

Buried Alive

Multiculturalism in Germany

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Since the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, one gets the impression that German public opinion has finally found a solution to all its problems generated by the enduring settlement of people from “different cultures,” i.e. “integration” instead of “multiculturalism.” It is now argued, that Germany should learn its lessons from the experiences of the Netherlands: stop being as “naive,” and face the problems unavoidably generated by its immigrants. At the heart of this “anti-multiculturalist mood” are Muslims and, more specifically, publicly visible Muslims, whose forms of life and religious practices are often considered contradictory to the normative foundations of western liberal democracies. These foundations are preferably labeled as being derived from a “Christian-occidental” heritage—a reference that is predominantly used in counter-conceptual terms to distinguish between “German” and “Muslim” cultures. This discourse is interestingly not only produced by rightwing or conservative circles, but seems to emerge from other diverse political and intellectual scopes as well.

The “model” rhetoric

The discourse on the failure of multiculturalism implies blame for other countries that have promoted it in the past, in that particular case, The Netherlands, for its construction of multicultural policies, frequently categorized as the “Dutch model.” Such labels reflect a common tendency within European rhetoric to describe immigration policies of other countries as “models.” This practice is particularly widespread in France, where the rejection of the so-called “Anglo-Saxon” model of multiculturalism often serves as an opportunity to restore the Republican ideal.¹

A closer examination of various national policies reveals, however, a more complex picture. The so-called “Anglo-Saxon” model is by no means a one-dimensional and linear way of simply promoting group rights, unanimously shared by all “Anglo-Saxon” societies.² The Netherlands model, which has recently been criticized the most, actually reflects a diversified approach to dealing with growing religious and cultural plurality. Indeed multiculturalism itself, entrenched with logics of protecting cultural differences, had come under pressure in Europe long before the murder of Van Gogh.

Contrary to the French case, the German critique of diverse models is not even based on a clear-cut conceptualization of a “counter-model” that would serve as a remedy. The rhetoric that “everything would be fine, if just the ‘Dutch model’ were not adopted” is de-legitimized by the simple fact that German politicians had not adopted the Dutch model in the first place. They had not even attempted to construct a coherent strategy of dealing with the effects of post war immigration.

What is German multiculturalism?

This brings us to the second unrealistic dimension of the current rhetoric, i.e. the assumption that Germany had practised, or even institutionalized multicultural politics, which it should now give up as soon as possible. A brief survey of the German experience shows that notions of multiculturalism were taken up in the early 1990s by a small number of scholars and politicians as a counter-discourse to the dominant conception of (German) culture as a homogeneous entity.³ Their concepts of multiculturalism focused on the modalities of citizenship within the framework of the restrictive citizenship tradition in Germany. They called for a change in ethnically defined concepts of nationhood and for a substantial reform of the citizenship law. The major goal was thus to emphasize that Germany had turned into a country of immigration,

Recent discussions in Germany around modes of dealing with the growing cultural-religious plurality reveal a widespread consensus that the so-called Dutch “model of multiculturalism” is a complete failure. However further examination reveals that this current backlash against multiculturalism is more of a symptom for a widely held discomfort caused by the realization that Islam has become an integral part of German society.

hence, into a de facto multicultural society, a reality that most conservative politicians still tend to deny today.

Apart from probably pushing forward the reform of the citizenship law of 1999 their calls went, mainly, unheeded. They were unable to effect much noticeable change in policies governing cultural and religious plurality. Moreover, the recognition that cultural and religious plurality would unavoidably affect the national self-understanding and, in the longer run, also transform the normative premises of the “recipient societies” was basically absent from these approaches. Some authors even contributed to the shaping of a folkloristic version of multiculturalism, condensed into the term *multikulti*. The notion *multikulti*, which has become a part of everyday German speech, occasionally celebrated compatible cultural differences, and promoted a folkloristic co-existence of Germans and their *Ausländer* (foreigners). However, neither substantial changes on the institutional level nor the conflictual character of cultural-religious plurality were envisaged in the original *multikulti* notion, which was referred to in the very-telling formulation, the “Döner-principle.” As Mark Terkessidis puts it “only those differences were recognized, which could enrich the national culture. All other cultural differences—especially those, which derived from the wider context of Islamic religion—were considered as expressions of a narrow-minded, potentially violent, “pre-modern” tradition, which first should be tamed by normative Westernness, in order to become finally a private life-style like one’s own culture. Put differently: there is a good difference, which is embodied in the Döner-principle, and a bad one, which is expressed through the headscarf.”⁴ This perception indicates the general problems encountered by most applied forms of multiculturalism. While trying to cope with the articulation of cultural or religious particularities, multiculturalists tend to domesticate differences by managing a consensus based on secular norms. Specific to the German context is, however, the lack of any serious analysis of the problematic implications of top-down multiculturalism, preceding the final current rejection of the concept.

Muslims turn into active citizens

Muslims in Germany have for quite a long time pragmatically settled within the *multikulti* framework as *Ausländer*. Their self-ascription as *Ausländer*, or as Turks, is still virulent amongst second and third generation Muslims.⁵ This has, however, not prevented them from quietly establishing structured forms of religious life. Moreover, the newer trend to assert their identity as Muslims will probably be further reinforced by the growing number of German-born Muslims, even if these have, to a certain degree, internalized the public perception as outsiders. Their comparatively high degree of social power and competence such as networking and interacting with the rest of society, familiarity with the legal and political tools, and, especially, a mastery of the German language, enables the young generation of Muslims to raise these demands by referring to basic principles and by using the structures provided by the state under the rule of law. The increasing demand by Muslims to be publicly represented has definitely challenged the idea of a “friendly” coexistence between the “abstract, antiseptic Other” and members of a pre-established consensus, as implied in the German *multikulti* version.⁶ Consequently, the questioning of certain norms—ranging from food regulations in educational institutions to a reconsideration of gender mixing—has turned Muslims into “real Others,” i.e. very concrete citizens. In fact, it seems to be precisely this process which has encouraged wide parts of the public opinion to conceive of “multiculturalism” as a failure, as witnessed by the increasing protest



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against headscarves, or the consistent blaming of certain Muslim organizations for their hostility to the constitutional order.

