

Book Review

JAN-JONATHAN BOCK & SHARON MACDONALD, editors, *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2019, 358pp. (pb £27.95).

Jan-Jonathan Bock and Sharon Macdonald's volume *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany* offers a contextualization and challenge of common narratives concerning the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Germany – a moment in contemporary German history which is not only characterized by a large influx of displaced people, but also by a sudden rise in sociopolitical tensions. In an effort to address these transformations, the volume asks a crucial question: in spite of political declarations of openness, are refugees actually welcome in Germany? To tackle this, it assesses public discourses regarding pro- and anti-refugee sentiments and challenges common modes of thinking which are held as self-evident by a politically divided public. As explained by Macdonald in her conclusion to the volume, the book follows a clear direction of thought – from fact to affect, from large-scale, universal differentiation to patterns of connectedness, and from past reality to contemporary transformations.

Refugees Welcome? offers depth of focus on unaddressed perspectives in public discourse by acknowledging that the root of the crisis is its very categorization as such. Relating

current issues to historical realities surrounding the Holocaust, the post-World-War-II occupation, work-migration and the restoration of German society, many of the chapters provide insight into the psychological consequences of Germany's efforts to rebuild its structures as well as its image. It also challenges the pro- and anti-immigrant divide of contemporary German society by analyzing the current state of assimilation politics as well as small sociopolitical venues seeking new routes for future development which embrace cultural difference.

The first part of the volume explores sociopolitical mechanisms which produce the distinction between 'Germans' and 'non-Germans'. Uli Linke argues that German language proficiency is perceived as a marker of social status and produces an environment of forced exclusion. Friedrich Heckmann and Gökce Yurdacul present perspectives of the German legal system by focusing on specific cases. Yurdacul's case offers a critical insight into the way in which the absence of equality concerning religious autonomy produces exclusion and religious hierarchies. She shows that categorizing religious fasting practices as potential child abuse while portraying the Jewish practice of infant circumcision as harmless perpetuates the ostracization of specific religious groups in Germany.

Appropriately titled *Potential for Change*, the second part of the book explores transformative events as well as the innovative concepts which redefine German society's approach to difference and diversity. Both Petra Kuppinger's as well as Carola Tize and Ria Reis' ethnographic analyses relay a dynamic state of diversification currently materializing in German society. Through interview with first- and second-generation migrants, they explore contemporary transformations set out to affect the way in which language, architecture and art shape new forms of cultural belonging, which may challenge categories based on heritage and tradition. This part, particularly the work of Naika Foroutan, delineates these new developments as both a generational social struggle and a possible goal for the future of immigrants and non-immigrants alike.

Refugee Encounters offers the reader access to the geopolitical realities of the 'refugee crisis'. This perspective also presents a direct connection to the modes of action which facilitate co-existence in German society. Kira Kosnick's discussion of the 2015 New Year's Eve attacks against women makes a compelling connection between simplistic representations and cultural attitudes toward immigrants by showing that media reports rested primarily on dramatized visual imagery and hyperbolic rhetoric highlighting words such as 'terror'. Serhat Karakayali's analysis of Germany's welcoming culture is a result of German political memory which causes apprehension as well as guilt and a need to make up for past mistakes. The apprehension which is connected to social phenomena such as right-wing anger and the rise of populist sentiments in Germany, is highlighted by Jan-Jonathan Bock's analysis of the anti-Islam Pegida movement in Dresden, which highlights the complex role of perceived victimhood and marginalization within the movement.

Finally, the fourth part, titled *New Initiatives and Directions*, explores emerging channels of understanding regarding diversity and difference. With chapters by Jonas Tinius, Damani J. Partridge and Werner Schiffauer, it hypothesizes the possibility of bringing together political and social groups which engage these emergent formations of co-existence. By exploring initiatives for change in German society, this section places its focus on perspectives and, above all, localities which seek to facilitate difference and diversity. Be it as part of theatres, museums, films, or churches, all three authors observe a social trend of hospitality. But what makes this part of the book compelling is its multi-faceted perspective, involving a more optimistic view from Schiffauer and a critical analysis by Partridge, which do not contradict, but rather work alongside one another.

The achievement of the book and what makes it different to many other works tackling the 'refugee crisis' is its focus on the ambivalence of direction. By including, for example, an assessment of right-wing anger as well as outlining the many fragmented and interrelated sociopolitical mechanisms which lead to the delegitimization of migrant agency, the volume manages to deconstruct the stereotypes and generalizations related to the topic in order to illuminate many differing angles and perspectives. It thereby moves the discussion

away from the reductionist representations of the 'refugee crisis' commonly promoted in public discourse, toward acknowledgement of the complexity of the topic. This deconstruction effort also allows for an informed and qualified exploration of current and future avenues for change.

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About the Author

Aneka Brunßen has been observing the development of the debate surrounding the so-called 'refugee crisis' since it began and has developed a personal and professional interest in exploring new formations of thought and action generated by its public discourse. Aneka has just finished her Master's degree in Transcultural Studies at the Institute for Anthropology and Cultural Studies at the University of Bremen, and will begin her PhD studies this year.

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