

Africans, Immigrants and the question of Identity in Germany

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Abstract

In this paper, I seek to discuss my notion that the issue of identity is closely related to the deeply entrenched xenophobic approach to people of colour which has always been prevalent in Germany. For, how are people supposed to integrate culturally when they cannot move professionally, economically or even geographically? Just over 50 years ago, the US supreme court banished the "separate but equal" policies that segregated state schools here; it seems Germany is embracing a dogmatic version of its antithesis - "united but unequal". There are not many opportunities for people of colour and immigrants to fully integrate into the culture and the economy. Those who try to protect their children by making them aware of their dual origins are said to fail to get themselves integrated into the society. But what is happening is that this new generation rejected by the country they call home need a sense of identity; a sense of belonging. This paper centres on this argument. I intend to make use of books like *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt: Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus* (Martin, Peter and Christine Alonzo, eds., 2004), *TheBlackBook*, 2005) among others.

Introduction

Given that Germany was at the centre of the World War I and II, the allied forces from The United Kingdom, France and later the United States of America also included Africans from the French and British colonies as well as African Americans. According to Christian Koller;

Insgesamt kämpften etwa 485000 "farbige" Soldaten aus den französischen und 160000 aus den britischen Kolonien in Europa. Die größten Kontingente kamen aus Algerien (173000 Mann), Indien (153000), Westafrika (134000), Tunesien (60000), Indochina (7000) und Madagaskar (34000). Hinzu kamen gegen Kriegsende zwei afroamerikanische US-Divisionen.¹

[A total of about 485000 "coloured" soldiers from French and 160000 British colonies fought in Europe. The biggest contingent came from Algeria (173000 Men), India (153000), West-Africa (134000), Tunisia (60000), Indochina (7000) and Madagascar (34000). They were joined towards the end of the War by two African-American US-divisions].

After the World War II, the National Socialists in Germany used these coloured soldiers' presence for political propaganda. They protested openly against these "Barbarians" sent to kill their people and destroy their country. The fact that African - American GIs as well as the Africans in the various armies had relationships with German women was seen as a blow to

¹ Christian Koller. „Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt“: Die Diskussion um die Verwendung von Kolonialtruppen in Europa zwischen Rassismus, Kolonial- und Militärpolitik (1914 – 1930), Stuttgart (Steiner) 2001, S. 87 – 96.

their aspirations for a pure German race. Subsequently, this is how, what has come to be known as the *Rheinlandbastarde* (World War I) and *Die Besatzungskinder* or Occupation Children (World War II) came about. These children mainly never knew their fathers and grew up in foster homes. They were alienated from their African and African-American origins. Thus they saw themselves as Germans with African origins. However, in a society that in the past persecuted non-Aryans, accepting people of colour has been quite difficult. Until the early 1970s, the German government looked for ways to give them up for adoption in parts of Europe.

These children were later joined by children born through relationships between African students and German women who left after their studies because the German laws did not allow them to stay on after their studies. Some of the students were even ignorant of their children's existence because they had to leave Germany after their studies. A number of them were put in foster homes or grew up with their mothers, sometimes ignorant of their African origins. The other also equally important group of people are North African immigrants in Germany who were taken to Germany to work alongside other guest workers from parts of Europe and Turkey to rebuild the shattered Germany economy after the World War II and have since been made their homes there.

I seek to look at the cultural aspect, which has always been a stumbling block for the immigrants, who are unable to be fully integrated into the German cultural traditions. I am specifically looking at the Afro-Germans and the second generation immigrants whom unlike their parents have lived all their lives in Germany and consider themselves German citizens but the government and the society perceive them as outsiders who will go back to their countries of origin, taking their bags of problems with them.

