READING JOURNAL

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"Post-Colognianism" — How the Cologne Incident on New Year's Eve Changed Germany's Attitude Towards Male Muslim Migrants

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1 Introduction

During the last couple of years Germany has transformed from being a country, which was praised for its extraordinary *Willkommenskultur* towards migrants to being a nation in which subliminal, racist tendencies articulated via sentences such as "*Ich bin kein Nazi, aber…*", or "*Das wird man ja wohl noch sagen dürfen*" seem to have become socially accepted again. Akrap points out that "*Willkommenskultur* […] is a word not born of custom but created to establish one" (2015: n. pag.). She continues to elaborate that while this term was originally used to invite foreign, skilled workers to find a job in sparsely populated German areas, the notion was later understood as a public appeal aimed at Germans helping refugees to settle down in Germany (Akrap 2015: n. pag.). Today, however, one gets the impression that little is left of this initial, enthusiastic welcoming culture.

One of the reasons why the attitude of many Germans may have changed towards refugees might have been caused by the incident that occurred on New Year's Eve in Cologne in 2015/2016. To broadly summarize the incident it needs to be stated that a large number of young men, many of them described as having an Arabic or North African appearance, gathered between the main railway station and Cologne Cathedral. It was reported that this is where they encircled mainly women, stole personal belongings, and sexually assaulted them. This incident has later come to be known as a 'sex mob' or 'mob attacks', and has resulted in numerous assault and robbery charges. While up to that point "German railway stations were symbols of *Willkommenskultur*, with crowds welcoming refugees from Syria and elsewhere, […] [Cologne's train] station has become a symbol for what some are calling Islamic 'rape culture'" (Posener 2016: n. pag.).

As this quote indicates media was quick to position the incident in a Muslim context. At this point it is worth pointing out that at the same time of the attacks there was a mass celebrated at Cologne Cathedral — *the* representative symbol of Christianity. After this incident, a huge number of debates was initiated, varying from discussions about different cultural understandings of sexual politics, over suggestions to keeping strangers at "one arm's length" away in public spaces (Eddy 2016: n. pag.), to publicly using racist notions such as 'Nafris' (abbreviation for North African people), as far as to openly discussing and genuinely considering a so-called *Obergrenze* for refugees.

Due to the debates that resulted from the incident I suggest to make use of the term "Post-Colognianism". This notion aims to describe the shift of atmosphere within Germany after the incident of Cologne. It contains the idea that the incident on New Year's Eve did not only invite people to openly discuss and criticize issues of refugee policies, but that it has also led to many rash con-

clusions about people of different ethnic and religious background within German society and the media landscape alike.

1.1 Procedure

While in the Master's Degree seminar "Migration/Law/Gender" we analyzed a number of fictional, popular media, and legal representations of migrants and asylum seekers in both English and German contexts, in the course of the present reading journal it will be focussed on the German situation only. To be more precise, it will be concentrated on the incident on New Year's Eve in Cologne, and how Germany's attitude towards immigrants has changed due to the aftermath of said event. It will be focussed on the common perception of alleged irreconcilable differences between Germans and people immigrating to Germany. Within this analysis I want to concentrate particularly on Muslim immigrants. By doing so, I aim to show how the media constructs cultural anxieties towards certain groups of immigrants. In the course of the present reading journal I will analyze popular media narratives that are frequently used to articulate and propagate alleged differences between the German host culture and the Muslim migrant's culture. In order to approach this reading journal in a systematic manner each chapter will be accompanied by one prefixed question. These questions, which I asked myself during my research process, shall help the reader to understand the approach of the journal more easily, and illustrate my personal reflection upon the issue.

