

UNPLANNED RESISTANCE:
UNDERPRIVILEGED MINORITIES IN A POSTMODERN EUROPEAN UNION

by

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Introduction

Postmodernity would seem to bode ill for immigrant communities in the European Union. Prominent theories of postmodern society, when analyzed in respect to the status of immigrants, pit several strikes against them. Taking as a given that the EU deserves the label "postmodern society," this essay discusses three such theories and draws out the implications of each for immigrants, particularly in Germany. The findings are anything but merry. If the theories prove true, immigrants should expect little or no improvement in their lot and, worse, deterioration. This said, I refuse to conclude the essay on a note of pure pessimism. Although I dismiss the likely success of planned, deliberate resistance to worsening conditions for immigrants, I point to unplanned, spontaneous resistance which can be successful if not predictable.

Though doubtless trendy, the craze of theorizing about postmodernity over the last two decades has produced much thought of lasting, penetrating value. Too little of this work has found its way into the social scientific research on migration despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that theories of postmodernity suggest mainly unhappy futures for immigrants. Below I look at the theory of 1) the two-thirds society, 2) the risk society, and 3) the truthless society.

The Two-Thirds Society

For over a decade students of postmodern (often called "postFordist") political economy have discerned an historically unprecedented development in advanced industrial nations: the

formation of a permanent underclass comprising a minority of the members of a given society. Before the advent of the Keynesian welfare state during and after the Great Depression, capitalism functioned with an underprivileged proletariat comprising the vast majority. Both Keynesian and Marxist visions of social progress professed and predicted the ultimate elimination of the great underclass. Similarly, eminent students of "modern" citizenship, like T.H. Marshall (1992), or of nationhood, like Reinhard Bendix (1977), anticipated long, but nonetheless successful struggles for general equality of rights and privileges for all citizens, all nationals.

Three decades of steady expansion in welfare spending, whether termed a "welfare explosion" (Piven and Cloward, 1971) by one expert or "hubristic Keynesianism" (Beer, 1982) by another, caused the middle class to swell into what Ralf Dahrendorf (1988: 153) calls the "majority class." This was largely made possible, of course, by liberal democratic political structures in which most decisions were made according to majority rule. For majority rule gives the economically underprivileged majority the political advantage to fight their inequality. But this critical political advantage dissipates, indeed disappears altogether, as the underprivileged come to comprise a minority as has occurred in all major advanced industrial nations. In that case, majority rule turns into a political disadvantage.

Dahrendorf, among others, argues that neither the economy nor the polity can be expected to come to the aid of the

underprivileged minority in postmodern societies. Due to such factors as mechanization, outsourcing and the shifting of production to countries where labor costs are far lower, postFordist economies exhibit "a certain dissociation of economic growth and employment." (1988: 145) In other words, growth in GNP does not insure growth in employment; indeed, more likely is a decline in employment. To the extent that advanced industrial nations can prevent job flight, they will have to match conditions of employment in Third-World countries. Thus, David Harvey (1989: 147-58) notes the return of the "sweatshop" to some postFordist economies in the 1980s long after they had been eliminated in earlier decades. Whether as a result of un- or underemployment, claims Dahrendorf, postFordist economies can be expected to spawn a sizable and permanent "underclass" of working and/or nonworking poor comprising anywhere from a quarter to a third of the entire population. (1988: 149)

Yet, postmodern governments are less likely than modern ones to assist the underclass precisely because of majority rule. In Dahrendorf's words,

It cannot be assumed as a matter of course that the majority class has an interest in breaking the cycle of deprivation of those who have dropped into an underclass position. On the contrary, in precarious times, the majority may well have an interest in actively defining some out and keeping them out to the protection of those who are in....Marx thought that bourgeois society was unique in that for the first time the suppressed class - the class of the future - would comprise the overwhelming majority of the people who would organize and topple the ruling minority. In one sense, the opposite has happened. The overwhelming majority of the people have found a reasonably cosy existence....But they are not sure the good times will last. They begin to draw boundaries which

leave some out in the cold. Like earlier dominant classes they have all kinds of reasons for drawing such lines. (1988: 153-54)

Claus Offe dubs this potential majority "the great coalition... between the traditional Left and traditional Right."

