Europe and its Muslims

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WHAT is unjust about the situation of Muslims in Europe? Should we, as social scientists, point to the cultural stigma or rather denounce economic discrimination? Do we need to raise issues ranging from ‘failed integration’ of Muslim communities to ‘discriminatory’ economic, educational and cultural structures of European countries? Or should we instead, highlight the ways the second and third generations are already in the post-migration phase pursuing a professional career, searching for political representation and disputing their place in different spheres of public life? Should we privilege the class issues, denounce racial prejudices and social discrimination? Or rather should we focus on the claims of religious minorities, the public visibility of Islam and the rise of anti-Islamic discourses and politics?

Such distinctions are analytical, meant to offer insights into changing historical trajectories and sociological conditions of Muslim migrants living in Europe. In reality, at the personal level of lived experiences, it is difficult to separate economic, legal and social discrimination from non-recognition of cultural and religious claims. Under the current conditions of economic crisis, discriminatory practices and cultural resentment seem to reinforce one another. Not only does such a spiral dynamics of exclusionary politics risk deepening the shared feeling of unfairness among Muslims and migrants of Europe, it furthermore threatens the very democratic foundations of the European polis based upon the ideal of equality and pluralism.

The principles of equality and the recognition of differences have constituted the two pillars on which European democracies were built. The ideal of equality and the quest for recognition of minority identities – whether racial, ethnic or sexual – provided a frame for naming unjust practices, struggling against inequalities, cultural stigmatization and political exclusion. Social movements and revolutionary passions were fostered by the ideal of equality, whether among races, social classes, nations, or men and women. The abolition of slavery, socialist revolutions, national independence movements, feminist and gay movements – each marked a fundamental stage in the history of equality.

Western democratic imaginaries have been shaped by the principle of equality as the basis of a just society as distinct from the hierarchical organization of societies, races, ethnicities and gender relations. The principle of equality is a transformative force in democracies. It empowers actors and has an effect of modernizing society, its institutions and legislations, working against the established structures and mentalities. The politics of equal rights, social distribution of wealth, education for all, and equal access to public life, are all claims of equality that are inseparable from the democratic ideal. The principle of equality
is omnipresent and continuously compels different groups, classes, men and women from different cultures, to foreground their claims against the prevalent norms. The struggles for ‘same sex marriage’, ‘family for all’, namely for gays and lesbians in western societies, or for the education rights of young girls in Muslim societies, illustrate the pervasiveness of the standard of equality in the contemporary world.

The second pillar of the democratic imaginary, namely the recognition of minority identities and differences, does not follow the same transformative trajectory. It developed in response to the criticism about the first phase of modernity, in particular the hegemonic forces of modern nationalism and market capitalism that suppressed singularities and identities, whether ethnic, racial or sexual. The recognition of differences and politics of pluralism not only works against the monistic cultures and universalist claims of the western world but also contends with unexpressed injustices and denied identities in European societies.

This second pillar of democratic imaginary was shaped by the critiques, not only from within but also from outside Europe. The critiques of colonialism and Orientalism have exposed the destructive powers of the ‘Civilizing West’ and contributed to an unsettling of the self-presentation of western modernity as the home for equality and justice. They also offered an alternative reading of non-western histories, enabling different stories about the ‘habitations of modernity’, and opened up the possibility for an indigenous politics of emancipation by the non-western, Black, subaltern and Muslims.

In the present time, Muslims ‘speak back’, not from their own homelands and locations outside Europe, but from within Europe. Muslims claim their equal rights and singularity in their new homelands, i.e. Europe. The comfort of distance, sustained by frontiers of separation, between the West and the Oriental colonial other has disappeared. The dominant western narrative of modernity operates a temporal and geographical distance and separation, based upon a denial of ‘coevalness’, namely the possibility of being contemporary with the West. In today’s Europe, the comfort of distance, both in terms of time and space, has disappeared.