I will discuss the debate on sexism, which has emerged from the incident of Cologne, by revisiting two theoretical concepts. Within the first section I want to concentrate on the stereotypical categorization of male perpetuators of Muslim origin, the careless generalization proclaimed via the media, and how such hasty condemnations can encourage a concept that has come to be known as the "ethnicization of sexism" (Dietze 2016: 94). By doing so, I want to highlight how Muslim male migrants are depicted as being 'sexually problematic' due to their cultural background. In the second section I will concentrate on outlining the common perception that sexual harassment and sexual violation towards women has slopped over into Germany with the floods of migrants. Here, I want to show how this idea can lead to the false conclusion that Germany is free from sexism and how sexism in Germany is now being trivialized under the guise of ethnoracialized sexism rooted in Muslim origin. The selection of texts I will be working with consists both of articles we covered in class and others that I found during my individual research process. In order to provide a broad variety of approaches, I want to link academic texts, national and international press articles covering

the incident, and personal perceptions and experiences I have gained during my time living in Cologne and in discussions with friends of mine, who are still living in Cologne.

2 Were We Just Looking for a Scapegoat?

Beginning with the notions of "ethnicization of sexism" and "ethnosexism" I want to revisit two texts by Gabriele Dietze. In one of her articles Dietze describes how the 'Cologne incident' can be considered as being of representative character for describing the alleged problems of sexual politics, i.e. sexual freedom and sexual emancipation, in regard to refugees from Muslim cultures. She claims that despite the lack of information about the facts of that night (invalid video material, identification problems, etc.), people tend to jump to rash conclusions, and seem to identify a clear message behind the incident: It is commonly believed that the 'sex mob' consisted of perpetuators of Muslim origin, who endanger German women, and who consequently have to leave Germany again (Dietze 2016: 93). By making this observation, she argues that there are two discrimination patterns that influence each other and cannot be considered separately: sexism and racism. Having this intersectional approach in mind, it can be concluded that gender is constructed in relation to migration, i.e. in this case to a Muslim cultural background. She explains this idea by picking up on the common perception that "sexism is an effect of Muslim education (Dietze 2016: 95)[1]. By mentioning this, she illustrates that sexism is considered to be inextricably linked with one's ethnic background. This justifies the quick public equation of being a sexual perpetuator when being male and being a Muslim. In her article "Ethnosexismus. Sex-Mob-Narrative um die Kölner Sylvesternacht" Dietze expands the idea of "ethnicization of sexism" by defining the term "ethnosexism" as follows:

> Ethnosexism can be understood as a form of culturalization of gender, which is particularly discriminating against ethnically marked people due to their alleged problematic or primitive sexuality or sexual hierarchy. […] Ethnosexism describes a specific form of discrimination against migrants […], intersecting complex variables such as gender, ethnic background, sexuality, religion, class, and geopolitical position. (Dietze 2016a: 4)[2]

As elaborated by Dietze, ethnosexism can be understood as an intersectional form of discrimination. By this definition, people are discriminated against due to their gender, ethnic background, or religious affiliation. By looking at this multi-layered form of discrimination it becomes evident that the

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[1] All translations from the German are by the author. The original reads: "Sexismus sei ein Effekt muslimischer Erziehung."

[2] The original reads: "Ethnosexismus wird hier als eine Art von Kulturalisierung von Geschlecht verstanden, die ethnisch markierte Menschen aufgrund ihrer angeblich besonderen, problematischen oder ‚rückständigen' Sexualität oder Sexualordnung diskriminiert. […] Wenn hier also von Ethnosexismus die Rede ist, dann ist eine spezifische Form von sexualpolitisch argumentierender Migrationsfeindlichkeit gemeint und deren komplexer Intersektionalität von Geschlecht, Ethnie, Sexualität, Religion, Klasse/Milieu und geopolitischer Positionierung."

term "ethnosexism" can be considered as a more detailed description of discrimination patterns. In addition to that it is essential to mention that Western societies apply an oriental perspective to migrants, degrading them to a backward position (Stoler qtd. in Dietze 2016a: 4). By doing so, they upgrade their own social status, and demonstrate Western social superiority. Also, they deny any sexist issues regarding their own sexual understanding. This belief encourages the idea of social discrepancies, and promotes the idea of a clash of civilizations.

