

The Problem with Culture: Politics of Integration between Recognition
and Discrimination

The Case of the German Social Democratic Party

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Introduction

The 2015 MIPEX report¹ recently published its newest ranking. For the first time Germany made it into the “top ten” of the renowned Belgian think tank's integration policy index. The aftermaths of the country's work migrant recruitment policies in the 1950's and 60's for the longest time prevented German politicians from seriously facing the challenge of integration, leaving the country to lack behind its Western European neighbours in integration policies (Schönwälder, 2010). Today, the think tank argues that Germany's newest political reforms lead the country to slowly become an international role model for good integration politics (MIPEX 2015). Despite this overall positive trend for the German integration policies, some results of the ranking, though, are worrying: Germany was ranked place 22nd in respect to antidiscrimination policies, much below Western European countries' average (MIPEX, 2015).²

Through phenomena such as reethnicisation, experienced or subjectively perceived discrimination can lead to the disintegration of immigrants. It creates a vicious circle that results in an even increased potential for immigrants to become victims of (ethnic) discrimination (Skrobanek, 2007). The negative effect discrimination has on successful integration, therefore, needs to be minimized through an effective antidiscrimination policy as well as a sensitivity of politics of integration not to reinforce negative stereotypes against immigrants that serve as the basis for ethnic discrimination (Uslucan & Yalcin, 2012, p. 22). Critics of multiculturalism remark that within integration politics an over-emphasis on cultural difference creates an *us versus them* mentality through *othering* immigrants and their cultural identity, creating potential for discrimination and justifying discriminatory structures in societies by reinforcing existing stereotypes (Phillips 2007, p.31). These scholars either argue for a *Multiculturalism without Culture* (Phillips, 2007) or see a retreat from multicultural politics in western

¹ The “Migrant Integration Policy Index” (MIPEX) is a tool developed by the Belgian think tank "Migration Policy Group". It evaluates policies to integrate migrants in 38 countries on the basis 167 policy indicators (MIPEX 2015).

² The countries that score the lowest in respect to anti-discrimination policies next to Germany are Iceland, Turkey, Austria, and Check Republic. The highest ranked countries for this field of policy are Canada, the US as well as the UK.

democracies as a result of cultural recognition (Schönwälder, 2010; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). At the same time, scholars promoting a politics of recognition argue that policies need to be designed in a way that acknowledges immigrants' cultural identity. A lack of recognition for immigrants' cultural identity is believed to enable discriminatory practices of governments and foster an environment for structural discriminations just as well (Habermas, 1994; Taylor, 1994). This leaves integration politics with a dilemma: either governments recognise cultural difference and act on it, possibly leading to discrimination based on an over-emphasis on cultural difference and with that the reproduction of stereotypes; or they retire from multiculturalism and cultural acknowledgement, which again carries the threat to discriminate against certain cultural groups.

To explore how this dilemma works out in practice, I take the German Social Democratic Party as a case study and ask the question: What approach for cultural recognition does the German Social Democratic Party take in their politics of integration and does it consider antidiscrimination politics as an integral part of their policies? For this purpose, various publications on cultural recognition of immigrant by the party between 2009 and 2015 were analysed. To answer this question is crucial, not only because of the mentioned influence discrimination has on integration, but also in the light of the political struggles other western European countries are facing due to the rise of right wing populism. I argue that the challenge for multicultural politics of recognition comes from treading the fine line between fostering integration on the one hand and provoking discrimination on the other. As a solution for this dilemma, I propose, antidiscrimination policies need to become an integral part of politics of recognition if the disintegration of immigrants is to be prevented.

The Struggle of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD)

Being the oldest and one of the two largest political party's in Germany, the SPD has in recent years put special emphasis on the importance integration policies play within their party political framework (SPD, 2007). One

focus point of the SPD's integration policies is the preservation of societal solidarity and social cohesion. In its programme from 2007 the party states that it aims to build on

“the strengths of the solidary civic society ... we want to strengthen cohesion in our country and foster a feeling of belonging and home...In Germany we want to nurture a culture of recognition: People should live together in mutual respect for the dignity, culture and achievements of their fellow citizens” (SPD, 2007, p. 6).

