

# The Construction of National Identity in Germany: "Migration Background" as a Political and Scientific Category

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“Migration Background” as a Political and Scientific Category**

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## Abstract

Migration has far-reaching effects on the construction of national identity. It can lead to established concepts of national identity and societal affiliation being questioned. In this working paper, it will be demonstrated on the basis of the contemporary German situation that the recognition of Germany as an immigration society does not come along with an overall recognition of migrants as equal members of society. Indeed it is still not sufficient to possess German citizenship to be accepted as a full member of society. It can be proven, that the distinction between "ordinary Germans" and "Germans with migration background" plays an important role in designating allegedly different elements of society. The paper discusses how the social sciences are involved in the process, which makes this differentiation appear plausible and acceptable.

*Keywords:* Germany, immigration, construction of a national identity, societal affiliation discrimination, social and scientific categories

## Introduction

Manuel Castells points out, that "it is easy to agree with the fact, that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are construed" (1997: 7). Therefore he argues it is decisive to examine the questions of "how, from what, by whom and for what" (1997: 7). On the basis of this recommendation I will describe in this working paper aspects of social change that affect the construction of national identity in Germany and the related societal positioning of immigrants. When discussing this matter, one can generally state that the question of what determines national identity continues to be debated in Germany. These debates include which factors establish the unity of a nation, as well as who is included in or excluded from the idea of a national identity. Issues surrounding national identity are the subject of ongoing controversies and conflicts.

As Harald Bauder has shown in his book *Immigration Dialectic* (2011), the reality of immigration in Germany raises questions about the possibility of deconstructing a traditional ethnic understanding of national identity without having first established a consistent and commonly accepted successional concept. Hence, through an observation of the German situation, one can learn much about the construction of national identity and its related conflicts.

In my analysis, I will address the role of the social sciences in the construction of a national identity too. It is my assumption that social scientific theories, concepts, and research are not neutral descriptions of reality without any consequences. Instead, they must be considered as involved in the process of constructing national identity. They serve either to justify or to question the validity of certain societal views, which in turn aids in the shaping of national identity, and they are conducive either to confirming specific descriptions of social reality or to criticizing them as problematic elements of the production and reproduction of power, domination, and inequality. Therefore, a foundational requirement for critical social science research is not to work within the differences and categories that are common in society, but instead to think critically about these differences and categories and to

take into consideration their possible premises and ramifications.

Along these lines, researchers such as Max Weber (1922; see Scherr, 2000) have questioned the scientific viability of the concept of ethnic groups. Benedict Anderson (2006), Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Ernest Gellner (1983) and others have similarly claimed that concepts of the nation and national identity are part of nation-building processes, which include the setting of external boundaries as well as internal exclusion and boundary-setting. Therefore, we have to acknowledge that national immigration regimes and the processes by which immigrants are positioned in society are connected to assumptions about who should be considered legitimate and equal citizens of a particular nation. More pointedly, in modern societies nationalism is a significant cause of discrimination and is often intermingled with racism or cultural racism and the construction of ethnic groups. Nationalism can be regarded as an ideology closely related to the political and legal structures of nation-state framed societies. But it is important to investigate the involvement of the social sciences within these processes, which also lead to the discrimination of migrants and minorities. This is necessary because the social sciences play an import role in developing and justifying concepts, which allow distinguishing between those who are acknowledged as full members of society, and those who are treated as members of social groups that have to accept social disadvantages.

### **Background Information on Germany**

I will begin with some background information on the situation in Germany. For the purpose of my argument, it is important to understand the context of contemporary debates on immigration and national identity in Germany:

- Germany currently has around 81 million inhabitants, of which about 7 million are foreigners, or, in other words, people who do not have German citizenship. 16 million, or 19.5% of the entire population, are considered to be inhabitants with a so-called “migration background” (‘Migrationshintergrund’). This means that they either personally immigrated, belong to a family that immigrated after 1950, or were born in Germany to parents who do not have German citizenship.
- Pivotal to immigration in post-war Germany was the intentional recruiting of migrant workers between the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. This workforce was recruited mainly from rural regions of Turkey and Southern Europe as a reaction to the lack of industrial workers in West Germany. This occurred, however, under the political precept that the recruited workers were only meant to stay temporarily in Germany, and were expected to return to their home countries once they were no longer needed.
- This recruitment period ended in 1973 during the first German economic crisis, which resulted in the attempt to return the so-called “guest workers” (‘Gastarbeiter’) to their home countries. Paradoxically, however, this led to an increase in the percentage of immigrants. Although some immigrants returned to their country of origin, a larger portion remained. In addition, this group motivated the entry of family members into Germany. In the

end, the recruitment of laborers, whose stay was originally intended to be limited, resulted in the permanent immigration of families.

