

Ethnic Division and Urban Staging: Metropolis goes ethnic?

A few weeks ago, in mid-august 2006, the italian town of Parma erected almost over night a wall of three meters height. This wall, in the middle of the town, encloses a quarter mainly inhabited by African migrants, who can now only enter and leave their quarter through very few exits, surveilled by police and videocameras. The socialist (!) local government announced that it was the last option to somehow get urban prostitution, drug traffic and other criminal activities under control.

Evidently, this is a case where a European municipality fully conscious of its own actions pursues and legitimates social segregation and „ethnic division“. However, the residents involved – with or without Italian passports – feel “ghettorized” and ethnically discriminated. Some even speak of an italian Guantanamo Bay. Yet, within a few days, media and tourists have gratefully accepted this third urban attraction of Parma: next to the famous ham of parma and the attractive soccer of FC Parma, one can now enjoy - with a gentle thrill - Parma’s mysterious new wall.

I mention this little episode from Italy not because one might see a subtle irony in the fact that the classic homeland of the mafia itself discovers an even more dangerous source of crime: the migrants – at last the „Others“!

Rather, this story is meant to exemplify the tense and ambivalent relationships between public and migration nearly everywhere in Europe at present. In particular In the European metropolises, the issue of “ethnic division” is the topic of highly controversial discussions taking place under new premises. And they are also staged in spectacular performances and confrontations. –

This is a dramatic development. And it will become even more dramatic during the next years, particularly at the expense of the cultural tradition and identity of our large cities. - This is my apprehension and my hypothesis. In the following I will present some observations and considerations from a European perspective:

On the one hand we know, that migrant-cultures have been, for some time now, an important social as well as symbolic capital of large cities. The well-known studies of

Sharon Zukin or Richard Florida have confirmed this most impressively. In the metropolises, migration stands as much for the transfer of work and knowledge as it does for cultural variety and exotic life-styles. In a certain way, it thereby embodies the conception of the “Welt for Ort“, the “World at home, locally, if you like, the cosmopolitan in the city.

Above all, however, it represents the culturally „other / foreign“. An „other“ which has long been appropriated here, at home in our own cities, and the music culture and eating habits of which we can enjoy in a form of „tourism at home“. It is due to this “ethnic colouring” of lifestyles and its apparent ease that the metropolises have become so attractive for what Richard Florida has called the “creative class”, the urban elites of the future, – which includes us here as well.

On the other hand, and at the same time, however, different and darker associations of migration increasingly emerge. Pictures of groups of young men, well adapted on the outside, but religiously motivated and fanatic within, such as those responsible for 9/11 here in New York; or those having schemed horrific terror attacks in London recently. Pictures, not of a far away Al Quaida, but of a close “home-grown terrorism” with migrant-background. – Besides, it is quite interesting from a German perspective to observe how British Muslims begin to advance to enemy number one in London’s tabloids - after 60 years of the „German Nazis “.

From an historic angle, both perspectives on migration – the somewhat brighter as well as the darker one - are both relatively young as they essentially refer to European experiences and discussions which took place hardly ten years ago.

Before and up to the beginning of the 90s, migration has of course been a central factor of growth and life of large cities as well. But it was rarely a central theme of “big politics”. Until then, the social and cultural consequences were discussed rather reluctantly and only sporadically: topics such as ethnic communities, the construction of mosques, or policies of education and language. The real problems were left to the local politics of integration which were poorly coordinated.

However, migrant-backgrounds and ethnic identities have now become central motifs of a discussion concerning both: the economic and cultural potentials of European

metropolises, as well as the existential threats (seemingly?) resulting from these developments. Both are now linked to each other causally (in many public discourses?): migrant culture and migrant terrorism.

In the German debate as well, the darker, threatening side long since dominates. It is articulated in terms such as “social segregation”, “Islamic fundamentalism”, or in the debate regarding ethnic “parallel societies”. Those pictures and terms address two levels at once: first, the process of migration itself, with all its social and cultural consequences; and secondly, the discourse led by politics and media concerning migrants, which increasingly influences the perception within society.

