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# EUROPE'S BACKLASH AGAINST MULTICULTURALISM[1]

*Jan Rath*[*]

In summer 2010, the world championship for men's national soccer teams was held in South Africa, the country that after many years of painful struggle prevailed over Apartheid. Spain won the tournament, but the revelation was Germany. Although Germany's is historically one of the most successful national teams, the calculating, unimaginative way the team used to play was not always much appreciated. Throughout the 2010 tournament, however, Germany impressed fans by playing an attractive, aggressive soccer game. After the rousing 4-1 victory over England, the *Welt am Sonntag* (Frommann 2010) exclaimed, "With courage and strength the German footballers were knocking on the gates of heaven. The happy ending for the midsummer fairy tale is getting closer." The team, interestingly enough, represented the new, multicultural Germany. Five players were born outside the country (in Poland, Yugoslavia, and Brazil), one had dual German-Ghanaian nationality, and several others were second-generation immigrants of Nigerian, Spanish, Tunisian, and Turkish origin. Christian Seifert, CEO of the German Football League, was jubilant: "[Germany] is a multi-cultural society where people come, where people live, where people love to be, and the national team as you see it is very different from those of former days. In 1998, all those who played for Germany had German parents. Right now we have a lot of players with migrant backgrounds. . . . So, today's German national team is proof of the success of the German national model" (Goal 2010).

Later that summer, German Bundeskanzler Angela Merkel made a public statement saying that the attempts to build a multicultural society in Germany had "utterly failed." Her comments came amid an intense debate about immigration and multiculturalism or, to be more precise, the death of *Multikulti*. The polemic first heated up in August when a former Social Democratic senator and senior official at Germany's central bank, Thilo Sarrazin, published a book with

[1] An earlier version of this article was published by the *Harvard International Review*, January 6, 2011, http://hir.harvard.edu/debating-multiculturalism?page=0,0.

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the provocative title *Deutschland schabt sich ab* (Germany Is Digging Its Own Grave) (2010). He stated that "no immigrant group other than Muslims is so strongly connected with claims on the welfare state and crime." These immigrant groups would be unwilling and incapable of integrating into the mainstream, something that according to Sarrazin would be due to their gene pool. Many people were appalled to hear such statements 65 years after World War II and accused him of racism and anti-Semitism. But the senator has already sold more than one million copies of the book. Furthermore, various surveys showed that approximately one-third of the German population believed the country had been "overrun by foreigners." Meanwhile, anti-immigrant political parties (initially Die Republikaner and later Die Freiheit) had been carving out a niche in the German electoral market, while mainstream parties, the Christian Democrats in particular, had become anxious about their electoral position. One really wonders how it is possible that the country that enthusiastically embraced multiculturalism during the World Cup condemned it so loudly less than three months later. So much for the midsummer fairy tale.

Germany is apparently confused about immigration and its resulting ethnic and religious diversity. Two years later, at the European championships, the German soccer team failed to qualify for the finals again. This time the popular German newspaper *Bild* (2012) struck a different tone, arguing that the players with immigrant backgrounds were to blame for this failure, as they refrained from singing the national anthem. But Germany is not the only country experiencing this: we are witnessing similar situations in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Governments in these countries, which until recently in various ways and with differing levels of intensity welcomed immigrants and even invited them to settle and allowed or encouraged them to establish their own institutions, shifted gears to embark on restrictive immigration and tougher integration policies, placing increasing emphasis on native norms, values, and behavior and on disciplining the "Other." The "new realism" that has informed this shift has been accompanied by fierce criticism of the "ethnic minorities industry," i.e., the self-proclaimed leadership of immigrant ethnic and religious minorities, the native white advocates of multiculturalism, as well as their institutions. In so doing, the political leadership felt it ought to respond to the smoldering discontent among parts of the native white population and to the plethora of populist, anti-immigrant parties that had so successfully won the hearts of the discontented. In several cases, including Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands, these parties even managed to become part of or closely associated with the ruling government. Although bigots, racists, fascists, and neo-Nazis gravitate to these radical parties, it would be too simple to say that each and every supporter is a neo-Nazi in disguise.

