

Chapter 8

Employment Integration at Any Cost? Germany's 2016 Integration Act and Social Mobility

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses Germany's 2016 Integration Act, specifically the "Flüchtlingsintegrationsmaßnahmen" [Refugee Integration Measures], or abbreviated, the FIM program, as a case study to explore how integration measures affect social mobility of persons seeking protection. The chapter draws on interviews with 28 persons seeking protection (including refugees, otherwise protected, and asylum-seekers) and 10 representatives of non-governmental organizations working in the context of forced migration in Stuttgart and Regensburg, Germany. The collected data speaks to perceptions, challenges, and opportunities of the FIM program, as well as experiences of discrimination. By analyzing this empirical data and situating it in discourse on social mobility, the author shows that employment integration 'at any cost', as exemplified by the FIM program, reinforces social disintegration and ethnic stratification.

INTRODUCTION

Framed around the motto *Fördern und Fordern* [Support and Demand], the German government passed the anticipated, yet contested Integration Act in July 2016. After a two-day cabinet retreat, the law was adopted alongside the Meseberg Declaration on Integration. Excerpts from the declaration reveal the underlying objective of the law: employment integration of persons seeking protection. As stated in the Declaration, employment integration ought to be understood as a two-way process that is guided by "justice for those recognized as refugees and justice for the German people" (German Federal Government, 2016).

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According to the German Federal Ministry of Social and Labor Affairs (2016), the 2016 Integration Act aims to strengthen solidarity through various integration measures that provide persons seeking protection with perspectives for a new start. The law seeks to advance employment integration by amending regulations in vocational training, securing residence titles before and after vocational training, suspending the *Vorrangsprüfung* [Preference Clause] dependent on labor market conditions, and introducing refugees and asylum-seekers to the German labor market through low-threshold precarious work. To facilitate these efforts, several new measures were established, amongst them the *Flüchtlingsintegrationsmaßnahmen* [Refugee Integration Measures] or abbreviated, the FIM program.

The FIM program may be required for asylum-seekers above the age of eighteen who are ‘capable’ of work, unemployed but are receiving social welfare, and are not subjected to compulsory full-time schooling. Participation in the program may be continued if asylum-seekers receive a residence title as refugee or otherwise protected. The decision to be required to participate in the program lies in local authorities. Failure to participate in a required FIM program may result in the loss of social welfare. FIM program participation may take up to a maximum of six months and can include up to thirty hours of labor a week. A major point of contestation has been the compensation for FIM-related labor: FIM program participation is not considered contracted employment, but rather a job opportunity; participants are thus not paid for the labor per se, instead they receive a compounded compensation of eighty cents an hour. The program was set to end in December 2020 (German Federal Ministry of Social and Labor Affairs, 2016).

In this article, I discuss the FIM program as a case study to explore how integration measures affect social mobility of persons seeking protection in Germany. In my analysis, I draw on ethnographic research conducted in Stuttgart and Regensburg during the summer of 2018. This includes semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight persons seeking protection (including refugees, otherwise protected, and asylum-seekers) and ten representatives of non-governmental organizations working in the context of forced migration. The collected data speak to perceptions, challenges, and opportunities of the FIM program, as well as experiences of discrimination. By analyzing this data and situating it in discourse on social mobility, I show that employment integration ‘at any cost’, as exemplified by the FIM program, reinforces social disintegration and ethnic stratification. More specifically, I claim that the FIM program further stratifies the labor market - with persons seeking protection at the bottom of it. This stratification facilitates social disintegration by pushing persons seeking protection into insecure living conditions and limited social mobility. I also contend that this stratification can be conceived of as ethnic stratification. Prior to the introduction of the FIM program, job opportunities for persons seeking protection were compensated proximate to so-called *1 Euro jobs*, same as for German citizens. The threshold for performing such jobs has been the receipt of social welfare. Given this threshold, migration status should be irrelevant in the determination of adequate and equal compensation.

I begin my discussion with an overview of the legal-institutional framework leading up the 2016 Integration Act. I then introduce the case study (FIM program) and outline preliminary assessments thereof. Following this contextual discussion, I present findings from my ethnographic research and situate them in regards to historical patterns of migrant social (im)mobility in Germany. My analysis is guided by perspectives on social disintegration and ethnic stratification. I conclude my exploration of social disintegration and ethnic stratification with a discussion of interculturalism. Here, I interrogate notions of interculturalism as a means of providing solutions and recommendations, and to charter a way forward in Germany’s discourse and politics on integration.

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