

A polyphony of voices with a different message

29 Authors counter Sarrazin's doom and gloom scenario

Hilal Sezgin (Ed.), Manifest der Vielen. Deutschland erfindet sich neu (Manifesto of the Many. Germany Invents Itself Anew), Blumenbar Verlag Berlin 2011.

Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre was booked out when the book "Manifest der Vielen" ("Manifesto of the Many") was launched in February 2011, half a year after former Federal Banker Thilo Sarrazin triggered an agitated debate on Muslims in Germany with his book "Deutschland schafft sich ab" (Germany is doing away with itself). Sarrazin claimed to prove that Muslims were not able to integrate successfully into German society because in his view their religion permanently alienates them from the Western way of life. Sarrazin believes that Islamisation threatens the future of German culture.

The Manifesto's subtitle, "Germany invents itself anew"; alludes to Sarrazin's pessimistic forecast and sets a pluralistic vision of Germany's future against it. On 220 pages the editor, German-Turkish journalist Hilal Sezgin, brought together 29 authors, most of them of Muslim background while at the same time representing manifold attitudes towards religion. Among the authors are prominent representatives of German-language literature like German-Turkish author Feridun Zaimoğlu, Bulgarian born writer Ilija Trojanow, Navid Kermani, who is of Iranian background and became renowned with books on Islamic Studies as well as with fiction, or Jasmin Ramadan, whose novel "Soul Kitchen" was made into a Film by director Fatih Akin.

Others represent German Muslim organisations, like Aiman Mazyek, chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, Bekir Alboga, in charge of interreligious dialogue at the Turkish-Islamic Union (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam), the German branch of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Birliği), or Ali Kizilkaya, chairman of the Islam Council of Germany. Along with them journalists and scientists wrote contributions. Most of the authors were born between the 1960ies and the early 80ies. Even though the book was published by a small Berlin publishing house, Blumenbar, it was on stock in many German book stores in spring 2011.

The contributions are very distinct from each other in form and content – the reader finds political texts, scientific articles, satire and fiction. This colourfulness is part of the message.

The Germany the authors envision gains its vitality from its plurality. For them a country that finds its identity mainly in a demarcation against Islam would no longer be an open society.

For Navid Kermani the conflict is not only a German one but a European question. He interprets the anti-minaret referendum in Switzerland as an attack against Europe:

“If there is a polity in this world besides the United States of America that holds out the prospect of an equal participation to religious and ethnic minorities, it is united Europe. In contrast to the nation state Europe in its emphatic sense constitutes a canon of values that one commits to or not, regardless of his nation, race, religion or culture. This does not suspend differences – to the contrary: Europe is not an extended nation state, it is a mode to disarm differences politically in order to safeguard them. The answer to the question who belongs to the European Us is not determined by the place of birth of one’s grandparents, but by one’s vision of the presence.”

One of the book’s major strengths is that it individualises perspectives and replaces the category “Muslim”, that has become a dominant marker in public discourses in many European countries, with individual voices. In her article entitled “Germany is doing away with me” Hilal Sezgin describes the effect of a public discourse that forces individuals into categories. Sezgin reminds of Simone de Beauvoir’s observation “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, and transfers it to current public discussions that result in a “Muslimification”, in a regression into pre-modern understandings of humanity:

“It is central for the self-conception of the modern human being to be not only an exemplar of a social category, but an individual – and to be perceived by others as such. This kind of recognition is as vital for the social life as the air we breathe, and developments like Muslimification threaten to strangle the individual.”

At the same time Sezgin describes the ongoing “Muslimification” as a violation of privacy and freedom:

“According to classical understanding religious freedom means, that first of all everybody has got the right to practice his belief. Secondly, that everybody has the right to believe in no religious content at all. Perhaps it is time to defend a third right: The right to remain silent about one’s own religion. The right not to be addressed constantly as a member of a particular religion. The right to decide in which context one’s own religious affiliation is important or not.”

A further individualizing effect of the book lies in the descriptions of feelings the debates of the past years aroused in those addressed by it. A wide range of reactions becomes visible. Sezgin describes encounters with friends of Turkish background in which fantasies about emigration play an increasing role. There are also different voices, one coming from the Afghan-born teacher Fereshta Ludin whose legal fight became renowned in Germany, after a primary school in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg refused to employ her because of her headscarf and her case ended up at the Federal Constitutional Court. Under the title “Thank you. Mr. President” Ludin praises the German Federal President Christian Wulff for explicitly stating in a speech at Germany’s national holiday in October 2010 that he is also the President of German Muslims: “Yes, of course I am your president - with the same passion and conviction with which I am the president of all people who live in Germany.” Ludin describes her sense of pleasure and her “gentle feeling of pride in my country” that overcame her when she heard the speech. As she notes, she has waited twenty years for this sentence.

Only some of the authors address the power game between established and ascending parts of the population that underlies the discourse. German-Turkish writer Feridun Zaimoğlu, one of the most prominent representatives of contemporary German literature, sees a “Kulturkampf”, a culture struggle in Germany - not one between Christianity and Islam, rather between Islamophobia and humanism: “A cultural struggle is going on in Germany, a war of provocateurs, that resemble butchers with blunt boning knives, they cut and stab, they rip and pull.” Zaimoğlu identifies a conflict about visions of society and Muslim-bashing as a means to realise a conservative concept of a culturally homogenous and authoritarian society.

Zaimoğlu has made some experiences in the field of integration policies when he was a member of the “Islam conference” organised by the German Interior minister Wolfgang Schäuble. In 2007 Zaimoğlu protested against the composition of the body and left the conference. According to him there were only traditionalist men representing Muslims and secularist women of Turkish background representing a meanwhile conventional feminism in Germany, whereas representatives of a younger generation of religious and self-conscious women were absent.

In the context of a confrontation between established and ascending sections of the society the public demand that “they” have to integrate becomes a rhetorical weapon that rather signals a demand for submission. The teacher Fereshta Ludin expresses this aspect when she writes:

“By instinct I cannot stand the word ‘integration’ any more. We moved here when we were children, often we were even born here and we lived in this country for almost our entire lives. We go to school here, we study, we work here, we are members of the local pigeon breeders’ association, we separate our household waste and play in the national team. Why do we still have to explain that we are integrated?”

Without claiming to have the one consistent concept for the interpretation of social reality the book markedly broadens the picture. It is an attempt not only to make other voices audible but also to define the setting in which they speak – without being just a talk show counterpart of populists who see Muslims as representatives of an inferior culture and thus becoming part of the hype that helps to spread their claims.

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