

Big City Issues: The Case of Berlin-Neukölln

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The region I come from, the district Neukölln of Berlin, is not typical for Germany's migration reality. Perhaps it is the visible and perceptible summit of its problems, honoured by the title "Bronx of Berlin". Every German is startled and irritated if someone pronounces the word "Neukölln", because it became the national symbol of disintegration, violence, unsuccessful education policy in the midst of our capital. The situation in Stuttgart, or Nuremberg, or Augsburg – cities in the South – is quite different, as well as their economic situation is much better, and it is different in other districts of Berlin. But Neukölln stands for the possible future of the big cities in Germany – and not only in Germany. My district is part of the banlieues d'Europe. Of course, the reality of migration and integration is much more complex than the catchwords, I suppose. The mass media love scandals of all kind and exaggerate, and, as surplus, we have a mayor who loves to talk to these media. It is a good field for horror stories.

But the problems we have to handle with are not invented by story tellers, they are real, and solutions are not obvious or not within reach. And they do exist in all big cities in Germany, perhaps all over Europe.

Back to Neukölln, long story short: The Northern part of Neukölln – and everybody talks just about this area – has about 160 000 inhabitants (Neukölln as a whole 310.000), among them over fifty percent legal immigrants and an estimated ten percent more who are illegal. Over fifty percent of the immigrants are unemployed (but not automatically without work). Most of the immigrants are from Turkey (40 %), 12 % from Arabic states (most of them Iraqis), 11 % from Poland, 10 % come from the former Yugoslavian states, estimated 8% from Russia, and a significant number are "stateless" (8%), such as most of the Palestinians. The number of African migrants is increasing. It is impossible to have exact dates.

The Neukölln migrants live in the narrow old worker's quarters,, comprising one-sixths of Neukölln's area. Neukölln is – according to the brand-new social statistics – the poorest community of Germany, with the lowest percentage of income. Our actual tackling problem is the combination of poorness, unemployment and migration. And the future doesn't look better: The education system hasn't been able (and is not willing) to react on migration. In the elementary school till 95% children do

not speak German as mother tongue, and a lot of them have no real chance to learn it. The majority of young people do not graduate the lowest exams, have no vocational training and start their grown up lives off work. The impossibility of social inclusion is the catastrophe that continues to threaten many immigrants in Germany's capital. The problems of the German education system already are visible in Neukölln. The other side of the medal: A lot of very engaged teachers, civic organisations, academics and local politicians are trying to change the situation by experiments, engagement, changes on a low level. They are left alone. A sustainable and deep change is not to be seen on the agenda of German education policy.

In Neukölln live people from about 165 nations. Very few are from EU-Countries, worth mentioning just the Polish. The former "Gastarbeiter" from Italy, Greece or Spain left a long time ago – few stayed, mostly because of family bonds. The ethnic groups are very different concerning their interest of integration, and of course, in between the groups there are considerable differences, mostly organized around social, religious and political backgrounds. There is very few contact between the ethnic groups; the community organizing is very often the organizing of closed shops – the more fundamentalism is aroused in a religious or political mind, the higher are the fences around them. The ethnic groups and communities till now, do not realise the necessity of working together - or it makes no sense to them after decades of living in Germany without being accepted as **immigrants** and not as euphemistically called "**Gastarbeiter**", who can be sent home after having delivered their labour. A far-sighted wise man, Max Frisch, observed many years ago: "We called for labour, but men arrived." Only the Nationality Law (*Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz*) of 2000, offers the basis for Germany becoming officially a land of immigration. But mentally we are not arrived at this point, as the again and again reactivated "Leitkultur"-debate shows, or the current debate about youth criminality, which lays the blame for violence at the young migrants' door: a big topic in Neukölln. Because of these just briefly mentioned reasons the fences against the host society are high, too. The lack of confidence from both sides is to be sensed everywhere. Participation is a big word, but sometimes a small reality. Advisory councils of migrants adjoined to the quarter council seem reasonable, but if they have no rights, they remain paper tigers, not taken serious by anybody.

