

## **Grammars of Difference: the Case of Germany**

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July 2010

“Deutschland den Deutschen, Ausländer raus!” (Germany for Germans, foreigners out!) – loud and aggressive chants of a mob rang throughout Hoyerswerda, Rostock, Mölln, and Solingen as firebombs attacked the homes of ‘others’ - asylum seekers, refugees and ‘foreigners’ - burning houses, burning humans. These slogans and incidents not only shook Germany at the beginning of the 1990s but also horrified the world. The attacks left the newly united German society desperately searching for solutions at a time when it was still in the process of redefining its national identity. Had Germany failed to overcome its racist Nazi past after all? Were these incidents to be interpreted as an exceptional backslide of some marginalized young men, or were they the logical consequence of an ever-present racism in Germany; would it just be a matter of time before yet another “racial setback”? Germany was in a state of shock and its present condition seemed to be caught up in its ugly racist past, a past it thought it had overcome with the ‘Stunde null’ (‘zero hour’).

In the following sections, I will elaborate on what I call ‘the grammars of difference’ in Germany by probing the categories of ‘**race**’, **religion** and **gender**. The German case will underline that **racist modes of exclusion are an integral part of modernity rather than an aberration or dysfunction**, and, hence, support the claim of critical race theory that **“race must be seen as a cultural and political product of its place and time; namely European modernity”** (Lentin 2008:491). Furthermore, a closer look invalidates the wide-spread assumption that with the post-WWII notion of ‘Stunde null’ Germany had left race and racism behind as an inconvenient anecdote of its past. There seems to be a gap between aspiration and reality: **though racism is a bitter reality in Germany, it has at the same time become taboo to talk about it.**

## **1. Race**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, German nation-building and unification was the result of several decades of wars that aimed at creating a loyalty to the new German nation. With its various ethnicities (Poles, Danes, French, Sinti and Roma) and minority religions (Catholics and Jews) the German nation that emerged was anything but homogeneous (Degler 1998:15). The aspiration to promote German identity as well as national loyalty involved strong and strategic efforts by state officials to demarcate cultural and social differences between Germans and the ‘others’ (Chin et al. 2009:16).<sup>1</sup> Over the course of time, German national identity developed according to a lengthy “politics of difference that established German subjectivity and superiority by delineating these from their historically, geographically, and politically relevant Others” (ib). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Germanness’ was defined in opposition to a range of racially defined groups of perceived ‘others’ such as Jews, Blacks, Slavs and ‘Gypsies.’ Intending to create an exclusive and superior German identity, each form of prejudice was developed into a tool; each ‘tool’ stressed a particular group of people as antagonistic and antithetical to a German social body aiming to construct its own ethnic homogeneity (Chin et al. 2009:11). As this process was intertwined with the search for cohesion and identity, Rita Chin et al. (Chin et al. 2009:16) speak of “nationalizing politics of difference” in this context.

The society of the Nazi era was hyperracialized – almost every dimension of the public and private spheres were regulated by Nazi race ideology. In its most perverted form, the regime made decisions concerning the destiny of its citizens based on racial distinctions and categories (Chin et al. 2009:6). However, referring to the myth of ‘Stunde null’:

most historians have operated on the unspoken assumption that the problem of race disappeared after the Nazi defeat, reflexively accepting that the postwar taboo against the term ‘Rasse’ also meant the question how to define and deal with difference was no longer central (ib).

In post-WWII Germany, the first major formative public discourses about cultural difference and the limits and challenges of integrating ‘others,’ namely ‘guest workers,’

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<sup>1</sup> This project comprised strategies “as diverse as Bismarck’s Kulturkampf (1873-1879), which targeted Poles and Catholics; imperial expansion in overseas colonies prior to 1918 and in Europe proper through 1945; a nationality law (1913) based upon patriarchal descent and an ethnicized notion of *Deutschtum*; and the cultivation of social knowledges of race – such as colonial anthropology, *Ostforschung*, eugenics, and other racial sciences – that legitimated state initiatives ranging from conquest, colonization, nationalization, and deportation to adoption, abortion, Aryanization, sterilization, euthanasia, enslavement, mass expulsion, and eventually genocide” (Chin et al. 2009:16).

