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Sexist violence

New Year's Eve in Cologne – some reflections

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On New Year's Eve the city of Cologne witnessed massive attacks against women. These attacks had a qualitatively new dimension – a combination of mainly migrant offenders and sexual assaults on a mass scale with theft, the equivocal attitude of the authorities and a strained social atmosphere eagerly waiting to be able to obstruct the liberal asylum policy of Chancellor Merkel.

I First of all some facts that can be reconstructed from the police reports.

Up to 1000 men were assaulting women on the square in front of the Cologne central station between 8.30 p.m. and 6.30 a.m. The women were surrounded by groups of men, insulted, sexually harassed and robbed. Even a rape is reported to have taken place. The mood in front of the station was aggressive. This might have partly been due to the fact that during the evening people, for fun, were throwing around fireworks, in some cases with the aim of hitting other people. The local police were present with 143 officers, the federal police inside the railway station with 70 officers. Neither group was able to cope with the situation.

It was not an isolated event. According to a report of the federal police office (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA) sexual and property offences on New Year's Eve similar to Cologne were reported from twelve federal states (Länder). The only exceptions were Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia. In some other European countries such events are alleged to have been reported but there is no reliable information.

By far the most offences were reported from North Rhine-Westphalia (1076) and Hamburg (195). For North Rhine-Westphalia the BKA reported 692 cases of physical injury and theft as well as 384 cases of sexual assaults, 116 of the latter “in combination with property offences” (according to news reports from 23 January).

Up to 23 January the police investigated nationwide 72 suspects, among them 12 Germans and 60 persons of other nationalities. Beyond that the BKA report was rather vague: Hamburg talked about small groups of “male persons having a Mediterranean appearance”. Hesse reported men of “North African/Arabic /Southern European/Eastern European appearance”. North Rhine-Westphalia talked about “an apparent migration background” and a “foreign appearance” without explaining what that could mean.

In relation to the Cologne events 30 suspects aged 16 to 32 have been identified according to the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior. Among them were 13 Moroccans and 12 Algerians. Weeks ago a report of the Cologne city police talked about “10 Algerian, 10 Moroccan, 4 Syrian, 5 Iranian, 1 Iraqi, 1 Serbian, 2 German citizens and 1 US citizen.” Half of the suspects were asylum seekers, 2 had a residence permit, 2 were unaccompanied minors, and 11 were supposed to be illegally in Germany; 7 persons are in custody, among them several Algerians (as of 21 January).

The media soon had a real go at “offenders from North Africa”. In fact the police for years (even before the outset of the current migration wave) has been hard on the heels of gangs of North African youth in German cities. Above all in Berlin the police have been dealing for years with around thousand male offenders from the Turkish and Arab communities. These people are a minority of the adolescents of the third generation of migrants. They have already experienced violent behaviour during their first years at school.

But we must see that a great number of the refugees that have come to Germany in 2015 and are still coming are single youth or young men without a family life. There is not a specific problem of young men from Arab countries, but a specific problem which is due to the circumstances: they have nothing to do and are living in scandalous conditions. It is understandable (though not to be tolerated) that they go berserk [1] and it points to those in the background who are responsible: the political and administrative leaderships and their policy of deterrence instead of integration. The circumstances of housing and living are very important and they make it evident that the federal government has zero intention of really integrating these people. People responsible for the work with migrants say: no more than 50 in one place, with enough privacy and so on. Especially important is that the families can come together again, and it is extremely cynical that the federal government forbids exactly that for those asylum seekers who are not yet fully recognized. The offences of these young people show that sexist and racist violence are linked to each other.

The BKA and the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior unanimously declared not to have any evidence that the offenders had had an arrangement with each other, and they likewise denied any link to organized crime. The Ministry considers it “very likely that group-dynamic processes influenced the individual offences on New Year's Eve”. A Moroccan who for three years has been “working” as a pickpocket in Cologne put it thus: “We were around 70 persons and met in Kalk [a Cologne suburb]. Then we went to the central station and talked loudly in Arabic. Thus more and more Arabic-speaking people joined us. Many took the opportunity to steal, some grabbed at girls and the whole thing completely went off course.” Only one suspect is recorded in the extensive police database on the Northern African scene.

