

October 2010

## Ideas for an intelligent and progressive integration discourse

The current debate on Thilo Sarrazin's comments in Germany demonstrates that integration policy does not only need tangible and progressive contents, but also its discourse has to develop further. This is necessary in order to counteract right-wing positions that have increasingly occurred all over Europe in the past few years. In order to do so, a concept of culture and integration obtained from cultural studies could help in the creation of an intelligent and progressive integration discourse that pre-empts and counteracts right-wing theories and positions.

**S. Anne G. Bostanci\***

### The beginnings of serious integration policy in Germany

Since a public statement made by then German Home Secretary Otto Schily in 2001, the era of turning a blind eye and blocking out is over. This is not a question of coming to terms with Germany's past in the classical sense of engagement with its historical guilt, but a question of immigration policy, or rather integration policy. While public discourse had before referred to guest workers who were expected not to overstay their welcome and return 'home', it was finally recognised at this point in time that Germany was a country of immigration<sup>1</sup> and that the

former expectations had been unrealistic by historical comparison and inappropriate regarding human social considerations.

This development did not stay without consequences. Even a conservative-led government had to face reality. Speaking in such broad terms, the political parties of the centre had reached a consensus. However, it is not the aim of this article to discuss how reasonable or successful the current government's handling of integration policy is and what role the opposition is playing. Importantly, the current public debate on Sarrazin's comments shows us one thing in particular; it is that integration policy does not only need tangible and progressive contents, but also has to develop further discursively.

---

\*Anne Bostanci is a former project manager for the UK office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in London and currently working on her PhD at the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey in Guildford, UK

**Politics also needs to further develop discourses on integration**

'We cannot leave the debate on immigration and integration to right-wing populists', social democratic parties all over Europe have been saying for several years. In spite of good ideas and intentions, European social democracy has, however, not yet found a way to efficiently counter their simplistic, often contemptuous and inflammatory slogans – slogans that usually do not represent majority views, but have an intensity that allows them sustained access to some groups (often identified as socially disadvantaged and marginalised) and grants them particularly effective publicity.

Indeed, it is difficult to pre-empt and counteract those discourses. It was for this and electoral reasons that it was possible, for instance, that UK governmental and political discourses and actions (incl. those of the Labour Party) met right-wing dispositions with a sharpened rhetoric represented by slogans such as 'Though on immigration' or the introduction of well-published policies (i.e. the points-based naturalisation system or making government agencies visible at border controls). Fortunately, in Germany the public debate around Thilo Sarrazin's comments expresses a legitimate indignation about the fact that those comments seemingly arise from the political centre.<sup>ii</sup>

But, while this indignation indicates that electoral considerations do not open the door to ideological relativism, the fundamental problem remains: it is hard to bring forward a constructive counter argument which allows the comprehensive rejection of right-wing dispositions. The reasons for this are numerous, but can be summarised in one main explanation: centre parties have not yet managed to efficiently use the insight that right-wing theories are often de-

void of a rational dimension and achieve their success through people's fears and lack of knowledge. With this knowledge and making use of the heightened public interest, now is the time for another advance by German Social Democracy.

**Where to start?**

On the one hand it is correct that the non-rational dimension of politics is still underestimated or played down deliberately. But, as stated by Chantal Mouffe<sup>iii</sup>, the parties of the centre, especially social democratic parties who pursued what they considered a suitable contemporary identity through the 'Third Way' or 'Neue Mitte' should instead accept the natural existence of strife in politics. As politics is concerned with the distribution of limited resources in society, which is determined by different ideologies and values, conflict and disagreement are unavoidable.

As the victory of the better argument is the first rule of rational argumentation, it is clear that the arguments contained in this political conflict and disagreement can only be rational to a certain extent. If conclusive argumentation is not possible, non-rational, often hot-blooded and affective preferences also have to play a role. Of course this is not only the case with right-wing positions, but with all political thoughts and opinions. What is necessary is the mobilisation of political enthusiasm for non-extreme policies. This is a possible starting point for Social Democrats across Europe.

On the other hand, people's fears and their lack of knowledge have to be addressed. Not only the pressing, possibly justified social and economic fears of marginalised groups are at issue here, but also cultural fears, which often derive from a lack of knowledge. However, here, like in

other areas in life, nothing is to be feared, things are only to be understood.<sup>iv</sup> Once understood, cultural differences often do not appear threatening at all. Instead of letting a language of inequality, of a nationally defined validity or invalidity of certain cultures, or even of cultural threat be forced upon them, Social Democrats should develop their own intelligent and progressive discourse on integration.