Consequently, the first task in any discussion is to get the scale of the immigration issue in perspective:

Immigration has been increasing in the last decade, but its scale is still far smaller than the peak of international migration - in the late 19th century - when some 17% of Europe's working population moved to the New World, mainly to the United States, where 30% of the population was foreign-born by 1910. Immigration into the EU has averaged around 1.4 million each year, compared with some 2.3 million into the United States. And about 5.3% of Europeans are foreign-born, compared with 10.3% in the United States, and nearly 25% in Australia. What has changed is the spread of countries around the world from which migration now occurs, with Africa and Asia replacing Europe as the main source of immigrants. More people have also entered Europe as asylum seekers in recent years, accounting for around one-third of immigrants - although it has declined sharply from its peak during the Bosnian and Kosovo crises. But more immigrants are also coming as high-skilled workers to take temporary jobs in areas of shortage, such as teaching, nursing, and high-tech computer jobs - and governments are encouraging that trend.²

But the German government has been slow to embrace this trend. People of African origins make up a small number of these immigrants in Germany. But unlike the older, first

² Schifferes, Steven. Analysis: Who gains from immigration? Monday, 17 June, 2002

generation of immigrants who knew their origins, the second generation had to search for their origins. Subsequently, the issue of identity is a topic that is hard to define in Germany. This type of identity is what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has rightly called modern identity. According to him, “modern identity is inherently political, because it demands recognition. The idea that modern politics is based on the principle of universal recognition comes from Hegel. Increasingly, however, it appears that universal recognition based on a shared individual humanity is not enough, particularly on the part of groups that have been discriminated against in the past. Hence modern identity politics revolves around demands for recognition of group identities—that is, public affirmations of the equal dignity of formerly marginalised groups.”³

In contrast to the United States, and even countries like France and Great Britain with colonial histories, Germany never saw itself as a melting pot of cultures. Migration was supposed to be useful to meet the need for labor during the economic boom years in West Germany. This goal was at least in line with the plans most immigrants, especially the students made when they came to Germany. Most of them believed they would return to their home countries after a few years of working abroad, and settle down there to put what they had learnt in practice. They dreamed of playing active parts in the construction of their countries in the post-independent era. Subsequently, this first generation African immigrant workers and students knew their roots and were not in search of their identities. They had their cultural traditions that remained a vital part of their lives. These cultural traditions were kept alive through their interactions with their fellow country men. Those of them who stayed on in Germany for various reasons had a lot of socio-political problems to deal with.

The “German society, on the one hand, drew a strict bureaucratic and often humiliating line between the German citizen and the so-called foreigners -- a term which is at least misleading for the younger generation. And, of course, children of legal immigrants in Germany still do not receive German citizenship automatically.”⁴

This so-called order, established in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s, was not challenged until the civil youth movement of 1968 protested against it in West Germany. The 1968 movement voiced strong criticism of social conventions. It showed that there was a need for the German society to relax its rules and embrace the changes taking place in their societies. It also had its effect on the immigrant children who were by then German citizens. Born and raised in the country, these children developed a growing and critical awareness of their social status, which was often described in traditional leftist terms as exploitation and class conflict. In the course of time, intercultural societies were founded, aimed at raising the consciousness and improving the social opportunities of immigrants. The activities ranged from cooking and language classes to feminist groups and political action committees. For many young immigrants, these clubs and societies opened doors into modern West German society for them. They saw it as an opportunity for personal development, and they made friends with people from other cultural backgrounds. “They created their own lives apart from

³ Fukuyama, Francis. Identity and migration. Prospect Magazine. Issue 131, February 2007. www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id=8239 – accessed 08.04.2007

⁴ Barbara Weber. Immigration and Politics in Germany. Journal of the International Institute. University of Michigan. www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol2no3/ozdemir.html - 27k - accessed – 08.04.2007

the often very strict and old-fashioned ideas of their parents, who often stuck to philosophies and ideas which in the meantime had become obsolete even in their home countries.”⁵

This search for identity starts quite early as has been illustrated in a book entitled *Sichtbar anders - Aus dem Leben Afrodeutscher Kinder und Jugendlicher* edited by Eva Massingue, a mother of an Afro-German child.⁶ In this book, the youths interviewed express their everyday fight to be visible because the xenophobic thoughts have so much been part of the German culture that they see nothing wrong in their actions. These children interviewed at different times give the impression of being lost and are in search of a place to belong. Children from single mothers were more affected than those whose parents are living together and are able to raise their children in both cultures. But even then, these children still feel the need to create spaces for themselves, with which they can identify. They are in search of a sense of belonging, a place where they will not have to ask to be loved. Such children are often surprised when they go to visit their African relations and are confronted with completely different cultures which often openly accept them as their own.