into German society, emerged in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The strategy to obtain cheap laborers from abroad during the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) created some surprising and unintended consequences, namely a significant shift in Germany's social, cultural and, not least, demographic landscape. While in 1956 the number of foreigners in Germany was a little less than 100,000, ten years later numbers reached 1.3 million and surpassed 1.2 million in the early 1970s (Eley, 2009: 157). Interestingly, **in the first years, the 'presence' of the 'guest workers' seemed to be unproblematic; not only were they considered an integral part of the booming German economy, but it was also literally assumed that the 'guests' would inevitably return home once they had accomplished their 'mission'** (Chin, 2009: 81). However, towards the end of the 1970s, the foreign population in Germany already surpassed 4 million, and the long-standing notion that their presence would be temporary turned out to be illusionary. **'The Turk' became a synonym for 'guest worker' or 'foreigner'** as the number of Turkish immigrants had outpaced other nationalities. In this period, certain types of race-based thinking in Germany seemed, once again, a useful tool to account for fundamental differences between peoples, "about what, or rather who, is not German. **This focus conceives difference as import: (...) it presumes a national homogeneity [and] suggests that Germany (...) has been essentially Christian and, if multicultural, then nonetheless white**" (Chin et al., 2009: 108). As long as 'guest workers' were not considered immigrants, it was possible to ignore the issue of difference. In this context Rita Chin (2009:81) points out that

this postwar redeployment of race was not equivalent to Nazi racial practice. Recognition of de facto immigration made cultural difference an issue, and culture (rather than biology) became the primary basis for explaining fundamental incompatibilities between Turkish guest workers and Germans.<sup>3</sup> (Chin et al., 2009: 84).

If there is a discussion about racism in Germany at all, it is trivialized to young, white, disillusioned, desperate, and marginalized men from former Eastern Germany (most of whom are portrayed as football hooligans). Unemployment, the constant psychological backlog of economic stagnation, and a generation deficiently familiar with democratic values (Chin et al., 2009: 2) are points raised in the public discourse in order to explain this phenomenon. **Today's German racism is being understood as the ugly legacy of an oppressive socialist state system and the difficult adaptation to capitalist**

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<sup>2</sup> However, shortly after WWII in Germany, there was already a public debate about the 'social problem' of the so-called 'Mischlingskinder' referring to 'black' occupation children fathered by Allied troops of color and born to white German mothers (Fehrenbach, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Chin draws attention to the euphemistic use of the word 'guest worker,' which denoted migrant workers, reducing their presence in Germany to pure economics: the term 'worker' implies that their space would be restricted to the labor market, and 'guest' alluded to their temporary stay. This mentality "presumed a racist understanding of difference, insofar as it foregrounded the impermeable boundaries between native and foreigner, permanent and transitory. Precisely because the guest worker figure was so successful at making these distinctions appear natural and absolute (...) invoking more explicit categories of race initially proved unnecessary."

**democracy.** Almost sixty years after the failure of the Nazi state, it is still somehow considered historically imprecise and inappropriate

to trace racist infractions back to the days of Hitler and thereby suggest continuities of racial ideologies and practice between the Nazi era and the democratic Federal Republic. After all, Germans (...) no longer even speak the language of "race." The term *Rasse* has virtually disappeared from the German lexicon and public discourses since 1945 despite the persistence of social ideologies and behaviors that look an awful lot like racism (ib 2009:3).<sup>4</sup>

Hinting to the myth of "Stunde null," Chin et al. point out, that rather than viewing the issue of race as a taboo or rupture after WWII, approaching it instead as a continuity would shed new light upon modern German history because

if the racial ideologies of the National Socialist regime are no longer perceived as an absolute break with what came before and after, then it becomes possible and even unnecessary to think about racial or ethnic 'difference' as an ongoing, constitutive question in the nation's development. (Chin et al., 2009: 10)

Chin et al.'s argument, by alluding to the "silence about race" (Lentin 2004) and "racism's conceptual double bind" (Hesse) in Germany, can be read in a broader context of 'race critical theory,' the primary aim of which is to establish the centrality of race to European modernity (Lentin, 2004: 491).

The rather sketchy illustration above shows that the mere fact that there is a general "silence about racism" in Germany – like in other European states – does not necessarily mean that racism does not exist.

