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A Protection Post-Mortem on the "Death" of Multiculturalism in Germany

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Abstract

Noticeably absent from the recent pronouncements of the "death" of multiculturalism in Germany, including Chancellor Angela Merkel's own conclusion that the policy had "utterly failed," has been any interest to seriously examine, let alone address, the reasons for such a failure.

Keywords

Human rights, Germany, Multiculturalism, Immigration, Education, Discrimination

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A protection post-mortem on the "death" of multiculturalism in germany

by Erin Mooney

Noticeably absent from the recent pronouncements of the [“death” of multiculturalism](#) in Germany, including Chancellor Angela Merkel’s own conclusion that the policy had “utterly failed,” has been any interest to seriously examine, let alone address, the reasons for such a failure.

Instead, it is asserted with matter-of-fact conviction that the lack of integration into German society by “immigrants” (a label that ignores the fact that many of the people in question have been in the country for two or three generations) is of their own doing. Of course, it is one thing if immigrants choose, as is their right, to maintain strong links with their cultural heritage and community of origin, thereby co-existing in so-called [“parallel societies,”](#) all the while participating in Germany’s economic and cultural development. However, it is another matter entirely when state policy and practice put legal, administrative, and institutional obstacles in their path towards integration.

Many of these problems originate in the education system, thereby impeding integration from the earliest age. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, following a fact-finding mission to Germany in 2006, [reported](#) on “the phenomena of exclusion and marginalization of schoolchildren, in particular those of immigrant origin” resulting from a system of classifying children at the age of ten for funnelling into one of three parallel education tracks. The criteria used for this life-changing assessment (for which it was found the assessors were not always adequately trained) give “disproportionate weight” to proficiency in the German language, with the effect of discriminating against children of foreign origin without adequately supporting them to achieve this requirement. Consequently, children of immigrant origin are over-represented at the *Hauptschule* vocational schools, while they are underrepresented at the academically-oriented *Gymnasium* schools. Echoing these findings, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has [reported](#) that children of immigrants also are overrepresented in “special schools for ‘under-achievers’ (*Sonderschulen*),” while being underrepresented in secondary and tertiary education. The UN Committee called on the German government to “take effective measures to ensure the integration of children of non-citizens in the regular school system” including by improving programs to support the German language skills of such children. A National Integration Summit and Summit on Education for Migrant Children, both convened by Chancellor Merkel in 2006, outlined over 400 additional suggested measures to improve access to education for children and youth with a migration background.

That much work remains to be done today is evident from the [report](#) to the UN Human Rights Council earlier this year by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, who called for comprehensive corrective measures throughout all education levels. In particular, he underscored the need to invest more effort in promoting German language competence among preschool children, considering the long-term and wide-ranging impact this would have on their future educational and therefore also employment opportunities.

Another key concern is the discrimination that migrant communities face in terms of access to housing. Paradoxically, this discrimination is enabled, the Special Rapporteur pointed out, by a provision in the General Equal Treatment Act that allows different treatment on the grounds of race or ethnic origin in the case of housing rentals when this would “serve to create and maintain stable social structures [...] as well as balanced economic, social and cultural conditions” providing a large legal loophole in which discriminatory practices can flourish. This drives migrant communities to settle together in certain “minority areas” which then creates additional barriers to their integration, particularly with regard to their gaining language proficiency.

Further, the Special Rapporteur noted that this process of ghettoization has “fostered the image of migrant communities as being ‘secluded’ and ‘unwilling’ to integrate.” This speaks to a fundamental problem in how the debate over integration has been framed in Germany. The Special Rapporteur observed that although “integration should be a two-way process involving both migrants and German society”, in reality “the debate so far has focused solely on the ‘responsibility’ of migrants to integrate, a term which in many instances is interchangeably used to mean assimilation.” However, as the International Crisis Group (ICG) points out in its 2007 [report](#) on *Islam and Identity in Germany*, placing the onus of adjustment entirely on immigrants not only is an “unrealistic expectation” it also serves “to encourage the authorities and political class to evade their responsibilities to facilitate this evolution.” Accordingly, ICG concluded that “German rather than Turkish attitudes were the primary factor precluding effective integration.”

Like a prescription for a patient who is ill, the reports issued by the UN human rights system and by NGOs over the years not only have documented and diagnosed the problems impeding the integration of migrant communities in Germany; they also have recommended ways to remedy the situation. If the German government actually is interested to reverse the “failure” of multiculturalism and to fulfil its human rights obligations, it is still not too late to follow the doctors’ orders.

Erin Mooney is a consultant to the United Nations and the Brookings Institution on issues of human rights and forced migration and Adjunct Professor in International Relations at the University of Toronto (2008-10). The views expressed are those of the author, writing in an independent capacity.