What, then, is happening in Europe nowadays? Has Europe been taken hostage by a bunch of twisted political entrepreneurs who have lost their minds, forgotten the lessons of 1933-1945 and the holocaust, and who are trying to gain political influence by trampling on immigrant ethnic and religious minorities? Or is it that Europeans have been too naive with regard to accepting individuals and groups from countries that are —or are seen as— culturally distant from the imagined national centers? Or should the current political mood be explained as a reaction to the politics of obstinate, left-wing lunatics and prophets of boundless multiculturalism?

There are no easy answers. In practice, things are much more complicated than popular wisdom suggests, and a wider perspective is needed to fully comprehend the current developments. Let us briefly examine a number of aspects.

First of all, it remains to be seen that we are dealing with a uniquely European situation. The rise of populist political movements that capitalize on anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural, and anti-government sentiments, religious fundamentalism, and narrow-minded nationalism can also be observed elsewhere. Take the United States. The recent immigration enforcement legislation in Arizona, the rise of the Tea Party with their swipes at minorities, and some of the recent electoral campaigns only serve to demonstrate that Europe is not alone. Australia, a country once notorious for its White Australian policy in days of yore, shifted to multiculturalism in the 1970s, but had already abolished its unconditional embrace of multiculturalism by the 1990s. This coincided with the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party. Mrs. Hanson was by no means a friend of immigration and diversity. She was quoted as saying, "I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians," and, "Of course, I will be called racist but, if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country," and she complained constantly about "reverse racism" and "political correctness" (*The Australian* 2010). One Nation never constituted a government, but her influence was unarguably huge. Since the 1990s, Australia has been advocating the idea of a "shared national identity' (with a remarkably high appreciation of the Anglo-Celtic heritage). Canada has treasured the public acceptance of ethnic and religious difference and support of cultural pluralism as a core element of its identity since the early 1970s. But Canada, too, hit upon the limits of multiculturalism, and the call for what has euphemistically come to be known as "reasonable accommodation" resounds loudly in the public realm today. It is unarguably true that these "classical countries of immigration" are more inclined to accept immigration as a fact of life and are not shocked when newcomers constitute ethnic enclaves. In that sense, everything is relative. For cultural backlash is everywhere and certainly not confined to Europe.

Secondly, it also remains to be seen that we are witnessing a rise of concerns about immigration and cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. As early as 1968,

the British Conservative leader Enoch Powell made a rather controversial speech in which he warned against "rivers of blood" due to what he saw as the continued unchecked immigration from the Commonwealth to Britain and the "race-relations problems" subsequent to that. His speech with its open appeal to racial hatred was declared "evil" at the time, but it inspired Margaret Thatcher (who had become prime minister shortly afterwards) to use the gist of his argument for her immigration and race-relations policies. A noteworthy side-effect was that by adopting a strong position, Thatcher stole the National Front's thunder, resulting in the demise of this racist party and a further rise of the Tory Party. In France, maverick politician Jean Marie Le Pen rose to prominence in the 1980s. He gained widespread popularity with his nationalist, anti-immigration platform. The very fact that he repeatedly denied the holocaust and put anti-Semitic slurs on Jewish politicians did not prevent numerous French voters from supporting him as candidate for the position of *président de la république*. Other politicians tried to take the wind out of Le Pen's sails by reaching out to xenophobic voters. In 1989, President Mitterrand said, "Il y a un seuil de tolérance" (there is a threshold of tolerance), implying that immigrants were a nuisance indeed and that the proportion of immigrants present in a population had to be minimized. Jacques Chirac joined this lamentation by complaining about "du bruit et des odeurs" (the noises and the smells) generated by African immigrants. Many voters grasped the message only too well. In Austria, Jörg Haider was a successful regional politician before he joined the national government in 2000. He was notorious for his offensive statements about immigration and immigrants, Muslim immigrants in particular, whose attitude and behavior were in his eyes incompatible with "Western" ones. In other countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, similar political situations arose. Peculiarly enough, many observers have a rather short memory when it comes to these matters. In the Netherlands, the country that likes to cherish the self-image of tolerance and the live-and-let-live mentality, it is often claimed that problematizing immigration and multiculturalism was not PC until very recently. The government pursued a multicultural policy —so it is believed— but not one single individual dared make any critical comment. Apart from the fact that the Netherlands never pursued such a policy —at best it paid lip service to the maintenance of ethnic and religious difference—, the critics apparently failed to notice the intense media debates in the early 1980s, or the election of dozens of racist politicians to Parliament and local councils since the early 1980s. Perhaps they were beamed up to the Starship Enterprise during these spectacular events. What is relevant here is that concerns about immigration and diversity have been voiced for quite a long time. So, what else is new?