Most recently, one cannot help feeling that it is less the original process of migration but rather this discourse on migrants that causes those anxious and constantly repeated questions: Isn't it true that migrant groups consciously pursue “ethnic division”? Is this a local version of the global “clash of civilizations”, which, according to Samuel Huntington, supersedes “multiculturalism”? Will an urban “management of diversity” still be able to succeed at all?

Obviously, a new form of ethnic-religious difference in our cities is being negotiated, from which appears to arise a new quality of cultural Otherness. The “old” faces of migration seemed already familiar by the mid-90s: as foreign traditions and life-styles in terms of variety and diversity, but still as a familiar “other” - which in the metropolises historically already belonged to oneself – to the own/zum Eigenen.

Very much in accordance with Georg Simmel, whose stranger comes and stays - and always had to come and had to stay, in order to let urban culture and metropolis develop at all. In this comparatively unagitated way, New York has obviously dealt with “its” Hispanics over the last 50 years, London with “its” Pakistanis, and Berlin with “its” Turks. To this day, it is still the same Hispanics, Pakistanis, and Turks, who come and stay.

Yet today, they have apparently ceased to embody a “familiar otherness”. On the contrary: they are being observed with obvious suspicion, and evidently cause an existential feeling of threat, a feeling that culturally homogenizes them, perceives them as a closed group whose “otherness” now turns them into a potential milieu of

aggressors: strangers as enemies – threatening to our culture, perhaps even to our lives.

And these seem to be the characteristics of those enemies:

- Phenotype „oriental“ (Edward Said says ‘hello’),
- predominantly „Arab“ origin (thus any country from Palestine to Pakistan),
- predominantly Muslim faith (that means: non-Christian and non-Jewish)
- and predominantly of „archaic“ mentality (typically used to describe the psyche of the suicide bombers - falsely, as the middle-class-biographies and education of many suspects have shown).

Thus, ‘Other’ refers just to a certain group of migrants and a very specific ethnic and religious affiliation. ‘Other’ in this sense, describes a new attitude, or at least a new form of attention from a majority within (‘mainstream’) society, that has spread out in Europe since 9/11 as well.

So far I deliberately spoke of “feeling” and “perception” when talking about this new otherness. Because those new „alienations” are in fact „cultural“ – and are „constructed“ – on both sides!

On part of the countries of immigration, the threatening part of migration is perceived as a sect-like fundamentalism; as a „jihadism“ announcing its hostility-to-the-death to Western modernity and Christian values; as something that converts this mental antagonism into militant terror and that claims to draw its legitimacy for such doing from Islamic and ethnic traditions, thus from cultural sources.

Whoever draws from the same cultural sources – and that is what large migrant groups are doing – appears, in reverse and in the eyes of the majority, to automatically be a suspect. Hence, both security authorities and the media immediately put entire ethnic-religious “milieus” under general suspicion.

On the side of Muslim groups of migrants, however, this situation is experienced as a sequence of tangible everyday discrimination. Because different appearance, language and religion, thus their own characteristics of identity, are hereby treated as

a criminal profile in an apparently self-evident way. That way, the experience of collective suspicion, in fact initiates collective consciousness.

This does not, by any means, only apply to the media discourse. It rather concerns the immediate experience of everyday life as well: suspicious glances on the street and in the subway as well as the rigorous passport controls or degrading physical inspections, that are almost automatically the result of an assumed “Arabic” or “Muslim” appearance, when getting into a traffic check or boarding a plane at the airport.

Of course, the reasons and triggers that have led to this situation are not primarily cultural. In fact, they are of an economic and political, sometimes ideological as well as terroristic or safety political nature. At the same time, they are always also “culturally” contextualised and coded. Yes, they are apparently subjected to such a strict “culturalistic” pattern of interpretation, that other, more differentiated perceptions and interpretations are barely possible any longer: Terrorism seems to be culturally caused and the direct consequence of migration.

Behind this interpretation lies a - in its dominance - new perception of cultural authenticity and - vice versa - of cultural difference. This perception moulds all types of politics of identity today with sustained effect: in the form of stereotypical images of an own “we” and an alien “other”, which allege a civilisatory contradiction. A contradiction, in which we see ourselves culturally represented: both societal minorities and majorities.

