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ANTI-RACISM AND ETHNIC MOBILISATION IN EUROPE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GERMANY

The Political Context

There is considerable concern in Germany, and more widely in Europe, today, about the significance of recent violent attacks on refugees, foreigners and immigrants, and the relative gains made by parties of the extreme right espousing ‘racist’ policies. Such developments are not unique to Germany. There have been outbreaks of violence directed against Maghrebians in France, and there the National Front under Le Pen has achieved greater electoral success than any other party of the far right in Europe. In Britain there is a record of racist attacks particularly directed against Bangladeshis in East London, which is actually far greater than anything equivalent in Germany, and the Fascist British National Party has recently gained local government representation and could possibly increase it. There are also equivalent political developments in Austria and in Flanders. In Germany, however, the question has been posed in a particularly sharp form, and there are fears that recent racist attacks might presage the re-emergence of Nazism as a political force.

It is against this background that the political integration of different kinds of minorities has to be considered. Are they to remain non-citizens? Are the problems which they face themselves

and pose to the national society capable of being handled within the normal political system, or are special institutional arrangements necessary for dealing with them? If they retain their own culture, will this mark them for unequal treatment and for physical attack, or make them available as scapegoats? Is the very fact of mobilisation on an ethnic basis not regressive and dangerous, as the recent history of Yugoslavia has shown? Alternatively is there a possibility that ethnic mobilisation could occur in ways which protect minority rights and actually contribute to the strength of democracy in a welfare state?

The Fear of Ethnic Mobilisation

The existence of organisations and the maintenance of distinct patterns of culture amongst immigrant ethnic minority groups have made these groups targets for physical attack. But anxiety about, and hostility to, these groups is by no means confined to young groups of skinheads and neo-Nazis. Unlike other countries in West Europe, there is a traditional notion in Germany of ethnic nationalism amongst the majority population. Germanness, according to this view, is regarded as a cultural matter, rather than merely a matter of citizenship, and ‘ethnic Germans’ are recognised even when they do not live within the national boundaries, while, at the same time, several millions who actually live and work in Germany are thought of neither as citizens nor as Germans. This produces an even stronger sense of ethnocentrism than that which exists in other countries in which the main bond between residents is thought of, in part at least, in terms of a common citizenship. The cultures of minority groups are also likely to be considered as alien and regressive, particularly if they involve differences of religion, as may be the case with some of the Turkish residents. Xenophobic and racist parties now make a small but significant electoral showing, and perhaps even more significantly the mainstream parties have adjusted their policies on such matters as asylum in response to racist attacks.

Fear of the outsiders is by no means confined to those who subscribe to right-wing ideologies. A common view on the left of politics is that ethnic consciousness is a form of false consciousness which divides the working class and prevents it from taking