Implicit in this project is a negative reference to the peripheral groups in the new social movements....The logical public policy consequences of this assumption are repression and surveillance, exclusion and nondecisions, and, at best, a measure of symbolic politics aimed at preventing the peripheral elements from winning support among the old or new middle classes. (Offe, 1987: 96-99)

As long as this coalition comprises an easy majority, say two-thirds, and majority rule stays in force, postmodern societies are likely to get easier for two thirds and harder for one third.

Much evidence exists to suggest immigrants form a significant part of Germany's underclass. Each year the Federal Commissioner for Aliens publishes a report "on the Situation of Aliens in the Federal Republic." And in each report foreigners, taken as a statistical aggregate, register below Germans in basic socio-economic indicators. Thus, foreign workers make only 87% of what their German colleagues earn. Foreigners usually suffer a rate of unemployment twice that of Germans. Of the unemployed 41.3% of Germans but 78.8% of immigrants possess no vocational degree. Among those who do work immigrants are overrepresented in low-paying, unskilled jobs. For example, while foreigners make up roughly 8% of the total German population, they constitute approximately one third of the workforce in the textile, janitorial, and hotel and restaurant industries. Inversely, when it comes to higher-paying jobs, Germans do much better than resident aliens (45.8% to 23.5%

in skilled jobs, 53.5% to 19.1% in management positions). Immigrants generally live in more cramped, lower-quality flats (21.5 square meters per person among foreigners, 34.5 among Germans), even though they pay higher rents per square meter (6.92DM compared to 6.85DM for Germans). Foreigners' children tend to do less well at school than German pupils. While 26.8% of foreigners and 13.6% of Germans attend the Hauptschule, 10.0% of foreigners and 24.1% of Germans enroll in Gymnasium. The latter records, of course, suggest that the inequities between foreigners and citizens will persist into the future. (Bericht, 1994)

General socio-economic indicators reveal only one other large group in German society which is systematically underprivileged: the east Germans. (O'Brien, 1996a: 114-20) Together, immigrants (around 7 million) and east Germans (around 16 million) comprise close to 29% of the total population. In other words, united Germany appears well on its way to becoming the stereotypical "two-thirds society" with a permanent minority underclass.

Are there signs that the mostly west German majority class is coalescing behind anti-immigrant policies and practices? The toughening of the land's refugee laws in 1993 stands out. Because the reforms meant amending the constitution (Article 16), Helmut Kohl's government needed two-thirds support in the Bundestag. Kohl had frequently failed to muster this support due to the steadfast refusal of the Social Democrats to sign on. That abruptly changed in 1993 when an arson attack on a refugee hostel in Solingen killed five Turks. Social Democratic leaders felt their party had to

respond boldly to the refugee issue because it had reached crisis proportions. They cut a deal with Kohl, the legislation designed to make it harder for refugees to enter Germany and easier for officials to deport them received the needed two-thirds vote in the Bundestag, and went into effect on July 1, 1993. Ofte's "great coalition between the traditional Right and the traditional Left" had been formed. Furthermore, the stark insensitivity of the legislation (blaming and attacking the victims rather than the perpetrators of xenophobia) would seem to make likely future anti-immigrant legislation (perhaps similar to the Welfare Reform Bill passed by the great coalition in the US during the 1996 election year).

The Risk Society

Ulrich Beck's vision of postmodernity is dominated by inescapable risk. Postmodern problems distinguish themselves from modern ones through exponentially heightened risk. Whereas in modern society, Beck explains, threats to human physical well being were largely tangible and correctable (for example, hunger) as well as concentrated against a specific group (say the poor), postmodern threats tend to be intangible, uncorrectable and dangerous to everyone in society regardless of status (for example, ozone depletion). The latter are experienced more as risks (what might happen) than ravages (what actually happens). Beck explains his argument in the following manner:

