

UC Berkeley

TRANSIT

Title

The Limits of Multiculturalism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3n30b83n>

Journal

TRANSIT, 1(1)

Author

Karakayali, Serhat

Publication Date

2004-09-16

DOI

10.5070/T711009694

Peer reviewed

Since the antiracist debates of the 1990s, it has been proper parlance in leftist circles to speak of multiculturalism as a particular kind of racism. But what does the subject of racism have to do with multiculturalism? Even if one were to disregard the unreasonable conception that the subject is racist in the sense of a “full subordination of the individual under a paranoid system of meanings and perceptions of the world” (Demirovic 81), a link is all too quickly forged between the violent racism of Neo-Nazis and a concept of multiculturalism that was originally located in the context of antiracist practice. Succinctly put, “In the antiracist scene, it has lately become a common position to criticize multiculturalism in civil society as racism” (Bojadzijeve & Tsianos 35).

The use of the concept “racism” thus plays a dual, ambivalent role. In the 1990s, it took hold on the left as a political concept to describe local relations; throughout the 1980s, the term had been used more broadly in relation to South Africa’s *apartheid* regime or to describe “racial unrest” in the US. In contrast, racist practices and ideologies in the Federal Republic of Germany have been identified in part with the concept of xenophobia. While xenophobia appeared to have more to do with a subject’s diffuse and irrational disposition, “racism” engaged in a systematic dispute with discriminatory, racializing practices in state and societal relations. At the same time, in the post-War era in Europe, the term racism was linked with the *völkisch*-racist politics of National Socialism to the extent that the political weight of western liberal democracies’ condemnatory declarations resonated with the racism concept as well. Against this backdrop, allegations of racism were a political weapon not to be underestimated.

The universalizing application of antiracist theory and practices is problematic, due to the fact that it imitates racist rhetorical strategies. According to one antiracist discourse, racism is an illness for which the common entity (as a body) must be treated. In this sense, antiracism conceives of society as a body overtaken by a virus (Silverman 130). Along with the problematic biologicistic implications of such a view, a substantivist use of the racism concept also emerges.

Instead of analyzing multiculturalism as it manifests in societal relations, this latter approach seeks discursive aspects by which to associate it with “*the* racism.” Thus multiculturalism is often compared to South African segregationist *apartheid* politics, because both operate through culturalist ascriptions. These constructions have different meanings in either case, but are taken out of their respective contexts and transposed into others. The concrete relations disappear from view, along with the resistance practices of the subjugated, who are always also part of the racist picture and without whom there would be no permanent process of transforming racism.

Detecting racism in multiculturalism and defining it as part of a linear continuity with other forms of racist practices leads to a metaphysical theory of racism. Racism becomes an entity, an ultimately immutable “being” which changes and manifests in different forms, but always remains the same. This is not to claim that “racism has many faces,” but rather to comprehend racism as every relation of domination in which the construction of race is a central, constitutive element.

Multiculturalism: Modernized Racism?

If an unchanging racism simply cloaks itself in different ways, then it is also possible to describe multiculturalism as a modernized type of racism. This notion has emerged with increasing frequency in the debate on racism since the 1990s. At the end of the 1980s, the concept “modernization” was tantamount to a shift in political strategies and modes of domination. As if

one could easily point at the alleged “dominating fraction” that installs a new mode for exercising authority. This way of thinking included a top-down model of conceptualizing the political.

In particular, the Red-Green coalition government and its corresponding civil societal “milieus” seemed to be the perfect example to prove this domination model. The function of modern civil-societal multiculturalism was thus described as a domination “trick.” The autonomous l.u.p.u.s. group in the early 1990s claimed that the difference between National Socialism and dominance in liberal democratic regimes is based on an agreement between the “politicians, industrialists, and the military.” They have “learned from the consequences of Nazism [and] ‘reworked’ it in their own way to technologize and modernize dominance” (l.u.p.u.s. 36).

Thus, the leftist critique of multiculturalism was achieved largely at the cost of crude simplifications. Putting aside the conspiratorial aspect of the notion that there would be a group of leaders agreeing on how to rule the world—the concept ignores what is coming from below.

