
Figurational Change and Primordialism in a Multicultural Society: A Model Explained on the Basis of the German Case

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1 Introduction¹

Now that ‘guest worker’ immigration has ended but immigration continues, Germany’s immigration society is entering a hierarchical conflict between established residents and migrants. The mere fact that migrants used to be regarded as ‘guest workers’ but are today seen above all as Muslims suggests that the hierarchical conflict is currently undergoing a process of culturalization. By ‘culturalization of conflicts’, I refer to the process of attributing allegedly incompatible primordialist cultural qualities to the disputants involved in order to legitimize the aim of dominating one’s opponent.

Using a figuration analysis of the conflict to reconstruct the development of Germany’s immigration society from the ‘guest worker’ immigration of the 1960s and 1970s through to the present day, I show that the current resurgence of a culturalistic understanding of the society is driven by a hierarchical conflict between non-migrants and migrants. The supposed cultural conflicts of Germany’s immigration society are hierarchy conflicts.

I unfold this argument by proposing a typology of figurational change (Fig. 1) which has been derived from empirical studies performed in different urban contexts within multicultural Germany (see Hüttermann 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2006,

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PARADIGMATIC INTERACTION ROLES		
Established residents	Intermediate actors	Immigrants
Figure 1: Accepted hierarchy		
Ushers	Interpreter	Peripheral strangers as guests
Figure 2: Challenged hierarchy		
Insecure ushers	Advocates	Peripheral strangers (as workers and clients)
Figure 3: Changing balance of power		
Partially disempowered ushers	a) Paternalists b) Protesters and complainants	Advancing strangers (as newly naturalized citizens)
Figure 4: Culturalized immigration society		
Secularized Western cultural subjects	a) Chief witnesses b) Dialogue actors	Muslim cultural subjects (as sleeper, wakened or still sleeping)

Fig. 1 Idealized figurations of Germany’s immigration society

2010, 2011). Sections 3–6 both illustrate the model and explain the social nature of what seems to be a cultural conflict. The typology of figurational shifts allows us to understand how the balance of power between established residents and migrants has been transformed since the 1960s. If we follow the four sequences of figurational change displayed in these sections, we see how and why the conflict between established residents and migrants has developed in Germany. Each figuration stands for a particular hierarchical relationship between majority and minority and is ultimately characterized by its own particular interactive roles and power differentials between immigrants, intermediate actors and established residents. Before entering into the analysis of figurational changes, Sect. 2 deals briefly with proponents and critics of the culturalistic understanding the society. I conclude the article by anticipating and discussing some obvious objections to my analysis (Sect. 7).

Following Elias, I understand figuration as an umbrella term for specific and at the same time changing power differentials on which the interdependence of people or groups of people is based (see Elias 2005, pp. 170–174).

2 The Culturalistic Understanding of Culture and Society

According to a sociological understanding of culture, humankind is not rooted in some immutable cultural substrate. Instead we are characterized by our ability to transcend ourselves and our circumstances, whatever the given historical and cultural conditions (Plessner 1928/1975, pp. 291–292, 309 et sqq.). As Max Weber argues, even the deeply rooted meaning-giving *longue durée* structures of religion are modified by creative appropriation and interpretation (especially by charismatic religious and political personalities). As Weber emphasizes, even a cultural fact like religion that has survived for millennia is not qualified to serve as a monocausal explanation for other social facts such as modern rationalism or modern capitalism (Weber 1920, p. 1).

In Germany this understanding of culture and society emerged from an intellectual but ultimately violent confrontation with a historically embedded mindset that elevated culture to the metaphysical. The intellectual environment in which German sociologists were operating around 1900 was steeped in the idea that culture represented the all-determining essence of a nation. From such a culturalistic angle, people are conceived as possessing neither legs on which they can move nor the intellectual and practical wherewithal to cross any boundaries they may come across. To a certain degree human nature is understood in analogy to plants rooted forever in an eternal cultural soil. They stand rather than walk, and they know and feel what their culture has imparted to them, rather than learning it. They have no biography, for their life-course is culturally predetermined. Each tribe and race is rooted in its fatherland and ‘cultural area’ (*Kulturkreis*) and matures into a homogenous cultural nation.

Aspects of the culturalistic understanding of the social are found in Fichte’s (1793/1967) response to the emancipation of the Jews in Germany in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Although Fichte was fundamentally willing to give the Jews human rights in a future bourgeois and democratic Germany, he rejected granting them full citizenship on the grounds that the apparently immutable Jewish character was insufficiently rooted in the culture: ‘I see absolutely no way of giving [the Jews] civic rights; except perhaps, if one night we chop off all their heads and replace them with new ones, in which there would be not one single Jewish idea’ (cited in Aberbach 2007, p. 163). Such a perspective is also behind Herder’s philosophy of history (see for example, Herder 1803, pp. 448–449).

