



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

Reflections on the Demand for a German Lead Culture [*Leitkultur*] (November 4, 2000)

Author and journalist Mark Tekessidis reflects on the notion of a lead culture [*Leitkultur*]. He argues that the actual supporters of a German lead culture would probably be hard pressed to identify what it actually is. The concept, he argues, lacks clearly-defined positive content, and often emerges only in opposition to the culture of immigrants. Ironically, it is those immigrants, he suggests, who might actually have the clearest understanding of this vague concept, since it is often used against them in very concrete ways. According to Tekessidis, the CDU/CSU demand for a “Christian-German lead culture” can only lead to further discrimination against immigrants.

The Culture and Origins Game

Germans are wondering what their “lead culture” is. Pig’s knuckles and McDonald’s, Bach and Roberto Blanco, the Reeperbahn and Cardinal Ratzinger¹? Muslim Hülya B. knows the answer.

Hülya B. is a trained kindergarten teacher and unemployed. The main reason for this is her non-Christian faith. An occupational counselor had already predicted this situation for her, since more than two-thirds of all kindergartens in Germany are run by church organizations. And that means that Muslim women are out of luck. Of course, Hülya B. applied at public kindergartens, but the competition there is very fierce. Furthermore, in telephone calls, school personnel often told her in a roundabout manner that most of the local German parents have a problem with Turkish Muslims caring for their children. The young woman is currently doing odd jobs. Hülya B. knows very well what a “German lead culture” [*deutsche Leitkultur*] means.

Commentators at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* dismiss the term as “drivel,” and by now even *Bild-Zeitung* editorial columns speak of an “undignified discussion,” but for most immigrants “lead culture” is anything but a meaningless phrase. In Germany, much more so than in other comparable European immigrant societies, something along the lines of a dominant culture does in fact exist. In the current debate, both opponents and defenders of “lead culture” agree on at least one thing: German society has long since become culturally diverse. The only thing up for dispute is whether that’s a good or a bad thing. Liberal public opinion views this diversity as

¹ The Reeperbahn is Hamburg’s red-light district. Cardinal Ratzinger is Pope Benedict XVI – eds.

simply normal, by and large. Why should the belligerent rapper-style behavior of Turkish adolescents or the headscarves of young Muslim women be deemed any worse than all the other private nonsense that goes on, ask members of this camp.

In the CDU/CSU, on the other hand, many people fear that cultural diversity will mean the loss of values, standards, or rules of the game. Thus, public statements by everyone from [Laurenz] Meyer to [Thomas] Goppel² always make “foreigners” seem as though they incessantly abuse the “right to hospitality,” violate the Basic Law, or behave disrespectfully toward German customs. In this sense, Angela Merkel also thinks that the “leftist idea” of a multicultural society has failed. But how much diversity can Germany really handle?

Hülya B. is not all that religious. She doesn’t wear a headscarf. If she did, then her problems would be more obvious. In this society, a headscarf is viewed as much more than a private inclination, as was recently demonstrated by the case of Fereshta Ludin. She couldn’t become a teacher in Baden-Württemberg because the Ministry of Culture and Education viewed her headscarf as a “symbol of cultural segregation,” which could not be reconciled with the ideas of tolerance in this country. Although crucifixes continue to adorn classroom walls in Bavaria, even after the Federal Constitutional Court issued a ruling against them, Ludin’s symbolic profession of her own faith is not allowed in school, even though this young college graduate is a prime example of “integration.”

Everyday Exclusion

Fereshta Ludin can doubtless imagine what is meant by “German lead culture.” So can the Muslim associations, which no longer want to practice their religion in ramshackle meeting places hidden in courtyards and which have therefore applied for building permits for mosques. Authorities and residents of most communities can’t stand the thought of seeing a minaret when they look out the window. On the other hand, bells chiming from nearby Christian churches are still considered normal although these churches are continually losing both members and meaning. The same thing is happening with regard to religious instruction. Members of the Islamic faith have been living here for forty years. But while it is taken for granted that the two main Christian confessions can be taught in schools, many still think the demand for corresponding instruction for Muslims will lead to the usurpation of German schools by fanatical Koran preachers.

Of course the issue not only concerns Islam. What about Orthodox instruction for schoolchildren of Greek or Serbian heritage? In contrast to France – as many people here don’t realize – there is no laicism in Germany. State and religion are not strictly separated. In this country, the two Christian confessions are given preferential treatment, and up to now few efforts had been made either to introduce laicism, thereby making religion a private matter, or to grant equal status to the religious faiths of immigrants.

² General secretaries of the CDU and CSU – eds.