Subsequently, these children grow up fighting for their rights to be called Germans and be accepted as an integral part of the society. They meet in small numbers and work together to create spaces for themselves. Communities like the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (ISD), the feminist group, ADEFRA and many more have made major contributions towards raising more awareness for their plight and need to be visible members of their societies.

Theirs is indeed a complex situation because they are not at home in Germany and they are constantly confronted with this even by the German government. The former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl said during his time in office, that Germany was not an immigration country. Hartwig Pautz, observes that the notion that, “Germany is not a country of immigration” is a fiction of national homogeneity that came under increased pressure with the advent, in 1998, of a centre-left government. New laws for immigration, integration and citizenship were to be introduced, eradicating the concept of *Volk* tied together by *ius sanguinis*. But the opposition Christian Democratic Union made an electoral issue of ‘*Ausländerpolitik*’, especially integration, accusing the government of jeopardising ‘German cultural identity’. What ensued was the *Leitkulturdebatte*, about Germany’s predominant culture, characterised by the notion of the ‘clash of civilisations’ and the incompatibility of ‘different’ cultures. This not only replaced racial belonging with cultural belonging, transforming the *ius sanguinis* into an equally essentialist *ius cultures*, it also formed part of a conservative attempt to re-establish a ‘normal’ German national consciousness, cleared of the memory of the Holocaust.⁷

A few years ago, “Germany's Christian Democrats gingerly floated the idea of *Leitkultur*—the notion that German citizenship entails certain obligations to observe standards of tolerance and equal respect. The term *Leitkultur*—which can be translated as a “guiding” or “reference culture”—was invented in 1998 by Bassam Tibi, a German academic of Syrian

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Massingue, Eva. *Sichtbar Anders – Aus dem Leben Afrodeutscher Kinder und Jugendlicher*. Verband binationaler Familien und Partnerschaften, iaf (Hg.) Frankfurt: Brandes & Apsel, 2005

⁷ Hartwig Pautz. The politics of identity in Germany: the *Leitkultur* debate. *Race & Class*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 39-52 (2005) DOI: 10.1177/0306396805052517. © 2005 Institute of Race Relations

origin, precisely as a non-ethnic, universalist conception of citizenship that would open up national identity to non-ethnic Germans. Despite these origins, the idea was immediately denounced by the left as racist and a throwback to Germany's unhappy past, and the Christian Democrats quickly distanced themselves from it. But in the past few years, even Germany has had a much more robust public debate about national identity and mass immigration..”⁸ In a report written by the Council of Europe, it said that "Racist and anti-Semitic violence is one of the most pressing and dangerous expressions of racism and intolerance in Germany... open and latent racism and anti-Semitism existing more generally within some segments of German society, and a general apathetic attitude towards such phenomena."⁹ This does not give room to the growth of an identity either as a German national. It is true that there have been an Afro-German consciousness that includes all Africans and people of African descent in the last three decades in Germany, but it is not known to most Germans as a collective voice of a minority group trying to make itself heard in Germany.