All this suggests the picture of petty-crime youth gangs rather than the variously expressed speculation about the apparently “coordinated procedure” having a political background with the IS possibly being involved.

The North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior claims to have “clear evidence that the offences had been committed by various offenders or groups of offenders”. They lived in various cities and came from various countries. None of the thirty hitherto identified offenders were residents of Cologne. Around half of them were residents of other North Rhine-Westphalian cities, the other half having no fixed abode at all. According to the report the assaults came about rather spontaneously: “That such offences had been committed nationwide – as well as in other European countries – still suggests the conclusion that the offences had not been planned in advance.” There is still no explanation for the wide-ranging appearance of the presumed youth gangs.

II Police did not take the massive assaults seriously

Initially the police did not take the massive assaults seriously and even tried to cover them up. Until conservative media like the magazines *Spiegel* and *Focus* used the assaults on women to stir up public sentiments against “Northern African asylum seekers” the event had not attracted public attention. But then the Cologne chief constable had to resign. Among the people who stirred up the anti-refugee sentiments was the president of the right-wing police “trade union” DPG, Rainer Wendt. He claimed that politicians had instructed the police not to publish criminal offences of refugees. At the same time the public media chiefly gave accounts of criminal offences committed by refugees and less of those committed by German citizens. Wendt's allegations and the media coverage suggest that leading politicians are eager to protect foreigners more than Germans and that the police are no longer able or willing to protect the citizens. The critical TV magazine *Panorama* questioned Wendt and other police officers. The former could not give any evidence that supported his allegations. Various police stations unanimously declared that refugee delinquency had not grown in 2015 and makes up only a fraction of the total amount of crime (e.g. in Karlsruhe around 50 cases from a total of 50,000).

The North Rhine-Westphalian part of the extreme right-wing PEGIDA movement and various fascist organizations mobilized only 500 people to a demonstration in Cologne on 9 January (against a counter demonstration of 3,000). On 6 January some hundred women held a manifestation against sexism and racism in front of the cathedral; later they joined a left-wing manifestation against the instrumentalization of the events for a hardening of the refugee legislation.

The events gave fresh impetus to the hardliners within the federal government and within the CDU/CSU and they annihilated the initial “welcome culture” the public opinion was so proud of. The general elections in the federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt on 13 March will probably carry the right-wing AfD (“Alternative for Germany”) into the parliaments of both *Länder*.

There were over 220 attacks on refugee camps in 2015 that is such incidents took place almost daily. Scarcely any perpetrators were arrested; only four sentences were passed. Some pogrom-like assaults on dark-skinned foreigners took place. Militant right-wing groups set up armed vigilante groups patrolling with dogs at night because the police are supposed to be no longer able “to protect the citizens”. There are mayors who tolerate the vigilantes and there are police stations that merely “observe” them.

The federal government is preparing a hardening of the refugee legislation; countries like Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia would thus be classified as “safe countries of origin”. Asylum seekers from those countries would have no chance of being acknowledged as refugees. SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel is threatening countries with stopping foreign aid if they are not ready to receive asylum seekers that have been sent back by the German authorities. Asylum seekers who are merely “tolerated” are not allowed to send for their families. This is especially cynical and stimulates situations as in Cologne on New Year's Eve.

The main purpose of the agitation against asylum seekers is to prevent the entrance of more refugees into the country. The federal government is using the label “safe country of origin” to restrict gradually the areas people are allowed to come from in order to be acknowledged as asylum seekers in Germany. Migrants are divided into “good” and “bad” ones by the media in order to counter the accusation of being racist.

III. On some problems regarding the reactions of the left.

Generally the left – like the police – did not take the events on New Year's Eve seriously. As the media began to agitate against “North Africans” the left objected to the racist instrumentalization of the attacks. Partly they went so far as to refuse to take into account the participation of the North African community because this seemed to be a racist attribution. Only the women's manifestations and the reactions of numerous women groups demanding a better protection of women against sexual violence led to a partial re-thinking by the left. The unspoken fear of the left is that the women's demands – by making no difference between German and non-German offenders – inadvertently join the racist chorus.

