

## Troublesome convergences

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# Troublesome convergences

## *A short comment from a Continental perspective*

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**ABSTRACT** Post-9/11 developments in the UK and Germany contrast.

On the one hand, in the UK, as a consequence of the 'War on Terror', a group which had been promised participation in a multicultural society has been increasingly stigmatized and branded with 'otherness'. On the other hand, in Germany, groups that had previously been 'outside' as 'foreigners' are being selectively accepted into German society, but the groups which are excluded from this process (and even more branded with 'otherness') are notably the Muslims. These different trajectories led to different reactions:

embitterment, disappointment and anger in the UK, and cynicism and resignation in Germany. An overall convergence of policies toward Islam is observable not only in Germany and the UK but throughout Europe.

It seems to be more related to the construction of a collective European identity than to Islam itself.

**KEYWORDS** *Britain, Europe, exclusion, Germany, Islam, multicultural society*

## Introduction

To my knowledge, no research comparable with that by Marie Gillespie and her team has been conducted in Germany or indeed in any continental European country. Therefore the remarks in this comment are based only on impressions from my own fieldwork on Islamic communities, or on the self-situating of a second generation of Muslims in Germany. A comparative project on Muslim youth identities is also relevant here (Schiffauer et al., 2004).

The key finding by Gillespie's team is the loss of trust regarding both media and state legitimacy among many segments of the population, but especially among British Muslims. Muslims are more directly affected by the consequences of the invasion of Iraq, not because they were fond of Saddam Hussein, but because they bear the brunt of deteriorating relations with the majority population. The statement that the world has become less secure since the invasion has a quantitative meaning for members of the majority society: the threat of attacks has increased.



For Muslims in the UK, it entails a new quality: not only has the threat of attacks increased, but also the risk of escalation. A vicious circle of terrorist attacks and racist counter-attacks entails the threat of being forced, in the extreme case, to 'return' to one's homeland (be it one's own or only that of one's parents or grandparents). The same governmental reasons, summed up as the 'War on Terror', justified both the invasion of Iraq and the targeting of Muslims in terms of domestic security policy. A majority of non-migrants condemn the Iraq policy but is apparently willing to support domestic security policy. To those immigrants who are branded a security risk, both policies seem to mislead the public: they accuse the government of keeping the public in a state of fear.

From a continental perspective, the UK peculiarity is the sense of disappointment which emerges from the data. Masood and Hamida, a Pakistani middle-class couple, were detained and interrogated at the airport on returning from Pakistan. As reported by Qureshi: 'There was a time [he] would have been prepared to die for this country', but this experience had undermined these feelings to some degree: 'And we thought here we're in a civilized country now – we're in a civilized country, look how they are treating us.' This disappointment relates to the promise of a multicultural society that the British Government made to immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, and which in this form was unique in Europe. More actively than other European nation-states, the UK attempted to redefine its national identity, Britishness, in order to take account of the realities of immigration. The concept of domestic heterogeneity, which permits no substantive definition of Britishness, was adopted. The message made its way into schoolbooks that there had always been heterogeneity in Great Britain: the new heterogeneity due to immigration might make the picture more complicated, but was nothing new in principle. The image of Britishness as white, Christian, clean-shaven and suit-wearing was relinquished in place of a pluralistic image: 'possibly black or brown, Hindu or Muslim, wearing a turban, a kanga, a sari'. There is a parallel 'between Greek Cypriots in London wanting their children to learn Greek, and Welsh nationalists wanting to preserve the Welsh language' (Brooman, 1994: 16).

Britishness was characterized by the ability to deal with social complexity in a reasonable and fair manner, and thus to defuse and cope with conflicts. The ideal of the multicultural society stood for the practical attempt to carry out integration while preserving differences, and to balance conflicting values of equality and individual rights. These ideas were only partially implemented in society as a whole. The redefinition of Britishness prevailed among some middle-class groups or members of oppositional cultures; racism lived on and the right-wing counter-discourse continued. Yet importantly, the concept gained a foothold in school practice, in both explicit and implicit curricula, and was actively taken up by pupils, as a European comparative study showed (Schiffauer

et al., 2004). The pupils in England stood up far more emphatically for their rights and were far more sensitive to infringements of them than pupils in France, Germany, or the Netherlands. The school was the site where the vision and mission of multicultural society was lived and put into practice.

The 'War on Terror' means renouncing the vision of egalitarian participation. The security discussion opens a gap between supposedly threatening Muslim immigrants and a supposedly threatened majority society. Immigrants must explain themselves to those who have always been there. Assumed to belong to the collective responsible for violence, they must vocally distance themselves from it. This pressure to explain makes the immigrant's precarious status clear. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, 'The unforgettable and hence unforgivable original sin of the late entry' (1991: 59) means that status can always be rescinded. Against this background, the failure of the multicultural society is announced and the vision of a national 'project identity' ('we stand for a certain vision yet to be realized') is buried. A defensive identity now increasingly emphasizes limits and boundaries. The dream of an exchange based on mutual respect cedes ground to a toleration which is both asymmetric ('there are some who tolerate the behavior of others') and limited.

