

## ... And if the stranger quotes Brecht?

The effect of social art on tensions in the context of migration

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*Contribution to the ad hoc group "Social (dis)tension and art: artistic-creative practices in the migration society".*

"Art is not a mirror that stands up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it." Bertolt Brecht

### Introduction

In addition to social integration, the official integration policy strategy of the Federal Government in Germany regards wage employment and the (German) language as central determinants of integration. Their importance is expressed in numerous support programmes, in sanctions imposed for non-compliance - and not least in the public discourse. The causal link between the provision of benefits and the securing of residence status is now increasingly anchored in German integration policy, especially since the migration movements of 2015, after countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia have already been aligning themselves with it for some time. Hannes Schammann (2019) cites the term 'meritocratic turn' for this. Similar to the narrative of the "lazy unemployed", <sup>1</sup>media coverage of the issues of flight and migration is mostly negative to neutral, or at least deficit-oriented (Schammann 2019, p. 49), and often focuses on language and labour. In an intersectional perspective, discrimination against people with specific combinations of characteristics concerning origin, gender, appearance and language becomes visible. The public debate, which is often conducted in an Othering rhetoric, inevitably results in social tensions.

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<sup>1</sup> Which was significantly shaped by the discourse on the Hartz IV reform (see also: Abbenhardt 2019).

Based on the assumption of theatre as a universal means of communication and expression in which social categories such as origin, gender or appearance do not play a role, the project format "JobAct Sprachkultur" addresses the three thematic areas of the Federal Government's integration policy strategy by combining language training, labour market integration and classical German theatre. Studies of the two Erasmus+ projects *JobAct Europe* and *ARTE*,<sup>2</sup> as well as the subsequent practical project *JobAct Sprachkultur*, showed that the social art approach used there has the potential to counteract these tensions and even reduce them in part.

In the following, the media portrayal of refugees and migrants, the role of work and language in the context of integration policy and the resulting social tensions are examined in more detail. In the second part of the article, the potentials of the non-formal educational principle of *social art* to reduce tensions are examined.

## Migration as a field of tension in the public debate

According to Marlis Prinzing et al. (2018, p. 13), the topics of flight and migration are currently the focus of ethical reflection in the media. Against the backdrop of the overly complex topics of globalization and digitalization, as well as rising populist tendencies worldwide and the phenomenon of "fake news", the authors state that the media landscape has a responsibility for differentiated, responsible, and ethical reflection in order to build bridges in discourse and counteract social rifts (Prinzing et al. 2018, p. 11). This journalistic responsibility is already being fulfilled to a large extent, which is reflected in empathetic reporting on the topics of flight and migration, although restraint is also noticeable in editorial departments and there is only a hesitant anchoring in "journalism concepts geared towards integration" (Prinzing et al. 2018, p. 12). Basically, integration is described as one of the most important tasks of journalistic mass media, as they have the mandate in a democracy to "contribute to the social cohesion of society" and to depict diversity. Media reports co-construct social realities, which also directly influences "the reality of life of refugees, immigrants, the excluded and disadvantaged" (Prinzing et al. 2018, p. 14).

A study by Heinz Bonfadelli in 2007, based on a sample of 3,000 press articles, showed that in Germany and Switzerland "foreigners" are mostly reported on in problematizing contexts with negative assessments and with terms such as "flood", "glut" or "avalanche" (Bonfadelli 2007, cited in Wentzel 2012, p. 114). This finding is confirmed by an analysis of the refugee discourse in 2015/16 by Margarete Jäger and Regina Wamper (2017), who can even identify this wording in the predominantly positive reporting of the taz<sup>3</sup>.

