

Integration for Migrants, Democracy for Citizens: Why Integration Is Beyond Redemption

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Abstract In recent years, many liberal democratic states have introduced the integration requirement to commit to shared values. This commentary examines this integration criterion in Switzerland, which requires subjects of integration to “respect the values of the Federal Constitution”. While the idea of having shared values is comforting and highly intuitive, the requirement is a paradigmatic example of integrationism and the integration dispensation: migrantized Others are monitored in terms of their integration, those marked as white, native, non-migrantized citizens are not. In the case of the value requirement, integration produces the social imaginary of society as a community of value(s), which in turn legitimizes integrationism. Abdelmalek Sayad’s metaphor of integration as an asymptote powerfully captures the paradigm that makes Switzerland an extreme case of the democratic paradox: integration for migrants, democracy for citizens. The commentary concludes that integration is beyond redemption, and that we should speak about democracy instead.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever asked yourself, or been scrutinized by others or state authorities, about how well integrated you are? Have you ever reflected on whether the values you hold dear align with those considered to be national or constitutional values? If your answer to these questions is no, you are probably *dispensed* of integration: those marked as white, native, non-migrantized citizens are not addressed, researched and monitored in terms of their “integration”.¹

Over the past decade, many Western states have introduced the integration requirement to adopt, share and respect national or constitutional values. In the United States, prospective citizens must demonstrate their attachment to the constitution.² In France, adherence to the values of the Republic is tested in assimilation interviews.³ In the Netherlands, people subjected to integration must sign the so-called Participation Statement, pledging to respect the Dutch values of freedom, equality, solidarity and participation.⁴ In Switzerland,

“respect for the values of the Federal Constitution” is a criterion for “successful integration” in both immigration and naturalization law.

Like the notion of integration itself, the idea of having shared values is comforting and highly intuitive. The required commitment to constitutional values therefore seems “highly normal and almost imperative”.⁵ In what follows, I seek to unsettle this deeply normalized idea and practice.⁶

INTEGRATIONISM

The monitoring and disciplining of the migrantized Other through “integration” has been conceptualized in critical migration studies as integrationism. Integration is understood as an instrument of power and domination, deployed through discourse, law and practice to govern the subjects of integration:⁷

“Integrationism produces the subject of integration, who is in need of integration, on the one hand, and its counterpart, the non-subject of integration, who is granted a dispensation of integration, on the other.”⁸

A central feature of integrationism is that it is “increasingly cast in terms of value compatibility”:⁹ immigrants are compelled to adopt liberal values, while those whose values are deemed incompatible are portrayed as standing outside of the liberal-democratic community.

In Switzerland, one prominent constitutional value to be respected according to the law and street-level practice is gender equality. Accordingly,

candidates in naturalization interviews may be asked who attends parents' meetings at school, what they think of same-sex marriage, or what rights their wives and children have.¹⁰ To fulfil the value requirement of integration, their answers must demonstrate what is considered a favourable attitude towards gender equality by the authorities.

INTEGRATION DISPENSATION

The value requirement is a particularly striking illustration of the integration dispensation. The crucial question is not who in Swiss society lives up to gender equality – or any other constitutional value – but who is asked to account for it and who is not. Gender equality is, of course, not an accomplished reality in Switzerland, nor in any other society. Care responsibilities remain disproportionately borne by women. Same-sex marriage was introduced in Switzerland only following a popular vote in 2021, in which more than one-third of voters rejected it. Yet, as Swiss citizens, these voters are never required by the authorities to account for their views on gender equality or other constitutional values.