Thirdly, discussions about immigrant ethnic and religious minorities and their relations with the mainstream are often dogged by explicit or implicit references to

Europe's Judeo-Christian tradition and its incompatibility with that of immigrants. Immigrants from Muslim traditions in particular are supposedly incapable of embracing modern norms, values, and behavior, and have little or no understanding of democracy, gender equality, acceptance of homosexuality, and so forth. (This argument is never used in reference to highly-skilled and wealthy immigrants from Japan or visitors from the Vatican.) These references, however, are not unproblematic. To the extent that such a tradition exists, there is a lot to be said against it. It was in the name of Christianity that soldiers and tradesmen sailed the ocean in sunshine, wind, and rain to conquer the rest of the world. Trade wars, looting, slavery, and colonial exploitation were only a few of the blessings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Judeo-Christian tradition, moreover, could not prevent two world wars, nor the holocaust, nor the troubles in Northern Ireland, nor the mass expulsion of Roma from France. References to the Judeo-Christian tradition, furthermore, fail to appreciate the fact that Europe is rapidly secularizing, or that people of other religions or cultures have historically been subjects of Europe's nation-states. Islam is often regarded as an immigrant religion, as something entirely new, but this obscures the historical presence of indigenous Muslims in Eastern Europe or the presence of Muslims in (former) colonial areas. The United Kingdom, the French republic and the kingdom of the Netherlands ruled many millions of Muslims in the Middle East, Northern Africa, India and Pakistan, and Indonesia. But even if we imagined a Europe without Muslims —a purely theoretical exercise of course, just for the sake of argument—, we would find immense internal diversity. Those who refer to the Judeo-Christian tradition may pretend that Europe is a cultural unit existing within clear-cut boundaries, but the opposite is true. In fact, all references to this tradition mainly serve the construction of Europe as a coherent and cohesive unit.

Fourthly, discussions about the ethnic or religious Other always pertain to fixed imaginary categories. The category of Muslims, then, invariably encompasses men with long beards in white dresses, silenced women with head scarves or burkas, and agitated young men who make anti-Semitic statements about Jews and Israel and abuse homosexuals. All Muslim immigrants are supposedly ignorant people with insufficient proficiency in the host country's language, people with unskilled jobs —if they are employed at all—, and people who live in inner-city working class areas or the *banlieues*, people who, in the words of the Somali anti-Muslim and anti-multiculturalism activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, never read the famous works of Voltaire, in short, folks who do not conform to mainstream norms, values, attitudes, who failed to notice the Enlightenment, who missed the boat to modernity, and who live parallel lives. Sure enough, those people do exist. But there are numerous other Muslim immigrants who do not conform to these inane stereotypes. In fact, the overwhelming majority of "Muslims" in Europe never visit a mosque

and do not feel represented by the unworldly imams that journalists are so crazy about. Likewise, something like a cohesive "Muslim community," to be sure, does not actually exist. Muslims in Europe, like all ordinary people, come in all shapes and sizes. They come from different countries, have different migration histories, different levels of education, different class positions, live in different neighborhoods, and have different political loyalties, life styles, and religious and ethnic identities and feelings of belonging. What's more, these differences are utterly dynamic; they change continuously, partly under the influence of the specific context in which they live, and this leads to ever more variety. Talking about "the" Muslims or about "the" ethnic minorities, therefore, is increasingly out of sync with everyday reality.