The "logic" of risk production and distribution is developed in comparison to the "logic" of the distribution of wealth (which has so far determined social-theoretical thinking). At the center lie the risks

and consequences of modernization, which are revealed as irreversible threats to the life of plants, animals, and human beings. Unlike the factory-related or occupational hazards of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, these can no longer be limited to certain localities or groups, but rather exhibit a tendency to globalization which spans production and reproduction as much as national borders, and in this sense brings into being supra-national and non-class-specific global hazards with a new type of social and political dynamism....(Beck, 1992: p. 13)

Beck underscores the irreversibility of postmodern threats. Unlike modern problems, postmodern ones elude rational, scientific solutions. The rational solution to hunger, for instance, was obvious and feasible: feed people. But what is the rational solution to postmodern problems like global warming or the Chernobyl accident? The "new...political dynamism" privileges irrational over rational forms of persuasion in postmodern politics. In the absence of rational solutions, Beck contends, the voices of reason (of scientists and other experts) become muted. In their place grow louder the irrational voices of doomsayers who greatly exaggerate risks and proffer irrational solutions.

Elsewhere I have argued that immigration deserves to qualify as a postmodern risk phenomenon.(O'Brien, 1996b) The source or cause of migration to Germany has become increasingly intangible and uncontrollable. In the Fifties and Sixties, public officials knew exactly where to recruit migrants and carefully controlled the number of them entering and exiting the land. But today, because resident aliens enjoy rights of uniting their families, it is difficult effectively to regulate the number of immigrants. For instance, Bonn officially halted recruitment of foreign workers in

1973; since then, the number of resident aliens in the land has steadily increased. (Bericht, 1994: 92) With each migrant permitted to immigrate there really is no longer a way to know how many, in the long term, have indirectly been accepted.

Relatedly, Germans have little control over whence or why migrants come to the Federal Republic. The so-called "push factors" in migration can abruptly change, sending an unexpected wave of refugees. This occurred after the coup in Turkey in 1980 and after the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia in 1991. Such incidents as well as the potential number of migrants they will send off are virtually impossible to predict. Nothing better dramatized the risk involved in migration than the sudden revolutions in East Europe in 1989 which raised the Iron Curtain. Estimates of the total of potential emigrants from the area ran as high as 25 million. West Germany was essentially "forced" to annex the German Democratic Republic lest its citizens crowd into the already densely populated Federal Republic. And although Germany appears temporarily to have stemmed the tide of east European emigration through astronomically expensive aid packages of one sort or the other, scary "what-ifs" continue to trouble Germans -- what if the eastern European economies collapse, what if the region is struck by a major environmental disaster?

Germans have also experienced how difficult it is to foresee the domestic consequences of migration. What began as an "all-win-no-lose" prospect of recruiting young, healthy foreign men has mushroomed into a complicated social phenomenon generating many

dilemmas. The existence of millions of foreign pupils has forced the educational system to tackle difficult financial and cultural issues surrounding multi-cultural student bodies. Ethnic enclaves like the many Turkish communities in Germany have produced organizations whose actions and principles often conflict with German law. Germans themselves have in response to migration jettisoned the predominant values of the Federal Republic's liberal democracy by supporting xenophobic parties and committing or tolerating acts of violence against foreigners. And again, there is no certain way to predict what impact these developments will have on Germany in the future. In this vein, an election analyst warns:

the number of voters who decide in favor of the extreme right-wing parties represents only a relatively small part of the general readiness for adopting a right-wing point of view and the protest potential which exists for our society and which could be mobilized in favour of a right-wing party, e.g. in the case of an economic crisis or under the strong pressure of immigration. (Jaschke, 1993: 127)

Today, the risks of migration threaten everyone. Gone are the days when only a handful of police officers, plant managers and slum landlords have to deal with migrants. Virtually everyone's children share classrooms and resources with foreign pupils. Scarce are the Germans who do not have a foreign colleague. All of Germany's public agencies serve and deal with resident aliens alongside German clients. Everyone's taxes go to pay for the countless public programs which address issues of migration. Reports of violent skirmishes between neo-Nazis and foreigners or between factions of foreigners themselves pepper the daily newspapers. Migration is now a collective, national problem atop

the political agenda. Not long after Unification, three quarters of polled Germans designated the "foreigner problem" as the most important issue confronting Germany. (Leggewie, 1993: 165)