But I am not desperate. Perceptible changes took place. I claim culture played an important role in this change. I experienced that culture is able to pull down the walls, at least to penetrate it and to fix some explosive devices. Often our work is not taken seriously neither by politicians nor by the elite art people, and we are not at all provided with sufficient funds. Like beggars we have to ask for money – non stop. We do this because we are able to build bridges between the “closed shops”, we can find common opening ours – few, but some, and they can become more and longer. We practise the “intercultural dialog”, we do not need a special year to do it. But: Although I am firmly convinced of the impact of the arts, I know that the great social problems of our country and all over the world cannot be resolved by art and aesthetic culture. Nor can the problem of unemployment or the problem of segregation - -the deep trench between poor and rich people-- be bridged by cultural or aesthetic activities. But political abstinence and withdrawal into the ivory tower of the arts would be a sign to agree and accept the inequality of chances and the inequality of possibilities for participation in education and culture. It would be an agreement to social exclusion. Nonetheless, we are not condemned to wait until we have reached a certain level of social justice. So – we have to work. We did it since a long time.

Our first Neukölln “opening our” was the festival “Kiez International”: It was, 20 years ago, the first common event of all interested ethnic communities. The festival is still flourishing today, now with the artistic heart “Bewegte Welten”, “Moving Worlds”. Dance groups from all over the world, living in Berlin, perform their professional and semi-professional traditions, from Korea till Mexico, from Azerbaijan to the Pontos Greeks. Many German Berliners love this view in the world. The remarkable point: It is the only bigger cultural event in Berlin, where Turkish spectators are willing to see Indian artists, or Russians looking to African dancers, or Arabic headscarf-women admiring Brazilian half-naked girls. Normally the Turkish come to Turkish events, and the Indians to Indian events. And very few come to German or Western European events.

Part of “Kiez international” are – besides exquisite international food - a lot of information booths, where the communities inform about their work and about problems in their home lands: for many of them the only easy available possibility to reach people out of an inner circle.

It is not possible in such a short time to tell in a painstaking way more about characteristic examples of cultural work which has real consequences for the process of migration and living together on the fundament of the principles of cultural diversity. But cultural politics and work executed by a longer term and not only in project fireworks prove: Art and aesthetic culture can establish **communication** by doing something together or trying to create something together by achieving an understanding; verbal communication would be more difficult. That way you can communicate and understand the message which is outside the regular communication. In this meaning culture offers a contact zone of approach – perhaps the most important function of culture. The chance to create common meeting platforms and locations of coming together is a central potential for a successful realisation of diversity policy. It creates confidence, and confidence is the basis of a common future.

As a central task we foster education programmes with artists in schools and cooperation between schools and arts institutions. Schools are the only place where you meet all children and young people, from all social groups and ethnic cultures. We hope (because we experienced) the kids and teens get to know the chance of communication – and the feeling of being successful and strong: not strong with muscles, but strong with brain, fantasy and creativity.

The cooperation with the ethnic communities was and is the central guideline of intercultural arts and culture policy in Neukölln. We made many, many things together – research projects, community or educational art projects, gender orientated projects, multilingual storytelling and language experiments. We realized a big youth culture project which dealt with “Leitkulturen” – we sought to discover together with young migrants and artists the value systems of migrant communities in Neukölln. We identified key value concepts and concentrated on those that played an important role in the value systems under study. The diversity and the different meanings of the identified values - obedience, respect, honour, shame, and tolerance - offered endless material for debate and dispute. The permanent misunderstandings and critical incidents showed the necessity of an intercultural discourse and acceptance of diversity if we want to live together, but – at the same time – the acceptance of common rules.

In the moment we start working – again with peer young people with migration background and artists – on a project called “19 Freedoms” – the 19 articles of our

German Constitution, They will work in many workshops with Neukölln youngsters who never heard about the German constitution, as well as they are Germans and – of course – the constitution concerns them and gives them rights, the ethnic background does not matter.

