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**‘Integration is like a swearword to me’:
Belonging in Germany through
the eyes of migrants**

by John McManus

The coalition agreement of Germany’s incoming Black-Red government, published on April 9th, gives plenty of space to the issues of migration, integration and cohabitation (*Zusammenleben*). While reaffirming that Germany is ‘cosmopolitan’ and a ‘country of migration’ (*Einwanderungsland*), the majority of measures it lays out see a tightening of migration policy: expanding the list of safe countries of origin (to make it easier to deport failed asylum seekers), suspending family reunification and making it more difficult to seek protection under international law in Germany.¹ Such policies do not come as a surprise, given the hardening of attitudes on migration that was visible across mainstream parties during the election campaign as they sought to fend off the threat of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Evident in the coalition agreement, and the wider public debate, is a consensus (largely implicit) that too many of those coming from outside struggle to, or do not want to, adapt to the rules, laws and customs in Germany. That adaption is referred to in the agreement – as in politics more broadly – using the term ‘integration’. ‘Integration must continue to be promoted,’ it says, ‘but will be demanded more intensively than before’.² A host of initiatives are proposed, including investing more in courses teaching German language and customs and reintroducing specialised language kindergartens (*Sprachkittas*).

But what, exactly, *is* ‘integration’? And is this level of anxiety around social cohesion merited? Spend time with people at whom these policies and rhetoric are aimed and the topic takes on a very different hue to the one used by politicians. Foremost, there is anger and frustration at being victimised. ‘I’m sick of it,’ a woman working in a charity for Turkish speaking communities in Berlin told me when I asked her feelings ‘Where should we “integrate” to? What do we have to do to be more “integrated”? What more do you want from us?’

¹ Responsibility for Germany: Coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD, 21st legislative period (*Verantwortung für Deutschland: Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, 21. Legislaturperiode*),

https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag2025_bf.pdf

² *Ibid.*, p.95

I am midway through a multi-year social anthropological project aimed at better understanding relations amongst Turkish speakers in Berlin. (I use the term ‘Turkish speaker’, as communities labelled ‘Turkish’ often include those of non-Turkish ethnic background, notably Kurds. The use of the word ‘Turk’ to describe people born or raised in Germany is also problematic). My project involves working with non-governmental organisations that support Turkish speakers – from those who first arrived as ‘guest workers’ (*Gastarbeiter*) in the 1960s through to newcomers arriving today. I was, and am, interested in how these differing Turkish speakers view and interact with each other. Yet as I conduct my research, I have been struck by the disconnect between the public debate in Germany around integration and the lived experiences of those I encounter who supposedly need ‘integrating’.

On first glimpse, ‘immigrant integration’ can appear commonsensical: arrivals need to adapt to the place they find themselves. Few would dispute that. Nor would many disagree that including newer members in a society on ‘fair and equal terms’ can be a significant challenge.³ The question, however, is whether ‘integration’ of ‘immigrants’ – with the worldview those terms evoke and the policies which accompany them – is the best means through which to generate the hoped-for inclusion and tolerance.

Since the 1980s, the concept of integration has risen to prominence as a ‘third way’ to talk about new arrivals in Western nation states. For a long time ‘assimilation’ was the preferred concept, until

it came to be seen overly restrictive and outmoded. ‘Multiculturalism’, by contrast, became perceived as too permissive and fragmented an approach to cultural difference (in 2010, German chancellor Angela Merkel infamously declared that, as a policy, it had ‘utterly failed’).⁴ Integration, then, would be a middle way by which new arrivals were not being asked to give up who they are, but at the same time adapt to the new settings in which they found themselves.

A broad field of analysts, policy makers and scholars has coalesced around ‘integration’. They are overwhelmingly self-described supporters of immigration, who mostly wield the term to measure impact, propose solutions, and design new approaches to make integration ‘work’. Thus, there are initiatives like MIPEX, the Migration Integration Policy Index, a tool created by researchers that ‘measures policies to integrate migrants in countries across six continents’.⁵ In Germany in 2019, the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) was set up. This was followed, in 2020, by the Special Council for Integration and Migration (*Sachsverständigenrat*). Both organisations conceive of integration in progressive terms. The term is also operationalised by the German government, used in the title of official positions such as ‘integration officer’ (*Integrationsbeauftragte*), funds NGOs can apply for (*Integrationsfonds*), and taught courses aimed at new arrivals (*Integrationskurs*). Integration, then, is omnipresent, both in the administration of policies aimed at arrivals and their analysis, development or critique.