Effective solutions to the problems of migration evade policy makers. Amidst anti-migrant sentiment following the recession of 1973, for example, the Schmidt administration initiated its "consolidation policy" (Konsolidierungspolitik) to reduce the number of foreigners in the land. By the time Schmidt left office, the number of foreigners had grown by 700,000. (Bericht, 1994: 92) Kohl's "return policy" (Rückkehrpolitik) met with the same fate a decade later. By 1992, the number of foreigners in the land had increased by nearly 2 million. (Bericht, 1994: 92) Foreigners enjoy a host of rights through the Basic Law or various international treaties which make it difficult for the state to control their entrance and exit. The same fate befell numerous other policies designed to sequester, silence or neglect migrants living in the Federal Republic. They foundered in the courts on the shoals of the extensive social and civil rights guaranteed by the Basic Law. (O'Brien, 1996a: 43-105) These policy failures in turn increase the (perceived) risk of migration because as long as they continue to fail, it is impossible to know how long or to what extent the problems of migration will confront the Federal Republic.

As already intimated, Beck predicts the decline if not demise of reason in postmodern politics. Or as he puts it, "in definitions of risk the sciences' monopoly on rationality is broken.... There is no expert on risk." (1992: 29) Rational discourse based on grounding

arguments in independent empirical or logical foundations stands at a disadvantage in the risk society because risks are ultimately produced by and dependent upon consciousness. That is, if someone feels at risk, the risk exists; and the greater the risk is experienced, the greater it becomes. As Beck puts it, "in class and stratification positions being determines consciousness, while in risk positions consciousness determines being." (1992: 23) In such an environment, those who are adept at shaping consciousness have considerable political advantage over those who merely measure being.

In the Eighties and Nineties, irrational voices keen to foment fear and hatred of immigrants have increasingly drowned out the voices of reason. During the Seventies, talk of "integration" dominated the discussion of immigration. Politicians debated the desired extent and pace of integration but virtually all accepted it as the primary goal of immigration policy. For all its faults and foibles, integration does constitute a rational response to large-scale immigration. But in 1982, the ambitious leader of the opposition sensed the potential political payoff of unreason. Keen to unseat Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl made immigration reform a major element of his relentless attacks on the administration. "The number of foreign citizens must be reduced" he proclaimed shortly before ousting Schmidt. Kohl knew perfectly well that it was the position of his own party as well as of its chief supporter, the German Association of Employers, that the German economy would become more dependent on foreign labor in the future

due to lower birthrates among Germans. More outlandish claims were made in the effort to usurp Schmidt. Soon-to-be Interior Minister Friedrich Zimmermann complained that Germans were "becoming a minority in their own land." (Elsner and Lehmann, 1989: 276) Needless to say, he offered no statistics to prove this absurd claim. A party communique published that year contended that "the limit of burdenability for our state and its population, for the infrastructure as well as for the housing and job market has been reached." ("Union," 1982: 11-13) It too conveniently neglected to note that West Germany took on over 8 million German immigrants between 1945-51 without disaster. Nor did the paper refer its readers to the countless scientific analyses which show immigrants to be a net gain for rather than drain on German society. (Sen and Goldberg, 1994)

Upon becoming Chancellor, Kohl announced, two weeks before national elections he called to confirm his majority support in the Bundestag, a slate of harsh measures he would implement after the election to curb immigration. Most of the measures, such as lowering from 16 to 6 the age at which a child could legally immigrate to Germany to be with its parent(s), Kohl and his advisors knew were unconstitutional. And, in fact, after the election they were tabled. But they had the desired effect among an electorate 75% of which, according to pollsters, opposed the permanent presence of a large immigrant community in Germany. (O'Brien, 1996: 77-89) Kohl and his coalition partners were returned to parliament with a majority of seats.

Others were quick to note the persuasiveness of unreason. The xenophobic Republican Party burst onto the political scene in 1985, winning over 7% of the vote in West Berlin. And as already suggested, the decision by all but one of the parties represented in parliament to toughen Germany's asylum laws in 1993 amounted to a sheer mockery of logic and reason. In effect, the parliamentarians sought to discourage neo-Nazi violence by giving in to precisely the demands they were making: Keep foreigners out! Advocates of immigrants and their rights should take heed and realize that rational arguments designed to protect or promote migrants are unlikely to be successful. They tend to fall on deaf ears in the risk society.

