‘Parallel Societies’ – A Neologism gone Bad

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Abstract

The German-language neologism ‘Parallelgesellschaften’ (‘parallel societies’) was coined as a sociological term in 1996 to denote purportedly ‘segregated’ immigrant communities, mainly those of Islamic or Turkish backgrounds. According to the common definition, ‘parallel societies’ practice a form of voluntary segregation, are unwilling to integrate themselves into German society and are a danger to the liberal democratic base of the German state. In this context, often ‘danger scenarios’ and ‘friend versus enemy’ dichotomies are presented concerning the various immigrant communities and their relations to the majority society. Many social scientists, politicians and opinion-makers – both of the mainstream and the far right – have found that this neologism can be fitted perfectly into their arguments against an open immigration and integration policy. Oftentimes, they also use the term in order to further their intended backlash against ‘multiculturalism’ and the growing cultural diversity in Germany. This shows the problematic element of such neologisms, being that they often go on to serve as negatively-connotated catch phrases, thus subtly altering the mindsets of those consuming and taking part in the public debate.

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Social scientists often engage in ‘terminology-building’ for the wider political arena. As the product of terminology-building, neologisms are created in order to define seemingly undefined social phenomena. These new terms are often picked up by politicians, journalists and the politically-active –and oftentimes end up in the public debate as ‘sociological’ catch phrases. In doing so, these public figures often adapt or misuse such terms in the public debate in order to further their own particular viewpoints.
Such word games are familiar terrain in Germany. One of the best examples is perhaps the term ‘European leading culture’ (europäische Leitkultur), coined in 1996 by Bassam Tibi, a political scientist at the University of Göttingen in Germany. Tibi created the term in order to dock on to the older traditions of the European Enlightenment. Instead of supporting strong multiculturalism, which, in his eyes, contains problematic elements of cultural relativism, Tibi created his neologism in order to gather terminological support for the liberal republican ideals – primacy of reason, individual human rights and secularism. According to Tibi, this ‘leading culture’ should provide a basis for a society that would embrace cultural pluralism through liberal republicanism, instead of one that would embrace multiculturalism. A society that embraces multiculturalism, as he claimed, is threatened to fall into divisive extremes, all of which would battle one-another for political control on the one level of society or the other.\(^1\)

Of course, the merits of Tibi’s argumentation can be debated, especially since he rather propagates a current “crisis in the multicultural society”.\(^2\) For the task at hand, though, it is more important to look at the political development of Tibi’s neologism per se, namely because it only took a few years until Tibi’s neologism was altered by those opposed to the concepts of both multiculturalism and cultural pluralism – namely the conservative and far right in Germany – in order to serve their own clearly Germanocentric and anti-cultural diversity purposes. In 2000, Tibi’s ‘European leading culture’ was significantly modified by Friedrich Merz, a leading Christian Democrat politician at the time, by transforming it into the ‘German leading culture’ (deutsche Leitkultur). In this sense, Tibi’s neologism quickly left the field of the European Enlightenment and entered into one of German nationalistic arrogance. Although the adaptation and subsequent use of Tibi’s neologism in the form of ‘German leading culture’ was heavily criticised at the time, it has also proceeded to lend support to the conservative right’s calls for a nationalistic policy towards the integration of immigrants and other cultural minorities. In the meantime, the term has also become one widely used in far-right and fascist circles and publications – in order to support their blatantly xenophobic and anti-immigrant arguments.\(^3\)

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2 Ibid. Tibi also utilises the term ‘parallel society’ in order to support his hypothesis of a crisis in today’s society. See: Financial Times Deutschland, 13.08.2004.
Whereas Tibi’s neologism was a term based on musings on the political theory of liberal ideology, the term ‘parallel societies’ began its concrete existence in the German context as a sociological term. In this sense, the latter has a seemingly different mooring in the social sciences. Political theory has not been able to claim objectivity – or even neutrality – for decades, if not centuries. Mainstream sociology, however, still attempts to lay claims to its ability to formulate and provide ‘exact’ science and a value-neutral terminology. Such terminology-building, though, clearly does not take place in a context that is void of the xenophobic resentiments and nationalistic zeitgeist in Germany of late. Instead, these newly-forged sociological terms often provide laypersons in the political sphere – journalists, politicians and the like – with ‘scientific’ language for their fight against cultural plurality and against a migrant-friendly and just society.