What the value requirement – and integration in general – does is rely on and reproduce the social imaginary of society as a community of value(s).¹¹ By monitoring and scrutinizing the values and integration of the migrant Other, integrationism sustains the imaginary that “we” already share these values and are already integrated, despite ample empirical evidence to the contrary. This presumption of integration is captured in the following statement by a former Member of Parliament:

“One naturally assumes that if Swiss parents have a child, then the integration criteria that are demanded of the foreign population are basically laid in the child's cradle, of course, because one is raised with our fundamental values, with our world view and everything as we know it in Switzerland.”¹²

THE ASYMPTOTE

The boundary drawn by integration is thus not between those who are integrated and those who are not, nor between the more and the less integrated. Rather, it separates those subjected to integration in the first place from those dispensed. Abdelmalek Sayad captured this boundary making of integration more than three decades ago through the metaphor of the asymptote: people are placed on one of two curves – either among those subjected to integration or among those dispensed from it. The curves extend indefinitely and move ever closer together, yet, by definition, they never meet.¹³

The asymptote is a powerful metaphor for integration. One might read it as: the more integrated you are, the closer you get to the “host society” and the “ideal citizen” against which you are evaluated. Yet the crucial point is that the two curves *never meet*: no one can cross from one to the other. Those dispensed of integration – the non-migrantized citizen – will never be addressed in terms of their integration, regardless of their conduct or the values they adhere to. Conversely, those subjected to integration can never be fully exempt from it. At most, they can attain the status of being “successfully integrated.” But this status remains precarious: it must be earned repeatedly and can be withdrawn at any time, depending on one's conduct and the values one is seen to hold.

THE DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

The boundary making of integrationism is particularly consequential in the Swiss case. On the one hand, an increasing share of the population is subjected to the integration regime. Currently, 27 per cent of the permanent resident population does not hold Swiss citizenship and is therefore subject to integration requirements for residence, settlement and/or naturalization. At the same time, these resident non-citizens are excluded from the political rights and democratic participation tied to citizenship. On the other hand, Switzerland's political system is characterized by direct democracy, in which citizens regularly vote on a

broad range of issues, including migration and integration policy. This makes Switzerland an extreme case of the democratic paradox: in the name of integration, a substantial part of the population is excluded both *by* democracy and *from* democracy – that is, from citizenship and equal political standing. Ultimately, integrationism therefore results in the following paradigm: integration for migrants, democracy for citizens.

As with Sayad's asymptote, the two categories of the paradigm are mutually exclusive: subjects of integration are not supposed to contest constitutional values, while citizens are not required to integrate and respect those values. While it is constitutive of direct democracy to permanently negotiate and contest constitutional values, non-citizens are required to respect and share these values – and not to contest them – particularly if they seek to acquire citizenship through naturalization.¹⁴

In the Swiss direct democracy, constitutional values are continually debated and, often, fundamentally challenged. In fact, the right to question and contest the “values of the constitution” is itself protected by constitutional fundamental rights. Citizens may, for example, campaign for the reintroduction of the death penalty, the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, or the abolition of the army.¹⁵ This means Swiss citizens may sign and vote for popular initiatives that relativize or abolish existing constitutional values, whereas naturalization candidates must take care not to advocate such positions.¹⁶

DEMOCRACY

I argue that integration is beyond redemption.¹⁷ Integrationism is an obstacle to liberal democracy not only because it excludes substantial parts of the population from citizenship and democracy, but also, more fundamentally, because it depoliticizes and invisibilizes the already existing plurality of values and political contestation within societies. The imaginary of society as a community of value(s)

follows a “nationalising logic of sameness”¹⁸ and “obscures the troubles” of the “host society” itself.¹⁹

To overcome integrationism and the democratic paradox, we need to recognize that contemporary societies are not communities of value(s) – and that they need not be. Rather than excluding non-citizens in the name of integration and supposedly shared values, all residents should be admitted to the ongoing negotiation of the “values of the constitution.” Such a post-integrationist democracy would be both more liberal and more democratic because it would genuinely enact its constitutional values. As Stuart Hall put it, this is what democracy is really like:

“We think of a nice, polite, consensual discussion; everybody agreeing. What you heard there [the Greater London Council] was what democracy is really like: an absolutely, bloody-unending row. That row, that sound of people actually negotiating their differences in the open, behind the collective program, is the sound I am waiting for.”²⁰

What some scholars have called the “integration paradox”,²¹ namely that more “integration” leads to more, rather than less, social and political conflict and contestation, may in fact simply be: democracy. Instead of speaking of integration and shared values, we should therefore speak about democracy.

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