The party here, on the one hand refers to a notion of solidarity that can be interpreted as the solidarity of a homogeneous society. This is in line with Charles Taylor's argumentation, who, in his approach to a politics of recognition, argues, that the conflict between politics of difference and politics of equality can only be solved through a common societal purpose (Taylor 1992, p.51). The politics of equality grant all societal groups equal rights and guarantee their equal treatment. In contrast, the politics of difference emphasise cultural differences. As a means for establishing cultural recognition and integration of immigrants politics of difference use positive or reverse discrimination as a temporary means until a balanced or equal treatment of all societal groups can be installed again. These principles of equality and difference, according to Taylor, come in conflict in multicultural societies, because while one is difference blind, the other makes difference visible (Taylor, p.43). Such emphasis on the preservation of societal cohesion, though, Wilhelm Heitmeyer found out, is likely to foster feelings of resentments against immigrants and lead to discrimination. This is because a belief in social solidarity always carries the belief in a homogeneous societal group in it, and people who think that solidarity is in danger feel significantly more threatened by cultural diversity (Heitmeyer, 2011, p. 15). Here, the criticism of scholars arguing for multiculturalism without culture, therefore, would be justified. On the other hand the party designs a politics of recognition along the lines of equal dignity that respects the differences in culture as well as the resulting potential achievements of different cultural groups and with that, grants

equal acknowledgement to all cultures. Again, this is in line with Taylor's idea of a politics of equality.

Adding to this, the party emphasizes the importance of equal opportunities for all (minority) groups on the labour market and the educational system. In order to ensure this, the SPD requests immigrants to learn the German language. (2007, p.40). For this purpose the party initiated the instalment of so-called integration classes in 2004. The party considers these nation-wide integration programmes a great success for integration politics (Scholz, 2010, p. 1). Here, again a notion of politics of equality can be detected. The party aims for cultural recognition but sets a German culture as the common basis for this cultural recognition. In a press statement from 2010, the party emphasises especially the progress the orientation class of the integration-class programme created for immigrant integration. This class is responsible for teaching immigrants "our lawful, cultural and historical basis" (Scholz, 2010, p. 1). Here, it becomes visible that the party believes in the existence of a unifying German culture that is distinct from that of non-EU immigrants, and moreover, that notions of this culture need to be acquired by these immigrants in order to successfully integrate into society. The idea of an "unquestioned fact of cultural difference" that stands behind these classes is another aspect criticised about multiculturalism by its opponents (Phillips, 2007, p.31). It is seen as a way of "simplifying difference", resulting in the creation of rights that are based on the reproduction of cultural stereotypes (Phillips, p.31).

Further included in the SPD' party program is the believe that: "The state is not responsible for truth, neither philosophical, nor religious or historical, but for the conditions of truth seeking" (p.31-32). This represents the free negotiation of cultural recognition under a neutral constitution and based on reason, as Habermas put forward in his approach to a politics of recognition (Habermas, 1994, p. 134). Habermas criticizes Taylor's approach by stating that the conflict between politics of equality and politics of difference is falsely constructed (Habermas, 1994). He argues that individuals themselves have to come to a clear understanding about what interests and

representations are justified to be treated equal or unequal. The system of rights, he argues, is neither blind to difference nor the social condition in general. The SPD, in this statement, argues very much in line with this theory of a neutral constitution. The party argues that it is only the state's responsibility to create conditions in which values can be discussed and evaluated, also in respect to their recognition but that it is not the state's responsibility to decide on ultimate truths. To guarantee this, Habermas strongly promotes a politics of difference that is shaped by citizen action and social movements. The premise here is an inclusion of all cultural groups in this process, enabling a negotiation over cultural recognition that by acknowledging difference overcomes exclusion and cultural hierarchies. This is pursued by the SPD in their establishment of a Muslim task force, for example.