Terminology-Building at Work

Wilhelm Heitmeyer, a respected mainstream German social scientist, is credited with coining the term ‘Parallelgesellschaften’ in 1996. He did so in order to describe a scenario in which Islamic fundamentalist groups are said to be gaining power in the Turkish community in Germany, especially among the community’s youth, and that these groups are propagating a form of voluntary cultural segregation from the mainstream German society. He writes that “there is that danger that religious-political groups could form ‘parallel societies’ on the edges of the majority society.” Accordingly, these Islamic fundamentalist ‘parallel societies’ pose a “growing danger” and are causing a “disintegrating society”:

The societal explosive force of the existing, and possibly increasing, acceptance of Islamic fundamentalist perspectives in Germany is difficult to determine. The risks cannot be ignored. When young Turks feel more and more strongly pulled towards Islamic fundamentalist associations, then this provokes the question to the degree in which they have already turned their backs on the Federal Republic [of Germany, W.H.].

In including a danger scenario into the context of the term ‘parallel societies’, Heitmeyer provides a model for its later use as a catch phrase for the mainstream public debate, especially for the conservative and far right.

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Over the course of the next few years, and especially after 11 September 2001, the term was established as such by the political class in Germany. Also in the course of this public debate, social scientists have attempted to scientifically codify a definition of the term ‘parallel societies’ in order to combat its use as a catch phrase – seemingly with little success. At the same time, these social scientists are paradoxically making the term more concrete in its definition, thus solidifying it as a viable and ‘scholarly’ term instead of merely a catch phrase. For example, the political scientist Thomas Meyer produced a concrete ‘scientific’ definition of the term in 2002. Meyer names a number of criteria that a social group must fulfil in order to be considered a ‘parallel society’. These are: “ethnic-cultural or cultural-religious homogeneity; almost complete everyday, civil societal and … economic segregation; almost complete duplication of the institutions of the majority society; formal, voluntary segregation; and segregation in living quarters or social interaction.” For Meyer, the level of voluntary segregation of these cultural minority or religious groups is the determining factor when applying the term ‘parallel society’ to a specific group. It appears as if Meyer proposes some sort of scale that could be used to decide whether a such group does, or does not, constitute a parallel society. In doing so, Meyer discusses the possibility of “incomplete parallel societies”, thus allowing for some leeway in the definition of the term.5

In contrast to Heitmeyer, who in general only wanted to contextualise the Islamic fundamentalist hard core groups as pulling the Turkish communities towards ‘parallel societies’, Meyer interprets the term in a larger context by looking at minority communities on the whole. He names a number of inner-city areas in Germany for which his criteria could apply, such as Berlin-Kreuzberg. He comes to the conclusion that these areas are at least ‘incomplete parallel societies’, and that there is a growing tendency towards the completion of such ‘parallel societies’.6 In this sense, Meyer describes the large immigrant communities in the inner-cities to be per se in danger of becoming ‘parallel societies’ – seemingly in parallel to the more suburban and rural ‘German society’. In doing so, Meyer completely ignores the cultural diversity of the inner-cities and the diversity of and within the Turkish communities themselves. It appears, quite simply, that Meyer ‘scientifically’ applies the negative label ‘parallel society’ to communities that he does not understand in their complexity.

