

## What it means to be an immigration country

*By Tamar Jacoby*

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In Europe as in the United States, no matter what other questions are dominating the political debate, immigration is never far behind – among the two or three underlying issues these nations can never quite put out of mind.

This is a relatively new development in Europe. As recently as ten to 15 years ago, few European states recognized they were "immigration countries," and there was little thoughtful discussion about how to regulate flows or integrate newcomers. This has changed dramatically in the past decade, in Germany and throughout Europe. The attacks of 9/11, the 2004 murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the 2005 Paris riots, and the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, among other shocks, have jumpstarted a robust debate – sometimes thoughtful, often heated, sometimes just so much incendiary shouting – about what the problem is and how to handle it. In the era of the 24-hour news cycle, ten years strike many as an eternity, and many feel this is already a tired conversation. But in matters of migration and demography, ten years is no-thing, and in fact Europe is just beginning to grapple with its immigration problem.

Even for countries on the right track, there's a long road ahead. The world's quintessential immigration country, the United States, tells us something about how long. After hundreds of years of mass immigration, the US is still struggling with the issue and ever redefining its approach. Just pick up an American newspaper for the latest round of policy debate. And that debate is only the tip of the iceberg. As a comparison between Europe and the US makes clear, how a nation handles immigration is not something decided mainly by government policies. American culture and national identity are far more important than law in helping newcomers integrate into the fabric of society. The US's success as a nation of immigrants is rooted in deep-seated values and attitudes: the way America separates church and state, its emphasis on the rights of individuals rather than communities, its historically fluid social structure, its relatively unregulated labor markets, and more. Together, they add up to the American way of immigration – an approach centuries in the making and, like a secret recipe, hard to replicate.

Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic often assume these cultural differences are destiny – that the US is by nature suited to integrating immigrants, while Europe is not and will never be. This is a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. America doesn't have all the answers for Europe, on this or any issue. Europe is different and proud of its values - shaped by a different history, a different definition of nationality, a different attitude toward community. And it would be a mistake in this, as any other realm, for Europe to blindly imitate US ways. But that does not mean that Germany and other European countries cannot become successful nations of immigrants.

What the US experience teaches first and foremost: just how deep a transformation this requires. It is not something to be accomplished in a year or two – it could take a generation or longer. It will not be solved by language classes and new naturalization laws – important as they are. More government funding is not the answer, certainly not the only answer, even if large amounts of money were available. Nor is this merely a matter of tolerance – what is needed from receiving countries goes far beyond tolerance. Becoming an immigration country is a profound historical shift. And Germany is just beginning down the path – just recognizing as a nation that it must go that way.

On immigration as on all topics, both Europe and the US can learn from each other. In the matter of integration, the best metaphor for their different strengths is two people struggling to sing a song, one in command of the lyrics but unable to carry a tune, the other forgetful of the words but bursting with the music. Where Germany has excelled in recent years: developing programs to help those with migration backgrounds adjust to life in Europe – language classes, civics instruction, job training and retraining, tutoring, mentoring, help in accessing social services, and more. The US provides virtually none of this kind of help and should learn from Germany, where both the public and private sectors are generating programs and helping to foot the bill. Where the US is ahead is in its vision of national identity.

The American way of immigration bears little if any resemblance to the much maligned stereotype of a melting pot that robs newcomers of the culture and loyalties they bring with them from their home countries. On the contrary, the United States that welcomes immigrants is universalist in its values – at its core are the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment – yet still leaves plenty of room for ethnic difference and for most of the content of most religions. Though unapologetic about what it stands for, it is still open and inclusive. It insists on a common language and adherence to a common set of political ideas, yet in all other realms grants newcomers the freedom to live as they like. America has not always lived up to this vision – far from it. But the ideal has endured and if anything grown stronger with time.

At the heart of the vision is an idea about citizenship: all citizens are equal, and (in theory, if not practice today) citizenship is open to anyone. This belief does not exist in a vacuum: it wouldn't work nearly as well divorced from a free-market economy and fluid social order that permit immigrants to work (mingling with the native-born as co-workers) and move up the social ladder. But the net result is unique in the world: a place where people can be different – deeply different - and yet belong. A place where a strange – looking foreigner with an alien faith can become a full-fledged member of society – an unquestioned American.

Can Germany and other European countries develop this kind of identity? Can they shift what they're aiming for from diversity to inclusion? Can they move beyond tolerance – important as it is – to offer genuine membership? Can they free their economies to allow most newcomers to work, understanding that the workplace is an essential crucible of immigration? This cannot be a matter of imitating America – even the suggestion would kill the effort - but, rather, borrowing the spirit of the American way of immigration to craft something truly German. This and no less than this is the challenge Germany and the rest of Europe face in becoming successful immigration countries.

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