Editorial

The articles in this issue, however diverse in focus, scope and argumentation, have an intriguing common feature; they deal with what I would call the “elasticity of the diversity discourse” in various European countries. Diversity has become a much celebrated political and social value lately and appears as a theme in an increasing number of policy documents across Europe. Institutions and companies are bound to have a “diversity strategy” to ensure maximum participation of people with diverse backgrounds. However, there is also a downside to diversity as a policy principle, namely when it becomes an argument for unequal treatment. All contributions to this issue have relevance to this “Janus-face of diversity”.

Giancarlo Anello describes how local governments in northern Italy have developed legislation to tighten conditions for Muslims to open mosques, thereby violating basic constitutional rights of religious freedom and equality. While these basic rights across Europe should guarantee equal treatment regardless of religious background, governments in several countries in Europe seek to develop conditions to treat certain communities, in this case Muslims, differently. This understanding of diversity and differential treatment bears a resemblance to Apartheid in South-Africa three decades ago.

Aida Kassaye and Anja van Heelssum in an article comparing the representation of Muslim spokespersons and opinion leaders in the media in the UK and Germany, argue that the differences found between the two countries are based on characteristics of Muslim spokespersons and the strategies they apply, but also on differences with regard to the criteria and conditions set for entry into the public debate. In other words, who decides who can sit at the discussion table and who cannot?

Sakina Loukili writes about the rise of DENK, a Dutch political party founded by Muslims who take issue with what they see as the one-sided way Muslims are portrayed by other political parties. After three years in Parliament, it appears that DENK is clearly more than an ephemeral phenomenon and that they have given a voice to many people with a migrant background, notably Muslims. Reactions to the founding of DENK were rather negative because they were accused of being a one-issue-party, promoting identity politics and “reverse discrimination”.

Martin Lundsteen brings the role of class and economics back into the analysis of the position of Muslim (migrants). In the early literature on migration in the 1970s, there was an abundance of studies that dealt with the relationship between migration and class structure. In the course of the 1980s and in the 1990s, the theme of class became an “old-fashioned” passé and the cultural background of migrants became the dominant analytical paradigm. Lundsteen shows how economic factors have taken on a new shape in the form of Islamophobia and racism in 21st-century capitalism.

The article by Hansjoerg Schmid deals with the diverse ways in which the role of imams in the integration of Muslims is perceived. Taking the case of Switzerland, he shows how very complex this issue is. Far from being “simple” religious leaders, imams have to navigate between different, often conflicting demands and requirements. In general, their role is being expanded to terrains and issues that are way beyond their original task. This brings in a fascinating perspective on the much-celebrated separation of religion and state in many countries in Europe, namely how to make sense of, on the one hand, the expansion of tasks and roles of imams and, on the other, the idea of religion as a purely private affair.

Thijl Sunier

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On behalf of the team