“Lead culture” – is it really just a meaningless phrase? The dominance of an invisible “lead culture” by no means affects only matters of religion. Serhat Z., for example, can’t find a trainee position. By now, he knows for sure that it has to do with his background. After numerous rejections he put it to the test. He called various small companies asking about an apprenticeship; sometimes he gave his own name and sometimes he invented a German-sounding one. When his real, “foreign” name was used, the conversation usually came to a halt rather quickly. Young people from immigrant families usually have more trouble finding trainee positions. It has nothing to do with their level of education. Studies have shown that people in decision-making positions in this country’s numerous small companies view the cultural heritage of young people of foreign descent as a problem. In particular, young Turkish men are thought likely to disrupt the working environment, supposedly because they lose their tempers easily when it comes to matters of honor.

With girls, however, it is often assumed that they would have to refuse certain tasks on religious grounds. Every perceptible difference is considered a deficit from the get-go. Immigrant youths who succeed in small companies despite the odds are constantly told that they are “just like Germans.” In most companies, integration means nothing more than absorption into the “lead culture.” The qualities attributed to immigrants by company decision makers are not unusual. Immigrants are often considered the embodiment of premodern traditions – and thus at best simply fossilized; usually, however, they are regarded as undemocratic and misogynist, and at worst as fanatical and violent.

The Guest who Stayed

This very same view was even reflected in the conceptions of multiculturalism that emerged in the late 1980s in church and Green Party circles. Supposedly the “foreigners” first had to be secularized and had to give up their ties to pre-modern customs and traditions. This approach certainly overlooked the fact that, at least as regards religion, German society has by no means let go of its traditions to the extent that most people here believe. For example, in their book *Heimat Babylon [Homeland: Babylon]* (1993), Thomas Schmid and Daniel Cohn-Bendit³ assumed that immigrants have to “learn” how to find their way in the “German value system.” But the two Green Party members could say as little about the nature of these “values” as Friedrich Merz⁴ can today.

In reality, the concept of a “German lead culture” today is not maintained by native Germans’ specific ideas about their own cultural identity. Instead, it consists mainly in a differentiation from the image of the migrants qua its inversion: “we” can consider ourselves modern because “they” are traditional; “we” are tolerant, because “they” exhibit intolerance; in “our” society, women have

³ Schmid is a journalist and editor-in-chief of *Die Welt*. Cohn-Bendit is a Green deputy in the European Parliament. Both were active in the Frankfurt student protest movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

⁴ When this article was published, Merz was the deputy chairman of the CDU Bundestag caucus – eds.

long been emancipated, whereas “they” visibly oppress the women, etc.

In contrast to France or Great Britain, “we” in Germany always only refers to the community of native Germans. To the ears of all non-Germans, this “we” always sounds completely exclusionary. However, the immigrants often don’t seem very accommodating either. To most Germans, their communities appear closed and focused on their native culture. Cafes for Turkish men or women wearing headscarves seem to belong to a different world. Without a doubt, many first-generation Greek immigrants hardly know anything of the cities in which they live aside from their workplace, the Greek community, and the way to the airport. The recourse to an imaginary homeland or one’s own traditions is rooted not in a fundamental defensiveness on the part of the migrants, but rather in the conditions for acceptance in Germany. From the very beginning, immigrants were almost totally barred from access to German citizenship, thus making political participation more difficult for them. On top of that, membership in a political immigrant organization can still be grounds for denial of German citizenship. Thus, the only thing left for immigrants to do was to direct all their community activities into cultural associations.

German authorities thus definitely encouraged immigrants to take their country of origin as their ongoing point of cultural reference. After all, the “guests” were supposed to return home, so in the meantime they weren’t supposed to become too alienated from their “homeland.” Thus, both the real, existing “lead culture” and the culture of the migrants, which often seemed traditional, are products of the basic political conditions in the Federal Republic – which were exclusionary and also thoroughly chaotic from the start. Integration was never much more than a slogan; concrete measures were rarely taken. Even today, adequate language instruction isn’t available. And ultimately, adapting always meant adapting to a vague and hard-to-define German culture, while participatory rights were only supposed to come after integration. Assimilation was also called for in France, but there it meant assimilating to the republic as a citizen – ethnicity and culture are considered strictly private matters. Without a doubt, in reality, people in our neighboring country would like to treat the republic and French culture as one and the same, but there the immigrants are citizens and can protest this inaccurate conflation. The recent new regulations in Germany, such as the mini-reform of the citizenship law or the introduction of so-called Green Cards,⁵ have not brought movement to this static situation. The old immigrants are choosing to do without a citizenship that seems restrictive, and the new qualified immigrants never came at all. If the Union [CDU/CSU] now blusters about a “lead culture,” they are actually aiming to exclude immigrants.

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Source: Mark Terkessidis, “The Culture and Origins Game” [“Das Spiel mit der Herkunft”], *Tagesspiegel*, November 4, 2000.

⁵ Initiative by Gerhard Schröder to allow for the immigration of 20,000 tech specialists – eds.

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