6 Ibid, p. 6-7.
Whereas Meyer nonetheless sees the need for both the majority and minority societies to work towards eliminating such segregationist tendencies for the good of cultural plurality,\(^7\) the political scientist Stefan Luft sees only the danger that “Islamic parallel societies” seemingly pose for German society. From the standpoint of the supposed existence of “ethnic colonies” in the inner-cities of Germany, Luft argues that these are more or less gravely in danger of falling into the hands of Islamic fundamentalist organisations, which through “hate preaching” and “Islamic intolerance” serve to fuel a larger “refusal to integrate” into German society.\(^8\) “One of the central goals of these organisations,” writes Luft, noting the Islamic *Milli Görüş* as an example, “is to hinder the integration of their Islamic compatriots into German society. This should be achieved by increasing the distance between them and the German society, as well as their isolation and separation.”\(^9\) In order to combat these trends towards “Islamic segregation” in Germany – which, in his eyes, poses a dire threat to both German state and society – Luft calls for a radical end to multiculturalism, opting instead for a strong constitutional state model, in which such “dangers” should be actively combated.\(^10\) In an alarmist language, Luft even invokes the far-fetched danger of Islamists being able to implement the sharia in a fictional multicultural Germany, something that no serious multiculturalist would advocate. He writes that “in a multicultural society, the Islamists in Germany would have the possibilities to develop themselves accordingly. They could live in ‘parallel societies’ in accordance to their own concepts of law (sharia) and their corresponding socio-political ideas. The balance of the integration [efforts] in the last forty years shows that we clearly have to much segregation, isolation and disintegration in Germany. Therefore, the concept of a multicultural society is completely unsuitable for Germany, a country which is smaller than the state of Montana in the USA…”\(^11\)

All in all, Luft appears to be a hard-liner among the social scientists who utilise the term ‘parallel societies’. Others, such as a number of social scientists working in the field of media studies, use the term in a more benign manner. For example, Kai Hafez, a

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\(^9\) Ibid, p. 58.


\(^11\) Ibid. *Droht die Gefahr islamisch geprägter Parallelgesellschaften in deutschen Städten?*, p. 21. Of course, Luft’s comparison between the state of Montana in the USA and Germany sounds rhetorically good, but due to the fact that Montana has a total population of 900,000 persons – Germany’s total
communications expert at the University of Erfurt, utilises the term to determine one end of his scale aimed towards measuring the levels of non-German language media use among the Turkish population in Germany (the other end of the scale being “transculture”). Thus, the term ‘parallel societies’ appears to have something to do with the use of a language other than Germany and the interest in political, social and cultural affairs of immigrants’ first countries in the diaspora. Hafez also sees some “strategic ethnicisation” at work within the Turkish community, which seemingly steers elements of this community towards living in a parallel society, including towards the more exclusive use of Turkish-language and foreign media. Although Hafez neither presents anti-Turkish ressentiments, nor looks at merely the unsettling aspects of the use of Turkish-language media in Germany, he does utilise the term in a sociological manner, thus allowing it to gain prestige in academic circles. The respected political scientist, Dieter Oberndörfer, travels along a similar path.

The Political Response

Politically, the term Parallelgesellschaft has been seemingly completely integrated into the terminology of politicians and opinion-makers in Germany. The most prominent figures in German politics today, including the Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and the head of the Christian Democrats, Angela Merkel, utilise the term in order to set the stage for their arguments on immigration and integration policy. Almost always, the term is coupled with the previously-discussed ‘danger scenario’. For example, in the wake of the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, Schröder stated that “[a] democracy can neither tolerate lawless areas, nor parallel societies. The diversity of cultures in our society is a fact, which cannot be reversed, and which we do not want to reverse. But no culture can separate itself from the social fabric.” Merkel

population is around 80 million, it seems inappropriate to compare the two. It seems that Luft is, reasons unbeknowingly, placing importance here on geographic size, and not demographic size.

