The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular

Nilüfer Göle

*A Secular Age* can be read as an attempt to give us an alternative narrative of secularism. The author, without letting himself be intimidated by the prevalent critiques and the decline of master narratives in the social sciences, undertakes the task of reflecting on a longue-durée history of secularity in Latin Christendom. His work proposes an alternative to the understanding of secularity as an outcome of modernity, locating its origins in the religious transformations that occurred throughout the history of Western Christianity. Against the dominant thesis of dualistic and simplistic oppositions between religion and secularity that are framed in consecutive and alternating historical phases, such as secularization, the triumph of religion, and post-secularism, Taylor engages a complex reading of the interconnections between and recompositions of the religious-secular divide which end up, according to him, in mutual “fragilization” in the present stage. He opens up new ways of reading the religious and the antireligious as contemporary with each other, and hence distances himself from a linear sociological thesis of secularity and modernity. The uncoupling of the two permits him to speak of Western secularity in its own terms without making a claim for a universal ideal model. He acknowledges the “multiple modernities” and different pat-
terns of secularism in other parts of the world, but he makes it explicit from the very beginning that his scope is limited and he is interested in what is unique in the experience of the West. It is inappropriate to regard his approach as ethnocentric; however, as I argue here, an introspective reading of Western secularity can lose sight of the cultural powers of the secular. As the authors of the introduction to this volume point out, the notion of the West becomes too limited if the “internal” history of secularity in Latin Christendom is thought to be unrelated to the processes by which colonialism developed. It is therefore a matter of recognizing not the plurality of historical trajectories and patterns of secularity but the enlargement of the notion of the West and a cross-cultural and cross-civilizational approach. Western secularity cannot be separated from its claim for a higher form of civilization, its impact in shaping and stigmatizing a certain understanding of religion (as backward), its role in spreading models of secular governance to different parts of the world, and, last but not least, its permeation of material culture in norms of sexuality and private-public distinctions. I will try to illuminate such blind spots in an inwardly West-looking narrative of the secular, which can be regarded as the civilizational, sexual, and spatial powers of the secular.

The civilizing missions of the secular are manifested in the shaping of non-Western historical processes by means of colonialism and Orientalism. We cannot therefore complete the picture of secularity unless we posit it in terms of interdependence between the West and its Oriental other or colonized counterpart. Critiques of European inwardness do not simply suggest a historical genealogy of secularity in different historical contexts or stress a plurality of secularisms. Limiting the narration of secularity to Latin Christendom dismisses the civilizational powers of Western modernity, which are inseparable from sexual and spatial politics. Although Taylor acknowledges the importance and correspondence of the disciplinary revolution and secularity, he does not link it with the civilizational claim of the West, namely its claim of superiority in mundane life, norms of sexuality, and cultural habitus.

Further, the location of secularity in a series of developments in Latin Christendom and hence the comprehension of secularity as a perspective that grew within religion —specifically within Christianity—remain a genealogical reading, without offering a key for uncoupling Christianity and secular...
larity. Consequently, in privileging the long-term connections between secularity and Christianity, current transformations of European secularity as it encounters other religions, in particular Islam, are kept oddly outside the picture.

Bringing Islam into our readings of European secularity is not an unproblematic move; it requires a criticism of the universalistic underpinnings of the secular and its equation with the European experience. In fact, secularism as a universal, value-free, culturally disembodied phenomenon is scrutinized and criticized by many in the social sciences. The particular link between secularism and Christianity is explored by philosophical and historical approaches other than Taylor’s, which offer a critique of universalist claims of the secular. Marcel Gauchet, for instance, depicted the ways secularism is transformed from within Christianity. His approach to secularism, critical of universalist claims, opened up a realm of plurality in the societal sphere. The neutrality claims of secularism have also been criticized by Etienne Balibar, who illustrated the Catholic underpinnings of secularism, which he named “catho-laïcité.” Talal Asad’s work on the formations of the secular offers a radical twist on and criticism of the universal claims of the secular underlying the power of the European states in their relation with Muslim migration. Non-Western forms of secularism, including different models of secular authoritarianism or pluralism, such as Turkish and Indian, are also subject to new comparative research and attention, bringing to the academic agenda the multiple workings of the secular in non-Western contexts.