For a lot of people the 'Cologne incident' confirmed the dominant social belief that male migrants of Muslim origin endanger German women, as they are not familiar with 'our' cultural understanding of sexual freedom. There is the common perception that people of Muslim background have a different understanding of gender hierarchies, in which males inhabit a dominant role and females are oppressed by them and considered to be inferior to them. Also, it is argued that Muslim women remain too traditional and can never be fully compatible with Western lifestyles (Lünenborg & Fürsich 2014: 961). To back this thought the German woman, able to combine family and career, is continuously contrasted with the oppressed Muslim woman, who is confined to the house, and whose sexuality is suppressed by the men of her family (Lünenborg & Fürsich 2014: 959). This supports the belief that in Germany "emancipation is complete" (Dietze 2016: 95).

Ironically, it is exactly this traditional gender hierarchy that is propagated by right wing German parties, such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*). At this point, however, I do not want to negate a different interpretation of gender roles in different cultural contexts. Rather, I want to focus on the mediated construction of the male Muslim migrant as a sexual perpetuator per se, and the reduction to his religious background only. In my opinion, it is a fallacy to stigmatize this huge mass of people that was involved in the Cologne incident by applying one overarching idea to them. Also, it is disastrous to believe that all men involved were refugees. In fact, all we know for sure is that "[t]hey have identified 31 suspects, who include at least two Germans, a Serb, an American and 18 asylum seekers from the Middle East and north Africa" (Akrap 2016: n. pag.). Of course, these numbers do not represent the huge crowd of people that was involved in the attacks. At the same time, however, these numbers are the only ones available and do not confirm the subjective observations captured by the media. At this point I want to emphasize that I do not want to trivialize the incident — it was horrible to hear about women being groped in public. However, I ask myself how quickly the greater public and the media buy into the myth of a refugee-motivated sex mob. How did people identify all men as refugees? Which external characteristics mark a person as a refugee?

At one point, Dietze mentions that such rash conclusions and condemnations about male Muslim migrants do not come without a reason. She argues that the media image of the dangerous male Muslim migrants already existed prior to the Cologne incident (Dietze 2016: 96).

This might be one of the explanations why people tend to quickly believe such ideas in the first place and proves that people were already familiar with this image. The police did not exactly help to stop these quick stigmatization patterns. When one year later a huge number of people was encountered at the very same spot again the police tweeted about "Nafris", abbreviating "Nordafrikaner". By doing so, another racist term that supports categorization patterns towards certain ethnic groups was generated. Especially in the media context such notions help to create familiarity and aid subconscious development of negative associations. All in all, it needs to be summarized that the whole incident was adorned by rash classifications. One can only assume that such a heated and emotionally charged debate tends to jeopardize a rational, non-judgmental investigation, as the politic, the police, the media and the public are looking for quick answers to a complex problem.

As I was doing a semester abroad during the time of the incident, and the discussions that followed, I cannot speak from my own experiences. However, after coming back to Germany it was astonishing to see how a huge number of people tried to convince me that 'Germany has changed' since I had left, that 'I have to be careful', and that 'I cannot feel safe' here anymore. I can only speak for myself when I say that nothing has changed for me. I do not feel more insecure when walking down a street. The only thing that truly scares me is how people's tone has changed when talking about migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, and how subliminal racist comments have entered political discussions, but are dismissed as comments of 'concerned citizens'.