The culturalistic understanding of the social is not a product of German blood or German soil. Nor is it the logical consequence of the German Enlightenment,

which has many more facets than the above quotations might suggest.² As Elias (2005, pp. 179–253) shows, its success was largely due to the historical figuration of a politically feeble German bourgeoisie that believed it could satisfy its longing for a nation-state only by uprooting the weeds of the French aristocracy (or by resisting the refined simulation of the French ideal of civilization by German landed gentry) and ultimately by rejecting the very example of the French Revolution and its ideals. So it posited the depth of German culture against the supposed shallowness of French civilization.

After the Nazis and their racist understanding of culture and society had been pulverized by a militarily and culturally superior Western civilization, the talk of cultural stock and rootedness took a back seat in Germany. But nascent debates in the reunified Germany are breathing new life into the culturalistic understanding of society as, for example, the controversy over the idea of a ‘defining German culture’ (*Leitkultur*) (sparked in 2000 by Friedrich Merz, then a leading conservative politician). Also discourses on Islamic terrorism, the question of European Union membership for Turkey or the institutionalisation of the so called *Islamkonferenz* by the German Ministry of the Interior (Tezcan 2012) raise an imaginary of incompatible cultural/civilizational or religious essences (see Sect. 6 and Leibold and Kühnel 1999). All these give succour and nourishment to a phenomenon that seemed to have withered away.

In 2007 Manfred Pohl, the former in-house historian of Deutsche Bank, published a book entitled—absolutely without irony—‘Das Ende des weißen Mannes’ (The End of the White Man). Reviving the *Kulturkreis* ideas, Pohl rails against the supposedly imminent ascendancy of non-whites and the modern woman. Such debates—which Pohl himself promotes as president of the influential neo-conservative think tank ‘Konvent für Deutschland’—are changing the way immigrants and ethnic minorities are seen here. Whereas migrants in the 1960s who were inserted into the Fordist world of work were seen as ‘guest workers’ (see Hunn 2005, pp. 29–206) and were largely invisible in urban public life (see Hüttermann 2000a), the aforementioned discourses contribute to transforming them and their descendants more and more into beings from an alien culture or religion (see Tezcan 2012).

How has this happened? Is the currently observable imaginary of a society divided into secularized Christian/Western cultural subjects and Oriental Muslim cultural subjects just the natural consequence of the revival of a deep-rooted German primordialism that resonates in Herder and Fichte?

² Even in Herder there are statements treating cultural difference as gradual rather than substantive (Nübel 1996; Fisch 1992).

This chapter contests that oversimplification. This may look like a cultural conflict, but its roots are to be found in the nature of society rather than the nature of culture. To recognize this we must start by analysing conflicts in Germany's immigration society in sociological terms. One promising approach is figuration analysis of conflicts, which focuses on the everyday interactions and discourses that shape the often conflict-laden processes of change in social hierarchies.

3 The Figuration of Ushers and Guests

Migrants migrate not simply into a society, but into a normative social order, to which they submit to the extent they understand it. The normative order of a society comprises formal and informal rules: norms for work, norms for hygiene, norms regulating traffic, as well as assumptions about good behaviour, dress, and social conduct that are sedimented in the lifeworld. The formal norms are codified and in some cases institutionalized rules. The informal norms are largely the rules of hospitality, or what passes as such.

The law of hospitality is an intercultural constant that has governed relationships between hosts and guests for millennia. Whatever the cultural differences, there is always an inherent hierarchical power differential: on the one hand the host or patron who shows guests their place; on the other the stranger as protégé and guest making no demands but accepting what is offered with appropriate gratitude.

The migrant encounters the normative order of the host society in the social figure of the host (whom we might call the usher, because he or she shows guests or strangers their place). Whether as foreman or caretaker, trainer or teacher, police officer or ticket collector, official or landlord, sales clerk or neighbour, colleague or friend, established residents are always showing newcomers their place and status—often incidentally, and sometimes physically if need be.

In the labour and housing markets, in neighbourhood and leisure contexts migrants occupy marginal social positions. At work and in public life they find themselves underground (sometimes literally). Even the TV entertainment of this era assigns the migrant to the marginal role of a well-intentioned, but awkward and naive figure whose repeated failure to understand the rules of the house gives rise to hilarity.

The boundaries between high and low status, between centre and periphery, are taken as the natural state of affairs by both the older-established ushers and the newcomers. They appear natural and legitimate to all involved. The marginal positions are anchored in the legitimizing principles of custom and the law of

hospitality. A peripheral stranger who violates the house rules of German society or their implicit extensions will be admonished with the words: 'Here in Germany we ...'

