

Analysing politics of fear

Patrick Bahners examines the discourse on Islam in Germany

Patrick Bahners, Die Panikmacher. Die deutsche Angst vor dem Islam. ("The Scaremongers. The German Fear of Islam"), C.H.Beck Munich, 2011.

It is the first comprehensive analysis of the German discourse on Islam in the past years released by a major publishing house, and it is 300 pages of acid criticism. Patrick Bahners, managing editor of the arts section in Germany's leading centre-right daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* describes an anti-Muslim melody that has become audible in Germany's public discourse in the past years, based on a tone of danger and threat. The melody implies that Islam is a main source of segregation, extremism, violence, sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism, and an unambiguous and imperative guideline for individual and collective attitudes. As a consequence protagonists of this view argue for a resolute self-defence of "the West" in order to preserve the achievements of occidental enlightenment. To examine the melody Bahners takes the musical clock apart from which it sounds. Starting from the debate on former German central banker Thilo Sarrazin and his book "Germany is doing away with itself" ("Deutschland schafft sich ab") Bahners proceeds with an analysis of a scene of self-proclaimed "critics of Islam" ("Islamkritiker") in Germany.

Actors

The book portrays activists, bloggers, journalists, book authors and politicians in the debate and describes a division of labour. In a first group Bahners sees the small circles of the determined: ultra-conservatives, right wing populists, fundamentalist evangelicals and operators of internet hate-blogs. Anti-Muslim activists in Germany are interconnected with like-minded agitators in other European countries and the United States running campaigns, web sites and groups like "Stop Islamisation of Europe" or "Stop Islamization of America".

The activists and their crude rhetoric would remain marginal without a second group, public figures who Bahners calls "facilitators" ("Vermittlerfiguren"). He sees the prominent German journalist and book author Henryk M. Broder as a main facilitator who seizes on the idea of Muslims being a major danger for Europe and popularises his view in books, newspaper

articles and his blog. Bahnert finds other facilitators among certain functionaries of political foundations organising conferences on Islam and through a constant one-sided invitation policy support speakers from the anti-Muslim spectrum. Finally, Germany's best-selling daily and major tabloid *Bild* plays an important role in this respect.

The facilitators are crucial since they connect the circles of the convinced, the bizarre sects and blog communities of the political right with a third group: occasionally mobilisable citizens, who do not make the fight against the alleged Islamisation of Europe a centre of their activities but find a number of aspects of the anti-Muslim worldview convincing. As a result of the facilitators' campaigns anti-Muslim claims entered the discourse of mainstream society while anti-Muslim organisations themselves remained marginal.

“Crown witnesses”

Among the facilitators Bahnert counts as an important subgroup “renegades” and “crown witnesses”, meaning authors of Turkish or Arab background who claim to have an authentic inside perspective on Islam. As the most successful German representative of this circle Bahnert portrays the bestseller author Necla Kelek in an own chapter. Kelek, born in Istanbul 1957, came to Germany in 1966 with her parents. She became famous with her book “The Alien Bride” (“Die fremde Braut”) in 2005, describing her own biography and the fate of “import brides” from Turkey in Germany.

Kelek's educational science doctoral dissertation on Islam among school students was published three years before in 2002 under the title “Islam in everyday life”. Bahnert shows that in her dissertation Kelek came to very different conclusions from those she drew in her bestseller three years later. In her dissertation Kelek claimed that Islam does not have to be an obstacle for integration, in “The alien bride” she implies the very antithesis, based on, as Bahnert writes, rather literary than scientific techniques of authentication. In his view the book was so successful because it presented a schematic juxtaposition of Muslims and non-Muslims that resonates with popular xenophobic imaginations.

Rhetoric of war

Many of the scene's popular writings are based on a schematic friend or foe perspective. As a typical example Bahnert quotes the Somali-Dutch activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali who said in an

interview in 2008: “There comes a moment when you crush your enemy (...), and if you don't do that, then you have to live with the consequence of being crushed.“ Statements like this show that the “critics of Islam” consider themselves as warriors in a historic clash of cultures that can only end in the West’s triumph or doom.