- Another considerable dynamic of migration, which developed in the early 1990s, had two major components. Firstly, it was driven by the immigration of war refugees and asylum seekers, especially from the former Yugoslavia, that occurred between 1990 and 1994, when there were more than one million applications for asylum. Secondly, this trend was supported by increased immigration from Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, especially by individuals who possessed proof of German ancestry and had the right to citizenship under German law. In the early '90s the immigration of asylum-seekers was mainly seen as a threat. This led to a series of violent attacks on refugees and provoked the formation of new forms of right-wing extremism. Subsequently, German asylum laws were massively restricted in 1993 and the possibilities for legal immigration for refugees became extremely limited.
- Due to these restrictions on legal immigration for refugees to Germany and Europe, many people have suffered. About 1,000 people have died every year since 1990 in their attempts to enter Europe.<sup>1</sup> In addition, each year thousands of people are forced, against their will, to return to their home countries.<sup>2</sup> Also notable is the fact that, according to current estimations, there are between 500,000 and one million people currently living in Germany as "illegal" undocumented immigrants. These statistics, however, are rarely mentioned in political and media dialogues.
- Since 2000, approximately 500,000 foreigners have immigrated to Germany annually, while a similarly large number of Germans have emigrated. Currently there is a new dynamic of immigration to Germany from the southern states of the European Union caused by extremely high youth unemployment, especially in Greece and Spain.

These cases demonstrate that various migratory movements continue to be an element of the German reality, and that, in spite of both political and judicial regulations, it is not possible to completely control immigration processes. Researchers must therefore consider migration as a process that changes social reality and challenges the self-description of societies as nations. The social relevance of societal self-description results from the idea, that the unity of society and its delimitations are in no way a self-evident given. Only by the means of self-observation and self-description emerges the concept of society as an entity, such as for example a nation state (Luhmann 1997: 866, 1045); a concept which can then be used as the foundation of a collective identity and for political agendas. The plausibility of these self-descriptions depends on the ability to account for social facts. Changes in social reality through migration therefore provoke changes to the prevailing societal self-description. They lead to debates about which new self-description adequately reflects reality and how the so described society should be designed.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://fortresseurope.blogspot.de/2006/02/immigrants-dead-at-frontiers-of-europe\\_16.html](http://fortresseurope.blogspot.de/2006/02/immigrants-dead-at-frontiers-of-europe_16.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/proasyl/Abschiebungen\\_2012.pdf](http://www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/proasyl/Abschiebungen_2012.pdf)

## Migration and the Transformation of National Identity

The reality of immigration described above presents, in the case of Germany, a specific challenge for societal self-description. This challenge becomes clearly evident in the fact that currently about 8% of the entire population, or 43% of the immigrant population, are immigrated foreigners. This means that they live permanently in Germany but are not German citizens and therefore are legally excluded from exercising democratic influence — specifically, they are not allowed to vote. This is a consequence of a citizenship law which, until the year 2000, was mainly based upon the principle of ancestry, with a narrow window of opportunity to obtain citizenship by other means. In 2000 a reform to the citizenship law was passed giving all those born as children of immigrants with a legal residential status in Germany the right to obtain German citizenship. This is, however, dependent upon immigrants giving up the citizenship of their parents. Double citizenship is only accepted in exceptional cases. Persons living long term in Germany also possess, after eight years and under certain circumstances, entitlement to naturalization, but this offer also comes with the price of giving up previous citizenship. This is, if nothing else, a result of policies of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), exemplified by the motto, "Yes to integration and no to double citizenship," which appeals to those with anti-immigrant prejudices.

Through the reform of these citizenship laws, a wide-ranging but still controversial change in the national self-image is expressed. This change is articulated by a semantic shift: from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s, the dominant political formula of the governing conservative party, the CDU, was, "Germany is not an immigrant country", as repeatedly pointed out. This description of Germany as being a non-immigration country has been recurrently and massively criticized since the 1970s, both from the social sciences and the left side of the political spectrum. Among other aspects, social scientists have pointed out that the issue involves a serious and intentional misjudgment of the reality (Bade, 1993). After all, no one could or can empirically deny the fact that ongoing immigration has been part of Germany's reality since the 1960s. The statement "Germany is not an immigration country" is therefore not only a false description of given reality, but also and predominantly a political concept used to shape reality by political power. Further immigration and the social equality of immigrants should be prohibited. This statement declared a refusal of further immigration and at the same time a refusal to recognize immigrants as equal members of society. One result of this sentiment was the renunciation of integration policies such as appropriate language support in schools. Furthermore, the statement is directed to the section of the population who view immigration as an economic threat and immigrants as foreigners who threaten national identity, which is seen to be not multicultural but mono-cultural. According to current surveys, this view is held by about 30-40% of the population (Decker at al., 2010).