This does not only mean a better comprehension of different cultural forms and their recognition in politics – even though this is often necessary as well. The development of an intelligent, progressive integration discourse starts, at the most fundamental level, with a better understanding of what the term culture (and integration) means. Driven by this very purpose cultural studies have become an established field of research within the social sciences over several decades now. Therefore it would be of help for politics, but in particular for Social Democracy, to take a close look at this field. Cultural studies do not only offer analysis and comparison of different cultures or cultural forms of one or more different nationally defined societies, but also a political potential that should be taken seriously. Especially in British post-colonial cultural studies concepts of culture have emerged, which are not only politically motivated but also very useful.

### **What does culture mean? What is integration?**

The term culture means something to everyone, but only few people can really put a precise meaning to it. One rarely ever finds a proper definition, even though, from a sociological point of view, a definition would be quite simple: culture is the entirety of the social practices of a society, which is, through education and prac-

tice passed on to the next generation. This includes language and discourses, spiritual, philosophical, political and economic doctrines and lifestyles, rituals, mentalities, preferences and values, as well as different forms of art. The social unity that results from these cultural practices is often defined nationally, even though there are far more and different ways to understand the meaning of culture. The implication that a nation is defined by its culture is an artefact of nationally defined states' attempts to create internal coherence which lends them political legitimacy.

This assumption of coherence, which is increasingly questionable in today's globalised world, also carries the assumption that national culture is bounded and unvarying. According to the understandings of cultural studies both these assumptions are mistaken. Here, culture is understood as a collection of practices, which resemble, overlap and differ between different societies and continuously, spontaneously or by means of mutual influences, change or enrich each other. This is why Homi Bhabha refers to the 'impossibility of [cultures'] boundedness' and unvarying continuity.<sup>v</sup>

An important consequence of this understanding is that integration cannot be a one-sided process. Even though, in the German context, the term itself tried to transcend the one-sided expectations that the formerly used term assimilation carried, a change in mentalities and discourses has failed to materialise. The main reason for this is that the mutuality inherent in integration policies mainly took the form of government initiatives. As a result, the general (mis)understanding of the meaning or function of culture was allowed to persist. Instead it should be clear, that the mutuality in processes of cultural integration affects everybody.

Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity helps explain this. It does not refer to an overlap or combination of ostensibly clearly distinguishable, separate cultures. Instead, his concept outlines the fact that by mixing different cultural influences and practices, a variety of new cultural forms are created. In contrast to Bhabha's reference to such forms as 'third' ones, the equation  $1 + 1 \geq 3$  is preferred here, as the numerical term is easily misunderstood as again numerically limiting. This means that the combination of cultural practices will always lead to more than the sum of the parts combined.

### Conclusion

The argument presented here can be summarised as follows: A more educated understanding of culture could help centre-left politics to create a more constructive approach to the topic of integration. If the assumption of the possible existence of a bounded and unvarying culture could be overcome, a new understanding of integration will be the result. This can be used to reach those citizens, who disagree with and are disgusted by the current, right-wing dominated discourses on integration. Those citizens do not have a public voice at the moment as progressive opinions and positions are not united in one discourse and therefore cannot be mobilised.

It is obvious that the establishment of a new discourse is not going to be simple. But, if no new, intelligent and progressive ideas on the integration discourse are advanced, European Social Democracy will be faced exactly with the situation they have wanted to prevent all along: right-wing populists setting the terms of integration discourses. It is time that integration becomes a topic of fervent pleas for humanity and solidarity that enable passionate enthusiasm for non-extreme policies and political discourses.

And with German Social Democrats' record of recognising the importance of integration, they should make use of the current opportunity to push ahead discursively as well.

---

**The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the FES London.**

**ViSdP (Person responsible according to the German Press Law): Karl-Heinz Spiegel,  
Director, FES office London**

---

<sup>i</sup> A. Geddes (2003) *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications (p.88 for the quote of former German Home Secretary Otto Schily).

<sup>ii</sup> It is therefore no question of an attempted restriction of Mr Sarrazin's freedom of speech, if the SPD and various other political institutions distance themselves from him, but a form of self-defence: they cannot stand on the sidelines while their name is being associated with positions that are incompatible with their values. Private individuals can, of course, hardly be prevented from expressing such opinions and positions, even if many consider them incomprehensible or repulsive. As a member of the SPD, however, Mr Sarrazin cannot expect that such positions, which clash with the party's values, will be tolerated.

<sup>iii</sup> C. Mouffe (1998) 'The Radical Centre: A Politics Without Adversary' in *Soundings*, No.9, pp 11-23 (p.13).

<sup>iv</sup> Based on the famous natural scientist and Nobel laureate Marie Curie.

<sup>v</sup> H.K. Bhabha (2002) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge (p.30).