Islam Resetting the European Agenda?

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The European project is undergoing a radical change in its encounter with Islam. It is not by chance that two countries that rejected the European constitution, France and the Netherlands, are the two countries where Islam was most publicly debated. While the negative vote was triggered to a significant degree by national values and sentiments hostile to globalization and neoliberalism, issues related to the Islamic presence in Europe (migrants, Turkish EU candidacy, and terrorism) played an equally decisive role in the shaping of public opinion.

Both French republicanism and Dutch multiculturalism have been challenged by the ways Islam is Europeanized. As Islam becomes European, the proximity engenders confrontation. Muslim migrants are uprooted, distanced from their countries of origin, and acculturated, but their reterritorialization is linked in the public imagination either with a politics of terror (the suicide bombers in the July 2005 attacks against London were discovered to be British citizens) or with claims to religious visibility that conflict with fundamental European understandings of gender and citizenship. It seems that both the republican politics of integration and multiculturalist politics of difference fall short in face of the nonassimilative strategies of European Islam.

In Holland, the 2004 assassination by a Moroccan immigrant of Theo Van Gogh, a well-known public figure who personified the Dutch sense of freedom of speech, crystallized and intensified the ways in which issues around migration and Islam have destabilized national self-understandings in Europe. The incident brought into sharp focus the particular ways the encounter between Muslims and Europeans is unfolding in a pluralistic Dutch society, exposing the limits of a multiculturalist discourse. No longer is a politics of cultural avoidance feasible, nor
would it be desirable to draw boundaries between different communities marked by race, ethnicity, or religion. Yet anxiety is growing among both Muslims and Europeans about a perceived breakdown of boundaries, a loss of identity that accompanies the dynamics of this encounter and is leading to the reinforcement of national and religious identities.

In France, the idea of maintaining boundaries and defending national identity became particularly pronounced in a series of public debates over the past decade. Opposition to the Iraq war, criticisms of American policies, the status of the Islamic head scarf in public schools, and Turkish membership in the European Union all provoked changes in the self-presentation of Europe as well as its representation of the other. The dissension around the Iraq war brought to light a fracture within the West, enhancing a definition of European values and politics opposed to the American quest for global hegemony. An anti-American attitude became part of the self-presentation of the French public and gave impetus to the mobilization of peace movements as a distinctive feature of European values.

Perhaps no other social issue provoked more passion and debate in France than the Islamic head scarf in the public schools (a debate that peaked during the fall of 2003). This was followed by a debate over Turkish membership in the European Union. These two long-lasting and nationwide debates culminated in, respectively, the passing of a new legislation to ban the Islamic head scarf from public schools and a call for a referendum vote on Turkish membership. Two very distinct claims by Muslims—to wear a head scarf in secular public schools and for Turkish membership in the European Union—thus triggered broader debates over the value of both secularism and European identity.

The head-scarf debate touched on issues of immigration, the secular public school system, the definition of citizenship, and the national politics of integration. However, Turkish membership in the EU cannot be equated with problems of migration (even less so in France than in Germany), nor can Turkey, which is a secular state, be identified with Islam. Yet, in public debates over the last two years, the matter of Turkish candidacy has shifted from the realm of foreign affairs to become a domestic issue that played a decisive role in the outcome of the referendum on the European constitution.

Questions of geographic frontiers, civilizational belonging, religious differences, and past memories all entered into the Turkish candidacy debate as a constellation of insurmountable differences and set a new agenda. Europe, until then an affair left in the hands of Eurocrats, became the center of a public societal debate, recomposing the political and intellectual arena independent of left-right,
secular-religious, liberal-republican, or feminist-conservative divisions. Identifying with Europe meant “othering” Turkey. Opponents of the constitution (a coalition of both socialists and the nationalist right) used the Turkish candidacy in their campaign, establishing a forced equation between the two and implying that the rejection of the constitution would keep Turkey out of the EU. The rejection can be read as an indicator of the rise of nationalist sentiments and a defense of singularity, whether defined by the French exceptionalism of integration and laïcité in a multicultural world, by social rights in a global liberal economy, or by French sovereignty against European solidarity.

These debates, precipitated by different problems, have been framed and problematized in European public and civic discourse in strikingly similar ways. Turkish EU membership became an agenda-setting issue for French identity politics, while the affaire du foulard (the head-scarf debate) provoked a larger debate on European identity and secularism. The very manner in which these debates have been framed thus creates a point of departure for viewing the making of Europe in its encounter with Islam. In these zones of contact that we can discern the hidden dynamics of the process: how these issues appeared in the public arena, how they were voiced by different public figures, and how they became part of a new European imaginary. In different ways, these public debates contributed to the problematization of the bond between European and Muslim identities. In the head-scarf debate, the principle of republican secularism, laïcité, was mobilized as a mode of French exceptionalism. By contrast, a different set of values were mobilized (and interestingly, not secularism) in the debate over Turkish EU membership, so that the status of Europe as a distinct civilization and whether Turkey was properly considered part of Europe, as well as its geography, history, and religion, became a major issue. In these debates, one can observe how Turkey came to represent the other against whom European identity was reinforced and reconstructed; while, concurrently, the Islamic head scarf was equated with gender oppression, against which emancipatory principles of feminism and secularism were interlaced as prerequisites of European citizenship.

Both cases deployed the trope of territory: Turkey as a territory of Islam, but by its membership, as implying an enlargement of European territory. Third-generation Muslim migrants, distanced from their countries of origin, bring to public discourse their experiences of a denationalized Islam. The question of territory is also raised by their claims of Muslim visibility and presence in European territories and public spaces such as cities, schools, hospitals, and prisons. In relation to both the Turkish candidacy and head-scarf debates, we witness a slide
from a political to a religious overdetermination of the issue. In both instances, anti-Americanism, in different ways, provided an anchor for the elaboration of a collective French and European self-presentation. In the case of the head-scarf debate, communitarianism and multicultural liberalism—identified with Anglo-Saxon ways of dealing with difference—served as a model of opposition to the Republican French universalism that is praised for enhancing the individualism and public neutrality achieved by laïcité. In the case of Turkish EU membership, American pressure is not merely considered diplomatically unacceptable but criticized as suspect in its hidden and destructive intentions toward the European project. In both these debates, then, we witness a struggle to find ways of thinking Europeanness and self-presentation in contrast to America.

Europeanism appears as an identity defined by shared history and common cultural values rather than as a project for rethinking the political bond. Paradoxically, it is in contexts outside the core of Europe that Europe appears as a political project that has the power to foster democratization. In Turkey, where Europeanness has not traditionally been accepted as part of the national identity, it has been appropriated voluntarily as a political project that promises a democratic frame.

The Turkish candidacy revealed, unintentionally, a tacit equation between the European project and European identity, on the one hand, and the tensions between universalist claims and the Judeo-Christian legacy on the other. The European claims for universalism and its limits are tested by Turkish membership. Today the problem is not the recognition of diversity but the recognition of commonality. The encounter between Muslims and Europeans can be thought through the creation of a common bond, through hyphenated identities such as European-Islam, French-Muslims, Euro-Turks—or, on the other hand, through the reinforcement of differences, at the risk of mutual annihilation. Europe, as a project, offers a possibility of surpassing the fixity and purity of identities in favor of an intercultural social experience. Will the European project seize this opportunity or follow the lines of global cleavages? It is an open, two-way question whose answer depends on both Muslims and Europeans.