

Workshop 53

Muslim Cultural Politics in Europe and the Middle East. Continuities and Disjunctures

(Invited Workshop)

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Transnationalism sheds lights on several contemporary processes which have to do with the mutable roles and functions of the nation–state and with the relationship between the nation – as increasingly composed of de-territorialized people who may display multiple loyalties – and the state. The Muslim presence in Europe is a paradigmatic example of the challenge that transnationalism poses to the presumed universal character of the nation-state, especially since it is urging a redefinition of its alleged secular nature by challenging the classic separation between “private” and “public” and between “religious” and “political” spheres. However, whereas on the one hand there is an increasing tendency to celebrate the challenges that the presence of transnational Muslim identities pose to the presumed universal and secular nature of nation-states, or to perceive Islamism as a driving force of modernism and democratisation, on the other hand, democratic, secular constituencies and Middle Eastern feminist are denouncing the danger of cultural relativistic approaches towards particular forms of Islam in the West as expression of the emergence of unconventional alliances between multiculturalism, neo-orientalist approaches and religious fundamentalist projects. This debate highlights an unresolved tension between two opposing and yet legitimate claims: the quest for recognition of Muslims in Europe and in the West more generally, who are the subject of increasing Islamophobia and racism, and a legitimate scepticism towards essentialist and relativistic approaches towards Islam. This workshop seeks to critically engage and expose these issues by bringing together theoretical interventions and ethnographic accounts which focus on the ways in which Muslim identities and claims are being constructed and accommodated in new discourses and practices of citizenship within the European and Middle Eastern, national and local public spheres, assessing disjunctures and continuities between them.

Conflicting Loyalties? Reflections on the Place of Islam in Contemporary Germany

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Despite constant pleas by religious Muslims to the contrary, the

compatibility of Muslim identity and practice with European legal and normative frameworks is continually questioned from within Europe's non-Muslim majority. The paper examines these claims and counter claims by discussing recent public debates and juridical as well as legislative decisions concerning a number of different Muslim forms of practice in Germany. Noting the often conflicting grounds on which the charges against the Islamic tradition are based, the paper suggests that concerns about Muslim loyalty to and compatibility with 'European' norms are largely misleading. The paper thus calls for a reassessment of the social context in which issues like the Muslim headscarf become centres of public debate and targets for state intervention. It suggests that the often so angry denunciations of the Islamic tradition highlight a deep political crisis within Europe, where the dynamism of once powerful political projects has largely given way to a defensive administration of the status quo.

Liberal Institutions Banning Islamic Dress: What's It All About?

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This joint paper will investigate discussions on face veiling within the context of the liberal university in different national and institutional settings. As a starting point it will examine the origins and implications of face veiling bans in Egypt at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and at Leiden University (LU) in the Netherlands. In both universities the appearance of a small number of students wearing the face-veil or niqab led to official bans on face covering. The bans were justified on remarkably similar grounds, at the core of which were arguments that face covering is inherently incompatible with principles and practices of liberal education. Yet the prohibition of face veiling speaks to issues far larger than pedagogy in liberal educational settings; it addresses critical issues relating to integration, liberalism, and the possibly uneasy place of Islam in it all. AUC is located in a Muslim majority country where adherents of political Islam actively participate in public debate; Leiden University is a prominent state institution in a setting where the Muslim minority finds itself increasingly accused of refusing to 'integrate' in Dutch society. Starting with a discussion on the impact of these different settings and the implication for legal argumentations and practical implementation, the paper will then critically investigate practices associated with Islam, or more specifically gendered choices relating to 'Islamic' dress and comportment (a-zayy al-Islami). Among the topics discussed will be power struggles and negotiations that have occurred over the headscarf (hijab) and face-veil (niqab) in educational settings in Egypt, the Netherlands and France, and recent legal cases concerning face-veiling in the U.S., the Netherlands and Egypt. Finally, we will raise questions about how Islamic dress, style, and image relate to broader debates being currently waged

about 'open communication', secularism, and liberal pedagogy.