3 Do We Ignore Everyday Sexism?

After the 'Cologne incident', German satirist Jan Böhmermann dared migrants to stop groping German women as a joke, as it is something only German men are entitled to (Neo Magazin Royal 00:05:35). While it was meant as a joke, there still lies some truth behind it. Every year there are reports about sexual assaults and sexual violations against women on public festivals, such as the *Oktoberfest*, or *Kölner Karneval. The Guardian* journalist Alan Posener points out that "[w]hen someone brought up the Oktoberfest parallels, Muslim-haters started a Facebook campaign arguing that, with 5.9 million visitors over a week, "only" 20 women were raped last year, whereas now 1,000 immigrants had attacked more than 100 women in one night" (Posener 2016: n. pag.). At this point it becomes evident that sexual assault seem to be 'more acceptable' when done in small doses. Also, one can single out from this statement that it is more relevant by whom sexual assaults are done, trivializing the act itself. This supports the common perception that sexual harassment and sexual violation towards women has slopped over into Germany with the floods of migrants, and ignores the fact that women have been assaulted by people of German and other Western European descent alike. At this point, the immediate connection between sexism and one's racial background becomes obvious again.

To challenge the argument of ethnically-based sexism it is also interesting to point out that we are confronted with sexist magazine covers, explicit advertisement, and existing problems of everyday sexism, such as misogyny and inequality. Dietze backs these impressions by saying that sexism in Germany is normalized to the extent that we do not define it as sexism anymore, but call it 'sexual open-mindedness' instead (Dietze 2016: 97). She applies this thought to the 'Cologne incident' by saying that "[n]ative sexism is not visible, although it is hyper-visible. Ethnic sexism, however, is visible even though we literally do not see it due to bad lighting and the lack of video surveillance" (Dietze 2016: 97).[3] As mentioned before, she claims that conclusions about the exact facts about that night are drawn by pre-existent images about people allegedly being involved in the incident. Joachim Kersten, for instance, introduces the term "stranger danger", a notion he uses to describe the mediated phenomenon of Muslim migrants (Kersten 2016: 367). In addition to that the image of the young, innocent, native girl is still prevalent in people's mind, although it has long been outdated (Dietze 2016: 95). Combining these two images, it is easy to convey people of the

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[3] The original reads: "Der einheimische Sexismus wird nicht ‚gesehen', obwohl er hypervisibel ist, der ethnisierte Sexismus dagegen wird auch dann ‚gesehen', obwohl er wegen schlechter Lichtverhältnisse und fehlender Videoüberwachung nicht gesehen werden konnte."

need of protection. Protection from "stranger danger", incorporated through male Muslim migrants, who do not respect 'our' women and Western values, and protecting 'our' women, representatives of open-minded, free Western world views. As a consequence, heterosexual, white men are portrayed as "specialists for protection", fighting for 'our' women and 'our' values and rights (Dietze 2016: 98). Especially at this point it becomes clear that "[m]igration coverage is saturated with moments of Othering. Often an unquestioned "us" is constructed as a default through dichotomizing discourses about "them"" (Lünenborg & Fürsich 2014: 961). By drawing a clear line between 'us' and 'them' the idea of having shared values seems impossible. Lünenborg & Fürsich elaborate this thought by stating that "[m]edia are important public arbiters in the construction of national identity. They play a decisive role in conveying cultural boundaries between "us" and "them"" (Lünenborg & Fürsich 2014: 959). This strategy was also implemented when covering the 'Cologne incident'. However, *The Guardian* journalist Doris Akrap points out that unverified information about the incident did not only mislead the public, but fueled the discussion about 'others' even more:

> An officer claimed a man tore up the papers identifying him as an asylum seeker in front of a policeman, shouting: "You can't do anything to me, I can get a new one tomorrow." The story went viral. Four days later, it turned out that it couldn't have been an asylum seeker's papers, because these are plastic cards and can't be torn. It's just one of several examples highlighting a hysterical mood that is making a monster out of what was already a nightmare. (Akrap 2016: n. pag.)