The following extract from an interview with a former trade union representative in Duisburg perfectly sums up the asymmetry:

'We had to teach them how to crap'

(Excerpt from an interview with a former trade union representative at Thyssen; see Hüttermann 2001)

And I tell you this. Back then I even had to teach them how to crap. We had a janitor at Thyssen and he said: 'Look here, this is how you do it.' And he took off his trousers (but not his underpants) and sat down and said: 'So, now do it in there.' There was an interpreter there too. 'And then you wipe, or not, depending.' We really did, we had to teach them how to crap.

The expectation that the protégé will follow instructions harmonizes with the migrants' great willingness to fit in. The following excerpt from an interview I conducted in 1997 with a policeman who went down in Duisburg's popular annals as the 'sheriff of Bruckhausen' may serve to illustrate the point:

'They did as I said'

(Excerpt from an interview with a former policeman, performed in Duisburg in the year 1997)

I had a close relationship of trust with the first generation. Well, they trusted me. So I could say 'Do it this way' or 'Do it that way', and they did as I said. And everybody benefited from that. And then one time this stupid thing happened. Someone came and said 'The neighbours tell me my 17-year-old son is always out at night. I've told him not to a few times but he just won't do as I say.' And at the end I say, more as a joke: 'You know what, I wouldn't let a 17-year-old just do as he pleases. If I had to I'd chain him to a radiator or something, wouldn't I.' Anyway, off he goes and the next day a colleague of mine takes a look in the flat and sees the lad chained to the radiator, with a chain round his neck and a padlock on it.

As well as illustrating the taken-for-granted hierarchy of life worlds, these two quotations also show how language problems and cultural misunderstandings can sometimes disrupt the smooth social reproduction of the hierarchy of ushers and peripheral strangers in everyday life. For that reason the interpreter role is of central importance for the figuration of the 'guest worker' society.

The interpreters employed to facilitate communication with the immigrant minority from Turkey were largely people who left Turkey immediately before or during the military coup of 1971. These were mostly political refugees, many of whom already had a university degree, or completed one in Germany. In fact, these selected migrants were rarely formally employed as interpreters. But as administrations, political parties, schools, housing associations, and voluntary sector organizations increasingly encountered a new migrant clientele and ran into corresponding communication difficulties, these individuals slipped to a greater or lesser extent into the role of interpreter.

For those who wish to do justice to the social role of interpreter, there is much work to do. They are integrated into a transmission role located between ushers and protégés (Jonker 2002, p. 9). Not just at work, but in politics, education, housing, and health, they contribute either explicitly or incidentally to the preservation of a hierarchy between ushers and peripheral strangers that is taken for granted and hence regarded as legitimate.

4 The Figuration of Insecure Ushers and Clients

The figuration of established residents and migrants has changed since the 1970s. The balance of power has shifted to some extent towards the migrants, firstly because the guests have increasingly acquired an actual a perceived identity as workers and pursue corresponding class interests, ultimately slotting themselves into the dominant figuration of labour and capital. But it is also because a new social figure comes to the fore, following in the footsteps of the interpreter: the advocate (see again Fig. 1).

The social figure of the advocate encompasses more than just the profession of lawyers. Generally without legal qualifications, the social figures we are talking about here find their way gradually into a new role that the immigration society offers. Initially sporadic but increasingly continuous advocacy for protégés turns many established residents into informal advocates for the concerns of the minority. Motivated by Christian, humanist, or socialist ideals of solidarity, or as comrades, established residents grow into a generally informal advocacy role as trade unionists,

caretakers, supervisors, colleagues, neighbours, doctors, or voluntary sector staff. They defend migrants against exploitation and attack, for example, from employers, landlords, and officials. The advocates we are talking about here are recruited from the ranks of the ushers. As compassionate ushers they are of great importance in humanizing the relationships between established residents and migrants.

The advocacy role implies seeing migrants primarily as helpless victims unable to speak for themselves. In view of the communication problems in the young German immigration society and the continued expectation that migrants will submit to the role of preventive compliance implied by the laws of hospitality, that view is certainly appropriate. Investigative journalist Hans-Günter Wallraff, whose undercover reports on working conditions in industry very effectively publicized the unfair treatment of migrants, represents one of the most prominent embodiments of the advocate figure in the field of journalism.

In 1983 Wallraff adopted the persona of a Turkish guest worker named Ali Sığırlioğlu and took various jobs, including working for a subcontractor at Thyssen. In the resulting book, *Ganz unten (Lowest of the Low)*, he describes the systematic violation of the most basic health and safety rules for migrant workers.

5 The Figuration of Weakened Ushers and Advancing Strangers

If we are to answer the central questions of how and why ‘guest workers’ have turned into Muslims as oriental cultural subjects and older-established ushers into secularized Christian/Western cultural subjects, the third figuration of Germany’s immigration society is of great importance.