An important step for the party in reforming the recognition of immigrant identity on its own benches was the establishment of the Social Democratic Muslim task force in 2014. This is the first party political task force led by Muslims in Germany. After an already existing Christian and Jewish task force within the SPD the Muslim equivalent aims to "reduce stereotypes" and to "encourage political and societal participation of Muslims" (Peters, 2014, p. 1). The newspaper article on the task force quotes one of its members stating that: "Muslims are well able to integrate 'Islam is not a culture'." (Peters, 2014, p. 1). Here, agency and recognition are given to a minority group on the basis of equality. Interestingly, the chance to reform the identity constructed by an out-group is immediately taken. In differentiating between Islam and culture the members of the SPD group redefine their cultural identity by separating it from their religious identity. The establishment of the Muslim task force is therefore a good example for politics of recognition and their inclusive character in respect to political and societal discourse and their ability to redefine cultural identities.

The results of the analysis showed that the German Social Democratic party is very much concerned with the practicalities of cultural recognition of immigrants. The party is caught in exactly the dilemma that characterises multiculturalism. On the one hand, it wants to abandon negative stereotypes

and acknowledge the importance of immigration for the country. On the other hand it cannot liberate itself from concepts like solidarity that stem from a time where societies were believed to be monocultural. Overall, though, the party very much follows an approach of a politics of equality, recalling politics of assimilation. These threaten to reinforce a hegemony that puts the notion of a national culture on top of a hierarchical order between cultures. This might lead to an undermining of immigrant's cultural identity since the standard for equality is likely to be the standard of cultural norms produced by the majority (Taylor, p. 43). Here, apparently difference-blind policies are actually discriminatory, even if this might be unconsciously and subtle. This could only be avoided through a politics of difference, which is not fully explored by the party. Further, the risk of discrimination through a non-neutral but biased constitution is only acknowledged very limitedly. Antidiscrimination work as an important part of integration policies is generally neglected. An active promotion of minority rights through politics of difference is not considered and is only mirrored in two projects realised by the party such as the founding of a Muslim task force within the Social Democratic Party (Peters, 2014) and the SPD's support for the Establishment of an Islam Conference (Klinge, 2012).

The need for a Politics of Recognition

Especially after 9/11, scholars have claimed that multiculturalist politics and their emphasis on politics of cultural recognition led to discrimination and disintegration of immigrants and as a consequence Western democracies moved away from multiculturalism as a political answer to diversity (Gozdecka, Ercan, & Kmak, 2014; Malik, 2015; Phillips, 2007; Yuk, 2011). The analysis has shown that in some aspects the ways culture is used in the multiculturalist debate creates new obstacles to integration rather than fostering the evolvement of a nation of immigrants into a society of equals (Phillips, 2007, p. 31). I argue that the concepts discussed within politics of recognition as well as in its criticism are the idea of social cohesion or solidarity, cultural conflict, immigrant identity, and the identity of the majority

population. These can either be defined in a manner that gives way for cultural discrimination or presented in a form that creates a safe space for cultural acknowledgement of all cultural groups. The case study has shown that the multiculturalist dilemma is very prominent in the party politics of the SPD. Cultural recognition is an important aspect of successful integration and its concepts are valuable instruments in evaluating politics on integration, but it is not a substitute for antidiscrimination policies and cannot be pursued only in matters of politics of equality.

The MIPEX claims that one reason for Germany's climb into the top ten of the ranking are the setbacks other Western European countries have suffered from due to the rise of right wing populism. Populist parties adhere to a strong notion of a national culture that needs to be preserved and eventually saved from distinction through cultural plurality that occurs with immigration (Heitmeyer, 2007). Hence, right wing populism includes tendencies that will lead to discrimination of immigrants on the basis of their assumed cultural difference. The formation of the populist AfD (Alternative for Germany) and the civil movement Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the islamisation of the occident) threatens Germany to follow the path other western European countries have taken. A reflected politics of recognition that emphasises the importance of politics of difference without acting on a notion of solidarity can help counter such tendencies. What are to be abandoned, therefore, are notions of monocultural ways that reinforce hegemonic structures between minority group cultures and majority population cultures. Hence, the ideological notion of a national culture needs to be overcome. Cultural groups need to define themselves in their own terms and cannot be constituted by laws or governments. Governments must only guarantee recognition to groups that were constituted through societal discourse and not such that are created along the divisionary lines of a national and a foreign culture.

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