Reviewing the role of the social sciences, we can state clearly that they have predominantly opposed the conservative rejection of Germany's status as an immigration society. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, relevant sections of the social sciences supported a view associating migration with cultural differences that create difficulties or problems. One influential and



highly problematic basic assumption within the educational sciences was that immigrants are faced with a conflict between two cultures, which is the origin of numerous problems (Hormel & Scherr, 2004; Nohl, 2010). Especially, rediscovering the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic groups in an often unsophisticated way, the social sciences supported claims that immigration, above all else, was a problematic clash of different cultures. This point will be addressed further in a later section of this paper.

First, however, I will illustrate some aspects of changes in societal self-description within Germany. Since the year 2000, even conservative political parties in Germany have generally accepted the reality of an immigration society.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Germany has developed policies that recognize the integration of legal and permanent immigrants as a necessity. However, this shift has taken place under notable limitations and restrictions. The objective to integrate immigrants is closely connected with the restrictive regulation of further immigration and assimilation requirements towards the existing immigrant population. For example, the acting chairman of the governing CDU party, Volker Bouffier, commented in 2010, "We have immigrants but Germany is not an immigration country", reflecting a belief that immigration countries are those countries which "officially want to have and attract" immigrants.<sup>4</sup> A declaration from the right-wing party of the governing coalition, the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), reported that "Germany is not a classical immigration country and cannot be in the future because of its historical, geographical and social situation."<sup>5</sup> Chancellor Angela Merkel recently stated that she regards the idea of a multicultural society as absolutely unsuccessful and failed.<sup>6</sup>

These statements articulate the idea that the integration of immigrants means more than simply enabling educational success, ensuring access to decent jobs, providing political representation, and motivating them to obey the laws. Integration means, especially in the conservative political spectrum, assimilation in relation to what is construed as the German "leading culture" ('Leitkultur'). The concepts "leading culture" or "our culture" are used as a definite distinction to the idea of multiculturalism based on a vague concept of national identity based on common history and culture. This concept is programmatically explained by the CDU as follows:

In this way, Germany is more than a country of birth or a residence. Germany is our spiritual home ('Heimat') and part of our identity. Our cultural values - influenced by our origin in the ancient world, the Jewish-Christian tradition, enlightenment, and historical experiences - are the foundations for societal cohesion and, additionally, shape the leading culture in Germany, to

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<sup>3</sup> [www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/eckpunkte-papier-der-partei-fordert-eingliederungsprogramm-fuer-auslaender---konkrete-vorschlaege-bis-sommer-naechsten-jahres-die-cdu-stellt-fest--deutschland-ist-ein-einwanderungsland,10810590,9849680.html](http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/eckpunkte-papier-der-partei-fordert-eingliederungsprogramm-fuer-auslaender---konkrete-vorschlaege-bis-sommer-naechsten-jahres-die-cdu-stellt-fest--deutschland-ist-ein-einwanderungsland,10810590,9849680.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abendblatt.de/politik/deutschland/article1706666/CDU-Vize-Deutschland-ist-kein-Einwanderungsland.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/cdu-csu-deutschland-kein-klassisches-einwanderungsland-122873.html>

<sup>6</sup> [www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/integration-merkel-erklaert-multikulti-fuer-gescheitert-a-723532.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/integration-merkel-erklaert-multikulti-fuer-gescheitert-a-723532.html)

which the CDU especially feels obligated. We expect that those who join us will both respect and acknowledge this.<sup>7</sup>

I cannot adequately explain here the very strange and demanding use of the idea of a single Jewish-Christian tradition in Germany. I can only indicate, that this represents a policy of remembrance, which is based on the assumption of a completed and successful coming to terms with the past (Frei, 2005). Viewing this statement against the background of the mass media debate surrounding societal disputes in Germany, one can conclude the following:

- It articulates a common attitude that still bases complete and equal belonging to society upon German heritage, which includes growing up with German as a first language ('Muttersprache') as well as affinities to habits, norms, and values believed to be typically "German." This implies that even immigrants who were born in Germany and have acquired German citizenship are not recognized and accepted as genuine Germans by a considerable percentage of the population. Instead, in everyday communication, people continually distinguish between Germans and Turks or other foreigners, even when talking about German citizens. Furthermore, the question, "Where are you from?" is often posed to Germans who do not resemble the "typical" German. In a pointed and yet ironic way, critical commentators have often mentioned that in Germany there is a weighty difference between "organic Germans" and "passport Germans". These distinctions go along with discriminatory practices, often seen in the housing market, the job market, and vocational training.
- The concept of a leading culture is clearly designed to exclude Islam and Muslim immigrants. In the early 1990s immigrants and especially refugees were seen as a threat, imagined as unfair competitors in the labor market and abusers of the welfare state. Currently, Islam is given the role of the opponent and "other" of "our" culture and society, forcing "normal" Germans to define "their" national identity.