Difficulties in the dispute with multiculturalism have to do, in part, with its position in the discourse on antiracism. Every antiracist praxis develops primarily against the respective dominating form of racist rule. Thus universalist antiracism positions itself against a racism structured primarily through the segregation that produces legal, social,

and political exclusions on the basis of race constructions. Universalist antiracism, therefore, claims equality and the need to ignore the differences that have previously served as objects of discrimination. Then there was also a universalism which had racist repression written into it: a universalism according to which everyone is French who is born in France but also must adopt a “French name”. The culture of universal human rights is allegedly French/European. The “right to difference” thus developed as a reaction to the terror of assimilation mapped out in the colonial context. Anti-colonialist struggles themselves operate through markers of difference. This counter-identification of “the Other” acts as a mirror to the Eurocentric construction of self. This mechanism of the “identification and counter-identification obeys the dominators’ culturalist ideology” (Müller 39) and also causes antiracism to become caught between assimilation and difference.

How can a politics be forged which enunciates the right to difference, but also intends to overcome them—that is to say, which does not lead to exclusion amid the differences? Multiculturalism appeared to represent the answer to this problem: a concept based on recognizing difference and rejecting the pressure to assimilate, but which also opens up the possibility of political equalization—or so it would seem.

The problematic double position of an antiracism which argues differentially became clear when law intervened in the discourse on multiculturalism in various ways. On the one hand, this occurred by way of a procedure which Taguieff called “retorsion”: the reversal of the political meanings of corresponding concepts (212). All the ways of speaking which once served in the anti-colonialist struggle to attack subjugation under the colonial system were then summarily turned against migrants. Whereupon the “right to difference” shall apply primarily to the inhabitants of the European metropolis—a right which will be constructed through keeping immigrants “at a distance.” On the other hand, there was and still is a denunciation of differential politics in the name of universalism, which targeted anti-discrimination ordinations and affirmative action programs. The Tories campaigned with the image of an Afro-Briton accompanied by the following slogan “For Labor it is a Black; for the Tories he is a Briton!” In essence, the retorsion effect consisted of a reification of this topos into the form of a

culturalization of difference, via the politics of the New Right. From this point of view, cultures are thus impregnable barriers and politics is not possible (Cf. Müller 38).

In the strategy of multiculturalism as antiracism, this culturalistic decoy reproduces itself in a similar way. Cultural diversity shall certainly supersede racism. The problem is however that the conditions for separating between one's "own" and the "foreign" culture are not scrutinized. In this way, the social conditions under which the various cultures are supposed to coexist in one society are fixed. Racism is then defined as an irrational phenomenon which does not come from the society, but rather from outside, whether from the state which leads people to need racism, or from single individuals who are ignorant or were poorly educated.

Multiculturalism in the FRG

The concept of multiculturalism in the Federal Republic of Germany was primarily a concept of political struggle developed and proliferated by German intellectuals. So it is primarily a concept that the majority society developed for dealing with the "non-German." As a concept of political struggle, it served above all as a counter-model to conservative and *völkisch* strategies. In this way, the emerging alternative-leftist civil society distinguished itself from the established parties, even from the Social Democrats. From this latter party, it was not exactly uncommon to hear that "guestworkers" should make way for German workers in times of crisis and then "go back home" again—even in the 1980s when many of the "guests" already had lived for 15-20 years in Germany.

Nevertheless, talk of the "guestworker" began to be put into question in that period—by parts of the leftist social democracy, by the emerging alternative scene and church circles, as well as by organized migrants themselves. It became increasingly clear that a large portion of the labor migrants would not be leaving Germany in much of a hurry. The rotation models, designed precisely to hinder this permanent residence, were dismantled and, in their stead, relatively broad guidelines emerged by which families could join their labor migrant relatives in Germany. These regulations were simply responding to the fact that many labor migrants had already lived in Germany for a long time, and also to the fact that the constant cycling-through of labor personnel was not entirely in the interest of employers. It was precisely this immigration of family members that added a *de facto* immigration to this particular situation. While it certainly came to be recognized that the labor migrants lived here permanently or semi-permanently, it was also assumed that, as foreigners, they should possess guest-status and enjoy no political rights.