After all, 56% of the Germans seemingly believe, that we are currently in a phase of „clashes of civilisations “and „cultural wars “. (the newspaper Der Tagesspiegel 23.8.06). In turn, many migrants with Islamic background believe that only an offensive and demonstrative defence of their religion can secure their own identity and enable self-respect. This makes the Islam also a social movement.

Thus, the political and media discourse inevitably suggests to both sides that they ought to apprehend themselves as two “sides”, two fronts in a cultural conflict. And these two fronts keep reinforcing each other.

The fact that we observe such a deep civilizing conflict at present, is not just confirmed by politics and the media. We, the academics, have also already spread this slogan - through Huntington and others -, albeit not all of us want to identify with Huntington's interpretation and language. We are also not just observers of this „cultural turn “, but are meanwhile its creators and moderators as well.

The crucial role that this amalgamation of politics, media and science plays in the process of discursive and social formation could be observed in Germany very recently in the debate concerning ethnic „parallel societies “.

This term emerged around the year 1996 within discussions in social science, to describe the situation mainly of Turkish migrant groups in German cities: their marginal situation – caused by social exclusion on one hand, and through self-demarcation in language and culture, on the other hand.

At first, this term remained without much resonance. Only in the context of new discussions about German politics of immigration and naturalization, media and politics suddenly jumped on the term in the year 2003. Since then, there has been an accumulation of articles and speeches under the heading „parallel societies “, complaining that in Berlin and Frankfurt migrants of Turkish or Arabic origin can go to their newsstand in the morning, move on to the bakery and the hairdresser, then to the coffeehouse and to the mosque, have some tea and a game of dice in the evening, without having to speak a word of German the whole day.

Furthermore, in the surroundings of certain mosques and certain family clans, German laws do not possess validity anymore and German policemen have little authority. That “forced marriages” and „honor killings” are on the agenda. That “hate preachers” agitate for Jihad. That in this “Turkish” or “Arabic” world, people intentionally live outside our political and social conventions.

It fits into the picture that in my own part of town in Berlin within the next two years, not the christian churches will shape the architectural cityscape any more, but rather the four large newly constructed mosques. These mosques with their deliberate representative style of architecture will set new aesthetic and symbolic accents in Kreuzberg. Such developments certainly prompt a variety of fears and feelings of

alienation, because they announce a social process of change and along with it, the painful loss of cultural habits and social security.

Precisely in those new mosques, some people see the dramatic signs of this much debated „parallel society“. A parallel society that seems to be at the verge of dominating the majority in society.

Others – like myself – interpret this development in a different way, rather inversely. For the Islamic communities in fact leave the shadows of the backyards with the construction of mosques and consciously enter the urban public; an urban public that will eventually make religious values and social practices of the Islamic communities more open and transparent. – At least that is what the historic and cultural laws of the metropolises would anticipate.

Another elemental part of this metropolitan law is the existence of a variety of lifestyles in any large city: a diversity of living and eating habits, different forms of family and marriage, a variety of (dress) styles and tastes; as well as the presence of multilinguality and religious diversity. Moreover, that this cultural heterogeneity permanently remains and runs through all milieus: through the different and diverse milieus of migrants as well as residents – who are themselves never homogeneous and hardly distinguishable from each other.

Diversity and variety have „always“ been the trademark of urban culture and simultaneously its main resource. This does by no means result in „parallel societies“ in terms of separate economic, social or political systems. In the worst case, this variety of urban culture causes the formation of small milieus with distinguishable styles of language and culture, which sometimes present themselves in public as “different” and “alien”: as the “Turkish community” or the “Arabic clan”.

Partly due to their financial dependence on society’s economic and social systems, such milieus however, are certainly often less closed and “different” as they would have us believe. Rather, openness, mixing, and hybridity as principles of urban life are indeed having its effects on them. Not a single rapper in Berlin who sings about the “geddo” is actually living in one.

By its ethnic-religious demarcation this degrading talk of „parallel societies“ brands as „alien“ what has been a normal and mostly familiar correlate of migration before: minor and major differences in life-style and life-values.

