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Europe's Reaction in Context

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In the summer of 2010, the world championships for men's national football teams took place in South Africa, the country that prevailed over apartheid after many years of painful struggle. Spain won the tournament, but the revelation was Germany. Although Germany has historically fielded one of the most successful national teams, the calculative and unimaginative way the team used to play did not always receive much appreciation. Throughout the 2010 tournament, however, Germany impressed spectators by playing an attractive, aggressive style of football. After the rousing 4-1 victory over England, the German national Sunday paper *Welt am Sonntag* exclaimed, "With courage and strength the German footballers were knocking on the gates to heaven. The happy ending for the midsummer fairy tale is getting closer." The team, interestingly enough, represented the new, multicultural Germany. Five players were born outside of Germany, one had dual German-Ghanaian nationality, and several others were second-generation immigrants of Nigerian, Spanish, Tunisian, and Turkish origin. Christian Seifert, CEO of the German Football League, was jubilant: '[Germany] is a multi-cultural society where people come to, where people live, where people love to be, and the national team as you see it is very different compared to former days."

Later that summer, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a public statement saying that the attempts to build a multicultural society in Germany had 'utterly failed'. Her comments came amid an intense debate about immigration and multiculturalism or, to be more precise, the death of "Multikulti". The debate first heated up in August when a former Social-Democratic senator and senior official at Germany's central bank, Thilo Sarrazin, published a book with the provoking title *Deutschland schabt sich ab* or *Germany Does Away with Itself*. He stated that "no immigrant group other than Muslims is so strongly connected with claims on the welfare state and crime." These immigrant groups are unwilling and incapable of integrating into the mainstream, which according to Sarrazin was due to their genetics. Many people were appalled to hear such statements 65 years after

WWII and accused Sarrazin of racism and anti-Semitism; nevertheless, the senator had already sold more than one million copies of the book.

Furthermore, various surveys showed that approximately one third of the German population believed the country had been 'overrun by foreigners". Meanwhile, anti-immigrant political parties—initially *Die Republikaner*, later *Die Freiheit*—had been carving out a niche in the German electoral market, while mainstream parties—the Christian-Democrats in particular—had become anxious about their position. Why would a country that so enthusiastically embraced multiculturalism during the World Cup condemn it so loudly less than three months later? So much for the midsummer fairy tale.

  Germany is apparently hesitant about the issue of immigration and the consequent ethnic and religious diversity. But Germany is not the only country to experience such angst; we are witnessing similar situations in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In various ways and with different levels of openness, governments in these countries had welcomed immigrants and even invited them to settle and establish their own institutions. However, these nations recently shifted gears to embark on restrictive immigration policies and tougher integration policies, placing increasing emphasis on native norms, values and behavior and on disciplining the "other people". This "new realism", moreover, fiercely criticized the leadership of ethnic and religious immigrant minorities and the native advocates of multiculturalism.. The political leaders felt obligated to respond to the smoldering discontent among parts of the native white population and to the plethora of populist, anti-immigrant parties that had so successfully won the hearts of the discontented. In countries like Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands, these parties even managed to become part of or closely associated with the ruling government. Although bigots, racists, fascists, and neo-Nazis gravitate to these radical parties, it would be too simple to say that each and every supporter is a neo-Nazi in disguise.

What is happening in Europe nowadays, then? Is Europe taken hostage by a bunch of twisted political entrepreneurs who have lost their minds, forgotten the lessons of 1933-1945 and the Holocaust, and who are trying to gain political influence by trampling on immigrant ethnic and religious minorities? Or is it that Europeans have been too naive with regard to accepting individuals and groups from countries that are, or are seen as, culturally distant from the imagined national centers? Or should the current political mood be seen as a reaction to the politics of obstinate, left-wing lunatics and prophets of boundless multiculturalism?

Easy answers do not exist. In practice, things are much more complicated than popular profundities suggest, and a wider perspective is needed to fully comprehend the current developments.

First of all, we are still dealing with a distinctly European situation. The rise of populist political movements that capitalize on anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural and anti-government sentiments, religious fundamentalism, and narrow-minded nationalism can also be observed elsewhere. Take the United States for an example. The recent immigration enforcement legislation in Arizona, the rise of the Tea Party with their swipes at minorities, and some of the November 2010 election campaigns only serve to demonstrate that Europe is not alone. Australia, a country once notorious for its White Australia policy, shifted to multiculturalism in the 1970s, but had already abolished its unconditional embrace of multiculturalism by the 1990s. Since the 1990s, Australia has been advocating the idea of a "shared national identity" though with a high appreciation of the Anglo-Celtic heritage. Canada too has treasured the public acceptance of ethnic and religious differences and support of cultural pluralism as a core element of its identity since the early 1970s. It however hit the limits of multiculturalism and the call for what is euphemistically known as "reasonable accommodation" today resounds loudly in the public sphere. It is unarguably true that these "classical countries of immigration" are relatively more inclined to accept immigration as ordinaryand therefore are not shocked when newcomers constitute their own ethnic enclaves.. Even so, as far as there is a cultural

backlash, it exists worldwide not just in Europe.

