

MICHAEL DUSCHE: IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA AND EUROPE. NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS 2010, 376 S., Rs. 850.

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When Osama bin Laden attacked America, it not only marked the beginning of global terrorism but did two more things. It reinforced Islam, or religion generally for that matter, as an ideological force suitable for filling the vacuum created by Gorbachev and having every capability to challenge the very tenets of Western dominance. Secondly, it revived a dangerous clash of identities. Take for example the recent Swiss referendum on the prohibition of minarets, which clearly signals the primacy of Switzerland's Christian identity – an identity to be safeguarded even at the expense of violating the very core values of democracy and secularism. Such is, by any standard, a politics based on identity.

In his recently released book, Michael Dusche, German philosopher and expert in global justice and international relations, has attempted to trace the origins of identity politics, i. e. the misuse of identity in the context of modern politics, and the reasons for its persistence. The title of the opening chapter of the book is “Europe and The Muslim World – A Brief History of Reciprocal Perceptions”. It deals with the early encounters between Muslims and Latinate Christians in West Asia, Andalusia and the Levant during the time of the Crusades. In this period, demonizing labels were used by Christians and Muslims alike and encounters took different shapes depending on who was ruling whom. This chapter covers the period from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the Reformation era when the erstwhile ideological conflict between Islam and Christianity took a form of forceful collision between the Turkish and the Western armies in Eastern Europe. Quoting from Luther's writings on the Turks, Dusche states: “Unlike his medieval predecessors who took Islam for a Christian heresy – that is a distorted faith but a faith nevertheless – Luther seems to suggest that Islam is no religion at all and that can thus not be countered by preaching true religion but only by force” (44).

The following chapter, “The Global Condition – Modernity and Its Critics”, deals with the emergence of modernity and its effects on identity politics. In this chapter, Dusche tries to trace the roots of identity conflicts and the function they probably play in the modern polity, which is defined by the formation of the nation-state. One hallmark of the modern polity, whether formally democratic or not, is that in such a state the governing elite gains its legitimacy from the bottom as well as from a socially transcendent authority. It is in this context that identity politics attains its significance. Here Dusche discusses two important roles that identity politics plays in the modern polity. First, it helps in the generation of power, often in a demagogical way, for the

ruling elites. Second, it unites and mobilizes the masses against an external enemy. However, in the modern era, as Dusche argues, the imagined enemy does not appear in “an unmediated fashion. Rather [it] is mediated through public discourse, mass media and so on” (49). That is where modernity, which itself is identifiable by huge technological advancements, affects and changes the form identity politics takes in the modern context.

Dusche’s book is a first volume of an extensive project focusing on India, Turkey, the Palestinian Occupied Territories and Israel. In order to provide an empirical access route and in order to highlight the roles of academic elites and intellectuals in the controversy over the identity of the polity of their countries, Dusche has conducted intensive in-depth interviews with the intellectuals and thinkers of the above mentioned countries. Part 3 of the present book, “Intellectual Elites and Normative Orders in India, Israel, Palestine and Turkey”, comprises twenty-one interviews with prominent Indian intellectuals and thinkers like Ashis Nandy, Imtiaz Ahmad and Deepak Mehta – to name a few – most of whom belong to the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. The ultimate aim of these interviews, however, is to understand the degree of acceptance or rejection of the normative orders, which are by the author’s definition systems of rules and norms governing the cooperation of actors in society, from within the circle of intellectuals. The second purpose of the interviews is to assess the degree of the intellectuals’ independence from or participation in the normative formations. As far as India is concerned, the result is quite striking. In India, while the “independent variable freedom of speech / academic freedom ranges comparatively high, the number of intellectuals uttering fundamental criticism of the dominant conception of order is close to zero” (142).

While such particular claims can be doubted, Michael Dusche’s book as a whole has to be looked at from a philosophical and from a political perspective. While reading, one must keep this in mind and always recall these two salient qualities of the author, for they may sometimes appear to overlap, sometimes to be complimentary. Especially due to its interdisciplinary approach, this book enriches ongoing debates about the history of transnational politics.