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SWISS PLURALISM IN CRISIS? REFLECTIONS ON THE MINARET CONTROVERSY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

In a referendum in November 2009, a constitutional amendment to ban the construction of new minarets in Switzerland surprisingly passed by a majority of 57.5% of voters. The referendum was initiated by a group of right-wing politicians from the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Federal Democratic Union (EDU). The campaign prior to the referendum blatantly drew on a widespread discomfort among voters about "the other": Minarets were depicted as "spearheads" of Islam which symbolize the claim to power that many assume lies behind religious-political Islam. Banning minarets is seen as a means to stop this threat. The underlying politics based on an understanding of "us" versus "the other", aims at excluding the other from the imagined community.

In the first part of our presentation we will analyze the minaret controversy and demonstrate how the other – here the Muslim community – was increasingly framed along ethnic and gender lines. We will also show how these constructions influence the predominant discourse on integration.

It is undeniable that questions of integration in a plural society such as Switzerland need to be addressed. We consider equal distribution of social positions and resources among the different social groups and strata as crucial criteria for integration. Systematic differences for example between immigrants and Swiss nationals in terms of labor market participation, professional position, educational achievement, income and quality of living conditions indicate difficulties in integration. Against this backdrop, social work needs not only to (inter-)act, but also to position itself. Thus, in the second part of our presentation, we will explore the usefulness of two different approaches to professional disposition: a) awareness of structures of dominance (Dominanzsensibilität) and b) a transcultural reflexive attitude.

The first approach highlights the need for social workers to be aware that their clientele's circumstances are structured by power relations and an unequal distribution of power and resources. A professional disposition in this line enables them to recognize the experiences and *habitus* of their clientele as well as their own positions and actions as structured by hierarchies (e.g. Mecheril 2010).

The second approach enables social workers to transcend homogenous understandings of cultures grounded on ethnicity and intercultural exclusion. A reflexive professional disposition along these lines perceives cultures as interpenetrated and interconverted (e.g. Welsch 1997). Differences are thus acknowledged without reinforcing the current representations of the „other“.

References

Mecheril, Paul et al. 2010: *Migrationspädagogik*, Beltz Verlag: Weinheim. **Welsch, Wolfgang** 1997: Transkulturalität. Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen. In: Schneider, Irmela; Thomsen, Christian W. (ed.): *Hybridkultur. Medien Netze Künste*. Köln: Wienand, pp. 61–91.