The Truthless Society

Postmodern societies distinguish themselves from their predecessors through the absence of accepted, guiding universal truths. For more than a century, a virtual army of Nietzscheans, Heideggerians, Foucauldians, Derrideans and others have been relentlessly hammering away at the foundations of Western thought -- and not without success. Deconstructivists of one sort or the other have spread suspicion in all transcendental claims, showing them to be biased or part of some hidden power play. This philosophical and cultural development prompted Jean-François Lyotard (1984) in a much celebrated piece to declare the death of universal truths or what he termed "metanarratives." Living without transcendental philosophies which guide the way we organize ourselves and our societies had become "the postmodern condition:" "I define

postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."(1984: xxiv)

Drawing out the political implications of Lyotard's work, Chantal Mouffe underscores "the impossibility of a world without antagonism" and "the illusion of consensus and unanimity" in postmodern politics.(1993: 4-5) Gone are the days when all citizens (or even a majority of them) can unite behind one overarching ideology such as "all persons are created equal" or "we all belong to one nation." Postmodernity has sounded the death knell to all such universal truth claims and left us with ineradicable diversity and antagonism.

Persons interested in better rights for immigrants, in other words, fool themselves when they think they can build mass support around ethical pleas for equality for or tolerance toward immigrants. Such calls were made in the Seventies in West Germany and met with considerable success as federal, state and local governments all promoted integration. Success was possible then because there existed a modern consensus in the land that the Germans must eschew the racist nationalism which had made Hitler and the Holocaust possible. That consensus fizzled in the postmodern Eighties. Early on in the decade, Christian Democrats began complaining about the nation's low self-esteem. This they blamed on an antequated hang-up with Hitler and the Holocaust. Franz Josef Straus, for instance, implored his compatriots to stop viewing their past "as an endless chain of mistakes and crimes." It was time for Germany "to emerge from the shadow of the Third Reich" and "become a normal nation again." It was time for Germans to

"walk tall."(Evans, 1989: 19) Conservative scholars, such as Michael Stürmer and Ernst Nolte, sought to lessen the weight of guilt by arguing that the Holocaust was not uniquely evil. Others - - Pol Pot, Stalin, the Ottomans -- had committed genocides of similar magnitude and ignomy. (Historikerstreit, 1987) Chancellor Kohl seemed influenced by these sentiments when he invited Ronald Reagan to Bitburg cemetery, where Waffen-SS men were buried, and began renewing long dormant demands for the reunification of East and West Germany.

Protecting and promoting the German nation was no longer taboo, and nationalists began coming out of the woodwork. In 1981, for example, 15 professors of considerable esteem published the "Heidelberg Manifesto," which warned that integration with its goal of a "multicultural society" was causing "the mongrelization of our language, our culture, and our tradition." The CDU argued it had an "obligation" to reduce the number of foreigners in the land in order to make room for emigres "from German-speaking territories." ("Union:" 1982) Citizen initiatives named "Lists Against Foreigners" sprang up in the early Eighties in several Länder and eventually formed into the Republican Party with its openly racist and xenophobic platform. The nationalist euphoria surrounding Unification in 1990 reinvigorated the underground neo-Nazi movement. It increased its attacks on and marches against foreigners. In Rostock in 1992, German citizens were seen cheering on neo-Nazis as they burned down a dormitory for refugees and tormented those fleeing the blaze. (O'Brien: 1996, 107-10)

It would be an exaggeration to claim a tidal wave of nationalism swept the land. Neo-Nazi incidents remained isolated if more frequent. Large counterdemonstrations against neo-Nazi violence were organized throughout Germany to protest Rostock and other incidents like it. Prominent politicians, like President Richard von Weizsäcker, condemned nationalism. (O'Brien: 1996, 110-14) No nationalist consensus emerged, but it did become equally acceptable to favor integration as to favor "reintegration" (Kohl's euphemism for repatriation).