This is in line with Schammann's (2019, p. 49) finding of a predominantly deficit-oriented integration policy in Germany until 2015, which made a change of perspective on the potential of refugees almost impossible due to the "omnipresent discourse of deficit orientation". For the period after 2015, Jäger and Wamper (2017) find a clear tendency of reporting from problematizing the situation of refugees to problematizing the situation for host countries, mainly due to a lack of integration capacity of refugees. The continuing topicality of the deficit orientation can be confirmed by a superficial review of article headlines in the German popular medium with the highest circulation, Bild-Zeitung. The following article

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the two EU projects "JobAct Europe - Social Inclusion by Social Arts" (duration 2017- 2019) and "ARTE - The Art of Employability" (duration 2019-2021), which the authors of this article accompanied scientifically, see: [www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/en/Projekte/Abgeschlossen/JobActEurope.html](http://www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/en/Projekte/Abgeschlossen/JobActEurope.html); [www.projektfabrik.org/index.php/jobact-europe.html](http://www.projektfabrik.org/index.php/jobact-europe.html); [www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/de/Projekte/ARTE.html](http://www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/de/Projekte/ARTE.html) and [www.die-schule.org/europa/](http://www.die-schule.org/europa/). In both projects, the labour market integration of vulnerable groups of people was/is the subject of research, in particular people who want to learn the German language and people with a history of flight or migration.

<sup>3</sup> The authors include in their analysis a total of about 600 articles from print media of different political currents: taz, FAZ, SZ and BILD.

headlines can be found on the topics of wage labour and language: "Only one in 103 children speaks German at home. Rector from Neukölln: We are Arabized" (BILD-Zeitung 2018a), "Majority of migrants are not willing to integrate" (BILD-Zeitung 2019a), "Every second unemployed person has a migration background" (BILD-Zeitung 2019b) and "After 1300 lessons. 4 out of 5 refugees fail German test" (BILD-Zeitung 2018b).

Most of the time, these headlines allude to an alleged lack of will with regard to integration, language acquisition or job search, or specifically assert this connection. With regard to the social impact of such reporting, Dirk Wentzel (2012, p. 108) refers to studies by Hajo G. Boomgaarden and Rens Vliegenhart (2007; 2009), who were able to show that "the quantity and also the form of (negative) reporting on the topic of migration increased the popularity of right-wing populist parties". The right-wing populist party AfD also polarizes to a large extent with the topics of migration and flight. The increase in the number of criminal and violent offences with a right-wing extremist background from 2015 onwards, which has remained constantly high ever since, and which appears to be underreported in the media discourse compared to criminal offences (/ potentials) committed by refugees, could also serve as an indication (Federal Statistical Office 2021).

## The importance of language and wage employment in the context of integration policy

According to the Federal Government's integration policy strategy, mastering the national language<sup>4</sup> and taking up paid employment are key integration benchmarks. This is reflected in the three central integration fields of "language teaching", "integration into training, work and (higher) education" and "social integration" (Bundesregierung 2019, p. 5). This is based on the idea that integration is an "offer, but also an obligation to make one's own efforts" (Bundesregierung 2019, p. 5). In practice, this includes both compulsory measures such as participation in an integration course with around 700 teaching units for new immigrants whose German language skills have been assessed as insufficient by the foreigners authority, as well as voluntary offers (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2018). Consequently, officially verifiable achievements must be made for official successful integration.

While this has been the case for some time in countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, the significance of the merit principle in the debate on migration is also growing in Germany, especially but not only since the migration movements of 2015. Schammann (2019, p. 44) calls this the *meritocratic turn*, which makes "work and performance [...] appear as new structural principles". If required performances are not met, sanctions can be considered. In the case of non-compliance with the aforementioned obligation to attend integration courses, this can, for example, lead to the refusal of a residence permit according to Section 44a (3) of the Residence Act (Schammann 2019, p. 48). Due to the Integration Act of 2016, moreover, well-educated refugees who earn higher wages and integrate more quickly into the labour market have better chances of obtaining a permanent residence title, according to which "de facto [...] labour market needs take precedence over humanitarian considerations" (Christ 2019, p. 5).

According to Utz Maas (2016, p. 14), the importance of language is also reflected in the fact that in German society "[...] even the simplest everyday processes are coded symbolically (in writing or written language)". Accordingly, everyday situations can be satisfactorily managed with the help of the available linguistic knowledge, whereas situations in which a (work-) technical diction or an official diction is required cannot be managed by the same people.