## **2. Religion**

In an era when (whether confirming or rejecting) reference to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis has become banal, it is unavoidable to tackle the dicey issue of religion, given its increasing use as a tool in the inclusion-exclusion mechanism. In order to grasp the religious dimension of the grammars of difference in contemporary Germany, one needs to understand both the role of religion in German society at large and the special state-church relationship that developed in the aftermath of WWII. Only then is it possible to comprehend the ongoing public discourse about the role of religion in Germany, which it is currently characterized by a **suspicious attitude towards the unwittingly imported 'alien' religion of Islam.**

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<sup>4</sup> For a proper understanding of discussions about race in today's Europe, it is important to note that after WWII, Western historians began to differentiate the study of racism and the study of anti-Semitism by treating these two as separate phenomenon. While the term 'racism' was primarily shaped in the 1920s and 1930s and included anti-Jewish discrimination, the post-WWII distinction between anti-Semitism and racism was accompanied by a new social conception of Jews: instead of constituting a 'race' they were seen as an 'ethnicity' (Chin et al., 2009: 3).

Also, even though a Jewish-Muslim comparison is limited, it is nonetheless useful in order to understand the current debates about the integration of the ‘other,’ namely, Islam, into German society. In the current debate about Islam’s role and place in Germany, one is tempted to think of the front lines as clear and distinct: autochthonous German Christians, trying to defend their enlightened and liberal society, versus foreign Muslims, who – as Modood (2003: 100) puts it for the European context as a whole, but is applicable to the German one, too – “are making politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable or theologically alien demands.” Islam, however, is not the first religion with which Germans have had issues. Just a few decades ago, under the premise of the “Endlösung der Judenfrage” (the so-called ‘final solution to the question of the Jews’), the racist Nazi-regime wiped out the Jews in a most perverted way, due to their perceived ethnic and religious alterity.<sup>5</sup> (I will elaborate on this in more detail below).

In this context, it is important to note that it was not just non-Christian religions that were perceived as a threat. Indeed, bloody intra-Christian conflicts constitute an integral part of the German past. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Reformation movement began in Germany, a shift which initially led to the division of the Church and eventually to the 30 Years Wars (1618-1648). This war is still present in the public memory in Germany as a time that not only devastated large regions but also millions of human lives (Henkel, 2006: 308). Due to its history and societal constellation, Germany was and still is considered a Christian country. Its population is predominantly Christian – one third is Roman Catholic and one third is Protestant. A significant group of about 28% consider themselves atheist, unaffiliated, or belonging to other religious groups.<sup>6</sup> With its estimated 4 million Muslims (BMF 2009:11), Germany has the largest Muslim community in Western Europe after France (with about 4.5 million), representing about 5 percent of the total population of Germany (82 million). The number of Jews is around 120,000.

After WWII, the 1949 Constitution of (West) Germany copied word for word the paragraphs of the **Weimar Constitution** that applied to **Church–State relations** (Henkel, 2006: 309).<sup>7</sup> This relationship is commonly described with the term “positive neutrality” of the State vis-à-vis the churches, meaning that the state provides religious

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<sup>5</sup> Before WW II more than half a million Jews constituted the third biggest religious community in Germany. Only about 16.000 Jews were left after the Holocaust in the early 1950s (Henkel 2006:309).

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/EN/Content/Statistics/Bevoelkerung/Bevoelkerungsstand/Tabellen/Content50/Population\\_\\_by\\_\\_age\\_\\_groups,templateId=renderPrint.psm1](http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/EN/Content/Statistics/Bevoelkerung/Bevoelkerungsstand/Tabellen/Content50/Population__by__age__groups,templateId=renderPrint.psm1)

<sup>7</sup> Certain religious communities were given the status of ‘corporation under public law’ (‘Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts’). This first of all applied to both the Protestant and Catholic churches, but it was also open upon application to “other religious societies..., if their constitution and the number of their members give assurance of their permanency” (Henkel 2006:309).

communities certain privileges justified by recognition of their positive role in public life (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the state is neutral on religious issues and does not interfere in church affairs, such as the domestic structures and administration of church life. Very often, the German situation is referred to as one of 'limping separation' ('hinkende Trennung') between Church and State. **The two big churches – also called *Volkskirchen* (people's churches) – are still privileged, even though many other religious groups exist in Germany** (*ibid.*).

