



INTEGRATION POLITICS AND SOCIAL STIGMATISATION

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NORWEGIAN integration politics are an ongoing public debate theme. The statements and the feelings provoked in discussions show that we have a very long way to go before we can accept the definition of Norway as a multicultural society. Plurality, culture and belief in an earlier culturally homogenous society lead us into new challenges. Norway is still a homogenous society compared to other European countries, this being a result of among other things Norway's geographic position as well as very strict asylum and immigration politics. Anyhow, an increase in the flow of people, due to wars or poverty increase in the rest of the world, led to a view of Norway as the only way to survive.

TODAY, Norway as multicultural society is a fact that has to be accepted without exception. This development, with all of its advantages as well as disadvantages led us into new challenges which need to be dealt with in a way that includes new countrymen with their ways of living in the current social and political context without depriving them of their identity. The conditions for successful integration have to be adapted to creation of better cohabitation of new countrymen and Norwegians, where integration politics should make cohabitation possible and conflict free.

Norwegian authorities are faced with the problems usual for any process of integration, "a lack of willingness" amongst some immigrants, as it is presented in the media, to access the Norwegian society. They do not speak the language, they are long-term receivers of social benefits and they are overrepresented in certain criminal statistics. These are the challenges or tendencies that authorities have to deal with by cutting them at their roots. One way would be by creating a goal oriented integration politics in the future, in contrast to what has been practiced in the past.

AFIRST STEP for the authorities would be to work out a set of instructions addressed to both, to authorities for meeting challenges in a multicultural society and to immigrants for gaining access to the Norwegian society. Two procedures I shall comment on in this article are meant as measures against discrimination of immigrants and measures for immigrant's participation in their own integration process. Storting's (The Norwegian Parliament's) announcement nr. 17 on integration states that the government's primary goal for creation of policies for multicultural Norway (to mention a few) are "a) all citizens, independent of background, shall have possibility, rights and obligations in relation to society, b) integration and emancipation are conditioned by adaptation and will to dialogue and unity from the entire population and



public authorities, c) all independently of their background have the same right to be seen as individuals, and not as only a part of a certain group, culture and religion, d) there are many ways to be Norwegian. By actively stressing that all citizens have an equal right to bring with them their own values and traditions into community, the basis for unity is only improved.” These instructions should open society for a different way of being and better inclusion of everyone. One of the conditions often mentioned in discussions is that the cultural and religious background of immigrants is an obstacle for successful integration. The way that Norwegians relate to foreigners is connected to Norwegians expectations of immigrants' behaviour and looks. This way of seeing relations should not have any influence on integration.

THE SECOND STEP would be making it easier for immigrants to enter the job market. In the introduction law, as government introduced it in December 2002, the authorities created conditions for a more active and individually adapted introduction program which will help immigrants to get a better view of the Norwegian society and job market. We were longing for such a turn in Norwegian integration politics, including foreigners more actively in their own integration process is very positive and this can open the door for more goal-oriented activity in the daily struggle for a better life.

THE QUESTIONS we need to ask ourselves here are: To what degree are integration politics grounded in reality? How are all these goals and laws implemented in Norwegian daily reality?

THE PUBLIC ENEMY of successful integration processes in Norway is a systematic stigmatisation of the entire groups. This is clearly demonstrated in the media and daily attitudes of the “ordinary Norwegians”. Stereotypical views always stress aspects and characteristics used to stigmatise a group that have nothing to do with reality. The possible reasons for this are two: either Norwegians have the need to show their superiority over others or there is a general fear of the foreign and unknown. The biggest worrying is that the authorities are not making any effort to fight these prejudices, as they should. They do not seem to understand that prejudices and expectations are created out of frustration caused by changes resulting from the process of becoming a multicultural society. They do not seem to understand that it is not always possible to demand or deliver results measurable in ‘kroner’ and ‘øre’. Up until now too much it has been expected of immigrants, since they have become used to living in a society where the social aspect of their integration is left to the public system. After some years of living this way, it cannot be a surprise to us that some of them developed an attitude of not having to take responsibility for their own life situation. It is authority's task to catch these developments and solve them so that society does not end up in a conflict.