This certainly causes a variety of social misunderstandings, tension and problems. However, “honor killings” or Islamic terror networks statistically as well as empirically are only part of this to a very much peripheral degree.

Such phenomena are hardly a characteristic face of migrant cultures in Europe. But in discourses they are readily painted as such and moved into the center of public attention, to legitimize this demarcation.

The conclusion is that this talk of „parallel societies“ in fact discriminates, stigmatizes, provokes and disintegrates, since it virtually provokes a contradictory position by those who are concerned. At the same time, it strengthens a small Islamic section which would be much weaker without this mobilization through discrimination.

Nevertheless, there are groups in the surroundings of a few mosque communities and Koran schools in Berlin and Cologne, that are trying to organize themselves like sects and thus offer alternative life-concepts to those offered by civil society.

Thereby, they utilize a religious fanaticism as has recently been mobilized by the ideology of jihadism. Youngsters, mainly of the second or third generation of migrants, whose perspectives concerning education, employment and social acknowledgement are rather limited, are particularly open to this role of a muslim “holy warrior” and “heroic avenger”. This likewise concerns young and well-educated academics for whom religious self-mystification (“You cherish life, we cherish death”) becomes the trigger for an identity turn in their own biography and promises a kind of charismatic self-fulfillment.

For both groups, this role often becomes the only attainable concept for their own identity; an identity as a respected member of a very exclusive (and sworn in) community, on one hand referring to stable traditions and values and thereby distinguishing itself from the complex German majority; and on the other hand, at the most extreme, supposedly finding its fulfillment even in terroristic attacks: religion as an instrument and weapon of politics. So far just very few take that direction; and

there are many Islamic critics as well, who have accused the preachers of jihad of taking the Koran “hostage”.

Nonetheless, many children and teenagers with migration background are desperately searching for positive self-images or collective-images, for attainable conceptions of identity. There are rarely any social stages and social roles that could help them develop positive self-images as well as social affiliations in daily life, especially images that are not depending on ethnic or religious “otherness”. To obtain those positive self images, the urban space and the urban roles, offered by schools, Youth or Sport clubs, discos or the city’s streets, are not sufficient at all. Thousands of graffitis in Neukölln or Kreuzberg illustrate this need – optionally in the religious version: “Muslims are the best. Long live Allah!” – Or in the mundane version: „Muslims fuck the best“ (Muslims “do something” the best that we don’t mention in public as reputable academics.)

This debate over „parallel societies“ basically illustrates why this form of “ethnic division” will have dramatic consequences for the situation of large cities and their culture. “Ethnic division” is not the source of social segregation but it presently embodies its central stage. Because the demonstrative reference to ethnic origin and religious confession as a strategy of representation has two advantages: firstly, the range for cultural and symbolic composition is almost unlimited, and secondly, it is open to almost any political instrumentalization.

Practically speaking, this means: a Turkish, Arabic or Islamic identity can be claimed almost independently from one’s own biography because it primarily concerns a symbolic attribution. The resulting otherness once again, legitimates the struggle for social acknowledgement and equal political rights – for some it even legitimates terror.

The social causes hence are not arbitrary, but perfectly real and well-known. They are related to experiences of unemployment and social injustice, to a lack of options in educational and career opportunities for young people, and related to social deficits and cultural violations in every day life. A familiar situation for almost any group of migrants.

This is why, in reverse, they often build up (defiant) self-blockades, remain in passivity and take refuge in victimhood; display an attitude of social refusal which is often caused by the immobility of language and culture and thereby results in religious as well as ethnic „revival“.

Whoever gets into this spiral will remain excluded from the very basic opportunities in „late modern“ societies; especially the option of a concept of personal individuality, which is able to flee from reglemented collective identities of national, ethnic or religious communities. A concept of individual identity that wants to be unconstrained in the evolution of personal life-concepts and the development of social loyalties. Certainly, not everyone needs to take that path but it must be an open choice.

The following realisation has emphatically shaped the collective memory of the metropolises: Max Weber's notion of the cities' smell of lawlessness *der Duft der Städte nach Freiheit*. In history, large cities always formed the central gates for people and ideas into the industrial societies of the 19th and 20th century. They still assume this role today and in a special way: cities are the gates (of integration) for new forms of global mobility and migration and therefore can be seen as laboratories of future social and cultural developments.