This is clearly exemplified in a book titled *Deutschland schafft sich ab*, or *Germany Abolishes Itself* (Sarrazin, 2010). Released in 2010, this book is among the most sold nonfiction books in German post-war history. Its author was and still is a prominent member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). This book states:

Through Muslim immigration and the growing influence of the Islamic faith, the Western world is being confronted by authoritarian, pre-modern, and even antidemocratic tendencies, which not only challenge our self-image, but also could pose a direct threat to our lifestyle. (...) From an economic standpoint, we don't need the Muslim immigration in Europe. Because of their low labor force participation and high utilization of social welfare benefits, Muslim immigrants cost each country more than they contribute in economic value. The idea of society and the moral concepts they represent signify a cultural and civilizational regression.

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<sup>7</sup> Beschluss des 23. Parteitages der CDU Deutschlands Verantwortung Zukunft;  
<http://www.cdu.de/doc/pdfc/101116-verantwortung-zukunft-beschluss.pdf>



Demographically, the incredible fertility of Muslim immigrants poses a long-term threat to culture and civilization in an aging Europe. (Sarrazin, 2010: 267)

In order to prevent false impressions, it should be noted that this book has also received substantial critique within mass media, both from the side of the politically more liberal or left-wing positions, as well as from the critical social sciences. The German president himself declared that Muslims are a part of the German society. It is, nonetheless, an expression of a considerably widespread mindset which is based on a definition of a nation clearly closed off to the outside and desiring to be as internally homogenous as possible.

The ongoing controversy around national identity and Islam (Bade, 2013) reflects a highly influential political position which views immigration and immigrants as both economically necessary and as a threat to national identity. Not only by those in the conservative spectrum immigrants are regarded not as independent individuals, but instead typically as ethnic and cultural "others" who are determined by their heritage and belonging.

### **The Ambivalent Role of the Social Sciences**

In the third and last part of my paper I will elaborate on the ambivalent role of the social and educational sciences in the process of shaping national identity. On the one hand, the social sciences in Germany have been active participants in the process that has led to the recognition of Germany as an immigration society. The social sciences are currently becoming increasingly involved in the analysis and criticism of racism and discrimination. On the other hand, however, the social sciences have also expressed variations of the assumption that immigrants are different from non-immigrant Germans and must be regarded as a problematic group in society.

To understand the construction of immigrants as a problematic group it is important to take into account various aspects of this portrayal. Firstly, a high percentage of immigrants in Germany — especially those from Turkey — are characterized by disadvantages in the job market and in the educational system. This can be explained by theories of social inequality and discrimination. In the 1960s and 1970s, German immigration policy was targeted toward recruiting relatively unqualified workers with little education, and nothing was done to further improve their qualification level. Until the end of the 1990s, there was very little effort to provide opportunities for children of immigrants to obtain a better social and economic position through education. Even today, the German educational system is characterized by structures that reinforce social inequalities. Immigrants are overrepresented in the branch of the educational system that offers a low chance of acceptance into vocational schools and no chance to attend universities. The effects of policy and of social structures which led to the positioning of immigrants within the lower social classes have since the 1980s been interpreted (especially by the educational sciences) as an unavoidable consequence of supposed ethnocultural differences. This is partially due to the fact that class theories had been neglected in the 1980s and theories on the connection between social inequality and education had to be rediscovered in the new century.

The interpretation of disadvantages as a consequence of ethnicity and culture was caused by a theoretically naive understanding of culture, cultural differences, and ethnicity.<sup>8</sup>

This theoretical naïveté is evident, for example, in surveys where ethnicity and citizenship are regarded as the same thing and data is collected without asking whether and how individuals define themselves in terms of ethnicity and nationality. Since the mid-1980s, several social and educational scientists have turned against an ethnic view of the problematic for subgroups of immigrants. They have done this with convincing arguments, on which I will further elaborate. Within education and schools, however, it is still considered legitimate and normal to “understand” the effects of social inequality through ethnic and cultural accounts.