12 For a good overview of the situation in Germany, see: Bacik, Çiçek, et al. Türkische TV-Sender in Deutschland.
makes less attempt to disseminate a positive message when she speaks of parallel societies as a seemingly grave danger to German society.\textsuperscript{16} Other examples of prominent users of the term are the head of the Christian Social Union, Edmund Stoiber, an important Christian Democrat legislator, Wolfgang Bosbach, and the Social Democratic Interior Minister, Otto Schily. One also notes a continuing tendency here to defame both ‘parallel societies’ and ‘multiculturalism’ at the same time.\textsuperscript{17} Not only are the mainstream parties using the term. The leading fascist party in Germany, the National Democratic Party, also has defined it to suit its own purposes. “Parallel societies… are ethnic and socially-structured groups and family units or clan structures with a partially direct relationship to organised crime. They segregate themselves from the German laws and handle their internal disputes through Islamic preachers or violent fights… Socially, these groups are visible as underclasses, they are non-educated and have little access to the labour market … We call for an end to the immigration of waste and the fair return of those persons who do not contribute to the common good to their homeland.”\textsuperscript{18}

As one can clearly see, the use of the term ‘parallel societies’ in the political arena has reached all corners of mainstream – and far right politics – in Germany. And, in the most cases, the ‘danger scenario’ has been propagated right along with it. It appears as if Heitmeyer created a monster.

The Term ‘Parallel Society’ and the Historical Term ‘Staat-im-Staate’

One factor that has been seemingly overlooked is the closeness of the term ‘parallel societies’ to the historical term of the ‘state within a state’ (\textit{Staat-im-Staate}). For centuries, this term denoted social groups which seemingly segregated themselves from the majority society and state. Through the use of this term, the claim was supported that these groups adhere instead to their own legal and political principles – oftentimes in opposition to the German majority society. In this sense, such groups were seen to function as a segregated entity, or ‘state’, within the body of the actual state itself. A


perennial example of such can be seen in the military, even though post-war parliamentary control of the military in Germany has undermined the it’s ability to function as a ‘state within a state’, at least outside of its own judiciary system and other special administrative regulations. Another historical example concerns the nobility who, until their privileged legal and political standing was stripped, did function to some degree as a ‘state within a state’ as well. A final example concerns a seemingly fundamental element of modern German nationalism, namely the differentiation between the German state and a so-called Jewish ‘state within a state’. A prototypical proponent of modern German nationalism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, argued in 1794, for example, along these lines when he claimed that Jews had no place in Germany.19 Long after the legal emancipation of the Jews came and went – an emancipation that not only gave individual Jews equal rights akin to those of ‘Germans’, but also removed the Jewish community’s political and legal control function over itself, thus making the term in its original definition superfluous – the term, ‘state within a state’ remained as a catch phrase that politically, socially and culturally haunted the Jews until the end of the Nazi regime.20 It appears as if the neologism ‘parallel society’ has, to some degree, replaced the term state within a state, which has justifiably lost its political clout due to its strong connotation with the Nazi regime’s murder of the Jews.21 However, the similarities to the ideological application of the term ‘parallel societies’ regarding the minority populations with Muslim or Turkish backgrounds and to that of the Jewish ‘state within a state’ are remarkable. Thus, a central question when utilising the term ‘parallel societies’ is whether one wishes to terminologically keep such company with older, similar terms such as the ‘state within a state’.

Criticism of the Term ‘Parallel Societies’

Especially since the outbreak of the use of the term ‘parallel societies’ after the murder of van Gogh, criticism of its use has become loud. A journalist from the left-leaning Tageszeitung, Christian Semler, has criticised the “fetishisation” of the term as a catch

21 This being said, the influential weekly magazine, Der Spiegel has actually used the term recently in a context similar to the term ‘parallel societies’ as its lead article. See: Angriff auf den Staat im Staat. Nr. 39, 2001.
phrase for the purpose of forcing the acceptance of the ‘German leading culture’ onto immigrants during the integration process. “The term,” he writes in reference to the term ‘parallel societies’, “sounds good, is apparently neutral and is surrounded with the aura of scientific background. When the term is drummed into our minds often enough, it will itself become a part of social reality because it will change the attitudes of the population. It is this [effect] that makes the term dangerous”. 22 In a similar tone, the Klaus Bade, a well-respected migration researcher, has also criticised the explosive use of the term, even though he upholds the term’s apparent scientific character, something that Semler refused to do:

Classical parallel societies do not exist in Germany. For them to exist, a number of points have to come together: a monocultural identity, a voluntary and conscious retreat in both community and everyday life, an extensive economic segregation and a doubling of the institutions of the state. [In Germany,] the immigrant neighbourhoods are mostly ethnically-mixed, the retreat is out of social reasons and a doubling of the institutions is lacking. Parallel societies exist in the heads of those who fear them… The situation can only get worse when the simple and dangerous talk about parallel societies continues. This kind of talk is not part of the solution, but rather part of the problem.23

In the same sense, Albrecht von Lucke, an editor at the left-leaning scholarly monthly, Blätter für deutsche und international Politik, speaks of the “hysteria” after the murder of van Gogh, as did others in the German media landscape.24 In this hysteria, von Lucke notes how catch phrases, or what he calls “fighting terms”, are brought to the forefront in debate, and then seemingly altered at will in order to escalate conflict within the public debate. Concerning the term ‘parallel societies’, which he sees to be mutating per definitionem into ‘opposing societies’, von Lucke writes:

Every day, new fighting terms are thrown onto the market of unlimited possibilities, with decreasing half-lifes. While opinion-makers were still drugging themselves with the discovery of ominous Turkish ‘parallel societies’, only a few days later the term mutated into ‘opposing societies’, seemingly because the sociological term appears too harmless… And then,

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these ‘opposing societies’ land on the cover of Focus [a leading weekly magazine in Germany, W.H.]: ‘Sinister Guests. The Opposing World of the Muslims in Germany’.  

Continuing on, von Lucke notes that German opinion-makers are creating the social image of Muslims into an “evil” opposing society through their use of such terminology. In this, von Lucke sees a ‘friend versus enemy’ dichotomy at work, in which the Germans are battling for their freedom of identity against a perceived Muslim opposition. “Germany is at war against the enemies of freedom,” von Lucke writes, „and the war on the homefront is perceived to be taking place in Berlin-Kreuzberg.“ This terminological escalation – away from ‘parallel’ and towards ‘opposing’ societies – acts as a “self-fulfilling prophecy“ in von Lucke’s eyes, being that such talk only causes more polarisation and hate among the communities at hand.  

One of the most substantiated social scientific critique’s of the term ‘parallel societies’ was published around 11 September 2001. During this first phase of high use of the term, the sociologist Stefan Gaitanides addresses the “legend of the formation of parallel societies”. In doing so, Gaitanides mentions a few terms that have been used – and misused – in the recent years in an anti-immigrant and anti-cultural diversity manner, including the term ‘parallel societies’ itself. With the simplistic use of the term, Gaitanides claims that the long-term “social scientific debate on the phenomenon of the concentration of immigrants in certain regional areas and on the retention of portions of their cultural identities” is being wilfully ignored in the current debate. Gaitanides recognises characteristics of a “political campaign” or a “staged debate” on part of the conservative opposition – a debate in which the opposition is “less concerned with a rational discourse concerning the political challenges of an multicultural immigrant society, and more concerned with the mobilisation of votes through symbolic politics.” In staging this debate, the opposition is “creating a menetekel of anomic ‘parallel societies’ that are incompatible with our ‘leading culture’”.  

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26 Ibid. Von Lucke names a number of journalists who have utilised these terms to propagate the ‘friend versus enemy’ standpoint.
Gaitanides does not go into the etymological history of the term ‘parallel societies’. Instead, he calls for a rediscovery of older, more substantiated sociological discussions on “individualisation processes” in the immigrant community, “subcultural community-building” and the like, all of which have been used by the social sciences to look at the transformation of the immigrant communities in Germany. Practically leading the way, Gaitanides looks at the difficulties and successes of such older concepts in a sober and sociological manner. Instead of fetishised catch phrases, ‘danger scenarios’ and ‘friend versus enemy’ dichotomies, he looks at possible solutions to the problems, all of which stress the integrative aspects of working together and taking the processes involved in the phenomenon at hand seriously.28