The relationship between Europe and the Muslim ‘other’ takes place in proximity and plays out simultaneously. The ‘migrants’ continue to remind us about a distant social reality, related to their ‘backward’ past, to a foreign culture, whereas European born Muslims break away from the migrant origins of their parents, become closer to the citizens of Europe, speak the same language, adopt the same cultural codes to formulate new claims and critical discourses. By claiming their religious practices, they manifest both their similarity and difference. They unsettle the established frontiers, remove distance and facilitate the presence of the (dis)similar Muslims in common spaces. They make Islam visible in the public sphere, that is to say in the eyes of all citizens. They exacerbate the disruptive effect of Islamic difference in proximity. The recognition of dissimilar Muslims as equal citizens, as pairs, constitutes a democratic trial for European publics. As Bosetti points out, it is crucial for the future of European democracies to find ways to rethink the issues around migrants and minorities and ‘winning the challenge of cultural pluralism.’

The migrant as a sociological category brings forth struggles around legal rights, social conditions and economic opportunities, whereas the category of Muslim problematizes religious difference and cultural norms. The transformation from the ‘migrant’ to the ‘Muslim’ can in part be understood in generational terms and situated within a chronological perspective. The first phase of migrants from Muslim majority countries to Europe took place in the 1960s. They came from erstwhile colonies, such as Algeria to France, but also from countries such as Turkey to Germany, where no colonial history linked them. The emblematic figure was the single male worker, termed in Germany as gastarbeiter, referring to men coming from the Anatolian villages to work in German factories.

In the second phase, the migrants were no longer perceived as guests, as transitory foreigners, who would one day leave and go back to their countries of origin. The emblematic figure, the young Arab boy, ‘le beurre’, illustrated the problems related to the first descendants of the migrant families. At the time education, language learning, and social marginality emerged as major issues. In the post-1990 period, the religious identification of Muslim migrants came to the fore. During this phase the young schoolgirls and their claims for Islamic covering, ‘l’affaire du foulard’, as the French termed it, became the emblematic figure of the Muslim migrant. The national and

ethnic identification of migrants became less salient and the controversies around the Islamic veil, mosque construction and halal food became pre-dominant public issues. In short, we can argue that the claims for religious practices emerged in time, pointing to the integration of migrants and their sedentarization in daily life in Europe.

However, a chronological narrative of migrants does not capture the full story. There are complexities and interrelations that escape linear descriptions and evolution in time. Derrida’s notion of hospitality can be useful to understand the relations between the host countries and migrant Muslims. Hospitality is an ancestral notion that captures a traditional gesture rare in modern times. Opening the doors of one’s home, giving shelter to a stranger and sharing food are often cherished by ancient civilizations as intrinsic/inalienable traits of their culture of hospitality. A mere word, a gesture transmits a culture in its microcosm. Hospitality is a word of that kind—the art of sharing, an act of generosity, a gesture that one associates with pre-capitalism, appears an anachronism in modern times.

Derrida wants to offer the notion of hospitality to moderns. For him, hospitality is a way of thinking that comes from traditions that we need to receive as a heritage from our past. However, hospitality cannot just be delivered, handed from one generation to the other. It needs to be ‘deconstructed’, reinterpreted and therefore animated by those who appropriate it. For Derrida hospitality implies the receiving of a stranger without any preliminary conditions, without the identification of the other. But there is a second facet to hospitality, which is a recognition of the other in her/his singularity. Hospitality requires the complementarity of this double movement, the first being an unconditional opening to the other, and the second, a recognition of the singularity of the person, her name, her narrative.4

Migration requires hospitality. The stranger transgresses the frontiers, looks for shelter, food and work, but also seeks recognition as a person, in his/her identity and singularity. Vincent Descombes, in exploring the troubles with the notion of identity in his recent book, distinguishes between the empirical and normative aspects of one’s identity.5 Since Rousseau’s work, the moral sense of existence is closely related to one’s identity; in the absence of moral conditions, such as liberty, reason and personality, existence in itself is not sufficient.

