
An Identity Crisis?

By Lothar Katz

In September 2015, Germany registered the highest numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in its recent history. Estimates for the year are pegged at a record-setting 1 million new immigrants, more than 1.2 percent of the country's total population.

Predictably, this trend stimulates intense political debates. While large parts of the population offer strong support and practical help, a substantial percentage of Germans protest against further immigration, with a small number of right-wing extremists committing xenophobic acts of violence across the country.

Such clashes are by no means unique to Germany. U.N. General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon, just reported on what he called the “biggest refugee and migration crisis since World War II.” From Pakistan to Mali, a ‘belt of conflicts,’ in several cases initiated or aggravated by Western interventions, has led millions to flee from their failing countries. In parallel, the lure of Western standards of living continually attracts many more would-be migrants hoping for a better life.

In response, Hungary started erecting a fence along its southern border, just as the United States did on its own one long ago. While EU attempts to reach agreement among its members on refugee quotas largely failed, bringing to light long-hidden cracks in its foundation, the union was quick to agree on military action against refugee traffickers in the Mediterranean. Right-wing politicians continue to gain momentum, in Europe and stateside, at the same time as some liberals and moderate conservatives issue calls for hospitality and tolerance.

Make no mistake: ideological battles over immigration MUST be taken very seriously. After all, they have the potential to destabilize societies. Everyone, regardless of where in the political spectrum they stand, deserves to be heard. In addition, weighty practical concerns warrant consideration in this crisis, from “*How can we accommodate all these people?*” on one side to “*How could we possibly accommodate so many people?*” on the other.

Not to belittle any of these aspects, I'd like to focus on another argument here, namely the oft-quoted risk of “*losing one's cultural identity.*” Those opposed to immigration regularly argue that excessive numbers of immigrants, especially those from ‘other cultural circles’ (read: Islamic countries), lead to cultural clashes and jeopardize the local culture because these immigrants commonly “*integrate poorly.*”

Germany, the world's second-most popular migration destination according to a 2014 survey, is a bit of a paradox. The constitution offers asylum to refugees, but no explicit immigration law whatsoever is in place. While traditionally a xenophobic culture, around seven million foreigners currently live in the country, and its population includes about 3 million people of Turkish and 1.5 million of Polish descent. Far more foreign restaurants exist in Germany than there are native ones. The nation is proud of being the reigning football world champion, kudos to players like Mesut Özil (of Turkish descent), Sami Khedira (German-Tunisian), Miroslav Klose (Polish-born), or Jérôme Boateng (German-

Ghanaian). Or take Berlin: a truly multicultural place, it is home to more than a half-million foreigners from a whopping 186 different countries. Naturally, these influences impact the German society.

Nevertheless, the core of the country's culture has not changed all that much because of immigration. Traditional German values, such as orderliness, punctuality and cleanliness, still dominate everyday life. Even staunch conservatives would be hard pressed to find any 'Turkish elements,' for example, in the country's contemporary culture.

Indeed, in Germany and elsewhere, the cultural identity argument usually turns out to be little more than a smoke screen, the real issue being something else: an expectation of integration. *"If only these folks tried harder to integrate themselves,"* one often hears, *"immigration would be far less of an issue."*

Digging deeper, the request for immigrants to 'integrate' themselves usually turns out to be an expectation for them to 'assimilate': to follow local rules and practices, to tone down or altogether give up what is different. This desire is at the very heart of the sentiment of xenophobia: *"The more different you are, the more afraid I am of you, therefore: become more like me!"* Accordingly, the issue is no longer a fear of the dominant culture being in jeopardy. Rather, it is one of not wanting to tolerate 'excessive' diversity.

There can be no doubt that moving to another country requires flexibility and adaptation. Each society works within its own framework, which everyone living within the country needs to respect. Asking people to assimilate, however, means more than that: it means asking them to be *"less like them and more like us."* In essence, it means asking them to give up, in parts or altogether, their own identity.

It is hard to deny that the EU is in the middle of a major identity crisis. Given the deep political trenches within the traditionally more collaborative United States, one might well arrive at the same conclusion in her case.

But to argue that immigration in itself threatens the identity of any country and culture is far-fetched. While lifestyles may be changing quickly, cultural core values rarely do. And that's a good thing. Unfortunately, what seems to be lacking in the current refugee crisis is a willingness to be tolerant rather than insisting on "integration." Accepting and tolerating differences would make it easier for everyone to preserve their identity – those who always lived here, and those hoping to find a new home.

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