**Churches and religion play an important role in much of German social and political life. The leader of the Protestant or Catholic churches regularly publicly engage on current social and political topics such as justice, war, abortion, as well as the integration of Muslims and Islam in Germany.** Furthermore, the 'people's churches' are in charge of a significant segment of the German welfare state, such as schools, hospitals, childcare centers, homes for the elderly and handicapped, etc. Due to such a wide field of involvement, the churches also play a significant economic role: with around 1.2 million employees, church institutions are the second largest employer after the State. Because these jobs are mainly filled with people who are affiliated with their respective church, eligible candidates belonging to other or no confessions are excluded from this great pool of job opportunities.

In the present as well as in the past, religion has been used as a tool for drawing a religious demarcation line between 'Us' the Christian Germans and 'Them' the non-Christian non-German 'Other'. In discussing the status of religion in Germany, Rita Chin et al. compare the Jewish and Turkish/Muslim experience in order to shed new light on the debate. **In Europe of the medieval and early modern era, religion served as the key marker of "absolute difference: Jews were viewed as religiously misguided and even the source of deicide"** (Chin et al. 2009:11). At that time, it was the perception of religious alterity that determined the way Jews were treated in German Christian lands. Even in times when they were tolerated, Germans regarded them as alien, inferior to, and separate from the rest of society. This condition was most evident in the strict limitations practiced upon Jewish attire, trade, and freedom of movement. Both the physical security and the economic and social standing of the Jews were extremely unstable and totally dependent on the benevolence of the sovereign in whose territories they lived (*ibid.*). Keeping this historical example in mind, interestingly, with the recognition of Turkish permanent presence in post-World War II Germany, the religious dimension has re-emerged as an essential cause for incompatibility; in this case, it is the wide-spread sense that Islamic principles are at odds with Western life styles. So the source of friction is not primarily a conflict of

theological or doctrinal interpretation, as was the case with the Jews. For the majority of the German population, the Muslim woman's wearing a headscarf is a clear indicator of Islam's deeply archaic and patriarchal nature and affinity to suppressing women (ib).<sup>8</sup> These aspects of Islam are considered diametrically opposed to the liberal understanding of gender equality in Germany. Consequently, the imported religion of Islam constitutes a serious threat to post-WWII Germany's hard-earned democracy (Chin et.al, 2009: 12).

In the eyes of Chin et al., another fruitful comparison between the Jewish and Turkish/Muslim experience is to juxtapose the push for integration and assimilation at two very different historical phases, where Christianity figures as a fundamental -- but at times unspoken -- aspect of German cultural identity. While the emancipation of the Jews mostly came with the expectation of conversion, Muslims have been regarded as colliding with a secular German state -- even as that state continues to allocate extra privileges for Judeo-Christian institutions (*ibid.*). Simultaneously, the reasons for German concern over the failure to remove difference are unique in each case. Anti-Semitism particularly condemned Jews for causing and benefiting from the massive upheavals of global capitalism, modernization, and industrialization. However, **the debate about Muslims demonstrates an insightful contrast: those who follow Islam have often been accused of fostering certain narrow-mindedness, a situation that is seen as particularly dangerous since it reintroduces backward norms and values into German society (ibid.).** In this context, it is important to point out that in public discourse, the repeated reference (mainly in conservative circles) to the supposed 'Judeo-Christian' heritage of Germany, also serves as a religious demarcation line between the Jews and Christians, on the one hand, and the 'others', mainly Muslims, on the other.

According to Chin et al., the comparison between Jewish and Turkish/Muslim experiences illustrates the complex calculus that is prevalent within biological and cultural conceptions of difference. Due to the genocide of European Jews in the name of racial purity, it has become commonplace in Western democracies to refuse the language of 'race' (Goldberg 2008:334). One consequence of this development has been the rejection of biology and the increasing turn to **culture** as an explanation for fundamental differences between peoples, what Etienne Balibar describes as "neo-racism" (Balibar 1991:21). Chin et al. (2009:13) argue that **the Jewish as well as the Muslim 'question' demonstrate that notions based on cultural difference have always existed next to their biological counterparts.** In the context of anti-Semitism,

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<sup>8</sup> A survey conducted in 2006 showed that more than three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they associate Islam with the oppression of women (FAZ 6.6.2006).