In following up along these lines of conceptualizing identity, we can argue that in the case of migrants both the empirical and the normative aspects of their identity become salient. For migrants, the factual attestations of identity become a perpetual source of vulnerability and struggle in contemporary western societies in which the limitations of immigration become a major issue. In order to exist, the migrant needs empirical proof, such as an identity card, passport, working permit, as much as the conditions in which he/she can individually raise normative issues related to his/her existence. However, the host countries expect from migrants an unconditional commitment and satisfaction, which is the sense of a politics of assimilation that leaves no place for the expression of discontent. The identity of the migrant is suppressed and negated to the extent that the moral conditions for fulfilment of the self are not acknowledged. A return to Islamic sources for the expression of moral conditions of existence can thus be interpreted as a form of management of the stigma of the migrant.6 Muslim identity becomes a source of personal and collective empowerment for migrants living in Europe and suffering from non-recognition. They manifest their presence by rendering visible Islamic signs and symbols in the public eye.

The public visibility of Islam disturbs and provokes a politics of anxiety, fear and rejection in many contexts of European countries. The rejection of the ‘other’ is often related to a situation when one ceases to be a stranger, a ‘migrant’, and manifests (dis)similarity, such as in the case of the ‘Muslim’ living in proximity in Europe. The moment the other transgresses the boundaries of separation and shares the same space, that the politics of rejection, a form of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism and anti-Islamism emerges. It operates as a way of reminding the other, whether Black, Jew, women or Muslim, that she does not belong to that place.

This is best captured as a ‘nigger moment’ by Elijah Anderson in his analysis of race and public life in contemporary American society in Philadelphia.7 He argues that the form of racism changed as the African-American experience changed. With the formation of a Black middle class and the advent of a multicultural era, a multi-ethnic mixing and racial public mingling took place, and the ‘cosmopolitan canopy’ came to be celebrated. However, ‘a niggermoment’—an acute

moment of distrust towards the other, alongside an act of discrediting – is also experienced under the very conditions of public mingling and cosmopolitanism, unsettling one’s feeling of belonging to that space. A ‘nigger moment’ is that moment when African-Americans are made to feel that they do not belong to these places, and are reminded of their ‘ghetto’. The moment can be a racist joke, or something more dramatic, as in the case recounted by the author, of police violence and humiliation against a young Black student of the Law School at Yale University in front of his White neighbours and colleagues.

One can argue that new generations of Muslims have already stepped out of their migrant conditions of existence, of their suburban ‘ghettos’ and claim social mobility, whether it was acquired by education, professional career or political representation. Their claims of public visibility testify to the post-integration phase because only those who have acquired cultural capital, with linguistic capacities, knowledge of self-presentation, and codes of communication of the host country, can publicly formulate their demands and dispute their place in the larger society.

In contrast to the first generation of migrants, who chose to be reserved and were far too intimidated to make visible their religious practices, the new generation of Muslims who are no longer migrants, ‘ostensibly’ assertively manifest their religious difference in the eyes of some sections of European publics. The visible manifestation of Muslim actors in public, Islamic signs, symbols and practices, has triggered a series of major controversies in different European publics. The manifestation of Islamic difference in public has a disruptive effect; it challenges but also reveals the established norms of European publicness and its limitations in accepting pluralism.

As Islam, equated with the Middle East, the Oriental ‘other’ becomes an indigenous presence, disputing its lack of visibility in the European public life, a politics of resentment, anti-Islamic discourse and exclusionary practice emerges from this frame of mind to remind Muslims of their origins, demanding that they be sent back ‘home’. I would argue that the phenomenon of Islamophobia operates as a ‘nigger moment’ for those migrants who have left their ‘ghetto’ behind, in situations where a public mingling with other citizens is underway, such as in schools, city life, the parliament and so on. They are reminded of their ‘migrant past’, migrant descendent identities, with a call for going back to their original countries (of their parents), where they may construct their mosques and practice their religion in public.

In refashioning the moral conditions of their identity and social existence by Islam, Muslim migrants are disputing the frontiers of national community and citizenship in Europe, challenging western monoculture and Christian secularity. They present a transformative power of political culture. What makes their existential situation unjust is that Muslims are continually seen as not belonging, people from somewhere else. Their identities are questioned both by the uncertainty of their factual conditions of belonging and, by a denial of their rights for questioning the moral conditions of their existence. Muslim migrants find themselves in this double bind: as migrants they face the precariousness of their legal and economic identities – they can be expelled from the country, or lose their jobs – and as Muslim they are expected to conform to the prevalent norms and values of a majority culture.