Yet the women were aware of the danger and from the very beginning they made clear that the issue is not violence by foreigners but violence by males. However, the fact remains that only with the growing agitation against asylum seekers could they get a broader hearing for their main demand to sharpen the penal code relating to sex crimes – a rather uncomfortable experience. But it is good that they have done it and that they are not caught in a trap like “The main enemy is the anti-refugee agitation”. Thus it turned out that they have been able to build a bridge between the rights for women and those for migrants.

In mid-January Syrian refugees took up the issue and held a manifestation during which they distributed roses to women and apologized for the assaults. Under these circumstances it was an important and nice gesture but a double-edged one as well. They apologized for something they had not done and that may inadvertently enforce the mainstream propaganda of “good” and “bad” refugees. Some Syrian demonstrators demanded as resolutely as the official German attitude the “severe punishment” and “deportation” of the offenders. Their wish to be accepted by the German society as equals is leading to their over-adaptation (which is not a new phenomenon). Moreover, migrants who are established in Germany fear that such events may challenge their own position, which they have achieved with difficulty.

Finally we should admit: Even the women realized only gradually that the events on New Year's Eve demanded a political response by them and that they could not go on with things as normal. In an interview with *SoZ – Sozialistische Zeitung* Behshid Najafi, a leader of the migrant women's organization Agisra, complained that even women do not take such assaults seriously enough and are ready to put up with too much.

IV The autonomous women's movement is a valuable ally

In this struggle the autonomous women's movement is a valuable ally that relentlessly refers to gender and the German patriarchal society's deficits rather than to different nationalities.

It should be recalled that the patriarchal condition is a social phenomenon related to the emergence of class rule and not a peculiar trait of a specific “nation” or “religion” though all major monotheistic religions are patriarchal. Only in a patriarchal society women can be treated as second-class human beings. Overcoming patriarchal conditions lies at the heart of the matter behind the women's demand: “A woman's NO must be enough!” Sexual violence is not only existing in the case of physical aggression but even when women are driven into situations where they are submitted to something against their will. The degradation of a woman is the first step to physical violence. Therefore the women's organizations unanimously demand that Germany should ratify the Istanbul convention and change the German legislation in accordance. But there is a strong opposition by a male lobby to that demand.

Patriarchal conditions manifest themselves in various societies in various ways – and even in one and the same society the position of women is different depending upon the strength of the women's movement and the influence of religion in everyday life. This is true for Europe as well as for Islamic countries. Even in European countries not long ago women were regarded as fair game when they showed more skin than usual. Recalling these conditions, insisting upon the universal validity of women's rights and fighting against violence the women's movement is a valuable force in the struggle against racism – especially since racism and sexism are based on a similar pattern.

V Finally there is another dimension

The women's demand to strengthen the legislation regarding sex crime is a problem for many left-wing people who are against the rearmament of the state apparatus. Yet we should make a difference between the repressive function of the state and its protective function. The neo-liberal state has massively dismantled the last and strengthened the former. In Germany there is not a lack of the means for staff and money to support women's institutions for self-help, violence prevention and police protection – the national budget has a surplus of 18 million Euros. But there is a lack of political will. This can be seen even more blatantly in the dereliction of schools, the dismantling of public services and above all in the way refugees are accommodated in this country: in mass quarters offering no private space and lacking adequate food supply or hygienic standards; the refugees often wait for months to be acknowledged as

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asylum seekers – not to speak about language or training courses. Thus it is not surprising that young people get a camp psychosis and form criminal gangs.

The left cannot compensate the state's failures by its own structures. Therefore women have no choice but to demand sharper laws, which force the police to act.

30 January 2016

*No one article can cover all the aspects of this discussion. **International Viewpoint** welcomes other contributions.*

[1] Our mothers told us that in the refugee camps at the end of the war women/children and men were separated for exactly the same reasons. The same measures are applied today in several refugee camps in Germany which have reported such problems. Of course such incidents do not happen in every camp, but one must say also that the conditions in the camps are quite different and the more social contacts and social control they allow the less incidents might be reported.