The concept of multiculturalism also advocated a basic acknowledgement that these numerous "guests" were nothing of the sort. The massive campaigns against migrants in the early 1980s demonstrated that this acknowledgement was not shared by large parts of the society and the establishment. On various levels, government and opposition began to question the presence of labor migrants and refugees. In 1983, the Kohl government went so far as to declare that the foreigner question would be one of the four key points of its "Urgent Program". While Kohl and Interior Minister Zimmermann pursued the ambitious goal of "sending back" (as it was called then) one million foreigners, a broad resistance formed against this policy, spanning from the Social Democrats to unions and churches to the Greens. The mainstream happily debated the modalities of promoting a "return home": should we liquidate and pay out the remainder of workers' unemployment insurance, or even their retirement savings contributions (of course only on the workers' side), or could it be paid out at all? And when it became clear that it could not, the few who actually wanted to go back anyway got a few thousand Marks.

For migrants, multiculturalism had ambivalent effects, it could also be useful in rejecting

demands for assimilation. However, by and large, multicultural political praxis established itself only on municipal levels. Particularly in this vein, one of the effects of multiculturalism was that it extended an opportunity for migrants to participate politically, socially, and culturally in the political and cultural life of the Federal Republic. For years, foreigner laws and politics had hindered political participation and galvanized those movements who had advocated homeland-oriented “Promotion of the Home Culture.” The consequences of this promotional culture varied from the banal phenomenon that culinary exoticization of migrants made many of them into (gastronomic) employers, to the literature industry, to political work in institutions such as the RAA (Regional Work Centers for the Support of Children and Youth from Immigrant Families) and intercultural bureaus, to heritage language education in schools, and support of Turkish hip-hop through youth centers, etc. (Cf. Terkessidis 81).

The shift of the dispute onto the field of culture contributed to a depoliticization: first of all by means of the culturalistic ascriptions which migrants then had to fulfill, given that multiculturalism was supposed to “enrich” Germany. The Strategy of Multiculturalists was to present the doom scenarios among immigration opponents by way of an antidote. It was alleged that migrants are not just a problem, but that they had brought something with them as well: namely pizza and *döner*-kebabs. Therefore, one had to serve tea and do folkdances, know about one’s “own culture” better than any cultural scholar, and if you were named Gülden or Dragan but did not speak Turkish or Serbo-Croatian, then it was seen as “really crude that you cannot speak your own language.”

Only those who accepted the multiculturalism paradigm could take part. It was generally those “display Kanaks” of the recently emerged Kanak middle class who could formulate demands and lobby high and low, but had to remain in the service of multicultural togetherness. Representation of migrants in multiculturalism was thus a fake, since if the “social relations are not thematized, the representation efforts of migrants lead to nothing. In the face of racism as political-legal exclusion, migrants’ efforts in the culture apparatus [...] has a specific political dimension, which they themselves hardly recognize. Representation in the sense of public visibility and representation in the political sense of advocating for interests are often mistaken for one another” (Ayata 10).

The Bureau for Multicultural Affairs

The example of the Bureau for Multicultural Affairs, unique nationwide, aptly demonstrates that most of the well-known cases in which it has engaged in political action are indicative of ambivalent practices of conflict management. They show that its supposed role as a lobby for Frankfurters without German passports (Vives 93) is permanently crippled and rendered dubious by the realities of the Foreigner Law and the pragmatism of the BMA-functionaries. Simultaneously, it often had the function of representing the interests of Germans who felt aggravated by migrants’ presence, such as in the BMA’s intervention in the conflict around the so-called Polish Market. Another aspect is that only those groups who are organized in some way can articulate their interests to the BMA at all, let alone realize them (Cf. Vives 93). To the extent that institutions such as the BMA expect migrants to develop institutionalized channels of address, they therefore contribute to the fact that organizations emerge—or existing organizations allocate a new branch of their work—in order to align with this kind of local politics. This subordinating inclusion of sectors of migrants is thus organized upon the background of a complete suppression of the social and political relations in which migrants in Germany live. It is alleged that Germans and migrants ought to respect and tolerate each other—

which is always linked to a particular demand upon the migrants. It is they who had to learn how to observe the cultural customs of Germans. What is remarkable here is that such rhetoric is primarily addressed to the majority population for whom the presence of migrants is to be made palatable. Perpetuation of the culturalistic dichotomy between self and other makes this possible. The result is de-politicization.