ANOTHER OBSTACLE that stands in the way of integration, as it is presented, is the immigrant's cultural and religious background. How else can we interpret repeated "attacks" on entire groups where religious belief, lifestyle and tradition are placed on "bench for the accused" in media and other public instances? Where did we get the idea that the integration of the same group could be easier after it was stigmatised publicly?

One of the government's announced goals is that independently of background one has right to be seen as an individual and not only as a member of a group, culture or religion. The problem is that in practice we do not see any indication of this happening. The discussion about the need for modernisation of Islam, as a base for the integration of Norwegian Muslims in Norwegian society makes this challenge even more complicated. Could it be that the Norwegian authorities also suffer from the global-political and religious tendency to hostility towards Muslims as result of the 9/11-2001? "War against terror" very quickly can be an obstacle for integration, a cause of immigrants with Muslim background feeling marginalized. These days Muslims are almost a synonym for potential terrorists. These types of descriptions of a certain group can give opposite results than desired, an honest wish from authorities to help the integration of immigrants who suffer the most.

THE ATTENTION MUSLIMS in Norway get in the media is mainly negative. It is about Muslim family culture, their social habits and their bad habits. Cultural conditions and their relationship to the state are taken out of a big context, or their natural habitat, and shown as something old fashioned and incompatible with modern western society. This is done without scientific comparison with similar situations that appear in the Norwegian society. This is how the nasty images are created and hate is accumulated in the public room which makes integration even more difficult. Respect and tolerance for other's beliefs, lifestyle and worldview can disappear due to manufactured fear of possible "terror action", even though this is a problem most people meet when confronted with other culture. The issue here is how to present another culture and another religion without falling into a populist demonising of something unfamiliar and therefore dangerous. This reminds me of Edward W. Said's "Orientalism" where he describes Western created images about Arabic and Muslim cultures. He refers exactly to those Western created images that have responsibility for presenting the Orient as something despotic, primitive, and therefore exotic in the West. Being different from the majority does not mean that communication between the two is therefore impossible.

ANOTHER QUESTION we need to ask ourselves is whether we expect that the media can release itself from a progressing political ideology. It is not easy to eliminate the picture in today's global political reality, where "war on terror" is the absolute worst due to number of innocent victims. I am afraid that that



“war on terror” divided the world further as West versus East, us versus them, Islam versus Christianity, rich versus poor. The cold war is over and instead of building bridges between the worlds we are divided further and further. This unfortunate view of reality cannot be corrected by simple solutions, especially not with intellectual lack of responsibility and populist statements that caused intensification of the division of the world into becoming a lasting problem. The world’s view of reality does not necessarily have to become a Norwegian view of reality. Mutual respect and lasting dialogue between different religions should be the goal for Norwegian authorities so that it can stand a chance of winning a battle against a growing stigmatisation of singular groups. The discrimination against Muslim immigrants in the job market, the property market and in schools, their “lack of will” to be integrated has had an effect on the Norwegian view. It resulted in dividing the society in “us/them” and “rich/poor”. It created a feeling of alienation and distance between Norwegians and immigrants. It appears as if we loose rational thinking on the way and uncritically accept the ideas and worldview of the authorities.

A NOTHER VERY OBVIOUS PROBLEM for the authorities' integration policies is that they in their action against integration problems reduce immigrants to a statistic, an inhuman instance. It is so much easier to relate to a problem without “living” human beings that can make a difference. It so much easier to “attack” their religion, use it as an explanation for unsuccessful integration. In this case it is for example belonging to Islam as a possible cause of resistance. Islam is show as a specific case because it follows its course without connection and comparison with other religions, modernity or any of the changes every society has to go through. Then it is easy to present Islam as an inhuman, authoritarian religion. It is wished for and demanded by many that Islam should be modernised. Unfortunately we see that western countries, Norway also, accept modernisation only on its own premises, set conditions for modernisation in their own way. Our Western world is of course viewed as developed, humane, democratic, rational and superior while “they” are viewed as underdeveloped, undemocratic and less valuable. One thing that needs to be understood here is that not all Muslims in Norway come from one single homogenous group. They do not necessarily have the same cultural and religious assumptions. One must understand that even though a large number of immigrants are coming from rural areas and have low education, a big number of them have higher education and a secular background.