A Representation of Muslim Identity of Bosnian Minority Through a Dress-code in Post-Yugoslav Period in Slovenia

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My paper is dealing with the identity of Bosnian Muslims living in Slovenia as it represents itself through the dress-code of Muslim women. After the constitution of the new state in 1991, Bosniacs became a new minority in Slovenia and went through a complex process of building their new identity in a new state. Before the fall of Yugoslavia and the constitution of Slovenia they've lived a very secular life in which religion didn't play a very vivid role. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, in Slovenia started a new national process, which could be described as a Slovenian orientalism. Building a national Slovenian identity, Slovenia didn't tolerate people from the republics of ex Yugoslavia, who became a disturbing element in Slovenia. Bosniacs, among them, have found themselves in a complex situation - on one hand they were confronted with Slovenian nationalism and on the other hand the war in Bosnia caused another crisis to them. In such a situation a new process of re-islamisation started among Muslims living in Slovenia. A Muslim identity became more vivid than ever before and represents itself in Muslim women dress-code. My paper will try to show how a religion - Islam as the most evident and "different" element of Bosniac culture - organises a life of people in a time of crises and plays a key role in a process of ethnic mobilisation.

Over Our Heads? Muslim Women as Symbols and Agents in the Headscarf Debate in Flanders, Belgium

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This paper discusses the recent headscarf debate in Belgium that erupted following the bill against headscarves in public schools in France in the fall of 2003. It is argued that the political and public discourse on the headscarf in the Flemish media can be viewed as illustrative of the essentialism that permeates the presumed opposition between gender equality and cultural diversity, played out in the 'multicultural riddle' of national, ethnic and religious identity and citizenship in contemporary European nation-states. The various subject positions on veiling as either 'oppressive', 'threatening' or 'liberatory' must be situated in colonial and postcolonial history, and the contemporary problematisation of 'integration' and the politicization of Islamic identity. Special attention is given to the way Muslim women as actors differentially participated in the discussion through letters to the media and protest marches in various cities, yet also how their voices were ignored and even strategically appropriated by Belgian male politicians and public figures in the familiar language of 'colonial

feminism’.

Muslims and Europe. Navigating Across Secular and Religious Fields

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In recent times, discussions around the legitimacy of exhibiting religious symbols in the public spheres have gained prominence in European political and popular debates. Most of these debates seem to emphasize that the issue at stake is around the extent to which European societies should allow challenges to the allegedly secular nature of their institutions and political culture. This tension is often represented in terms of a clash between modern, secular outlooks, embodied by the histories and institutions of European nation-states, and religious or so-called “fundamentalist” groups and projects which are seen as threatening the former with their craving for recognition in the public spheres. This paper aims at questioning the dichotomy “secular-religious” as an appropriate frame for understanding the cultural politics of Muslims in Europe. By analyzing the different voices and discourses which emerged around two highly discussed events such as the French law banning religious symbols in public schools and the claim for removing the crucifix in public schools in Italy, this paper will explore how notions of “secular” and “religious”, rather than two opposite terms of a dichotomy, crosscut and variably intersect both Muslim and supposedly secular constituencies’ discourses in their search for legitimization and recognition.

Between Islamophobia and Eurocentrism: Reflections on Muslim Feminist Identities and Political Strategies

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The proposed paper seeks to reflect on both, the constructions of Muslim feminist identities as well as their political strategies in the context of transnational political spheres. Taking as a starting point my own positionalities – a secular feminist within Egypt and a Muslim feminist in the UK – and experiences within political groups and networks (Women in Black, Women against Fundamentalisms and Act Together: Women’s Action on Iraq), I will explore the wider and ongoing dilemmas and tensions of talking “across the divide”. Moving back and forth between geographical locations, political contexts and audiences, the being a secular Muslim feminist gains different meanings and class for different strategies and emphasis.

In addition to reflecting on my own political experiences in both in Egypt and the UK, I will draw on my research on the women’s movement and secularism in Egypt (Gender, Secularism and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement, CUP, 2000), a critical analysis of Bobby Sayyid’s A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism (Zed, 1997) as

well publications by various relevant women's organization.