The Quest for the Holy Grail

In the 1990s, multiculturalism was primarily criticized based on arguments which are attributable to the universalistic anti-racism complex. Universalistic anti-racism was however not only too general, it also did not see that the problems arising from counter-identification could not simply be ignored and idealistically defined away. Rendering the real differences invisible—above all, those brought into the world through racism—could be just as problematic as their permanent recurrence. In the USA, affirmative action programs make this much more clear than it is here.

The whole debate around multiculturalism and universalist anti-racism is however itself captured in an identity-political image. Hybridity and identity guerillas represent mere abstract answers that ignore the social struggles against racism and often tend to avoid clarifying important questions by resorting to charges of identity politics. Consequently the ambivalence of minority strategies, which are based on ascribed and bestowed identarian markers, cannot even be recognized. (Bojadzijeve & Tsianos 38)

Attacking multiculturalism cannot mean attacking culturalization “in itself.” The different elements *an sich* have no political meaning, whether it be the identarian marker or recourse to a different culture. To draw the conclusion from the experience of retorsion—of the reversal and appropriation of emancipatory content by new right—that ground has thus been lost, has shown itself to be hardly a fruitful path. Also the attitude for which every retorsion process delivered proof, that the retorsing position must have been false from the outset, only favored the fatal search for the *correct* correct politics, one which would never be able to be reversed. Thus the leftist discussion at the moment on racism and antiracism finds itself caught between two predominant results of this search: identity guerillas and radical identity critique.

What must be of concern today—project *Kanak Attak* stands for this among others—to develop an antiracism in which the identities acquired in the struggle against racism will be historically and societally contextualized instead of being summarily repudiated or simply rejected. The criteria of political utility in the struggle against racism cannot be extracted from a “theory of resistance.” Since racist relations generated not only an ethnicized class as victims of racism, but also as diverse subjects and practices against it, it is the history of migrants itself which must be taken up and transformed.

Struggles against racist relations change not only because “racism” is always modernizing itself, but also because the struggle against “it” includes its own dynamics which also always historically reconstruct the migrant group.

Works Cited

autonome l.u.p.u.s. gruppe. *Geschichte, Rassismus und das Boot. Wessen Kampf gegen welche Verhältnisse*. Berlin: Edition ID Archiv, 1990.

Ayata, Imran. “Heute die Gesichter, morgen die Ärsche.” *Spex* 11(1999): 10-11.

Bojadzijeve, Manuela and Vassilis Tsianos. “Mit den besten Absichten. Spuren des migrantischen

- Widerstands." *iz3w* (Informationszentrum Dritte Welt-Freiburg) 244 (2000): 35-38.
- Demirovic, Alex. "Vom Vorurteil zum Neo-Rassismus. Das Objekt ‚Rassismus‘ in Ideologiekritik und Ideologietheorie." *Die freundliche Zivilgesellschaft*. Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1992. 73-94.
- Höhne, Thomas. "StatePeopleCitizenship: Notes on Citizenship, Nationality, and the 'Foreign.'" *Diskus* 1/99 (1999): 25-30.
- Mestre Vives, Laura. *Wer, wie über wen? Eine Untersuchung über das Amt für multikulturelle Angelegenheiten*. Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1998.
- Müller, Jost. "Rassismus und die Fallstricke des gewöhnlichen Antirassismus." *Die freundliche Zivilgesellschaft*. Berlin: Edition ID Archiv, 1992. 25-44.
- Ruf, Werner. *Die algerische Tragödie*. Münster: agenda, 1997.
- Silverman, Maxim. *Rassismus und Nation. Einwanderung und Krise des Nationalstaats in Frankreich*. Hamburg: Argument, 1994.
- Terkessidis, Mark. *Migranten*. Berlin: Rotbuch, 2000.
- Taguieff, Pierre-André. "Die ideologischen Metamorphosen des Rassismus und die Krise des Antirassismus." *Das Eigene und das Fremde. Neuer Rassismus in der alten Welt?* Ed. Uli Bielefeld. Hamburg: Junius, 1991. 221-68.