Secondly, in Germany the term “migration background” (‘Migrationshintergrund’) has been established as a common category to collect data and construct explanations of problems with regard to immigration, both within official statistics and in the social sciences. Contemporary surveys differentiate between Germans without a migration background and inhabitants with a migration background. In this context, the category of “migration background” is described by the definition from the Federal Statistical Office:

This group of people consists of all those who have immigrated to Germany since 1950, as well as those in the country who were born with foreign citizenship, and Germans who were born here and are living with at least one parent who either immigrated or was born in Germany as a foreigner. (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012: 1)

This definition, somewhat confusing at first glance, calls for a more exact examination. Here we see that the category of those with migration background includes not only those who have themselves immigrated, but also those whose parents immigrated. Additionally, those individuals who were born in Germany and are German citizens are considered to have a migration background not only if one parent was born abroad, but even if one of their German-born parents has a foreign parent. This means that having a non-German grandfather or grandmother could be enough to classify someone as being German with a migration background. I personally think this is interesting because it establishes a statistical category which is defined in a way that corresponds with an ethno-national conception of membership. In this way, a distinction is established and accepted that differentiates between “normal Germans” on the one side and Germans and foreigners with a broadly defined migration background on the other. Statistical data gathered under these terms can lead to the circular confirmation of the premise that considerable differences exist between actual Germans and those with a migration background. This seems to be true only when, for example, the effects of social class, achieved educational level, the length of stay, and the legal status are not controlled in surveys. Therefore these differences are

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<sup>8</sup> The core problem of a theoretically naive understanding of ethnicity and culture is to be seen in its neglect of the fact that cultures are complex and without clear borderlines, and that individuals and groups cannot be regarded as cultural dopes, but must be acknowledged as agents of doing culture and doing ethnicity according to their living conditions and experiences (see Willis, 2000).

predominantly the effects of spurious correlations.

Compared with those of other countries such as France, it becomes evident that these typical German categories of empirical research and official statistics are not genuinely scientific or theoretical, but are instead categories through which national concepts of belonging and acceptance, of social divisions and distinctions, are articulated. Information on the migration background of French citizens is not gathered, as nationality in France is defined by citizenship and not by heritage. In Germany, on the other hand, no information is compiled on ethnic self-definition or on “race”, because ethnicity is typically considered to be the same as nationality and “race” is regarded an illegitimate category.

By establishing such categories, social sciences contribute to the legitimization or delegitimization of differences that are constitutive elements of the social order. It masks or exposes social lines of social conflict, and constructs or deconstructs the legitimate view of the social world. One can draw the conclusion that science should justify its categories theoretically and should examine them for possible effects on power relations, rather than simply deriving them from commonsense or dominant discourses.

Categories such as migration background are also subject to the further problem that such classifications, which intend to describe collective identities, are also part of the construction of these collective identities. And collective identities often have no direct correlation to social groups, defined as groups with shared experiences among people who know one another.

As Georg Simmel stated, they refer to what he calls “abstract groups” (Simmel, 1908/1968: 335), or to that which Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” There are undoubtedly “imagined communities” that are real; following Max Weber, they are real to the extent of the weight of their members’ belief in a shared history, culture, and identity (see Scherr, 2000).

It is my view that the responsibility of critical social sciences should be to reveal the requirements, forms, and ramifications of the construction process of such abstract groups, including an analysis of the processes that make people believe in their belonging to a constructed unit such as a nation. This belonging shares important similarities with being part of a group among people who know each other and develop a common understanding of their situation by talking about their shared experiences and their situation.

The prerequisite for such an analysis is, as Rogers Brubaker (2007) has convincingly argued, a critique of “groupism” within the social sciences. This approach would critique the idea that belonging to a single social group could be a precondition for social scientific explanations. The existence and meaning of categorically constructed groups is to be seen, in contrast, as something to be explained, not simply as a fact that can be used as a foundation for such explanations.

In the case of the German category of “migration background,” it is evident that its function is to maintain the idea of a foundational commonality of ethnically constructed Germans under conditions that have considerably challenged this construction. Ultimately, the category is a political and societal expression of a nationalism aimed at denying immigrants equal status, equal

rights, and the chance to be seen as equally valued members of society.

Immigrant societies committed to democratic and human rights, should be, in my opinion, directed by descriptions of membership that are bound neither by origin nor by national, cultural, or religious identification. I am, along with Zygmunt Bauman (1999: 63), convinced that the preferable perspective does not lie in returning back to allegedly clear national and ethnic affiliations, but in the continuation of the modern disembedding process.

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