In all these projects artists played an important role. They helped to install the “contact zone” and to find common languages.

The last concrete experience from Neukölln I want to mention is the “Community Foundation of Neukölln”, set up in 2005. It is a baby of the confidence networking practised in cultural community work, activating the strength of many who have no strength as long as they act alone. Some Neukölln inhabitants understood that there is no use in waiting until the state takes care of the deficiencies. In the “Community Foundation” (*Bürgerstiftung*) people are engaged from ethnically diverse backgrounds--Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Poles, New Zealanders, Africans from different countries, Iraqis, Americans and of course Germans. They are developing new ways of intercultural and civic engagement of the kind that has been very scarce in Berlin until now. Their aim is to draw attention to the potentials of Neukölln’s diversity and to make use of their benefits – and to introduce new working programs by hands-on-activities. Up till now it is the only German Community foundation based on the idea of diversity.

I did not speak about Europe during the last minutes, instead I reported about migration and the situation in a big town caused by migration. Migration inside the borders of the European Union is for the most part not regarded as migration – except the migrants from Poland. Migration is something for underdogs. Inner European mobility seems to work as if it is the most natural thing in the world, especially among the young educated middle class people. No secondary school without partner school in other European countries, meetings and travelling in Europe without borders is taken for granted. Bi-lingual capacity counts much if it is in German + English, or French, or Spain. But bilingualism in German/ Turkish or German/ Arab or German/ Vietnamese is not respected as an important potential, it is regarded as defect. That is not the only reason why the not-EU-Berliners feel treated as second class migrants, what they indeed can prove.. European arrogance destroys confidence.

The society founded by and on migration of today is much more than the result of splendid European mobility. It is a world wide phenomenon, and - at least - is similar in any European big city. It causes everywhere boarder societies differing only in their ethnic shade. But a sense for or a feeling of Europe does not play any part in these societies on the edge – in the “Banlieues d’Europe”. There, Europe does not matter. Yet, the banlieues have to matter to Europe. Not only because they are potential social time bombs. In the atmosphere of the banlieues happens a lot, and they often show a high denseness of creativity – in the quarters, who are outcast in an urban as well as in a social and economic context.

I can watch this in Neukölln: We arrived not only at a high denseness of migrants with overwhelming diversity package, we became homeland for many, many artists from all over the world. The district developed to a laboratory of art and creativity. In the recent years known as a dull, run-down worker’s district, today more and more artists like to live in this difficult district, and they play an important role in the empowerment strategy of the district. Many of them are able to communicate well; they feel accepted with often strange and marginal ways of life (and they estimate the outsiders they meet in Neukölln); they are entrepreneurs with a variety of subjects and aims; they live courageously and experimentally. This development proved fruitful for Neukölln. The best example is the festival “48 Hours Neukölln,” which since 1998 has been organized by a network of artists und cultural activists. It reveals an unexpected face of Neukölln: a courageous, multicoloured, experimental, high quality event. In 2007 more than 1000 different art activities could be visited. People from all over Berlin and abroad are coming to look into the “pot of urban culture”.

A comparable development is to be seen in other European big cities, too, as a conference about multicultural theatre in Amsterdam verified some years ago: The future of European urban culture possibly develops in the multicultural banlieues d’Europe. For sure, I talk in very short words about a very complicated process full of obstacles, and of course it does not work by its own: We have to give chances, we have to grant social inclusion and adequate education. We have to make possible cultural work which cares for participation. We have to care of empowerment and we have to show respect. And we have to take seriously the cultural potentials we gain by the people who come. Migration changes the old society, opens it, twists it, tangles it up, and culture can build the platform of communication, the contact zone.

New hybrid artistic and cultural realities will grow in correspondence to the changes of society, and I am sure they will differ from excluding “Leitkultur” ideas – as well as I hope our cultural heritage will be part of it.

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