Conclusion

One etymological question that has been periodically raised in the course of the debate concerns why the term ‘parallel societies’ seemingly only concern religious and cultural minorities in the German society. Indeed, if one were to build a neologism of this nature according to sociological method, then the term clearly should not only be applied to merely one specific phenomenon, the phenomena in point being so-called “ethnic-religious” social groups or whole immigrant communities. Rather, terms of this nature should attempt to signify an abstract process in reference to varying phenomena. One could, for example, use the different areas of the city of Berlin as the varying phenomena to prove this point concerning the term ‘parallel societies’. If the city suburb of Zehlendorf in Berlin were to be seen as a ‘parallel society’ – where wealthy Germans make little attempt to hide their willingness to exclude themselves from the inner-city ‘ghettos’ in Neu-Kölln, or if the extremely ‘East German’ Hellersdorf in Berlin could be considered to be a ‘parallel society’ in comparison to western Berlin’s working-class Reinickendorf, then it would seem appropriate to discuss the ‘Turkish-dominated’ Kreuzberg in terms of a ‘parallel society’. But, this is not the case. Only the last example plays a role in the current sociological use of the term. These seem to be murky waters for a supposed ‘exact’ social science.

However, it should not be argued for expanding the use of the term ‘parallel societies’ to any societal group that is marked by exclusionary tendencies or that would fit abstract schemata based on the current definition of the term. One already can notice that a transformation of this sort may be already occurring in the public discourse.

28 Ibid.
concerning the term at hand.²⁹ If this trend continues, the catch phrase character of this neologism could conceivably be used for all sorts of situations in which certain opinion-makers intend to propagate a ‘friend versus enemy’ dichotomy in the midst of a ‘danger scenario’. Such intentions would not be, as one journalist puts it, “totalitarian”, ³⁰ but it would definitely be simplistic and conflictive in nature. In modern society, in which individualisation processes and cultural plurality have created a situation more akin to a ‘multitude’, ³¹ it would be a divisive step backwards to begin suspecting parallel societies behind every sociological phenomenon of differentiation in society. In the end, one could seemingly plug in almost every fragmentary religious or cultural phenomenon into this formula: the ‘rich’, ‘academics’, ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’, ‘heroin junkies’, ‘Gothic music lovers’, ‘football fans’ – you name it. Relentlessly searching for such parallel societies in a liberal republican society does not seem to make sense, nor can it be productive for sociology.

Returning to the ‘parallel society’ at hand, Gaitanides appears to be on the right path when he calls for a return to the substantiated discussions of the past. Additionally, he also appears correct when he suggests that one should once again look outside of the German social science context in order to find ways of defining – and handling – the migration phenomenon in Germany. He invokes Seyla Benhabib’s discourse ethics as a manner to create a public discourse, in which representatives of all groups at hand can discuss their problems, differences and the like. In this manner, he sees the chance that conflicts can be meaningfully discussed and solved, instead of trumpeted and escalated.³² Here, terms such as ‘parallel societies’ would quite simply not be used.

One should not get too carried away with expecting the formation of a political culture made up of ethical discourse, equality and respect. A central problem of liberal republicanism has always been its inability to provide for a political climate of this sort, given the power behind aggressive opinion-making. What is to be done? Reject the term ‘parallel societies’ as an ideological catch phrase that is based on creating a danger scenario and a ‘friend versus enemy’ dichotomy. Be wary of neologisms in general, and

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²⁹ The most prominent example can be seen by Angela Merkel’s statements on 15 June 2005, in which she specifically states that “there are parallel societies, and not only between the various cultures in our country”. She names the divisions between young and old, employed and unemployed and east and west. http://www.angela-merkel.de/termine/57_477.htm
critical of those that become catch phrases. Get back to the matter at hand, namely sober, outcome-oriented sociological research on the migration phenomenon and the political propagation of the concept of a working deliberative democracy in the existing culturally pluralistic society. Cultural pluralism is not going to go away, but it can go bad.
Literature

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