

Position paper

ON THE INTEGRATION TERMINOLOGY

The term “integration” often crops up in debates about refugees and migration. What is meant by “integration” is often not explained further. Instead, “integration” is often used as a [political ‘dog whistle’ term](#) to demand desirable behavior from [migrantized people](#). In the following text, we explain why we reject this concept and what counter-proposal we advocate.

What is the prevailing understanding of “integration” in politics and reporting?

When people talk about “integration”, it is often about what migrantized people should do (e.g. learn German, work). People who are assumed to be “culturally” different are expected to adapt to the [dominant society](#). According to this understanding, migrantized people therefore have an “obligation to contribute”. If they (supposedly) fail to fulfill this obligation, it is referred to as a “failed integration” or as a “refusal to integrate”.

Why do we reject this idea of “integration”?

This understanding of “integration” has many points of criticism:

- Under this terminology, migrantized people are portrayed as “others” in a supposedly homogeneous society. In reality, however, our society is by no means homogeneous. When talking about a “we”, the question arises immediately of who this “we” actually is. Similarly, the “people to be integrated” are in no way a homogeneous group
- In a democratic society characterized by many different lifestyles, it is questionable whether there can be a system of values which goes beyond the Basic Law that can be binding for all people.

- Calls for integration also ignore social structures, which leads to the result that opportunities to participate in society are distributed extremely unequally. Migrantized people in particular experience structural exclusion and racism. Demands from migrant struggles for social and political rights were and are made invisible in the integration discourse. Instead of meeting the demands for structural access to political and social rights (e.g. the right to education), integration is treated as a prerequisite for continued residence or access to individual services (e.g. requiring certain language skills for residence permits), without simultaneously creating access for all. This shift as part of the integration discourse and policy hinders the development of a more just society.
- There can be no comprehensive “integration” into society as such, as society consists of various sub-areas (e.g. work, health, housing), into which all people (not just people who have immigrated to Germany) are involved differently or from which they are excluded to varying degrees due to privilege, resources, relationships, social roles, etc

Furthermore, we reject the above notion of “integration” because it promotes “[othering](#)” - in other words, it creates a contrast between an “us” and “the others”. This contrast is often based on the (supposed) culture of the people ([culturalization](#)) and often goes hand in hand with a disparaging mindset towards “the other”. In addition, the way the word “integration” is often used is an expression of entrenched power relations in society: a group that has many privileges and a powerful position in society presumes to evaluate the lifestyle of people with fewer privileges. It is noticeable that in this context calls for “integration” do not subside, even if the people concerned have, for example, ‘successfully’ “integrated” into various areas of society (such as work or housing). In other words: Those who formulate integration requirements always claim a powerful position for themselves in society. This constructs a superiority of certain people, which reproduces [neocolonial](#) structures.

Should we avoid the word “integration” then?

There are good arguments for avoiding the word “integration”. The term is highly ideologically charged and therefore often represents a political ‘dog whistle’ term. As a result, instead of contributing to peaceful coexistence, it tends to foster division.

Instead of talking about “integration”, we should rather focus on the opportunities for individuals to participate in society. The aim of participation is to ensure equal economic, legal, social, and political participation of all people in all important areas of social life. This is intended to create equal opportunities and at the same time counteract discrimination and exclusion. In contrast to the term “integration”, “participation” refers to the fact that the opportunity to participate in society is particularly dependent on structural conditions. The word participation is also not so normatively charged, i.e. it does not judge the behavior of people as right or wrong. When we talk about refugees who have only recently arrived in Germany, we also use the terms “arrival” and “having arrived”. These refer to people’s feeling of being able to participate in different areas of society.

In some situations, however, it is unavoidable to use the term “integration”. In such instances, we try not to reproduce the term without reflection, but question it critically:

- The term is used in current legislation and case law. When we talk about laws or judgments/decisions by courts that deal with “integration” or “integration services”, we have to reproduce these terms to some extent. In legal cases, the term “integration” is often associated with positive legal determinations for migrantized people. In counseling situations in particular, however, we try to handle the term sensitively, as it is hurtful for migrantized people to be constantly confronted with societal expectations that make them feel inferior and that they do not really belong..
- Particularly when dealing with people who create an atmosphere against migrantized people, it can be helpful to remember that the term “integration” is not sociologically related to migrantized people, but describes [processes that affect society as a whole](#).

Conclusion: What do we stand for?

We would like to avoid using the term integration as often as possible and classify it critically

if we cannot avoid using it. However, from our perspective, avoiding a term alone is not enough. The structures and assumptions underlying the term must be questioned and changed in order to achieve real change.

Instead of an integration policy for migrantized people, we demand equal access to social and political rights for all citizens in Germany. Participation must become a reality for everyone.

We see the guarantee of participation as a task for society as a whole, which must be implemented jointly by the state and all the people who live in it.

It is the task of the state to create a legal framework that enables equal participation in society for all people - including those who have not lived in Germany for very long. In our view, the state is not sufficiently fulfilling this task, as can be seen, for example, from the fact that many refugees are deliberately hindered in their participation in society (e.g. through work bans or special laws such as the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act).

At the same time, the coexistence of people requires a process of adaptation and change for all those involved. In terms of migration, this process must include both new arrivals and people who have been living in a country for some time. The dominant society must therefore also make its contribution to the participation of all people living in a country, e.g. by creating structural and organizational access for newly arrived people. Members of the dominant society must also reflect on their own privileges and relinquish some of them so that all people have the same opportunity to participate in society.

If coexistence is shaped in this way, we believe that society as a whole will benefit.

Literaturempfehlungen

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