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Thea D. Boldt (2012): Silent Integration: Identity Constructions of Polish Migrants in Germany

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Abstract

Since, at the latest, the German integration debate was polarised by the Thilo Sarrazin's theses concerning the genetic foundations of ethnic group belonging and its associated essentialist identity characteristics, it has once again become clear that social science must come into renewed debate with those opinions and positions in the German public sphere. This book heeds this imperative in various ways.

On the one hand it makes empirically clear that identity and ethnicity should be viewed not as essentialist but rather as processually constructed phenomena. Using examples, it shows how individuals negotiate their identities in different historical and social contexts, and how ethnic belonging as social construction becomes a relevant point of reference for their every day actions. In this way, ethnicity is being viewed as a socially constructed category used for managing biographical experience and organising social relationships in day-to-day life.

On the other hand, this book will attempt to introduce a new perspective on the multi-ethnic composition of German society, thereby contributing to the public discussion about German multicultural identity. Germany is an immigration country whose discussion about integration views certain immigrants as problematic and arranges them discursively into visible groups; in contrast, others are viewed as unproblematic, yet at the same time they remain invisible. Over the years, established opinion has viewed this latter group, foremost the Polish migrants, as particularly capable of integration. Since Polish migrants and their civil society representatives in Germany seldom express themselves in German immigration and integration debates, and hardly talk about their experiences as migrants in Germany, their integration passes by unnoticed in the German public sphere. They are thus perceived as a well integrated but also invisible minority.

Clearly contributing to this situation are the complexities of the problematic statistical accounts of the German resident population. Some Polish organisations tell of around two million people who define themselves as Polish living in Germany; however, the statistics do not take individual self-definition into account, only citizenship. Since dual Polish-German citizenship was not available until Poland entered the European Union in April 2004, those people of Polish origin who became naturalised in Germany before 2004 had to renounce their Polish citizenship and so remain unaccounted for in some statistical accounts of the German resident population. In addition to this, a large proportion of those in the so-called second great Polish-German migration wave (in the 1980s and 1990s) were naturalised through the liberal method of state recognition, namely as German repatriates, despite having been socialised in Poland and the majority having known nothing about their German ancestors prior to arrival. In spite of this, they are viewed and constituted statistically as people of German origin.

The silent integration of Polish-origin people in Germany exacerbates the fact that the emerging historical, ethnic and cultural diversity of German society has already gone unperceived for many generations. To counter this trend, and simultaneously to raise awareness about the meaning of the German-Polish migration streams reaching back into the 19th century, and playing a firm part in the German-Polish collective experience, this book analyses biographical accounts of long-term German residents who define themselves as Polish despite their statistically-attributed citizenship.

Accordingly, this book is not least about perceiving more clearly the perspectives of social subjects in relation to their own migration and identity, which is lacking in present publications. A glance at the current state of the arts supports the assertion that until now studies of Polish migration to Germany have predominantly focused quantitatively on economic and political "push and pull" factors. This approach, however, does not take into account the narrations associated with migration in the total biographical and family context. This qualitative biographical study shows that the familiar narrative of handed-down discrimination experiences in German-Polish collective history has a powerful influence on the biographical identity constructions as well as in the self-orientation of Polish migrants in Germany society. It also shows, that migrants still contend with multifarious forms of discrimination in their day-to-day life. Even though this theme has hardly received any discussion in the German public sphere until now, the interviews with Polish migrants show that precisely these experiences play a central role in their ethnic-identity formation processes.