How does a Muslim experience of secularity transform and question our understanding of the secular age? How can one go beyond the limits of the local, particular qualifications and religious boundaries and address critiques of the “common” knowledge of secularism? The question is, who has access to the “universal”—what kind of agencies are considered to be bound by a particular culture and locality and what kind are considered to bear a universal significance? In other words, the taxonomies between the universal and the particular are not power-free, autonomous domains of knowledge. 

tiques of secularism therefore necessitate bringing into the picture those voices, practices, and experiences that are classified as particularistic, religious, traditional, that are not in conformity with the universal norms of secular modernity. My suggestion for reading the secular in relation to Islam is drawn not from totally outside Islam but, on the contrary, from close encounters, confrontations, and copenetrations of Islam and secularity. I focus on the interdependence of the two, rather than setting apart a particular tradition that is supposed to be authentically different from or immune to the “secular age,” and propose a reading of secularity by means of a displacement of the perspective toward Islam.

One cannot but be reminded of the fact that the renewal of interest in secularism owes much empirically to the introduction of Islam into the picture. Religious claims of Muslims living in Europe invigorated the debates on secularism. As a result, European secularity and religious Islam can no longer be thought of as separate from and indifferent to each other; the two are becoming closely interrelated and mutually transformed in the present day. Some aspects of (Western) secularism come to our attention only if we bring into the picture European Muslim perspectives. In other words, the contemporary powers of the secular are not working in mono-civilizational terms; they have become a matter of inter-civilizational conversation.

The headscarf debate illustrates the ways in which secularity is debated in inter-civilizational terms. This debate has occupied a central place mainly in two countries, Turkey and France, two secular republics that have radically

---

5 The notions “secular,” “secularism,” “laïcité,” and “secularization” concern different meanings and historical processes. Talal Asad refers to “secular” as an epistemic category and to “secularism” as a political doctrine, and searches for the connections between the two. Secularity is linked to Charles Taylor’s notion of the “immanent frame”; namely, it provides an unformulated background to our thinking that makes us believe that the secular order is given, and therefore it appears to us as natural. French “laïcité” and Turkish “laikkı” are mainly approached as particular forms of political secularism that are assertive and exclusionary practices of the religious. “Secularization” refers to a long-term societal process through which the domain of religion is withdrawn from the realm of everyday life, changing practices of art, sexuality, and rationality. Secularization and modernization were thought to be inseparable and universal formations—an equation that today is open to increasing criticism. For a very elaborate approach to the variety of theories, historical meanings, and Western/non-Western trajectories of secularity, see Philip S. Gorski and Ateş Altııordu, “After Secularization?” Annual Review of Sociology 34 (March 29, 2008): 55–85.

different historical trajectories and patterns of secularism. The Turkish heritage of political authoritarianism and the role of the army in secular politics bear a different weight from the legacy of individual freedom and liberties that has shaped the history of France. The place of Islam is not symmetrical at all in the two cases: Turkey is a Muslim-majority country, whereas France is a Muslim-migrant one. Historical (repressed) memories are also very different: the transition from the multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire to a Turkish Sunni majority in the building of a nation-state created a heavy legacy of the loss of cosmopolitanism and acts of ethnic cleansing; in France, it is the unacknowledged legacy of the colonial past that underpins the present relations of French society with its Muslim migrants. French and Turkish patterns of laïcité are compared and contrasted mainly as state secularisms. The varying degrees of tolerance for religious plurality and the nations’ respective tendencies for exclusionary, assertive, if not authoritarian politics of laïcité are treated comparatively in the recent literature.

Turkish secularism is often depicted as an authoritarian derivative of French laïcité, measured in terms of its gaps, inconsistencies, and deficiencies with regard to the ideal model of French secularism. Seyla Benhabib’s way of interpreting Jacques Derrida’s notion of iteration is useful here in going beyond such reductionism, because in the process of repeating a term or a concept, we never simply produce a replica of the original usage; every iteration transforms the original meaning and adds new meanings to it. As such, the French notion of laïcité becomes laiklik in Turkish. The use of the same notion with a slight change of accent points to a process of iteration in which the workings of the secular power go beyond imitations and add new meanings, discourses, images, and practices.

