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A VIGNETTE: “YOU’RE AMERICAN?” ATTEMPTS TO REACH MUSLIM HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN GERMANY

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While I am at my desk, a sedan speeds by my window blasting Arab music, a mild annoyance reminding me of teens cruising to the heavy beat of hip hop in my Vermont hometown. Snow-topped mountains and green river valleys have been replaced by the urban landscape of Germany’s capital, enhanced by the scent of roasted lamb and sesame oil and the sight of young people dressed somewhere between Islamic traditionalism and Western chic. With a scholarship awarded by the Fulbright Commission and under the auspices of the Institute for Historical-Political Education at the Technical University of Berlin, I currently lead a study on democratic practices in secondary education. Berlin is home to my husband’s family, where our two children were born when we lived in the city some 15 years ago.

“It’s hard to live between two countries, not really being at home,” remarked a girl after I had presented to her class.

“It must be the same for you. Where do you feel at home?” I asked.

“Germany is home. I never want to live in Turkey. Vacation, okay, but I can’t even write Turkish. And the people are so different. What would I ever do there?” Her girlfriend nodded in agreement.

Moments earlier, standing before the students, I had switched from my usual silent role of the non-participant observer to become the object of students’ inquiry. Often after an hour of serious discussion, students and I would meet in the cafeteria and halls during my two-week stay. Roughly a third of the 44 teachers observed had welcomed the opportunity for an American to speak, despite its competition with curriculum mandates and test preparation. Turkish and Arab children comprise the majority in many schools located in Neukoelln, Kreuzberg, and Wedding, where a significant number of Berlin’s 213,000 Muslims live (Statistisches Landsamt Berlin, 2006). They disproportionately attend Hauptschulen (Main Schools), which are vocationally geared for those considered to possess the least academic ability. Of Berlin’s
15 year olds, 26% have parents who speak a language other than German (Carstensen et al., 2003). Yet after sixth grade, when students are separated into the antiquated three-tiered secondary school system, 45% of them are enrolled in Main Schools, approximately a quarter of whom drop out before the final tenth year (Berlin Senatverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2006). Only 15% attend a Gymnasium, a pathway whose origins date back to 1538 (Huebner, 1962) to serve the highest achievers, though just under 10% receive the Abitur diploma, the passage to university (Berlin Senatverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2006). After a visit to Germany’s schools, United Nations envoy Vernor Muñoz condemned the divided system, saying, “This country is giving away its reserve of talent” (Meng, 2006, p. 2).

The past decade of economic slowdown, acutely felt in Berlin and the eastern German provinces, has produced a crisis for youth with a migration background. Only 30% land an apprenticeship, compared to 60% of those of German heritage (Gewerkschaft, Erziehung und Wissenschaft, Landesverband Berlin, 2006). For students who attend Main Schools, their chances are drastically reduced, with only about a fifth of graduates becoming apprentices. This has resulted in a swelling underclass of unskilled and unemployed young people, the perpetuation of poverty, and, in the words of Wolfgang Edelstein, a leading educational researcher at the Max Planck Institute, “creates a high potential for an antidemocratic mindset among the masses” (Edelstein, 2005a, p. 15). Knallhart (Brutal), a recent film shot in Berlin’s most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, depicts Arab immigrants as amoral drug dealers who corrupt misguided German victims.

The shop teacher at Pine Main School\(^1\) introduced me to Mohammad, who smiled knowingly and said, “I know, the American.” At once we returned to the topic of conversation from class. “Saddam Hussein is a bad man, but the war is about oil,” said the sixteen year old.

He reflected on his own life. “Is it better for Arabs in America or in Germany?”

“That’s difficult to say…” I began.

“Here I will always be an Ausländer (foreigner). They always think I’m Arab or even Turkish, even though I’m a German citizen. On the street, they see ‘Ausländer.’”

“What do you feel you are?”

“I’m Kurdish. My parents are from Lebanon, but we’re Arabicized Kurds. We visit, but there’s no work over there. I have a better future in Germany… I don’t want to lose my culture… I’ll only marry a Muslim and will speak Arabic to my kids.”

\(^1\)All names of schools and individuals are pseudonyms.
Twenty minutes later, we were alone in the shop. “You have to join your class,” I said, extending my hand, “but it was great talking with you. You’re so articulate and so interested in politics. You could be a diplomat.” We shook hands.

