2021). In Germany the derogatory term *Zigeuner* (gypsy) remains a common moniker. For centuries German literature has styled *Zigeuner* as a threat to society. They are depicted as criminals, robbers, and kidnappers of children (Solms 2008). Marko insisted, though, that his family has been accepted into the small southern German village they settled in after they left Hannover. The native Germans living in this part of southern Germany are referred to as Swabians and they speak a distinctive local dialect called Swabian. One stereotype about the Swabians is that they are very frugal, bordering on being embarrassingly cheap. Marko referred to this stereotype when he explained that the Swabian neighbors had no hesitation knocking on his family's door when they needed to borrow tools or flour. When someone from his family had to

borrow tools in return, the neighbors were happy to reciprocate. Marko's tongue-in-cheek depiction of village dynamics implied that the cheap nature of the Swabians outweighed their racist instinct to treat their Roma neighbors as social pariahs. He even joked that his parents had assimilated to the Swabian way of life completely since they also saved rather than spent their money.

Although Marko affirmed acceptance of his family, he recalled that his former supervisor referred to him as a Zigeuner. He claimed it was mostly in good fun: "I used to call my boss potato." He conceded that some people have said "stupid" stuff. Although he believed that his treatment was not undeserved since that he had not been a particularly "nice guy." Despite the stereotypes about Roma, Marko never concealed his identity: "I have nothing to be ashamed of," he asserted.

Similarly to Arslan and Carlo, Marko also remained uncertain about his acceptance in German society: Other Germans, he believed, would likely not consider him a "model German citizen" (*Vorzeigedeutsche*). After his release, he planned on entering an arranged marriage with a woman who lived in Germany but who, like him, came from a Roma family. Marko related that his family's expectations were more traditional in terms of gender roles. Marrying a German woman unfamiliar with his cultural heritage would have gravely disappointed his parents. Even though Marko was committed to Romani cultural traditions, he also embraced his German identity. He spoke German without a traceable accent and, while he was set to marry within the Roma community, he planned on settling with his future wife in Germany.

Arslan, Marko, and Carlo came from very different ethnic backgrounds. In the eyes of the German majority, their

appearance—most importantly their darker skin, marked them as “foreigners.” Despite their different citizenship statuses, all three had internalized that they could never be “fully” German—irrespective of how long ago their families had settled in Germany. Although German society identified them as “the other,” the young men wanted to stay in Germany. As Arslan remarked, being born and raised in Germany was part of his self-understanding. While he enjoyed going on vacation in Izmir he was aware that he did not belong there either.

In *Unwanted*, Sandra Bucerius (2014) observed that her German-Turkish respondents compensated their exclusion from German society by identifying fiercely with the part of Frankfurt they had grown up in. Almost twenty years later, this new generation of immigrant children and grandchildren did not anchor their identity in a specific locale. In contrast to Bucerius’s group, a majority lived in homogenous small-town communities. Their families stood out as “the Turks,” “the Blacks,” or the “Gypsies.” Countering these simplistic categories of “otherness,” the young men assumed a “hybrid identity,” claiming a liminal space of hyphenated Germanness. By embracing the complexity of their dual identity, these young men inadvertently challenged centuries of hegemonic assumptions about what it means to be part of the German nation (Bhabha 1994; Brubaker 1992).

CONCLUSION

Comparing the narratives of the German and American respondents reflects the different cultural and structural mechanism of exclusion in both countries. The Latino and African American young men I interviewed grew up in a much more diverse society than the German respondents did. The most recent census

data of the United States estimates that 13.1 percent of the population identifies as African American and 18.5 percent classify themselves as Hispanic or Latino.¹¹ Jeremiah and Jesus could be much more confident in their American identity than Arslan and Marko in their “Germanness.” The fundamental questions of belonging to American society never emerged during our conversations. As a multiethnic nation, the United States allows the young men to identify with their racial and ethnic identity without “officially” compromising their Americanness. From a legal standpoint, all respondents were American citizens and so were their parents and grandparents. Unsurprisingly, not even Latino respondents expressed the same kind of uncertainty about belonging that was common in the German group.

The ethnic diversity of the United States, as well as the comparatively straightforward access to citizenship, masks the well-known reality of residential segregation. Paradoxically, the African American and Latino respondents had very limited opportunities to interact with white middle- or upper-middle-class peers (Massey 2020; Shedd 2015; Massey and Denton 1994). As a result, their identity construction took place in relation to the minority communities they were part of. The young men focused on the deficits they perceived in their communities. At times they drew conclusions about their own behavior that came astonishingly close to Oscar Lewis’s (1975) infamous “culture of poverty” argument. Segregation, mass incarceration, and poverty meant that the discrimination was at once more visceral but less apparent in the day-to-day interactions of the US-based respondents. They were torn between recognizing the extreme structural disadvantage of their communities and interpreting self-defeating choices as cultural dysfunction.

German respondents, in turn, were aware that their “migration background” put them at odds with the majority of ethnic

Germans. They downplayed being discriminated against, even though anti-immigrant political discourse had become more openly hostile during the time in which they came of age. In a comparative analysis of immigrant rights and political processes in European countries Koopemans and others argue that expansion of citizenship rights for immigrants was met with an electoral backlash and the rise of right-wing parties (2013). To the authors, Germany was a notable exception, as the country's past still favored suppression of neofascist rhetoric. Less than a decade later, Germany does not defy these patterns anymore. The right-wing party, AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), has gained significant ground in state, federal, and local elections. The young men assert their self-understanding as German + X (Turkish, Albanian, Polish, etc.) against the backdrop of a persistent cultural narrative that indefinitely precludes their full belonging in German society.

The comparative approach reveals how historical and cultural idiosyncrasies warp the identity of young men at the margins of society. While the American respondents focused on rationalizing away their structural disadvantage, German participants needed to come to terms with their perpetual status as interlopers in an ethnically homogenous society. Both groups did not blame social structures, inherited disadvantaged, or racism. Instead, they focused on maintaining their agency and hope for the future. In Germany, immigrant children construct a hybrid self, while German society hardly registered the nuances of their identity.

The young men in the United States similarly negated the existence of structural racism as they recounted how segregation shaped their upbringing. Respondents in both countries understood that they are systemically disadvantaged and "othered." Being in their late teens or early twenties, these young

men simply needed to believe that their past experiences did not define their future. As a way of creating meaning for themselves, they emphasized what they hoped could be possible rather than giving into hopelessness and resignation.