Although discrimination against, and racism towards, people with a history of migration and/or flight are sufficiently well known on numerous levels, they become even more explicit when viewed from an

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<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, a language more commonly used in professional contexts, such as English.

intersectional perspective, particularly in relation to language and wage labour. Margarete Stokowski (2019), for example, points out that multilingualism in particular is socially valued differently, depending on further categories such as gender, appearance, religious/cultural background and sexual orientation. In particular, mother tongues such as Arabic, Polish or Turkish would often not be mentioned by postmigrant adults in their CVs, as they would not be perceived as a competence based on societal attributions. If one follows Stokowski's argumentation, the same language skills are positively evaluated, for example, in a heterosexual, white person with a higher level of education. The politically much-invoked pluralism in Germany as well as multilingualism thus do not seem to be perceived positively by people who have a migration and/or refugee background, since they are not encountered positively. They are only connoted positively by certain people with certain characteristics and the "right" language. Mithu Sanyal (2019, p. 111) notes that also in education, and especially in schools, migration history would be "perceived as a deficit, and in teaching [...] emphasis would be placed on deficit elimination, such as learning German", instead of perceiving children's bi- or multilingualism as a resource. With regard to wage labour, racism as an obstacle to the integration of refugees into the labour market is a well-known problem that has received little attention to date (Huke 2020), which is also reinforced by the effects of intersectionality.

On the basis of the above, a high significance of wage work and language in the context of integration policy can undoubtedly be identified. However, it must be noted that this does not reflect the personal-subjective importance for the persons concerned, but above all the relevance with regard to integration into German social security systems. To what extent this integration can then be equated with actual social integration and reflects the needs as well as the reality of life of those affected remains open.

### Interim conclusion on the significance of wage labour and language in the context of integration policy

What has been said so far makes it clear that the importance of wage labour and language is high. On the one hand, it is required by the official authorities, and on the other hand, it is made more difficult by the media.

discourses as a yardstick for assessing the ability and willingness to integrate: The content of the Federal Government's integration policy strategy with its three thematic fields of language, work/education and social integration also creates a simultaneous significance for people with a history of flight/migration in that fulfilment is binding in terms of residence status.

Tension, which describes a state of friction as well as two poles between which space for tension arises, can be identified on several levels in the migration context. First and foremost, it is conceivable that the expectations and demands described in the article lead to internal, personal tensions among people with a refugee/migration history. On the one hand, this is due to the prejudices and stereotypes they are often confronted with, which are reproduced by the media coverage described above, which shows migrants a devaluing image of themselves and the (partly unfulfillable) expectations of parts of society, and on the other hand, due to everyday racism, which leads to discrimination in numerous areas of life (for example, work, housing, education). On the other hand, tensions arise due to sanctions, which can be of an existential nature, e.g. if they concern the residence status. The emphasis on the performance principle, which, as Simone Christ (2019, p. 5) also concludes, in fact leads to the priority consideration of the needs of the labour market over "humanitarian considerations", as well as the definition of a successful person based on his or her professional successes, are anchored in the capitalist narrative and come into play here. The fact that at the same time access to the labour market for refugees is reduced for legal as well as internal labour market reasons and as a result of disadvantages further reinforces this tension.

In addition to internal tensions, external tensions also arise at the societal level, which are expressed in fears and prejudices against people with a history of flight/migration as well as through racially

motivated criminal and violent acts. Structural and institutionalised racism also leads to the production and reproduction of tensions.

In summary, one of the main causes of the tensions can be seen in the barriers between the poles of people with and without migration and refugee histories, which are promoted by the media through the prejudiced shaping of images of the foreign and the self. Offers to change negative images of the foreign and the self often require the acquisition of the national language and the taking up of paid employment - demands that are almost impossible to meet for many refugees for structural, personal, family or other reasons. Against this background, an approach is considered below that not only offers assistance in meeting these demands, but can also help to reduce further tensions and promote a rapprochement between the aforementioned poles.

