

# THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

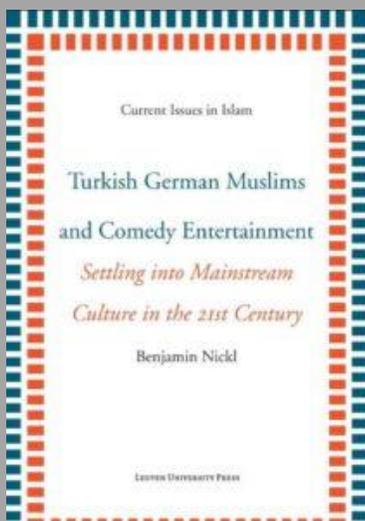
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Benjamin Nickl. 2021. *Turkish German Muslims and Comedy Entertainment: Settling into Mainstream Culture in the 21st Century*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. 215 pp. ISBN (Paperback): 9789462702387. ISBN (ePDF): 9789461663412. ISBN (ePUB): 9789461663429. [DOI: 10.11116/9789461663412](https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461663412)



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Benjamin Nickl's *Turkish German Muslims and Comedy Entertainment: Settling into Mainstream Culture in the 21st Century* looks at the use of humour among immigrant communities in Germany where population mobility has a long social, political and economic history and often stirs up uncomfortable public debates. Nickl is tackling this significant topic at a time in which sad historical developments, partly associated with the Middle East and Islam during the last two decades, have provided an excuse for some populists, right-wing extremists and political opportunists to stoke xenophobic and islamophobic fears and prejudices. Such fear-mongering often relies on skewed reasoning and sweeping generalisations that associate certain ethnicities and races with undesirable characteristics, including the lack of a sense of humour and an inability to understand liberal playfulness. Nickl adds nuance to his discussion of the comedy of Turkish German Muslims and its social functions by investigating gender, as well as place of origin or immigrant background, in multiple modalities, including movies, television, literature and online media.

Nickl argues that humour at the expense of minorities is often perceived as funny when little is known about their lives. In the case of the Turkish community in Germany, many came to the country in the wake of World War II to provide an inexpensive workforce for the booming post-war German economy. But despite their many contributions, they have never been fairly represented in the German culture. Nickl underscores the porousness of German, Turkish and Muslim identities and frankly

claims that, like “anti-Semitism, anti-Turkism is one of Germany’s oldest institutionalised hatreds. Both discriminatory practices date back in much of Europe to the early Middle Ages” (45). Although he attempts to trace the historical reasons of othering (or even scapegoating) the Jewish and Turkish communities in Germany, there are major differences between these two types of animosity. For one, anti-Semitic sentiments have never been limited just to one nation-state. Further, the reasons behind the emergence of anti-Turkish sentiments in Germany are hardly on a par with anti-Semitism. Nor are Turkish people the only community identified as *Ausländer* (alien) or *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) in Germany; in fact, in legal developments in 2000 and 2005, avenues to citizenship were finally granted to Turkish immigrant workers.

Chapter one offers an intriguing theoretical discussion of concepts and tropes that commonly play into German and Islamic conceptualisations of national identity. The next five chapters present a series of case studies of Turkish-German humour and comedy in different modes of popular entertainment. Chapter two concentrates on a discussion of four “clash films”, which as the title suggests, largely revolve around “colliding cultures” in Turkish-German cinema (62). The primary contention in this chapter is that members of the Turkish community take pride and joy in self-representation in German cinema. They “reflect through their representation on screen that there is joy in Otherness; that the positioning as Other and a clear-cut identity per nationality is reductive; and that difference and diversity always rest in the eye of the beholder” (63). Though the focus is on German cinema, the discussion opens with a historical survey of the clash film genre in the USA. Chapter three looks at several examples of Turkish-German television series, with the USA again acting as a point of departure. Here, Nickl contends that, the “ethnic sitcom helped German and international audiences to extend the meaning of the wider German family and disprove the myth of cultural normativity” (94). Chapter four concerns two more popular genres, namely Chick-Lit and Dick-Lit and their role in constructing and undoing gender(ed) ethnic and racial identities. This chapter adds nuance to the complex issue of identity construction by considering gender identities among ethnic communities.

Changing the focus to more recent technologies, chapter five investigates Turkish German comedy videos on YouTube. Nickl argues that digital media have provided a place for the counterhegemonic framing of ethnic and cultural diversity by Turkish Germans. Exploring the intersection of gender and ethnic identities, the discussion here integrates user comments to emphasise the interactive nature of this form of comedy as well as the reception of Turkish humour in Germany. In chapter six, Nickl discusses the future of postmigration comedy, following a brief discussion of the (usefulness of the) term ‘postmigration’. He hails recent developments in which even “the most established German satire shows, television companies and cinema comedy productions, and cabaret and local stage play producers, are increasingly more open to all kinds of Germanness and collaborations among the producers of humour related to its attending themes: race, ethnicity, religion, class and gender” (176).

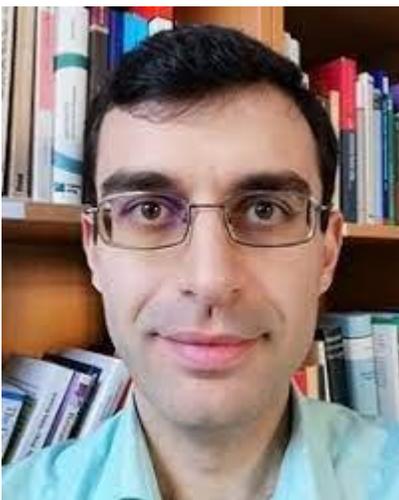
In conclusion, Nickl insists that it is impossible to understand Turkish German humour without understanding popular Muslim comedy in the west. “In 2020,” he observes, “Muslim entertainment comedy increasingly engages the anxiety around Islamic beliefs and the mere presence of Muslims as the reality of being Other in non-Muslim majority countries” (183-184). He cites examples from the UK and Canada to illustrate how comedy engages gender and ethnic clichés and cautions against “the risk of reproducing negative, anti-social messages about ethnic identity and about who may belong to a group and who shall be excluded from it because of religion, gender, sexual orientation or citizenship status” (186).

*Turkish German Muslims and Comedy Entertainment* tackles a significant topic and its attempts to foster intercultural mutual understanding are laudable. Each chapter opens with a helpful abstract. The writer manages to eschew jargon and complicated theoretical discussions, while he strives to historicise a subset of ethnic humour in twenty-first-century Germany. A minor reservation concerns the mixing of the types and theories of humour. Nickl bases a part of his argumentation on incongruity humour, relief humour and superiority humour as categories. I am not entirely convinced that these three theories of humour (from among others) can be safely translated into a comprehensive and reliable taxonomy. Additionally, some items (like Berger 2010 and 2012 on which the book heavily relies for explaining the theories of humour) seem to be missing from the list of references. Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading the book and would recommend it to anyone keen to learn more about ethnic humour in contemporary Germany. This monograph is currently free to access on the website of Leuven University Press, JSTOR and OAPEN.

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Massih Zekavat is an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Fellow at Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany. He is currently working on a book about the use of humour and satire in environmental advocacy for Routledge Environmental Humanities Series. His monograph, *Satire, Humor and the Construction of Identities*, was published in 2017 by John Benjamins.