All too often we find it hard to differentiate between facts and fake. This is not only caused by so-called fake news, deliberately trying to manipulate our opinion, but also by hasty, public perceptions that influence our attitude. The situation described in the quote above is one of them. When the story of an alleged migrant tearing up his papers in front of a police officer went viral, people were outraged. One is quick to believe such stories. As mentioned above, however, this incident could not have had happened they way it was described, as identification papers laminated with plastic cannot be torn. This underlines the sensitive environment of such stories and shows how easy we come to believe such media-effective stories. In addition to that "media tend to take up a national ethno-centric position that questions the possibility of integration or checks on the degree of assimilation of the newcomers. […] The expected task of migrants is to adapt and integrate into a seemingly fixed society" (Lünenborg & Fürsich 2014: 961f.). This position might be subconsciously embraced by the audience. Moreover, a majority of people seem to have very limited knowledge about Muslim culture, which proves that the audience perceives media content rather undifferentiated. Muslims, used as an overarching umbrella term to describe a huge mass of people, dismisses

any kind of distinction between people of different backgrounds. Muslims are generalized by belonging to 'the Islam'. This depiction disregards two notions. First, it is assumed that all Muslims are the same, and that religion in itself can be regarded as a whole. This assumption can be compared with saying there is only one form of Christianity. While in Germany we live with the binary opposition of Catholics and Protestants, there are numerous other Christian confessions. The same variety is true for Islam. The islamic religion and its followers, however, are regarded as one undifferentiated entity. This supports the argument that stereotypical representation goes hand in hand with a lack of knowledge about Islam in Germany and the West in general. Second, the label 'Muslim' reduces people to their religion only. This unilateral perspective dismisses other features of said people and encourages negative ideas about Muslims in general. Also, identified as Muslims, many jump to the rash connection between religion and terrorism. It seems as if over the years, these two notions have become inseparable: "Over the past decade, the American media, in particular, has laboured to instill in its viewing public the notion that "Muslim" equals "terrorist" and that all adherents of Islam are dangerous fanatics" (Stetz 2000: 67f.). This observation is not only true for American media, but can be recognized in Germany and other European countries as well. By using insufficient notions such as 'Islamic State', which implies a connection to the Islam, instead of 'Islamistic State', which would describe its extremist character, help to remain this linkage.

4 Conclusion

The aim of the present reading journal was to capture the shift of atmosphere within Germany after the incident in Cologne on New Year's Eve in 2015/2016, which here was referred to as "Post-Colognialism". At the beginning, it was looked at how the media constructs cultural anxieties towards people of a certain ethnic background by making use of the theoretical concepts of "ethnization of sexism" and "ethnosexism". Both of these concepts describe the intersectional discrimination patterns that a huge number of immigrants, i.e. male Muslim migrants, are subjected to. In addition to that, it was mentioned that by repeatedly depicting them in a negative light, they are positioned in contrast to women in general, and to German women in particular. Here, it was outlined how the dominant, public belief that male Muslim migrants endanger German women, which leads to the conclusion that they generally defy Western values. This supports the common perception of a clash of civilizations. At this point, it is alarming to see that instead of pointing out similarities, and what we all have in common with one another, it is mainly concentrated on differences.

In the second section it was argued that there is the common perception that sexual harassment and sexual violation towards women has slopped over into Germany with the floods of migrants. This denies the prevalence of sexism in Germany. It was pointed out that problems of everyday sexism, such as misogyny and inequality at the workforce are being trivialized under the guise of ethnoracial sexism. It was argued that within this debate the media tend to be important arbiters and take a ethnocentric perspective. Consequently, this supports the idea of 'us' versus 'them' and negates the idea of shared values and world views.

What I personally take away from writing this journal is how our lack of true engagement with different cultures hinders us from establishing our own opinion towards complex issues, such as the Cologne incident and the following debates on various related topics. I find it crucial to critically reflect one's own handling towards media images, and to honestly deal with premature judgment towards others, as it impacts our social contact with one another. I think that we buy to easily into simplified ideas proclaimed by the media. From my own experience I can say that Cologne can be understood as one of the most tolerant and open-minded cities in Germany: known for the biggest pride parade, and openly embracing cultural diversity. That is also why I claim that Cologne does not suffer from any "post-colognial" trauma, but rather that this trauma is medially and politically upheld.

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