However, this crucially presupposes the ability to continuously arrange urban environments “openly”. In a way that they steadily strive for cultural homogeneity and social integration, yet at the same time leaving enough open space for individuality, diversity and difference – hence for cultural heterogeneity and openness as a central urban resource. Only the free interaction of mobility, change and otherness as characteristics of urban life, create that social and cultural tension, through which indeed „creativity “ emerges: the ability to create new cultural styles, concepts and syntheses.

Certainly, if this heterogeneity fades and if the metropolises cease to be „an open system“, if the politics of exclusion and a culture of mistrust dominate instead, then a key-element of urbanity submerges: the polymorphism and non-conformity of urban society and culture.

And this is a realistic danger. The demand for more surveillance of streets and public areas in the European cities is increasing. The surveillance of streets, public transport, buildings, meeting places should be intensified in order to decrease violence and terror through dragnet investigation and biometric identification. What is being searched for is a “suspect” that only too frequently corresponds with the phenotype of “the stranger “. Object of control is especially this „mixed zone“ of urban cultures and milieus: the urban public, which then inevitably mutates into a large public space of discrimination. In London, for example, the chance of being documented by videocamera more than a hundred times within one day is rather high.

In case this gloomy scenario of control and discrimination will really occur, the metropolises would lose their openness. With this openness they would also lose their main resource: the free flow of migrants and new ideas, since migrants are not just indispensable as workers in urban industries and services. They are not merely agents of this ethnic economy in the touristic and cultural landscape.

Rather, today, more than ever, they are pioneers and actors of a cultural globalisation from below. Their experience of migration and mobility, with a precarious and provisional existence, with networks and informal economy, embodies a sense of “the world tomorrow”. Hence, the important competence of social navigation in transnational and transcultural space. The ability of cultural orientation and social survival, anywhere and anytime.

In this respect, “knowledge of migration“ in fact means a form of transcultural knowledge, that will become more important in future. The metropolises were not able to do without this knowledge in the past and they will be even less able to do so in the future. This is one of the reasons why at present nearly all politicians and researchers on migration talk of integration, especially in Germany. Many of them seem just now to realize that indeed Germany has been a country of immigration and still is, and that this country needs its own policy of immigration. After all, 12,6% of the people in Germany have a migration background. Even in the very classical country of immigration, the USA, the corresponding figure is just 11,5% (TS 14.8.06)

However, many of those concepts of integration policies are going in the wrong direction. Offers for integration such as “How to be a good German” present an entirely inappropriate answer to the quest of migrants for a place in society. For those who come here first of all ask for their space both on the labor market and in civil society, for a world for living and a concept for life.

Not in demand however, is usually the assignment of a new cultural identity. Especially if this new cultural identity – as in the German case - claims to cross Germanic genes with Goethe’s ingenuity.

Policies of integration have to be pursued in an active and intelligent way, and they have to succeed because else the open society is in fact in danger – especially in large cities and especially in Europe.

The German-Turkish sociologist Necla Kelek warned already some time ago of a wrong European multiculturalism, that is based on “the misleading and sentimental assumption ... that deep inside all cultures are based on the same values.”

Particularly in the case of an aggressive Islamism this is definitely not the case, claims Kelek.

Instead she warns: „If the agenda and practices of a pre-modern, anti-democratic world will be considered further on – without any control and doubts – as an “untouchable culture”... , then our civil society is in fact in danger.” (TS 27.2.06).

For our metropolises this danger would mean a lot more than just an „ethnic division“ with a wall à la Parma.

Hence, both has to be forcefully fought against: the new cultural discrimination of migrants as well as the new and aggressive politicization of origin and religion. In order to prevent narrow thinking of difference and a populist anti-Islamism spreading amongst society’s majority, and secondly, that Islamic fundamentalists do not solely account and stand for Islam. Thirdly and lastly, that a few terrorists of jihadism do not succeed in taking hostage our urban civil societies having “apparently already succeeded in taking the Koran”. This is what this terrible game of “ethnic division” is all about.