

*Democracy, Diversity and Civic Inequality:
Culture and Religion in the Netherlands, Germany and Beyond*
June 22, 2009 13:30-21:00 in Berlin

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The recent elections to the European parliament have brought to light a disturbing rise of the right wing vote in the electorates of numerous European states, and much of that vote especially in the wealthier, more advanced countries of Western Europe such as Britain and the Netherlands correlates with issues of immigration and issues around religion and colour. Beyond that, the rise of racist and anti-Semitic tendencies have become rampant throughout the European Union.

With this conference, we wish to address, from different theoretical and political positions, these and other contentious issues in relation to citizenship and immigration. Today, much of the debate has moved from multicultural discourses to those of “diversity” and “integration.” All three terms, of course, address the very same issue—that of the positioning of the immigrant in the new society. These different terms do that quite differently, however. The term “integration” as it is being used today is not much concerned with the internal structuration of the immigrant population and it tends to address the issue in terms of techniques of control and of forcing immigrants into existent national molds. The German idea of “Leitkultur” is an articulation of that idea. Rarely if ever does that culturalist approach deal with the economic issues that beset this population: their high unemployment rates, discrimination in the housing market, discriminatory access to higher education and the like.

The idea of “diversity” on the other hand, while typically paying lip service to recognition of difference, is not much of an improvement in this regard. Like “integration,” it ignores or even denies community and the political that is inherent in community, and it is therefore of little surprise that in 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to inscribe the diversity principle into one of the first articles of the French constitution, debated in the Simone Weil Commission where in the end it was turned down. Diversity, moreover, can mean many things: from diverse religious beliefs, political attitudes, sexual orientation, gender issues or physical or mental handicaps, and it therefore erases the central question of the reception of immigrants. Much of this ideological shift has occurred in the aftermath of 9/11, 7/7 and the van Gogh murder in the Netherlands.

Up to these incidents, European discourses had centred around the notion of multi-culturalism, with a strong impetus coming from debates in North America, especially Canada. In contrast to discourses around diversity and integration, however, the notion of multi-culturalism, while also culture-, not economy-centred, nevertheless contains a notion of communities, agency of community, and a



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distinct positioning of immigrant groups in nation states which must be recognized. That term, however, clearly is in need of careful further analysis. At a time when there is much talk about transnationalism and cosmopolitanism à la Arjun Appadurai and others, the definitional power of the state is too easily being ignored, and where we do not recognize the different national contexts of discourses around multiculturalism, we will fail in the effort to debate it. Multiculturalism has an entirely different meaning in Canada from that in France, and different again from the one in the Netherlands or Germany. It is states, after all, that shape their dealings with the immigrants in conformity with their own specific narratives of the nation, in today's European Union little less than before that time. These states also exert power and shape power relations between (and even within) immigrant groups which however should not deny the agency that immigrant groups through their institutional structures might have. These, then, are some of the issues that our conference will hope to address.