When I apologized to the shop teacher for keeping Mohammad from class, he said that such talk was the best thing for him, reflecting the Main Schools’ social-vocational rather than academic focus. Perhaps Mohammad’s gregarious manner will blunt the German reality that one’s socioeconomic background is the number one determinant of educational success (Schwarzkopf, 2006) and help secure for him a highly coveted journeyman position in one of four hundred specialized professions.

Students were always gracious during and after presentations, but those who merely heard I was American were less likely to talk.

“Are you from England?” asked a young woman. All but her sweet face and hands were hidden by flowing black and white cloth.

“No, from the United States,” I answered.

She broke eye contact at once. Her expression faded as she scanned the room. To break the uncomfortable silence, I suggested that we practice English together sometime, and then exited for the next observation.

The reputation that the United States has earned over the past three years warranted this rejection. For many Muslims and others worldwide, Bush’s America conjures up images of torture at Abu Ghraib, pitiless incarceration at Guantánamo Bay, and rouses rage against a falsely justified war that has killed no less than 33,700 civilians (Iraq Body Count, 2006) and possibly over 100,000 total Iraqis (Roberts, Lafta, Garfield, Khudhairi, & Burnham, 2004). Muslims in Germany may be especially fearful, since a naturalized German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, was captured while on vacation in Macedonia, and under the “rendition” process, was sent to prison and suffered abuse for five months in Afghanistan as directed by the United States (American Civil Liberties Union, 2005). This volatile backdrop further compelled me to reach out to Muslim students in Germany. Putting my research to the side, I acted as a private citizen to share a critical perspective rarely heard in media coverage of Americans. Giroux (1997, 2005) advocates for educators to transgress traditional boundaries and enter terrains of “border pedagogy,” where intentional dialogue attempts to replace fear and prejudice with enlightenment and hope.

Correctly predicting that students would sympathize with my views, which mirror those of most Europeans, I felt safe to speak. Herr Al-Bathich, an Iraqi-born social worker filling a high school dean’s role, affirmed my attempt to reach out to the students of Maple Main School, 80% of whom have a “migration background,” the majority being Muslim. He explained, “I always tell the kids, you must separate religion from state and people from government. We
must approach them with respect and love.” This I had learned as an undergraduate at Goddard College, reinforced by a decade of teaching in Vermont schools. When educators assume an air of superiority, demand that students leave their personal lives at the door, and push an inflexible curriculum, the result is increased conflict and decreased learning. Whether in the company of familiar or dissimilar students, to foster wide-awakeness (Greene, 1995) and progress toward critical consciousness (Freire, 1993), only a praxis characterized by respect, trust, equality, and truth can yield convivial, constructive results. While fully aware that Paulo Freire would criticize my “actor” approach, relying on what Germans call “frontal” instruction, a pedagogical departure emerged when students found themselves in control of the content. By asking questions of their own design, the all-encompassing state curriculum and the entrenched role of teacher authority were momentarily abandoned.

A history instructor at Maple managed the flood of questions by listing students’ names on the chalkboard. Having learned that I was a teacher, the ninth graders asked about the American school system. “Is it really like the movies, with kids bringing weapons and classes out of control?” “Are girls and teachers allowed to wear headscarves?” Quickly the questions grew political, beginning with, “Did you vote for George W. Bush?”

“Neither time,” I replied honestly. “He lost my state in both 2000 and 2004.”

“Is there much prejudice against Muslims?” a boy asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I answered. “It is very confusing. The United States has been a country of immigrants since its founding, but during times of conflict, many politicians and media outlets target groups for blame. When I was your age, the enemy was the Soviet Union. Now it’s the Arabs, which is absurd because the U.S. has many Muslim allies, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan. Over the past four years, stereotyping against Arabs has intensified to gain support for the War on Terrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over half of Americans now want to pull out of Iraq, and Bush’s popularity has been reduced to only one-third of the country (Pew Research Center, 2006). There’s a backlash of clearheaded thinking, a real resistance movement to stop the war.”

“Isn’t Bush afraid that by invading Iraq, Arab people all over the world will unify and retaliate against the United States?” asked a girl wearing a glossy headscarf.

“It’s evident that little was done to stop the attacks on September eleventh, though much information was known in advance (Lichtblau, 2005). The Bush administration has responded on a worldwide scale with increased warfare against those considered terrorists. President Bush also fervently espouses that the American way of life is what most people de-
sire. When the U.S. brings its ways to another country, whether through trade or war, he’s convinced that most would want to adopt them as their own. But reality has shown Americans otherwise. At this point, the current administration does not represent the interests of the majority of American people.”

