

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies Political Strategies - Social Changes - Educational Concepts

Conference Paper

Contribution to Workshop 4, Session 2:
Religious Identities and Citizenship

Haci Karacaer, Merhaba Foundation, Amsterdam

Lisbon, Portugal, April, 26-28, 2007

www.bpb.de/nece

‘A specter is haunting Europe.’ This not the specter of communism to which Marx and Engels were referring but rather the specter of Islam.¹

I would like to make some remarks about the current political situation in the Netherlands. The former Dutch government of Christian Democrats, right wing Liberals and the List Pim Fortuyn has fallen after not more than three months of total mismanagement, ego fetishism and the most bizarre proposals to discourage migrants to integrate and feel well in Dutch society. Pim Fortuyn was a wanderer in the political landscape. He started his career as a Marxist university professor, ended as a one issue populist, well embraced by the underbelly of Dutch *gesundes Volksempfinden*. In the same time he was a flamboyant gay, preferring dark rooms and young Moroccan boys. In some perspectives he was more liberal than xenophobe. The List Pim Fortuyn showed in the end to be an anti-migrant initiative and its follower parties showed that their common ground was not ‘the heritage of Pim’ but plain xenophobia. After his murder Pim’s List got 26 out of 150 seats in parliament. Without their *Maximo Leader* his parliamentarians and party members spent most of their time with fighting each other in public and spoiling the political mores still further. For the record: he was not killed by a fanatical Muslim, but by an extreme left wing animal liberation activist. After last elections in November 2006 they disappeared in the void. A centre-left coalition government, including the Christian Democrat Party, I (CDA), the Labour Party (PvdA) and the Christian Union (CU), is sworn in. Right wing leader Wilders got 9 seats. He seems very successful in his anti-Muslim rhetoric. Wilders is a defector of the right wing liberal party VVD and a soul mate of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, although he doesn’t share her touch of civilization.

The Muslim community in Europe is finding its place. Following the path of earlier immigrant groups. Muslim in Europe are putting down roots and becoming socially, politically and organizationally engaged. The community is becoming more visible and making headway in its effort to move into the mainstream. We can see it in rising number of mosques, Islamic centers and schools in every part of the country. We can see it in the ranks of medicine, engineering and academia. Recent studies proved that already one fourth of young Muslims of the second and third generation follow successfully an academic education.

¹ Jack Goody; Islam in Europe

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Celebrations during Ramadan across the country are a place to be for local and national politicians and scientists. When some youth of Muslim migrant origin are overrepresented in crime statistics or in school failure, their score does not differ from earlier immigration histories in the Netherlands or abroad. They are only overrepresented in the bonfire of current Dutch political populism.

Despite growths and significant progress we, Muslims, are faced with a variety of challenges as we try to find our path in mainstream of the society. The general public still has little understanding of the teaching in practice of Islam. As it struggles for acceptance and understanding, the Dutch Muslim community still faces those who question their status and view them with distrust. For many, Muslims remain 'the other'-the outsider, the enemy, the threat.

Fostering a better understanding of Islam is not simply a challenge for Muslims, but a challenge for all Dutch citizens. Islam, after all, can no longer be considered a non-Western religion as Muslims are no longer 'them.' Muslims are 'us'. The Muslim community is here to stay- their future is in the Netherlands, in Europe.

Islam in the Netherlands has a bad image. Partly because of the populism, partly because of the envy of some Muslims to try to keep up a parallel society, partly because of the mismanagement on all sides to fight radicalization. We need a new generation of Muslim leaders who dare to find new ways, ways that differ from the one of the Islamic establishment. We do not bask in our Islamic background, but we occupy ourselves with our future in the Netherlands. To start with: the Netherlands is our country with all its challenges.

Of course, religion is important to us, but not religion pure, but in the experience of our religious practice in a secular, read democratic context. This means on the one hand a large interest in the social needs of our community and on the other hand the challenge of our Dutch citizenship. We want to be Muslim within and as a part of the Dutch existing order. We do not want to be a pathetic minority at the sideline, which cherishes its minority role. Nothing makes one more indolent than a self chosen role as a victim of society. In other words, we want to be part of the mainstream of our society, with all the consequences it brings.

It sounds great, but with such an attitude one has to live up to the expectations. One has to take risks. One has to invest in his networks inside Dutch society, to build up trust. Therefore a policy of open doors and open windows is needed. One has to dare to criticize when necessary, including your own people. One has to train his people to trust democracy, to invest in the self purifying ability of Islam. One has to be open for criticism. Never lie to the press, be open for the media is part of the game. Sometimes Muslims accuse you to foul one's own nest when you criticize their attitude. Be it. If Muslims take their religion seriously, they'll have to become active citizens. That means that they have start to think as individuals, taking their own responsibilities. Answering questions with what is written in the Qur'an doesn't serve our needs today. Try to start questioning what the Prophet would have done when he lived in our days...Maybe that is a start.

Multiculturalism is failing to bring communities together. But political and economic integration, citizenship and education could tackle the increasing climate of unrest. In some parts of big cities in the Netherlands is a total lack of contact between the communities. Citizenship is more useful than chasing ideas of identity, or concepts of 'Dutchness'. Citizenship is much more a contractual type of relationship between people.

To be active citizens we have to learn new skills and build our capacity to achieve that. How do we develop a sense of citizenship that hold all of us together? What are the common values that need to be promoted? How do we ensure that particularly black and minority ethnic people, and also disadvantaged white section communities are integrated into the institutions? How do people actually relate to each other on the street, in the schools, in the neighbourhoods? Let us be quit clear: in our big cities more than half of our school population has a migrant background. Who is integrating in what?

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

To prepare answers to this and other questions we established in Amsterdam the Marhaba foundation. Marhaba will support mainstreaming process of Muslims. We will support the community leaders of tomorrow. Our focus is local and national in same time. In the local context, it is about getting people more involved in working together to a common purpose that means working across the communities rather than just within them. We build bridges between different communities. We will also find out what is going on in the rest of Europe and the rest of the world. We try to pool together these positive experiences. We think we can also learn a lot from the countries of origin.

The politicians, government and local agencies will have to invest in young leadership.

I wanted to remind the Europeans that, whatever the problems are with Islam, they were not only to be seen as attached to the 'backward' other. Islam has played a significant role in Europe since its advent in Spain and the Mediterranean in the eighth century, followed by its advance into Eastern Europe in the fourteenth century and its movement in to the northern steppes soon afterwards. Today, all western nations include literally millions of Muslims. To dump down potential conflict we need to understand something of the past and present of this religion, as well as of its politico-religious agenda. We need to suspend our disbelief, whether in Islam or in religions generally, in order to be able to assess the aims and implications of this highly successful worldwide creed and to treat its practitioners as one of the Peoples of the Book as well as of European itself.²

² Jack Goody; Islam in Europe