Such an existential conflict seems to permit all means. The diffusion of this belief among parts of Western societies and their elites explains the toughening of public debate the book describes. The “critics of Islam” imagine themselves as heroes of free speech fighting against a conspiracy of silence. According to Bahners this shows “a fundamental mistrust in the democratic public” and a “radical disbelief in the legitimacy of politics”. Referring to Richard Hofstadter’s essay “The paranoid style in American politics” Bahners interprets anti-Muslim rhetoric as a paranoid style of political reasoning.

As a noticeable element of the anti-Muslim discourse Bahners analyses the notion of “taqiyya”. The Arabic term originally describes the religious permission in Shia Islam to conceal one’s belief in a case of danger to life. Anti-Muslim hate pages and popular writings on Islam, like those of Necla Kelek, distort the concept and misrepresent it as a religious commandment of Islam to deceit non-believers in order to advance Muslim domination in Europe. Bahners identifies this purposeful misinterpretation as an instrument to contaminate social coexistence in pluralist societies, since it results in “a destruction of common sense in everyday life” and in a perceived permanent state of emergency. He writes:

“With this denial of the minimum level of trust among fellow citizens everywhere in Germany local politicians and church representatives find themselves confronted in town hall meetings when they defend the right of Muslims to build mosques. When it is pointed out to them that nobody knows, if the imam is only pretending to be a friendly democrat, then this is not a result of bad experiences with Muslims. On the contrary, the will to avoid any experiences with Muslims uses any justification.”

Bahners accuses some leading German politicians of embarking on anti-Muslim scenarios. He criticises German Chancellor Angela Merkel who reassured her audience at a Christian Democratic party congress in 2010 that the basis of the German polity is not the Sharia but the German constitution and with this according to Bahners implicitly suggested that Islamic law could shape German public life soon if politicians and the public do not confront Muslim aspirations. Bahners considers such rhetoric compromises with anti-Muslim campaigners as fatal: “Popular opinion takes appeasement as confirmation. Those who feed the dragon will be swallowed by it.”

Government policies

As Bahners shows, the discourse influenced policies, especially on the level of the federal states (Länder) that are powerful players in the German system. He describes the history of the infamous “Muslim test” in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg that consisted in a list of questions to be used as a conversation guide by government officials vis-à-vis naturalisation applicants. It came into force in January 2006 based on an administrative provision of Baden-Württemberg’s interior ministry and was directed to the state’s 24 naturalisation offices. The guide covered questions like: “Do you think it is acceptable that a man imprisons his wife or his daughter at home to prevent her from bringing shame on him?”, or “What do you think of men in Germany being married to two wives at the same time?” The senior interior ministry official who pressed ahead with the guide followed the idea of a basic conflict between Islam and a Western understanding of the state as one proposition of the “critics of Islam”. In his perspective discriminatory treatment of Muslim applicants was advisable.

The conversation guide was called “Muslim test” in the press. After it aroused broad criticism in civil society and media the ministry published adjusted instructions that scaled back the project two weeks after its introduction. Yet Bahners gives a negative summary of the discussion: “It remains disturbing, that through administrative channels Muslims could easily be declared a class of suspects.”

A new tone

Bahners’ book is a sign for a new phase in the debate. One peculiarity of the book is that its author does not come from a background caricatured by populist “critics of Islam” as a scene of naïve leftist multicultural dreamers. As a prominent editor of the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* many of his readers share a sceptical view on Muslim immigrants. Necla Kelek and other clash-of-culture pundits acquired much of their popularity in the past years through their articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*.

“The Scaremongers” will hardly catch up with Thilo Sarrazin’s bestseller in terms of sales figures. Bahners refrains from presenting a doom and gloom scenario with mass impact. His account moves between politically involved writing from a liberal-conservative perspective and an academic discourse analysis. However, since the author is a prominent journalist and

the book was released by one of the most renowned German publishers, it aroused considerable attention. Prominent authors wrote book reviews for major German dailies. Together with other recently published books it signals a new awakening of those parts of the German public that stand for a more differentiated view of immigration, diversity and Turks in Germany.

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