In comparison to European and especially German developments, the UK case has been peculiarly dramatic. German society never made any promise of multiculturalism. Given the refusal, until 1999–2000, to recognize that Germany is even 'an immigration country', redefining 'being German' still remains hardly conceivable, not least because of the debates concerning National Socialism. German proponents of the multicultural society, the liberal and leftist bourgeoisie, conceive of German society as sharing a common destiny and responsibility to draw consequences from history: 'never again Auschwitz' and 'never again a war of aggression from German soil'. This means a strong commitment to oppose all racism, e.g. attacks on immigrants. German liberals and leftists consider themselves extremely anti-nationalistic, yet without realizing it they define a national 'we group' – those who share the guilt of National Socialism. Within this identity construct, migrants occupy a position as potential victims rather than full members of society. The idea of a multicultural society has therefore remained colourless and unconnected with any new vision of Germanness, and was never seriously implemented. No promise was made to migrants, and none was broken. Equally, when the Schröder government was re-elected in 2002 because of its refusal to participate in the invasion of Iraq, this was in part due to the prevailing national self-concept. The government avoided entangling itself in the web of lies used to legitimize the attack.

Nonetheless, the 'War on Terror' had far reaching consequences in Germany. When September 11 occurred, German society was slowly but surely beginning to recognize the reality of immigration and to define



itself officially as an immigration country. The debate on exclusion intensified. Was it really desirable to let those migrants who had been living in Germany as guest workers for some 40 years become fellow citizens? How could the construct of a society of common destiny and responsibility be harmonized with the reality of immigration? Concerns about 'integratability' primarily focused on Muslim 'otherness'. Islam was seen as a continuum in and of itself with a wide-ranging, static symbolic system marking its difference; as something decidedly different from a supposedly rational, enlightened, liberal Europe; and as a religion and/or culture whose dangerousness had been exposed by the terror attacks (Schiffauer, 2006). A marked 'Muslimization' of immigrants from Islamic countries ensued: immigrants who had been perceived primarily in terms of nation were now increasingly viewed as Muslims. Equally, Islam was ethnicized – any descendant of a Muslim was considered a Muslim. The entire nature of the discussion shifted. Until the end of the 1990s, leftist-liberal and rightist arguments had remained in balance. The former supported immigrants' rights, as previously described, and opposed xenophobia and exclusion; the latter maintained a 'Germany first' position. Since 9/11, there has been an alliance between Left and Right regarding Islam. On the Left, 'Islam' is chastized for misogyny, authoritarianism and anti-Semitism. Note that the responsibility deduced from the National Socialist past no longer consists in protecting Muslims from attacks, but rather in controlling Muslims. On the Right, concerns are voiced about being dominated by foreign elements and, remarkably, about protecting 'Judeo-Christian' culture.

An aggressive 'neo-realist' position emerges, propounding the failure of multiculturalism and integration and linking this to the 'nature of Islam'. In Germany, as in the Netherlands and the UK, multiculturalism is now just the illusory ideal of unrealistic leftists who denied the problems and refused to recognize that Islam is incompatible with free democratic culture. Many Muslims redouble the stance of this neo-realist argument. Only dreamers full of illusions ever believed that Europe, and Germany in particular, would one day open up to Islam and accept Muslims as equals. The bitter reality is that Europeans never wanted the presence of Muslims. This corresponds to a new fascination with migrants' parents' countries of origin, which increasingly assume the character of wistfully longed-for dreamlands, providing new significance for the term '*umma*'.

As far as Muslims are concerned, the consequence of the 'War on Terror' in the UK is that a group which had been promised equality and participation has been increasingly stigmatized as 'other'. In Germany, groups previously placed outside as 'foreigners' are being selectively accepted into society, but Muslims are excluded and increasingly branded with 'otherness'. These different trajectories lead to different reactions: embitterment, disappointment and anger in the UK, and cynicism and resignation in Germany.



British and German arguments are converging. This applies to more or less all European discussion on the subject. The previous particularities of nation-states in dealing with the alien (Schiffauer, 1998) are giving way to a pan-European argument under the auspices of security policy. Muslims are being construed throughout Europe as the ultimate 'other', the counterpart where danger originates. And yet could it not be exactly the other way around? Just why has the security argument had such success throughout Europe? Is this really the result of a threatening situation? After all, there have been about 4000 victims of terrorism worldwide since 2000, fewer than the number who die on German roads in a single year (6000 fatalities). Perhaps it is not the security problem which is helping to develop a pan-European common position, but rather the need for a pan-European identity which is steering the discussion about Islam. When no one knows what Europe stands for, a discussion about otherness and alienation is quite welcome: you build the Muslim up as something completely different, the absolute other: misogynist, anti-Semite, patriarch, antidemocrat, terrorist. Then distinguish yourself completely from that stereotypical 'other'. You still might not know what you stand for, but you will know what you do not stand for – namely the entire set of values, allegedly, of Islam. A collective identity is developed by fashioning a common enemy. The danger, then, would be that of repeating on a pan-European level the mistakes made during the constitution of nation-states in the 19th century, which led to the violence of the 20th century: collective self-identification based on the invention of enemies.

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## Biographical note

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