In the course of the 1990s we see a completely new figuration emerging. The role of the erstwhile interpreters is withering away as immigrants increasingly show one another the ropes and find their way around the prevailing house rules (and their deficits). Pioneers and late-comers are now in permanent exchange. Another factor is that migrants navigating the jungles of bureaucracy and the maze of the welfare state increasingly rely on the services of their German-educated offspring.

The erstwhile ushers are becoming increasingly powerless, as the life world-sedimented situation³ of hospitality—and its transmission belt, the interpreter—

³ The concept of life-world sedimentation follows Alfred Schütz’s sociology on the structures of life worlds. According to this phenomenological approach a life world is partly structured

steadily loses importance. The guests of the host, the clients of the advocates and the wards of the paternalists are growing into workers, ‘foreign fellow citizens’, and ultimately fully entitled citizens who demand to be treated as equals. These advancing strangers know their rights and no longer want to dwell in the gratitude of the guest or the invisibility of the peripheral stranger.

Precisely because the migrants and their offspring are no longer content to occupy the margins of society, they appear more alien than ever to the increasingly powerless ushers. As they transgress and tear down life world-sedimented status barriers they encounter the ushers with a new immediacy that is both confusing and frightening. This advancing stranger is not Simmel’s stranger who ‘comes today and stays tomorrow’ (1908 [1992], p. 764); this is the stranger who came the day before yesterday, stayed yesterday, and today challenges both the outsider roles assigned to him or her and the hierarchies so dear to the ushers. As the stranger transgresses the life world-sedimented hierarchical divisions—which especially longer-established actors would much prefer to maintain—this gives rise to disturbing everyday hierarchy conflicts, sometimes sporadic, sometimes more structured.

Three questions arise: (1) Which hierarchy divisions does the advancing stranger transgress? (2) How does the stranger transgress these boundaries? And (3) What do transgressions have to do with hierarchy conflicts?

5.1 The Formation of Hierarchical Divisions through Avoidance Behaviour

In various fields of interaction in urban society, group figurations and group boundaries are stabilized through everyday routine. One way in which this occurs is through power-based and hierarchy-fostering avoidance behaviour.⁴

The avoidance behaviour we are talking about here is seldom explicitly conscious. Rather, it is generally incidentally embedded in the routines of everyday urban life, work or leisure. Ego reproduces power relations symbolically (and thus also materially) by forcing its will on alter ego through a space-grabbing show of

by historically accumulated sediments of taken for granted assumptions that still have an effect on current everyday life, though current thinking does not reflect on them.

⁴ Of course avoidance behaviour is not the only form of social activity that affects hierarchies. Charisma (Weber) and charm (Stölting 2000), rationality discourses (Foucault) and even art (Bourdieu) all also imply hierarchy formation, and the list could be extended.

status symbols, lifestyles, or social prestige in the broadest sense of the word. On the other hand, ego can also bring its superior power into play in the social game by demonstrating to others who refuse to do as they are bid its ability to withdraw from particular spaces (or the unpleasant encounters associated with them) and retreat to other spaces it regards as privileged (e.g., rotary club, exclusive shops, leisure events, etc.).

Now it is obvious that strong hierarchy-relevant avoidance behaviour need by no means automatically bring forth social conflict. Where avoidance behaviour merely confirms stable social hierarchies conflict is unlikely because powerful actors have no interest in their situation changing, while weak groups see no opportunity to change the balance of power. Only if changes in avoidance behaviour alter or destabilize the balance of power and the figurations will a potential for conflict develop (Gaventa 1980, p. 23; Horowitz 2001, p. 525).

5.2 How the Advancing Stranger Transgresses Hierarchy Divisions

Hierarchies change when the other no longer avoids me as I had become accustomed to expect, but instead confronts me, resists me, or even expects me to avoid him or her (or us both to avoid each other). The forms of compliance with, enforcement of or refusal of expected avoidance are manifold and sometimes very subtle. In his sociology of imitation, Gabriel Tarde wrote that the French Revolution really began in the years before 1789 when the bourgeois audience in Paris ceased obediently applauding the theatre plays that always premiered at Versailles (2003, p. 223). In this context the refusal to applaud was not simply about not clapping hands. It represented in body language the rising bourgeoisie's refusal to grant the aristocracy the right to set the artistic trends. Instead of obediently applauding in deference, the rising bourgeoisie now drew a new line of resistance against the privileges of the dominant social group.

Changes in the avoidance behaviour of social groups with implications for the hierarchy may also be directly connected to the use of social space. The following observation from 1997 shows how established residents in the Duisburg area of Marxloh felt about the way the former 'guest workers' were no longer keeping to the margins of society but were beginning to move into new areas.

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