Secondly we are still witnessing a rise of concerns about immigration and cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. As early as in 1968, the British Conservative leader Enoch Powell made a controversial speech in which he warned against the "rivers of blood" due to what he saw as the continued unchecked immigration from the Commonwealth to Britain and the "race-relations problems" subsequent to that. His speech with its open appeal to racial hatred was declared "evil" at the time, but it inspired Margaret Thatcher, who became prime minister shortly afterwards, to use the gist of his argument for her immigration and race-relations policies. By adopting a strong position against immigration, Thatcher was able to lead her Conservative party to defeat the National Front.

In France, the maverick politician Jean Marie Le Pen gained widespread popularity with his nationalist, anti-immigration platform. The very fact that he repeatedly denied the Holocaust and employed anti-Semitic slurs on Jewish politicians did not prevent numerous French voters from supporting his bid for the presidency. Other politicians tried to take the wind out of Le Pen's sails by reaching out to xenophobic voters. In 1989, President Mitterrand, who is to date the only Socialist Party member to be elected as president said "Il y a un seuil de tolérance", there is a threshold of tolerance, implying that immigrants were a nuisance indeed and that the proportion of immigrants present in a population had to be minimized. Jacques Chirac joined this lamentation by complaining about 'du bruit et des odeurs', the noises and the smells, generated by African immigrants.

In Austria, Jörg Haider was notorious for his offensive statements about immigration and Muslim immigrants in particular, whose attitude and behavior were in his eyes incompatible with 'Western' ones. In other countries including Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, similar political situations developed. Peculiarly enough, many observers have a rather short memory when it comes to these matters. In the Netherlands, the country that likes to cherish its self-image of tolerance and the live-and-let-live mentality, it is often claimed that the government did not problematize immigration and multiculturalism until very recently. The government pursued a multicultural policy, so it is believed, but no one dared to speak against it. Apart from the fact that the Netherlands never pursued such a policy—at best it paid lip services to the maintenance of ethnic and religious difference—the critics apparently failed to notice the intense media debates in the early 1980s, or the election of dozens of racist politicians in Parliament and local councils since the early 1980s. What is relevant here is that concerns about immigration and diversity have been voiced for quite a long time.

Thirdly, discussions about immigrant ethnic and religious minorities and their relations with the mainstream are often dogged by explicit or implicit references to Europe's Judeo-Christian tradition and the incompatibility of this tradition with those of Non-Western immigrants. Especially immigrants from Muslim traditions are supposedly incapable of embracing modern norms, values and behavior, such as understanding democracy, gender equality, homosexuality, and so forth. These references, however, are not unproblematic. For as far as such a tradition would exist, there is a lot to be said against it. Trade wars, looting, slavery and colonial exploitation were only a few of the blessings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Judeo-Christian tradition, moreover, could not prevent two World Wars, nor the Holocaust, nor the troubles in Northern Ireland, nor the mass expulsion of Roma from France.

References to the Judeo-Christian tradition, furthermore, fail to appreciate the fact that Europe is rapidly secularizing, or the fact that people of other religions or cultures have historically been subjects of Europe's nation-states. Islam is often regarded as an immigrant religion that is something entirely new, but this obscures the historical presence of indigenous Muslims in Eastern Europe or the presence of Muslims in former colonial areas. The United Kingdom, the French Republic and the Kingdom of the Netherlands once ruled many millions of Muslims in the Middle East, North-Africa, India and Pakistan, and Indonesia. Yet even if we imagine a Europe without Muslims, a purely theoretical exercise of course, we would find an immense internal diversity. Those who refer to the

Judeo-Christian tradition may pretend that Europe is a cultural unit within clear-cut boundaries, but the opposite is true. In fact, all references to this tradition mainly serve the construction of Europe as a coherent and cohesive unit.

Fourthly, discussions about the ethnic or religious 'other" always pertain to fixed imaginary categories. Muslims are invariably portrayed as men with long beards in white dresses, silenced women with head scarves or *burqas*, and agitated young men who make anti-Semitic statements about Jews and Israel and abuse homosexuals. All Muslim immigrants are supposedly ignorant people with insufficient proficiency in the host country's language, people with unskilled jobs if they are employed at all, and people who live in inner-city working class areas or the outskirts working class areas. They are, in short, people who do not conform to mainstream norms, values, attitudes, who failed to notice the Enlightenment, who missed the boat to modernity, and who live parallel lives.