However, this problem of conservatism and the need to preserve national identity against outside influence is not only peculiar to Germany but instead it is a problem commonly found in other parts of Europe and the rest of the world:

The formative experience for contemporary European political consciousness is the two world wars, which Europeans tend to blame on nationalism. Yet Europe's old national identities continue to linger. People still have a strong sense of what it means to be British or French or Dutch or Italian, even if it is not politically correct to affirm these identities too strongly. And national identities in Europe, compared to those in the Americas, remain more ethnically based. So while all European countries have the same commitment to formal, political citizenship equality as the US, it is harder to turn that into felt equality of citizenship because of the continuing force of ethnic allegiance. The Dutch, for example, are famous for their pluralism and tolerance. Yet in the privacy of their own homes, the Dutch remain quite socially conservative. Dutch society has been multicultural without being assimilative, something that fits well into a consociational society that was traditionally organised into separate Protestant, Catholic and socialist "pillars." Similarly, most other European countries tend to conceive of multiculturalism as a framework for the coexistence of separate cultures rather than a transitional mechanism for integrating newcomers into a dominant culture (what Amartya Sen has called "plural monoculturalism").¹⁰

In most of the cases, multiculturalism has meant separatism and stigmatisation for those immigrants. This has not given room for any form of integration. Why is it so in Germany? There are many reasons for it. One key factor is the fact that their bond to ethnic definition. This bond was not introduced by the National Socialist Regime; instead, it was already a part of their social perceptions. “Unlike, say, the French, who acknowledge that their culture and language derive from the Romans and that they are akin to other Latin peoples, the Germans

⁸ Fukuyama, Francis. Identity and migration. Prospect Magazine. Issue 131 , February 2007. www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id=8239 – accessed 08.04.2007

⁹ Germany rapped for racist violence. 3 July, 2001

¹⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. Identity and migration. Prospect Magazine. Issue 131 , February 2007. www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id=8239 – accessed 08.04.2007

see themselves as unique. In the words of philosopher Johann Fichte, they are an Urvolk -- an archetypal people. That makes for an inflexible -- almost tribal -- sense of identity.”¹¹ This makes them an ethnic bound people. “Even after World War II, when West Germans did everything in their power to rid their culture of chauvinism and racism, they left intact a citizenship law that was based on blood kinship rather than on place of birth. That meant that the children of Turkish guest workers, born in Germany, were not automatic citizens, yet an ethnic German from Romania whose family had never resided in contemporary Germany was.”¹² This explains the lack of sense of integration among people of African descent that make up less than 5% of the German population. They have no sense of belonging because of the rules in place and the long entrenched schizophrenia against them and their skin colour. “It wasn’t until 2000 that a more open citizenship law took effect. In arguing for a territory-based notion of citizenship, then-Interior Minister Otto Schily proclaimed that Germany needed to rise above “the destructive principle of ethnocracy.” Six years on, Germans are only beginning to differentiate between their ethnic and civic identities. Ethnic Germans still tend to look on nonethnic Germans as *auslander*, or foreigners. Even the media, when they acknowledge minorities as German citizens, use tortured phrases, describing someone as a “Turk who carries a German passport,” for example. Not surprisingly, such marginalization has negative consequences.”¹³ These negative notions overshadow the fact that these non-white Germans are a vital part of the German societies because they pay their taxes and make major contributions to the German economy.

To conclude, the issue of identity among people of African descent and other ethnic minorities in Germany will continue to be an issue because of the lack of adequate provisions made by the government to fully integrate them into their societies. There is no doubt that there are integration offices scattered over the country but not all minority groups are well represented. Apart from that, there is not much coordinated information on their activities. The German public is also not always aware of their efforts as representatives of the ethnic minorities in Germany. What happens is the small immigrant communities often tend to depend on themselves to resolve their problems or makes themselves heard. But as experience has shown, it is highly difficult to break down the walls of cultural conservatism that have surrounded the Germans over centuries. Their strong sense of superiority supersedes the socio-geographical changes that have taken place in Europe whose the map needs to be redrawn to accommodate these immigrants. Ignoring their plight does not mean that they will go away overnight.

¹¹ <http://www.cantonrep.com> accessed – 08.04.07

¹² Gregory Rodriguez. "Germans stick to the ethnic definition more than any other European nation" Special to the Los Angeles Times. CantonRep.com. 06.06.06

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