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Same same but different: Integration discourse raises questions in US and Germany

The worry that foreigners unwilling to assimilate pose a threat to the "host" culture is common to many nations. But a comparison between debates in Germany and the United States suggests they shed more heat than light.

With the publication of his book "Deutschland schafft sich ab" ("Germany abolishes itself") in late August, banker and politician Thilo Sarrazin gifted the German media an incendiary topic for the autumn. Among the book's controversial theses is the idea that higher fertility rates would allow non-assimilated Muslims to dominate Germany in the not-too-distant future.

The book tapped into fears among some Germans that German culture and the German way of life is in danger. But the discussions engendered were reminiscent of similar debates in other cultures.

In the United States, the publication in 2004 of a book entitled "Who are We?" by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington sparked discussions about whether the increasing prevalence of Spanish-speaking Americans would bifurcate US culture and threaten what the author called the American "creed" of enlightenment democracy.

But though the subject matters are seemingly similar, the levels of discourse in the two debates are very different. German immigration expert Klaus J. Bade praises Sarrazin for pointing up abuse of the German welfare system by migrants and Germans. But he takes the author to task in other areas.

"Huntington's book was more scientifically informed, whereas Sarrazin knows as much about demography as I do about his specialty, state finances: namely just bits and pieces," Bade told Deutsche Welle. "In this field he's a populist writer who partly trades in cheap commonplaces and looks for statistical evidence for pre-conceived ideas - the exact opposite of the scientific method. It's what we call beer-coaster demographics."

And the difference between a demagogue and a respected professor is not the only respect in which superficial similarities fall apart.

Apples and oranges

Debates in Germany and the US about whether immigrants are sufficiently assimilating are inflected by the different histories and demographics of the two countries.

The United States is a nation with a growing population and a rising number of immigrants, which from its very inception embraced the idea of foreigners becoming citizens. Germany, on the other hand, has stagnant population and immigration and was traditionally wary of taking in non-Germans looking to better their lots in life.

"Social integration and acknowledgement of the dialogue with Muslim communities - these things have developed over the past few years," Philip Anderson, professor of social sciences at the University of Regensburg, told Deutsche Welle. "But there needs to be more

of that and far less of the fear of a sullyng of the German identity and sometimes even German blood."

Debates about assimilation in Germany and in other Western European countries are additionally heated because most of the foreign residents and immigrants in question are Muslim. But Klaus Bade warns against seeing them as a homogeneous group.

"There's no such thing as a single Muslim group in Germany," Bade said. "Immigration from Iran, for example, centered on elites who had little problem integrating into German society. Immigrant Turks tended to come from rural Anatolia, and not Istanbul, and so there were educational problems, especially three generations ago. But that had nothing to do with them being Muslims. Problems among Italian immigrants, for instance, were and still are worse."

Self-fulfilling prophecies

Sarrazin has had to step down from his job on the board of Germany's Federal Bank, and may yet lose his membership in the Social Democratic Party for his ill-advised and ill-informed opinions. But is there anything to the points he - or Huntington - raised? Can demographic changes mean the end of a language, a culture and a way of life?

"There is an aspect comparable between both books, namely the vision of a competition between cultures," Bade said. "But competition is not the same thing as total war. Moreover, we should think less about groups and systems and more about individuals. For many people the Huntington book has something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's a circular argument that echoes older fears about the decline and fall of Western civilization. This seems, on a national level, comparable to Sarrazin's message."

In other words, warnings about conflicts of civilizations - to paraphrase the title of another of Huntington's books - tend to create the sort of tension they claim to be decrying.

"Generally there is far more acceptance - especially in the cities, where people lived together - than is usually acknowledged," Anderson said. "Politicians need to push that as a positive image of how people are getting on."

For Bade, reasoning that fails to distinguish and differentiate between individual attitudes among immigrants and resident aliens is inherently faulty.

"When asked 'When did you last go to a mosque,' many European Muslims may not know where the nearest one is or may respond: 'For religious or cultural reasons?' That's comparable to the way many Christians feel who may go to church to look at art or attend a wedding. There's an infinite number of hybrid forms and milieus of Islam, and from one generation to another Muslims themselves will - hopefully - adapt more and more to European civilization as they did and still do in the US."

Culture is constantly in flux, and demographic changes, of course, bring cultural shifts with them. But a "host" culture being taken over by a monolithic foreign group, say experts, is one thing neither Americans nor Germans need to fear.

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