Of course, however, this ignores the reality that most Muslim immigrants do not conform to these inane stereotypes. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Europe never visit a mosque or feel represented by the unworldly imams so often featured by journalists. Likewise, something like a cohesive "Muslim community", certainly does not exist in actuality. Muslims in Europe, like all people, come from all backgrounds. They come from different countries, have different migration histories, different levels of education, different class positions, live in different neighborhoods, have different political loyalties, life styles, religious and ethnic identities, and feelings of belonging. What's more, these differences are utterly dynamic—partly under the influence of the specific context in which they live—and this leads to even more variety. Talking about "the" Muslims or about "the" ethnic minorities, therefore, is increasingly out of sync with everyday reality.

Fifthly, there is something that always seems to be overlooked in these kinds of discussions. There is a more fundamental but rather general discontent in Europe about the role of the state, the welfare state in particular, and about the elite rulers. For several decades, Europe has been pursuing a neo-liberal course. Competitiveness and economic growth were to be boosted by giving more space to the business sector and by organizing society as if it were a private enterprise. Welfare-state provisions were considered acceptable as long as they would serve these goals.

Since the 1980s, all European countries have deregulated their economies and dismantled the welfare state, leading to ever more precarious labor market positions. Also, a plethora of services that were once offered by the state or by institutions under the aegis of the state have been privatized. Thus, services such as health care, postal and telephone services, public utilities and public transportation are now available in the private market. The pundits of neo-liberalism slap one another on the shoulders, but numerous consumer-citizens fail to acknowledge the insidious shortcomings of this system: the overall quality of the public sector has seriously deteriorated both in terms of services offered to the public as well in terms of quality of labor for civil servants. As for the latter, the introduction of output-driven systems of quality control has increased red tape with a rising number of "managers" in a controlling position, and deprofessionalization lurks largely. The mindless liberalization of the economy, the impudent pursuit of self-interest, and the perplexing lack of public responsibility and accountability have resulted eventually in the current economic crisis and Joe the Plummer is expected to pay the bill. People expect the state to take care of them, but many feel abandoned.

Those who find themselves—rightly or wrongly—on the wrong side of the tracks, are keen to point out the culprit. And there they are both the immigrants and the elite. As for the latter, the economic elite have been too busy cashing after profit; the cultural elite are in their own in higher artistic spheres, squandering tax payers' money on their own hobbies; the scientific elite—social sciences in particular—have lost touch with the reality; the political elite were bickering all the time, indulging in inanities instead of addressing real problems. This slanted representation of reality has been propelled by a media industry that is continuously on the lookout for a scoop and uproar.

In this conjuncture, it is easy and rewarding to make a lot of fuss about minorities with little political clout. Moderate local politicians—part of the political elite—are keen to show their credentials to their constituency. Some now talk about a "tsunami of immigrants"—referring to labor migrants from EU member state Poland—as a means of putting political pressure on the central government for more funding. But in so doing, they are reproducing unfounded suggestions of uncontrollability and irreparable damage. In this political climate, one can easily have the impression that a Turkish girl's head scarf is a serious problem, while the fact that she dropped out of high school and is excluded from the labor market is seen as less relevant. For as far as there is a cultural backlash in Europe, it is about fear and lack of social security of mainstream people, it is against the cultural, economic and political elites who are regarded as responsible for this, and it is manifested by using politically weak minority groups as a convenient vehicle.

Last but not least, while there is a lot of fuss about a "cultural backlash" in Europe, a miracle is slowly and surely taking shape: ethnic and cultural diversity is becoming commonplace in Europe. In the Netherlands, for instance, while the government was considering banning headscarves in public spaces, the biggest supermarket chain—Albert Heijn—introduced headscarves for the thousands of Turkish, Moroccan and Pakistani girls and women who work as cashiers. These females wear the headscarves—in the company color of course— when they sit behind the checkouts and nobody has ever bothered about it. Also in the Netherlands, in cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the most popular local radio station—FunX—broadcasts what is called "an urban program", a program that reaches out to the majority and all ethnic and religious minorities by playing different styles of music and talking about the things irrespective of ethnic or religious background. In addition,, the restaurant sector, the fashion sector, the housing decoration sector, the sport sector, and so forth, are thriving thanks to ethnic food, clothing and gadgets. Despite complaints about immigration and diversity, and despite integrationist or assimilationist discourses, "multiculturalism" by stealth is *de rigueur*. This almost seems a midsummer fairy tale.

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