It is important to note that the relatively advanced institutionalization of Islam is the result of the historically shaped close relationship between the Church and the State in Germany, and not the result of any structured attempts to institutionalize multiculturalism.⁷ The comparatively privileged role that the Christian Churches have traditionally held in German society has obviously encouraged other religious groups to struggle for a similar status and to demand spaces for practising religion on a similar public level as Church based institutions. The issue of Islamic instructions in state schools is a case in point, further indicating the active involvement of Muslims in German society. The only subject in state schools, guaranteed by the German constitution, is "religious instruction." The demand made by Muslim groups to teach Islam in state schools is accordingly backed by recourse to basic principles, and not in reference to particular group rights, as entailed in most concepts of multiculturalism. Even the decisions held by Supreme Administrative Courts that allow Muslim girls in some cities to abstain from coeducational sports lessons, or the recent decision on the right of Muslims to slaughter according to religious rites were legitimized through claims of basic principles (i.e. freedom of religious expression), and not of group rights. Although such decisions are, indeed, a step towards the (legal) recognition of certain Muslim practices in Germany, they are examples for successful claim-making in the name of national or supranational norms. Moreover, as such examples quite significantly show, the responsibility for "multicultural" concerns in Germany has been mainly left to court institutions, instead of forming a part of systematic political programmes. What has developed from there is some kind of de facto multiculturalism that clearly goes beyond the multi-kulti version, and that especially expands the dominant understanding of religion as just a "secularized" version of Christianity.

The longing for a "Euro-Islam"

It seems to be exactly the fact that Muslims increasingly speak from within German society, claiming rights for practising a "non-German" religion (while referring to German principles), which irritates the public opinion most. The capability to use the very tools provided by the state, under the rule of law for becoming an integral part of German society as "Muslims," could be interpreted as a sign for their "integration" into German society. It is, however, precisely not the type of integration that most public authorities and media discourses are heading for. The recurrent paradigm of a "Euro-Islam" may serve as one of the most pertinent indicators for this assumption. This concept has predominantly figured in the German public sphere as part of the same discourse that lashes out at multiculturalism. Moulded by one of the most popular Muslim public intellectuals in Germany, Bassam Tibi,

this version of "Euro-Islam" only legitimizes one particular model of Islam, that which is oriented towards an "enlightened European system of values" and in harmony with "secular constitutions."⁸ The problematic is not only that a large number of Muslims, who do not fit into this notion, have been excluded from the process of shaping the implications of "Euro-Islam," it is also not at all clear, whether the (German) "Euro-Islam" should be based on "universal" (i.e. western) principles, or whether it should be nationally shaped, as suggested by the attempts to merge Islamic organizations into the German church-model, and the recent appeal that imams should preach exclusively in German language. The dominant lines of "Euro-Islam" reflect the same problematic as that of the integration paradigm, which is now offered as an "alternative" to multiculturalism. They both reflect a one-sided, one-way process, which presupposes the ability and willingness of Muslims to submerge themselves into the dominant norms of the recipient societies. Yet, the concrete contents of the "western," "European," or "German" outlook, into which Muslims are asked to integrate, is much more contested than implied in the wishful thinking about the emergence of a tamed "Euro-Islam." The rhetoric of the failure of multiculturalism can thus be interpreted as an expression of the discomfort at the demise of an illusion of a "monocultural" society, and the fact that multiculturalism in Germany with all its conflicts, misunderstandings, and fears has become an irreversible social reality.

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Students participating in a cultural youth project rehearse ballet with the Berlin Philharmonic, 2004.

Notes

1. See Eric Fassin, "Good to Think: The American Reference in French Discourses of Immigration and Ethnicity," in *Multicultural Questions*, ed. Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (London: Oxford, 1999), 224-41.
2. Multiculturalism has been theorized as a top-down solution to the "problem" of minorities, or in terms of reification of "culture," or as part of a more liberal tradition aimed at avoiding re-groupings of separate communities.
3. See Claus Leggewie, *Multi kulti: Spielregeln für die Vielvölkerepublik* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1990); Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Thomas Schmid, *Heimat Babylon* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1992).
4. Mark Terkessidis, *Die Tageszeitung*, 1 August 1998.
5. See Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Reaffirming and Shifting Boundaries: Muslim Perspectives on Gender and Citizenship," in *Yearbook of Sociology of Islam*, 6 (Bielefeld: transcript; Hamburg: Lit/New Brunswick; London: Transaction (forthcoming).
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Ein Plädoyer für die Intoleranz* (Vienna: Passagen, 1998).
7. The most important elements of article 140 of the German Constitution which regulates the status of religion are the "freedom to associate into religious communities" and the status of a "corporation of the public law." The status of the corporation of public law guarantees privileges such as the collection of church taxes or the organization of religious instructions in state schools, as regulated more systematically in article 7(3) of the Constitution.
8. Bassam Tibi, *Der Islam in Deutschland: Muslime in Deutschland* (Stuttgart and München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2000), 36.