³ Adrian Favell, *The Integration Nation: Immigration and Colonial Power in Liberal Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity, 2022, p. 1

⁴ Matthew Weaver. “Angela Merkel: German Multiculturalism Has ‘Utterly Failed.’” *The Guardian*,

October 17, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-german-multiculturalism-failed>.

⁵ ‘What is MIPEX?’ <https://www.mipex.eu/what-is-mipex>

Lined up against this proliferation of integration expertise is a counter school. Led primarily by academics, they attack integration from a host of angles: accusing those using the term of assigning a homogeneity to the 'native' society which it doesn't possess, through to viewing integration as a 'neocolonial practice'.⁶ In their eyes, integration – perhaps migration studies as a whole – is the contemporary manifestation of previous eras' racist interactions. Labelling individuals as 'immigrants' and compelling them to 'integrate' is a means to perpetuate European dominance. The endeavour should be rejected and replaced by something more humane.

It is important, I believe, to not simply dismiss this stance as an unrealistically idealist position. Such critiques can be light on practical detail when it comes to offering alternatives. Yet I believe it both fruitful and salient to think of European migration in relation to the colonial encounter, especially in Germany which, outside of the National Socialist period, struggles to view itself as a coloniser.⁷

One reason it is important is because immigrant integration is profoundly racialised. Across all Western nations, integration's lens is attributed selectively, in a way that frequently tracks conceptions of ethnicity and race. White arrivals often fall outside of its remit, which saves its full force for the supposed backwardness of certain cultures, particularly those influenced by Islam. To give a personal example, I arrived in Germany a little over 2 years ago and speak so-so German, yet no one ever calls me an

immigrant. If I switch into English, I receive sympathy rather than chastisement for not being sufficiently 'integrated'. Friends and contacts from Turkey speak of very different experiences, including having their German grammar curtly corrected or their pronunciation chastised.

The racial dimensions of integration's worldview also emerge in the conversations I have had with NGO workers in Berlin. One staff member told me an anecdote from a further training course (*Fortbildung*) that they ran. The topic was community work, and the group was discussing what more could be done to bring Germans and non-Germans together.

"There are those foreigners with the typical thinking: "We'll organise a festival, we'll cook some food, we'll do a cultural dance and invite them [Germans]", and so on and so forth. I said, "shall we offer them virgins, too?" [mimes people being shocked]. "This," I continued, "is a colonialist way of thinking. You know those white guys with their ships going to an island? They encounter the local inhabitants, who present them with their riches, the daughter of the tribal chief. Is that what we should do?"

It is striking that this person, unprompted, invoked colonial first contact to describe a meeting of German and non-German citizens. Notable also is how their ire is trained on those minorities themselves who they accuse of sustaining a narrative of exoticism or difference from German 'culture'. This reflects an ongoing anger in minority circles aimed towards those who are seen as not serving the interests of their own communities but instead those of the German state, often conceptualised as oppressor.

⁶ Favell, *Integration Nation*, p. 111, Willem Schinkel, "Against 'Immigrant Integration': For an End to Neocolonial Knowledge Production." *Comparative Migration Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2018), p. 12

⁷ Daniel Pelz, 'How is the reappraisal of colonialism

going?' ("Wie läuft die Kolonialismus-Aufarbeitung?") *Deutsche Welle*, April 23, 2021.

<https://www.dw.com/de/wie-l%C3%A4uft-die-aufarbeitung-des-deutschen-kolonialismus/a-57314614>.

When the chasm between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ is being conceived in racialised terms, it underlines the failure of ideas of integration to do what they are supposedly trying to achieve: namely, bridging differences and generating cohesion.

How can we push the ‘integration debate’ forward, then, when some see no issues with the status quo while others want to burn it all down? Is this simply a case of different registers – of a scientific language comfortable with the term and a daily one that prefers more colloquial terms? Experts, of course, develop specialist lexicons to allow for quicker or more precise exchange with other experts. Yet the social sciences are not the hard sciences: the object of study is, ultimately, human societies and cultures. Speaking in ways alien to or rejected by those who are the object of study strikes me as somewhat condescending. It also seems the wrong causality: rather than apply a term to people, is it not better to hear what language people themselves use and then theorise out from that?