Fifthly, something always seems to be overlooked in these kinds of discussions. There is a more fundamental but rather general discontentment in Europe about the role of the state, the welfare state in particular, and about the elites who have been ruling the country and created the situation that we are now in. For several decades, Europe has been pursuing a neo-liberal course. Competitiveness and economic growth were to be boosted by giving more space to the business sector and by organizing society as if it were a private enterprise. Welfare-state provisions were considered acceptable as long as they served these goals. Since the 1980s and 1990s, all European countries have deregulated the economy and dismantled the welfare state, leading to ever more precarious labor market conditions. Also, a plethora of services once offered by the state or by institutions operating under the aegis of the state have been privatized. So, health care, postal and telephone services, public utilities such as gas, water, and electricity, public transportation, etc., are now available on the private market. So far, so good. The pundits of neo-liberalism slap one another on the back, but numerous consumers —oh, excuse me— citizens fail to acknowledge the blessings of this system: the costs of health care have been soaring, while fewer services have been made available; the telephone market has become hopelessly non-transparent; public transportation has gone downhill; and so forth. More fundamentally, the overall quality of the public sector has seriously deteriorated both in terms of services offered to the public and in terms of quality of working conditions for civil servants. As for the latter, the introduction of output-driven quality-control systems has increased red tape with a rising number of "managers" in a position of control, and de-professionalization looms large. The mindless liberalization of the economy, the impudent pursuit of self-interest, and the perplexing lack of public responsibility and accountability eventually resulted in the current economic crisis . . . and Joe the Plummer is expected to pay the bill. People expect the state to take care of them, but many feel abandoned.

Those who find themselves —rightly or wrongly— on the wrong side of the tracks, are keen to point out the culprit. And there they are: immigrants and the elite. As for the latter, the economic elite have been too busy going for profit; the cultural

elite have been on their own in lofty artistic spheres, splashing taxpayers' money on their own hobbies; the scientific elite —the social sciences in particular— have lost touch with Joe's reality; the political elite are bickering all the time, indulging in inanities instead of addressing "real" problems. This slanted representation of reality has been propelled by a media industry that is continuously on the lookout for a scoop and a scandal. At this moment, it is easy and rewarding to make a lot of fuss about minorities with little political clout. Moderate local politicians, part of the cursed political elite, are keen to show their credentials to Joe the Plummer. Some, like the deputy mayor of The Hague, Marnix Norder, talk about a "tsunami of immigrants," referring to labor migrants from EU-member-state Poland, as a means of putting political pressure on the central government for more funding. But in so doing, they are reproducing unfounded suggestions of uncontrollability and irreparable damage. In this political climate, one can easily get the impression that a Turkish girl's head scarf is a serious problem, while the fact that she dropped out of high school, is excluded from the labor market, and cannot develop her talents to the interest of herself or of society at large is seen as less relevant. For to the extent that there is a cultural backlash in Europe, it is about fear and the lack of social security of mainstream people; it is against the cultural, economic, and political elites who are regarded as responsible for this; and it is manifested by using politically weak minority groups as a convenient scapegoat.

Last, but not least, while there is a lot of fuss about a "cultural backlash," a miracle is slowly and surely taking shape: ethnic and cultural diversity is becoming commonplace in Europe. In the Netherlands, for instance, while the government was considering banning headscarves in public spaces, the biggest supermarket chain, Albert Heijn, introduced headscarves for the thousands of Turkish, Moroccan, and Pakistani girls and women working as cashiers. They wear the headscarves —in the company color, of course: blue— when they sit behind the cash registers, and nobody has ever bothered about it. Also in the Netherlands, in cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the most popular local radio station, FunX, broadcasts what is called "an urban program," i.e., a program that reaches out to all ethnic and religious minorities by playing different styles of music and talking about the things that matter for all youngsters, regardless of their ethnic or religious background: school, finding a job, politics, shopping, dating, and so forth. And again in the Netherlands, restaurants, fashion, home decorating, sports, and so forth are all thriving thanks to ethnic influences: ethnic food, clothing, and gadgets sell (Aytar and Rath 2012; Rath 2007). Despite complaints about immigration and diversity, and despite integrationist or assimilationist discourses, "multiculturalism by stealth" is *de rigueur*. This almost seems like a midsummer fairy tale.

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