Not only was I the first American many students had ever met, but one inquisitive class learned that I was Jewish. The group didn’t skip a beat and continued firing questions on everything from high school graduation requirements and Eminem to life in the Bronx and the Ku Klux Klan.

“How do you feel having Ms. Dorfman tell you about America?” asked their teacher.

“Really good. It’s great to hear another perspective,” was their answer.

Within the hour, five tall boys accosted me in the schoolyard. Sharing the olive complexion and dark eyes of most Mediterranean peoples, accentuated by our contrast with ethnic Germans, we looked more like family than adversaries.

One said, “You’re a Jew?” The teacher with whom I had been chatting became silent.

“Yes,” I said.

“What do you think of this?” He pulled a keychain from his pocket striped with black, white, and green, and printed with the word, Palestine.

“I think it’s okay… I am very much for a Palestinian state, and against the wall being built around the West Bank, as are many others who are working for peace.”

He did not reply, fingering the lettering as if deep in thought. His buddies looked expectedly.

“Ist alles in Ordnung?” I asked. “Is everything in order?”

“Ja, okay,” he said, and walked away with the crowd.

I sought out Herr Al-Bathich, since he handled violence prevention and conflict resolution, for his view on the incident.

“This is a real problem,” he revealed. “Many students are fanatics, but they know almost nothing about their religion, just prejudice from home.” Later during an interview he elaborated: “I tell the students, all religion is good; all people are equal. They have no clue when they say, ‘My honor!’ I ask them, What do you know about honor? Honor when you have good character, when you behave yourself, when your parents are proud of you. That’s honor. Not when someone teases you, or hits you and you give it back twice. Our prophet Mohammed said, ‘To those who insult or wrong you, reach out your hand to him, out of politeness.’ If you hit back, that’s not honor. I’m sorry but you’re no Muslim.”
Impressed by the impact of his first year on the job, the Berlin Department of Education has resolved to appoint a social worker with a Muslim background in the role of dean in every Main School by 2007. While the inclusion of staff members ethnically representative of the student body may momentarily give cause for celebration, in fact this is little more than a band-aid to hide the school system’s glaring inequities. The number of children with a migration background who are selected for special education is double their proportional population (Edelstein, 2005b). Often they attend schools removed from the mainstream, and when integrated, 70% are assigned to a school level below their potential (Lehrer-Online, 2006). The result is intense “[d]evaluation and discouragement, segregation, exclusion, [and] an orientation of being on ‘Loser Street’” (Edelstein, 2005b, p. 13). The stigma of low achievement and Ausländer in the eyes of others compounds the sociopolitical struggles of Muslims living in Germany. Many German educators have expressed fears of youth uprisings like those seen in France. On the first of May each year, protests flare in neighborhoods with high numbers of Muslim residents. As mentioned earlier, just over a quarter of Berlin’s fifteen year olds have a migration-background, though the surrounding province of Brandenburg, a mix of upper-middle class suburbs and abandoned East German factory towns, has just 6% (Carstensen et al., 2003). This year a Neukölln elementary school announced that it no longer had any German pupils. The effects of segregating these students, first by district, second by school level, have resulted in savage inequalities resembling that in the U.S. educational system (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 1992).

The Bush administration’s much publicized refusal to openly negotiate with dissenting Muslims prevents the dialogue needed for reconciliation and reduces the possibility of peace. My words in Berlin’s classrooms may have reflected Freirean beliefs, though they were only accepted because students agreed. What would the boys at Maple Main School have done had I expressed disdain for the Palestinian cause? How would the students react had I repeated the official positions of the U.S. government? Perhaps our discourse will be remembered when students hear of more deaths at American hands in Iraq and elsewhere, though my impact on most was certainly minimal. As when working with American youth, one-on-one chats on personal matters met with greater success.

“Did your parents allow you to date?” asked a young Pakistani in hushed tones.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Mine, too. I am so in love, but he says that he hates me. I don’t believe him. I see him all the time, but he tells me I’m ugly.”
“That’s ridiculous! You’re beautiful. Why do you bother with this guy?”
“I love him. I hope that someday he’ll love me. I think deep down he does.”
“You’re wasting your time. You’re in Berlin! There are so many young men out there who would love to go out with you. Take control of yourself. Forget him.”
“You really think I’ll find somebody else?” she asked, as have countless students back in Vermont, to whom I would return in the fall of 2006.
“I guarantee it.”

REFERENCES