By coupling the incomparable—Turkish and French secularism—one is invited to engage in an interdependent mirror reading of the two instead of measuring the gap between them or the deficiencies of the former in the


ideal image called ‘French exceptionalism.’ Following the questions raised by Taylor, one can go beyond the political level of comparing state secularisms and understand the ways that (voluntary) secularism takes place at the level of presentation of the (‘civilized’) self and the phenomenology of everyday modern life. The headscarf debate draws into our view the importance of space, material culture, bodily habitus, gender, and sexuality—the implicit powers of European secularity.

The Refashioning of Secularity: The Headscarf Debate

During the headscarf debate that occupied the forefront of the French public scene in 2003 and 2004, one often heard the phrase “Secularism cannot be reduced to a piece of cloth.” This expression conveyed the resentment and apprehension of those who were witnessing a debate that had started with the religious claims of some female Muslim migrant students to cover their heads while attending public schools. Progressively it has been transformed into a more general debate on the meanings of French laïcité, an issue that was thought to be confined to regulations in the public schools but that later included hospitals and prisons and ended up as a debate on the secular values and foundations of the public sphere in general.

For many, secularism cannot be “reduced” to the headscarf issue because the claims over the headscarf appear to be a minor, trivial issue compared with the long-term historical heritage, philosophical definitions, and juridical underpinnings of French laïcité as a shared social value. Many feared that opening secularism to a public debate would mean giving up cultural singularity, referred to as “French exceptionalism.” Secularism is understood as a

9 “On ne peut reduire la laïcité à un bout de tissu.” The first debate on the Islamic headscarf took place in 1989, in Creil (a little town close to Paris), when three young female students came to school wearing scarves and were refused entry by the school authorities. See Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, Le foulard et la république (Paris: La Découverte, 1995). During the first debate, a regulation was issued by the minister of education, François Bayrou (called the circulaire Bayrou), that banned students from wearing “ostentatious” religious signs in public schools. The word “ostentatious” reappeared ten years later, in the fall 2003 debate. But the decision of whether to exclude the girls was then left to the interpretation of the school authorities.

The public debate on the same issue that took place in fall 2003, in a much more passionate, widely shared, and long-lasting way, ended in the passage of legislation on March 15, 2004, that banned the Islamic headscarf, along with other religious signs, from the public schools. A semantic shift occurred between the two debates, from “headscarf affair” to “Islamic veiling,” indicating a move toward a more religious designation and the presentation of Muslims in France.
principle of the French republic that guarantees the “neutrality” of the public sphere, in which citizens are expected to bracket their ethnic, religious, or class origins. The public school represents the pillar of secular republicanism, a place where, ideally speaking, “particularistic” identities, whether they stem from regional, cultural, religious, or ethnic differences, are to be replaced by a common language, memory, and education. Both instructors and students are expected to be distanced from their traditional, particularistic differences in entering the classroom and to embrace French secular values of citizenship, prerequisites for freedom, critical thinking, and dialogue. The way Islam appeared in the public schools—namely, gendered and covered, which made religious-ethnic difference visible—disrupted the republican picture of French secularism. It meant the French republic had failed to integrate its migrants and accommodate Muslim difference. Finally, the phrase “Secularism cannot be reduced to a piece of cloth” conveyed the commitment and determination of the French not to yield secularism to new religious claims, especially not to girls who, by adopting the headscarf, contest not only the secular neutrality of the public schools but also gender equality.

For more than two years the headscarf debate occupied a central place in the public arena and fueled the collective passions of French society in defense of secularism. Commissions were created, with politicians, feminists, experts on Islam, historians, legislators, and spokespersons of migrant communities, to investigate the state of secularism in France. The public, the commissions, the media, and the government all converged in the view that