## Tension reduction through the educational principle of social art?

The use of artistic principles in the described space of tension builds on each other and addresses several of the demands and problems described: Language acquisition, stereotypes, distorted foreign and self-images. Countering the tensions and prejudices of the outside world requires not only language skills on the part of the refugees, but also a solid sense of self (value) that can stand up to negative images of others. Often, however, resilience is rather limited due to the refugee experience. Approaches for target groups affected by this should therefore include empowerment elements that make the individuals' strengths visible to themselves and others and thus promote preconditions for language acquisition. In combination with the public visibility of artistic approaches, these can ultimately contribute to the reduction of prejudices.

Social art, which is used here, is based on the Beuysian approach of an expanded concept of art, but goes beyond this in its dialogical claim. The focus is no longer on a physical work, but on the artistic process of its creation (Krenn 2016). It enables the processing of unpleasant or problematic situations through a

"slow indirect approach to topics and experiences" (Kechaja 2017, p. 195) and their (re)evaluation and processing. Essential elements are that art is transferred from the usual top-down approach into a participatory framework in a multi-professional cooperation of actors from the fields of art/culture, education and social work (Heinrich 2016).

Artistic approaches in the field of empowerment are based on the assumption that art is a universal level in which cross-linguistic understanding and exchange between the target group and its environment is possible. This is another reason why artistic approaches are a field of encounter at eye level, between trainers and participants as well as between the participants themselves. Linguistic deficits can be compensated through para-linguistic and physical forms of expression and the participants experience themselves and the others in a safe space of shared creativity. Artistic work with language, for example through singing or theatre, gives language acquisition a shared goal and creates a cooperative space for shared learning. Performative methods in particular offer participants the opportunity to try out different roles. In this way, they can perceive themselves as other people, reflect on behavioural patterns and broaden their horizons. Learning barriers can be broken down through the playful elements, and linking the learning situation with physical training leads to better consolidation of the content. Artistic work already creates many opportunities for a sense of achievement in the performative development phase, which can have a motivating effect and strengthen self-esteem. The use of cultural assets from the host country or the linking of cultures can lay the foundation for cultural understanding. Finally, the public performance of the developed contents creates an opportunity to break down prejudices among the audience and a wider circle of recipients through the involvement of the press and social media.

Tension is an essential principle of social art. Only through tension can the energy arise that is necessary for a process of social transformation. The goal should therefore not primarily be a reduction of tension, but rather a channelling; the reduction of negative, destructive tension and the building up of positive, constructive tension, in the sense of a provocation to change thought patterns, from which intercultural encounter can arise.

## Social art in the practical example JobAct language culture

In the case study JobAct Language Culture considered here, the combination of social art and language training is implemented in the field of theatre work. A mixed-age and mixed-gender group of up to 30 participants with different levels of language competence and from different countries of origin develop a play ready for the stage over a period of 6 months. Parallel to this, language lessons take place, with the play acting as a unifying element. Job coaching is also part of the concept, which specialises in the group of unemployed migrants and refugees. During three days of theatre training, one day of language training and one day of costume and set design or individual job coaching, the participants have the opportunity to find their personal strengths and work with them. Immediately after the performance of the play, a three-month work placement follows, in which the key competences built up are consolidated and applied. Accompanying this, the theatre and language training continues one day a week in order to maintain motivation and to solve any problems that may arise in the group, i.e. to maintain a balance of tensions.

On the level of internal effects on the participants, according to trainers, a clear development of language skills and biographical goals or an expansion of the perception of career options can be observed after only a short time. The diversity of the group contributes to pull effects - weaker participants and participants with access barriers to artistic methods benefit from the motivation of the others and the cooperation in the team. The length of the project, 8 months, is conducive to a sustainable build-up of competencies; at the same time, this time span is a challenge for the trainers to maintain the tension curve and to counteract a drop in motivation after the initial enthusiasm. The effectiveness of the method is not only highly dependent on the trainers for this reason, but also because a great deal of tact, empathy and intuition is required to build up and maintain the appropriate level of tension in a heterogeneous group. It should also be noted that not all learning barriers can be overcome - for example, the empowerment approach shows a positive effect on the well-being of people with weak learning routines, severe traumatising or unspecified barriers, but in a small percentage there is hardly any improvement in the ability to express themselves in the national language. In addition, the follow-up perspective is essential: where, despite all efforts, no transition to an internship can be realised, a regression into old routines can be observed, and the effects of the training cannot be perpetuated. At this point, the interdependence between the internal and external levels becomes apparent.