Jewish religious practices and habits proved their essential otherness from Germans. In a similar way, German conservatives express their fears about Muslim cultural difference by condemning what they perceive as Islamic-driven forms of behavior. In both examples, neither the cultural nor the biological is fully absent from a racialized concept of difference (Chin et al., 2009:14).

### **3. Gender**

In the context of constructing racial differences, especially in claiming superiority of one race over another or in efforts to maintain racial purity, the issue of gender has played a central role. Using the examples of the Third Reich and current discourse on multiculturalism, I want to illustrate how gender has been or is being used as a tool for constructing racial differences in Germany.

As the case of Germany shows, modern nationalism was concerned with sexual control and restraint as part of the larger effort to cope with complex social and political changes (Vertinsky, 2009: 332).<sup>9</sup> The Nazis had transformed the pre-racialist idea of culture versus barbarism into pure racism:

Jews and Slavs, both from the East, have become the white desexualized mother-sister ideal, guardian of culture and morals and guarantee and basis of a patriarchal identity. The ideal German man was not only a reflection of the classical Greek warrior-hero-athlete, he had become (...) lithe and tall, with steel-hard muscles and firm flesh, blond hair, blue eyes, and a particular clarity of skin. (Vertinsky, 1998:332)

The Third Reich regime was virulently antinatalist regarding non-Aryan reproduction and pronatalist regarding Aryan procreation. At that time, new regulations were enforced which aimed at controlling the social as well as sexual preferences of Aryan women – who were considered eugenically and racially useful as reproducers of the “Volk” – towards Aryan male partners (Fehrenbach 2009:34). In order to avoid ‘Rassenschande’ (‘racial pollution’), any sort of relations between those women and racially ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ men -- whether Black, Jewish, Soviet or Polish -- were forbidden and sanctioned. However, the same was not applicable for Aryan men, who maintained the right to have interracial sex and wartime rape, provided it was nonreproductive (*ibid.*). The National Socialists enforced a culture based on a “racialization of sex” in which the bodies of Aryan women were strictly regulated while the bodies of non-Aryan women were violently exploited. Herewith, the sexuality of

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<sup>9</sup> With reference to the building of the German nation-state, the importance of drawing boundaries to ‘other’ Vertinsky further states that the “emergence of the modern state stimulated new imperatives to control and discipline the body as the idea of nationalism and the emerging concept of national identity became potent devices to define the boundaries between normality and deviancy, masculinity and femininity, health and sickness, beauty and ugliness, and to provide an appropriate vocabulary for the sense of difference” (Vertinsky, 1998: 333).



women was instrumentalized for certain political goals by a regime set on enforcing a hyperracial state. As the German case illustrates, nationalism and the question of sexuality and gender are interrelated phenomena (Vertinsky 1998:332).

With the arrival of the occupation forces after the defeat of the Nazis, the restrictive Aryan exclusivity regarding German women's sexual relations ended too. After the end of WWII, it was not just their previous enemies that returned to Germany but their declared racial enemies<sup>10</sup> as well (ib). The consequences for German women were that the restrictive Aryanized sexual culture of the Nazi regime gave way to a broader range of choice in sexual partners and social interactions (ib).

Using the gender category as a demarcation line between 'us' and 'them' is not just a thing of the past, found only at the time of the creation of the German nation-state or during the Nazi regime. Currently, in the context of the multiculturalism discourse, **at a time when Germany is trying to redefine itself as an immigrant society and to adjust its national identity, gender plays a central role.** Gender helps to secure the 'us' by creating the Muslim/migrant 'other' as culturally different (Rostock et al. 2008:346). The debate on integration and the obligations of immigrants is occurring under the pretext of preventing the violation of women's rights. The perceived oppression of Muslim women -- presumably confirmed by the headscarf, forced marriages and honor killings -- serves to substantiate the notion that Islam is not part of Germany (ib). Gender equality serves as a marker of liberal German society. Migrant women are usually portrayed as victims, either of Turkish men or of German society. The oversimplified illustration of the oppressed Muslim woman usually goes hand in hand with a claim of superiority on the part of German society in general (Rostock et al. 2008:352).

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<sup>10</sup> Jews, Blacks, slaves who served in allied armies or were liberated as slave laborers, or death and concentration camp survivors, all counted as 'racial enemies.'

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