Not only Germans suffered from lack of consensus. Immigrants have found it impossible to unite even among themselves. Not only have different national and religious identities hampered cooperation between, say, Greek and Turkish or Christian and Muslim immigrants, immigrants sharing the same nationality or religion have found it hard to see eye to eye on matters. Within no group is the political diversity, indeed antagonism, greater than among the immigrants holding Turkish passports. Religious organizations range from the Avrupa Milli Görüş Teskilatları to the İslam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği to the government-sponsored Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği all the way to the Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu. Politically, the list runs from the conservative Hürriyetçi Türk-Alman Dostluk Cemiyeti through the Sosyal Demokrat Halk Dernekleri Federasyonu and Göçmen Dernekleri Federasyonu all the way to the Partiya Kerkeren Kurdistan. Not only do many of these organizations find it impossible to cooperate with one another, they often find themselves in vehement, at times violent conflict with one

another. (Sen and Goldberg: 1994: 92-117). Such diversity is to be expected in postmodern society. By the same token, a unified immigrant community struggling together against worsening conditions is not to be expected.

Unplanned Resistance

Surprisingly, the Nineties have seen some of the greatest improvements in the rights and opportunities of Turks and Kurds since immigration began in the Sixties. In 1990, a new Aliens Law went into effect and significantly liberalized the regulations governing naturalization. The new law dropped the difficult requirements for naturalization (proficiency in German, adequate housing, steep fees) from the 1965 Aliens Law and granted all resident aliens under 23 who had lived in Germany at least eight years a right to become a German citizen. Those 23 and older could naturalize after 15 years of residence. The greatest disincentive to naturalization -- the ban on dual citizenship -- the Kohl administration lifted in 1994 for children under 18. Since then the Chancellor has talked about allowing dual citizenship for all soon.

The government also intensified its efforts to protect resident aliens from violence. Between 1989 and 1995, state and federal governments banned ten neo-Nazi organizations. In 1993, the Bundestag amended the Victims Indemnity Law to make foreign victims equal to Germans in benefits. A year later Kohl's government successfully proposed that parliament expand the powers of the police and intelligence service to apprehend more right-wing extremists. The same legislation made public display of Nazi

symbols a crime. Kohl had earmarked in 1992 DM 20 million per year to combat neo-Nazi violence in east Germany. The measures proved effective. From 1993 to 1994, the number of reported hostile acts toward foreigners halved. (O'Brien: 1996, 113-114)

These significant improvements did not, however, result from a long and deliberate lobbying campaign on the part of immigrants and their backers. The acts came rather in response to perceived crises of the moment. Moreover, in those crises immigrants' deadliest foes ironically acted as their greatest allies. The Aliens Law of 1990 was hurried through the Bundestag as "emergency legislation" during the fall of 1989 to allay increasing fears among nervous onlookers (O'Brien: 1989) that the soon-to-be unified Germany would not repeat Hitler's mistakes. Ironically, swelling German national pride and solidarity aided the immigrants' cause. Similarly, neo-Nazis did more to pass the other acts listed above than immigrants or their supporters. All of that legislation came shortly after and in direct response to highly publicized acts of terror against foreigners in Hoyerswerda in 1991, Rostock in 1992 or Solingen in 1993.

Conclusion

I do not wish to dismiss this legislation. It amounts to the most significant improvement in immigrants' rights in Germany in decades. I wish rather to dismiss the potential illusion that the legislation reflects some broadly based national consensus in favor of immigrants which can be tapped again and again in the future to continue improving the rights and opportunities of immigrants. The

years 1989 to 1994 were unique. No one, including the Germans, knew what a reunited Germany would do. The risk of making mistakes at a critical juncture in history moved German policy makers to act in bold ways. As the anxiety over the future of Germany subsides, policy makers are likely to return to their old incremental ways.

Political activists for immigrants can learn from this experience. They can learn that conventional lobbying and organizing are unlikely to bear much fruit in postmodern society. They can learn to divert much of their energies and efforts to irrational arguments designed to spread fear and anxiety. And they can learn to redefine the meaning of "ally" from someone who believes as they do to anyone who directly or indirectly helps their cause. This may seem like unprincipled US pragmatism, but in postmodern politics it and only it works.

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