10 The Stasi Commission, named for its head, then the minister of education, was to examine the application of the principle of secularism in the republic. The status of the commission and the role it played in the public debate require particular attention. It indicated the presence of the state and its way of intervention by nominating a sort of “enlightened public,” the members of which are called “the wise people” (les sages). Among the members were public servants, experts on Islam, historians, sociologists, businessmen, representatives of nongovernmental associations, and interfaith personalities. After five months of intensive work and a series of semiprivate hearings, the commission published a report, “Laïcité et République” (December 11, 2003), and presented its recommendations, which had been adopted almost unanimously (one member, the historian and specialist in French secularism Jean Bobérot, dissented). The commission served by and large to legitimate the law to ban the headscarf for the enforcement of secularism. But the report acknowledged changes in the sociological makeup of France caused by migration and by the presence of Muslims and advised an opening up (to a certain extent) of the interpretation of secularism to a multicultural reality. It proposed, for instance, that the calendar be changed to include a major vacation for each monotheistic religion in France. However, such propositions were dismissed both by the public at large and by the lawmakers. For a discussion of the report’s presentation of a pluralistic opening in the interpretation of French laïcité, see Immanuel Wallerstein, “Render unto Caesar?: The Dilemmas of a Multicultural World,” Sociology of Religion 46, 2 (Summer 2005): 121–133.
French secularism was endangered and that a new law was required (enacted on March 15, 2004) to prohibit any sign or clothing that indicated a student’s religious affiliation in public schools. The law banned all religious signs that were to be considered “conspicuous,” such as Christian crosses and Jewish yarmulkes as well as the Islamic headscarf. Although the law mentioned all “conspicuous signs” without singling out the headscarf, everyone agreed that it was mainly designed to discourage Muslim girls from wearing headscarves.¹¹

John Bowen’s book *Why the French Don’t like Headscarves* attempts to answer this puzzling question and meticulously details the various debates that led to the lawmaking process and the ban. He argues that secularism is not a fixed, well-defined legal and cultural framework but a “narrative” framework that permits public figures—politicians, journalists, and public intellectuals—to debate what laïcité should be and how Muslims ought to act.¹² His work helps us understand the power of the secular discourses and the fear of political Islam in contemporary French society. He calls for acknowledgment of the importance of the multicultural challenges to French society and the need for the republic to develop a better acceptance of migrants and their religious signs without stigmatizing or excluding them. The confinement of the analysis to the national scale stresses not only French singularity but also the role of the state. The public sphere is taken to be a given entity granted by French republicanism, not a secular space that is transformed and transgressed by Muslims. Bowen’s analysis is in line with the politics of integration and accommodation of differences. In a way he argues that the potentialities of French singularity can also work for migrants, as they give up some of the troublesome differences of Islam to become part of the republic.

In her book on the politics of the veil, Joan W. Scott engages a more argumentative and critical approach in regard to the French notion of laïcité that works as an exclusionary force for Muslim migrants from the public sphere. She argues that the new version of French laïcité, hardened and framed in

¹¹ The ban has been enforced in the public schools without major opposition from Muslim girls. This leads many to think that the headscarf is no longer an issue in French society and the new legislation helped to resolve it. I think we need to pursue a closer investigation of the consequences of the law on the educational choices of Muslim girls and whether it leads to silence or helps to express their perceptions of self, religion, and French citizenship.

opposition to Islam, became “an ideological tool in an anti-Muslim campaign.” She criticizes the proponents of the headscarf ban in the schools, for whom “integration is a prerequisite for education,” which is at odds with the French historical tradition that the school produces integration by means of shared experience of education, where some commonality is created. In her view, banning headscarves in public schools makes the point clear that only one notion of personhood is possible and assimilation is the only route to membership in the nation. Thus, one cannot be both Muslim and French. The notion of personhood includes that of womanhood as well in setting the model of citizenship. Scott acknowledges the realm of sexuality as a battleground between secular and Islamic conceptions of selfhood and points to the contradictions in Western feminism, which she calls the “psychology of denial.” She criticizes the universal claims of French secularism and feminism that represent them as superior and “natural,” and attempts to open up a space for recognition of religious and cultural differences.

The expression “Secularism is not to be reduced to a piece of cloth” was revealed to be false and true at the same time. False, because the debates on secularism became a matter of clothing, body, and gender. True, because by enacting a law, French society at large expressed its determination to maintain and reinforce the principles of republican secularism. But on the whole, the headscarf debate and the law signified a turning point for French secularism, leading to a critical review of its own understanding and self-presentation in its encounter with Islam. Islam became an active factor in redefining French self-presentation. By the same token, the defense of women’s rights and gender equality were placed as core values of republican secularism. The debate also reconfigured the feminist field in France: the majority of French feminists defended the headscarf ban and aligned with republican values, while a minority stood up against the exclusion of girls from the schools (defending “one school for all”). The novelty was that new faces of migrant women appeared in public, voicing the struggle of young secular Muslim women for gender equality and secularism against their own oppressive communities in the banlieues (the movement of “ni putes ni soumises,” “neither prostitutes nor submissives”). In distinction from these “acceptable”

14 Ibid., 102.
15 Ibid., 135.
voices of migrant women, a “subaltern” movement of French migrants emerged and took a critical stand against the republican legacy of secular feminism and the colonial past. They labeled themselves autochthones of the republic (“les indigènes de la république”). Thus, the Islamic headscarf debate (although there was more consensus than debate) calls for rethinking secularism from a new perspective. The headscarf became a central marker in changing and reshaping perceptions and definitions of secularism, feminism, and the colonial legacy in France.