On the external level, people can be located in the context of the project who work with the participants, who encounter them in a combination of parallel art projects, the audience of the performances (real and virtual) as well as the recipients of the accompanying reporting in regional and social media. Depending on the immediate proximity to the participants, effects of tension reduction can be observed here with decreasing intensity through changes in the images of others and of oneself. An essential point here is the cultural rapprochement through the processing of cultural goods of the host country: Through the performance of German classical plays, the "foreigners" show a willingness to integrate, initiative and language competence at the same time, whereby essential stereotypes are simply no longer tenable. It should be noted, however, that despite efforts at broad accompanying public relations work, the effect only reaches a limited group of people with self-selection effects, and groups of people with stronger stereotypes may not be reached.

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## Conclusion

Social art as an educational principle and its application in the JobAct Sprachkultur practical project cover all three goals of the Federal Government's integration policy strategy: Work/training, language teaching and social integration through cultural rapprochement. In social art, the significance of classical categories such as origin, educational level, religious background, Gender and appearance are dissolved; in the common game every person is equal. Here also exists potential to reduce tensions among themselves. Performative play provides a space for expression beyond language, which is usually not given in the everyday life of language-based German society. Within the framework of JobAct Sprachkultur, the most well-known stereotypes in the context of integration are addressed through the elements of language training, job coaching/labour market integration and classical German theatre. Ideally, after participation in the project, language skills are strengthened, a job or internship is found, access to social contacts as well as an insight into cultural aspects is created. Through the acquisition of these competences, the self-confidence of the participants is usually strengthened, so that a reduction of internal, personal tensions takes place in order to confront stereotypes in an empowered way or not to integrate them into their self-image. A positive effect can also be observed with regard to tensions in society as a whole, since the project makes it possible to establish contacts with one another and to refute prejudices. Also the presence on stage usually changes the self-image as well as the external image of the participants. In summary, it can be said that the format presented offers the opportunity to promote and integrate participants and to reduce tensions on several levels. The approach also offers a real perspective beyond the government's integration policy goals: in social art, everyone can be who they are, get to know themselves better, identify their own abilities and weaknesses, find access to art and national culture, and develop strength from within themselves. These skills are not explicitly emphasized in the official strategy of the government, but they are undoubtedly of high personal value.

However, it remains questionable to what extent prejudices in society as a whole can actually be reduced if structural and institutionalised racism still exists, employment and integration opportunities are made more difficult by prejudices, stereotypes are reproduced in the media and are persistently anchored in parts of the population. It therefore seems one-sided and only conditionally promising to see the responsibility for integration exclusively on the side of the newcomers. From this point of view, the approach of social art must be viewed critically, since it too relies much more on the effect on refugees than on natives, empowers the former, but leaves them - apart from providing a real and virtual stage for self-presentation as cultural workers and future employees - with the responsibility for changing negative images of others. Another aspect is that the achievement principle holds few answers for those who cannot achieve much for a variety of reasons such as illness/disability, poverty or the racism they face. For a different approach in the future, it would be desirable if multilingualism were valued as a resource rather than a disadvantage, irrespective of categories such as a person's appearance, gender or origin. The notions of "successful" integration could also be reconsidered and expanded. For the greatest integration efforts cannot succeed if the following words of Brecht still hold true:

*"The passport is the noblest part  
of a human being. It does not  
come about in such a simple way  
as a human being. A human being  
can come into being anywhere,  
in the most frivolous way  
and for no sensible reason,*

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*but a passport never. For  
this it is also recognized, if it  
is good,  
while a man can be as good as  
he is and still not be  
recognized."*

Bertolt Brecht, Refugee Talks 1940/41

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