One route to greater sensitivity, then, is through paying greater attention to the language used by new arrivals and minorities. Outside of referring to the official German government positions, courses or funds mentioned previously, I never hear workers and volunteers in the NGOs, nor those people using their services, speak of integration. ‘Integration is like a swearword to me,’ the founder of a decades-old NGO told me with a smile. ‘They say that people of immigrant origin should integrate,’ he continued. ‘However, they should think like this: we learn

from them, they learn from us and we become one. Not “me”, not “you” – us, together’.

This person raises another issue with the term. In theory, it is possible for integration to involve both ‘foreigners’ and ‘natives’ adapting. The German Ministry of Interior and Community speaks of integration as a ‘two-way process’ (*wechselseitiger Prozess*), requiring the majority society to become receptive to it (*Aufnahmebereitschaft der Mehrheitsgesellschaft*).⁸ Yet one rarely hears or reads self-criticism or reflection as to where Germany itself may have erred in its approach. One big obstacle that Turkish speakers continually tell me about has been Germany’s overly strict nationalisation laws. Historically, people born and raised in Germany have remained ineligible to hold dual citizenship. This was a policy out of kilter with other Western nations, and one that disproportionately affected people with a recent family attachment to Turkey.⁹ It was only in 2024, with the passage of a liberalising citizenship law, that this impediment was removed. It will, I imagine, take some time for the hurt of this decades-long policy to subside.

Finally, it is worth noting that criticism voiced by newcomers and minorities often finds itself cast as ingratitude towards Germany or an unwillingness to properly ‘fit in’. See, for instance, the backlash received by Emiř Gürbüz, the mother of one of the victims of the 2019 racist attack in Hanau that left 9 dead. On the 5th anniversary of the attack, Gürbüz gave a speech that included forthright criticism of the authorities.¹⁰ This criticism was received badly by some. The ruling

⁸ Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs, ‘Why Integration is so Important’ (“Warum Integration so wichtig ist.”), <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/heimat-integration/integration/integration-bedeutung/integration-bedeutung.html?nn=9771890>.

⁹ Susan Willis McFadden, “German Citizenship Law and the Turkish Diaspora.” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 1 (February 2019): 72–88.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that she is not alone in her criticism. The official local Parliamentary investigation reported

coalition of Hessen, the state in which Hanau is located, accused her of ‘political agitation’ and ‘untruthful statements’ (*wahrheitswidrige Aussagen*) in a statement entitled: ‘anyone who demands respect must also act with respect.’ Towards the end, the statement noted that Gürbüz had recently applied for German citizenship, and mused ‘Why she has done so in her current state [of anger towards authorities] is her secret’.¹¹ The ‘ingratitude’ argument reinforces the deep-seated inequality of power between new(er) arrivals and the state, reminding that it is the latter that still holds the cards. As one NGO in Berlin wrote in relation to changes in the German citizenship law, ‘citizenship shouldn’t be conceived of as contingent in this way’, as a reward for integration (*Integrationsbelohnung*) but as, ‘an instrument for fundamental rights in the country’.

So where does this leave us? At the very least, I hope, we should stop using the term ‘integration’ uniformly and uncritically. More widely, I think the publics of Germany and other Western nation states need to embark on a process of thinking about what counts as belonging. The recent debate in Germany around foreigners becoming part of the armed forces is a good example.¹² What do we want our shared cultural touchstones to be? Our imaginations remain quite limited, shaped by ideas of ‘the nation’ that have not advanced far enough from colonial or ethno-nationalist conceptions. This is perhaps a hard thing to argue for in our current climate of rising nationalism and reactionary governance. Or, perhaps, it is the state of the current climate that makes newer forms of thought precisely so necessary.

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that there were failures on behalf of the authorities in their response to the attack, see

<https://starweb.hessen.de/cache/DRS/20/4/11754.pdf>.

¹¹ ‘Anyone who demands respect must also act with respect’ (*Wer Achtung und Respekt einfordert, muss auch mit Achtung und Respekt agieren*), February 21, 2025, <https://fdp-hanau.de/meldung/wer-achtung-und-respekt-einfordert-muss-auch-mit-achtung-und-respekt-agieren/>.

[respekt-einfordert-muss-auch-mit-achtung-und-respekt-agieren/](https://www.kas.de/de/monitor/detail/-/content/auslaender-in-der-bundeswehr).

¹² Konstantin Krome, “Foreigners in the German Army” (*Ausländer in der Bundeswehr*), Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, <https://www.kas.de/de/monitor/detail/-/content/auslaender-in-der-bundeswehr>