PREJUDICES CREATED through mismanagement of integration led to “ordinary” people's fear of Islam and Muslims and a strong desire to control them. We think we know what is best for them, and this is why we are ready to strongly underestimate all those adults, those free thinking individuals. Muslims are



usually viewed in frustrating environments, without any possibility or hope for progress or better life. All the time their family structures are targeted as obstacles for humanism and human rights. Men's dominance in the family, how it is reflected socially is one of the primary areas of demanding modernisation as the only right thing, as the only solution. "Mis-habits" (bad habits) in family relations, such as women's circumcision, abuse of women and arranged marriages are not conditioned by religion. Instead they are cultural and social phenomena that deserve scientific examination and not pretensions statements. The fact that all of them take place "between four walls" and that they are not discussed outside of one's family is not a phenomenon we meet only with Muslims, in Islam. Violence against women and children is not an unknown element in Norwegian society. Even though the same phenomenon appears in certain other religious environments, we do not pinpoint them as elements of religion, quite the contrary, we immediately classify them in media as family tragedies, isolated singular appearances.

CONSISTENCY COULD SOLVE a lot of the immigrants' frustration. Everybody should understand by now that these social phenomena take place in certain immigrant environments. Authorities should react in cases of "bad habits" with very strict jail sentences instead of observing things that take place from a distance and handling the situation with policies which do not solve anything but only worsen the problems. Immigrants are colourful groups, they are people with different backgrounds, and the assaults something that appears in all societies independently of their religion or culture. Creation of myths about immigrant groups does not give us the opportunity to analyse and understand the problems we are facing. Myths only make finding good solutions for satisfaction all the parties involved even more difficult. Making myths more or less always results in a fight between the strong superior state and a weak less valuable, loose group.

IS THE DISCOURSE created by cultural and religious differences or social and economic elements? An invitation of immigrants with Muslim background to a dialogue as equals could also solve a lot of problems. The authorities need to come with clear demands about measures against "mis-habits" and with suggestion of laws for protection of all their members, because we all agree that no cultural tradition or belief can justify acts against Norwegian law. Up until now we could only see the authorities' hypocrisy. We have to take as a starting point that the whole immigrant group consisting of people with different cultural conditions and work out integration politics accordingly. One cannot demand from immigrants that they abandon their own identity and cultural traditions for the purpose of "smooth" integration.



DURING THE LAST TEN YEARS Norway received a big number of refugees. This policy had no cynical agenda behind it, picking out resourceful individuals with higher education, as in some other western countries (USA). This is what Norwegian society has to get a credit for. Their doors were open for all those who needed help and protection. At the same time this does not justify a clear lack of insight and knowledge of how to create a functional integration politic.

THE INTRODUCTION LAWS are well on their way towards elimination of the hindrances immigrants meet when competing in the job market. These policies can function only if the authorities go first and set an example for others involved. The need to see a number of immigrants in state positions is bigger than ever. The new generations have to see some proof that it is also possible for immigrants to climb up in leading positions of Norwegian society. Currently there are very many resourceful immigrants who are unemployed, or even worse, who are doing jobs typical of immigrants, professions such as cleaning, services and alike. In these cases accepting their education, recognising the job experience they have got from their native country would give them back the dignity that all people have and wish to keep. In exchange they can offer a lot to Norwegian society. First and foremost they can function as bridge builders between two realities that exist in Norwegian society.

TO AVOID PREJUDICES, generalisations of entirely groups without having a real insight in their culture, religion and lifestyle, and at the same time seeing their daily obstacles on their way to a better life can prevent future problems. To use the concept of “immigrant” for those who are born and raised in Norway is not a sign of welcome in any way. For many of them this means closed doors to one’s own society. It is time to change the starting point and open the society towards different societies and different values that do not necessarily undermine Norwegian traditions or values. One may be surprised what developments in a modern and democratic society can bring. Immigrants do not want to be assimilated; they want to be a part of society, which is also theirs.