The headscarf became such a powerful marker because it condensed in one single icon the multilayered realm of conflict around gender, space, and intercultural issues (and, more precisely, civilisational issues, to the extent that the cultural difference is external to the Western model of enlightenment). The symbol draws attention to a strong visual aspect of the Islamic religion, both in ways in which it is personalized and embodied and in ways it is communicated and perceived. The notion of “conspicuous” that is used in the wording of the French law illustrates the importance of the visual aspect and the intercultural discord in the creation of a public. The notion also conveys ambiguity in terms of intersubjective communication: where to draw the boundaries between a conspicuous and a discreet sign (for instance, crosses and the hands of Fatima are allowed if they are small enough, but Jewish yarmulkes and Sikh turbans are not)—that is, which religious signs and clothing are to be considered conspicuous, and according to whose gaze? A religious sign that is familiar to a given community and therefore “invisible” to their eye can become noticeable, “conspicuous,” and disturbing in the eyes of the members of a different religion. The personal meanings attached to signs and clothing may differ from its public perceptions; similarly, public connotations of religious signs can impinge on self-perceptions. The ambiguities and discussions around the notion of “conspicuous” attest to the

16 Emmanuel Terray qualified the debate as a “collective hysteria” to the extent that it became contagious, meaning that all positions went in the same direction, in favor of legislation to ban the headscarf. See Emmanuel Terray, “L’hystérie politique,” in Le Foulard islamique en questions, ed. C. Nordmann (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2004), 103–118.

17 For instance, classrooms were secularized in France a long time ago (by what is known as the Jules Ferry laws); however, in Germany the presence of a Christian cross on classroom walls became an issue when it became “visible” in a multireligious migrant country. For a comparative analysis of the debates, see Schirin Amir Moazami, “Discourses and Counter Discourses: The Islamic Headscarf in the French and German Public Spheres,” doctoral diss., European University Institut, Florence, 2004.
importance of the visual, symbolic, and communicative aspects in debating the different meanings and powers of the secular.

As an outcome of this confrontational encounter, both French secularism and the Islamic headscarf, in different ways, ceased to be a monocultural issue. The making of a law guaranteed that the Islamic headscarf is imprinted in the French collective memory; it became an intrinsic part of French history, a “French possession.” On the other hand, as the Islamic headscarf entered the public realm of European societies, it ceased to be an exclusively Muslim issue, limited to a Muslim-majority country or to a region. Thereby it signifies that European Muslims as a minority group living in a secular (and Christian) environment face a set of new issues (interfaith relations, modes of gender sociability, dietary habits, and construction of mosques, use of cemeteries, and so on) that are not raised in a similar fashion, if at all, in national Muslim-majority contexts. Muslim migrants are called to (re)think about their religion and faith from the vantage point of their experiences as European citizens. Similarly, European secularism is refashioned in confrontation with issues raised by Muslims. Accounts of secularism limited to genealogies of the Christian religion and Christendom fall short of grasping the contemporary forms of intercultural intercourse.

The Civilizing Mission of the Secular: Turkish Gendered Laiklik

Turkish secularism hints at the ways in which the power of the secular works as part of a “civilizing mission” that operates at the level of everyday life practices and changes material culture, corporal appearances, spatial divisions, and gender sociability. Although Turkish secularism, laiklik, is mainly seen in its political and authoritarian aspects, it provides us with one of the most resourceful historical examples of how the modern secular is indigenized and acted out in changing Muslim definitions of self, ethics, and aesthetics. The Kemalist reforms exemplify the formations of the secular Muslim, namely Muslim habitations and iterations of the secular in a noncolonial context that is characterized by voluntary and authoritarian adaptations of the secular.


19 However, one should not think that the historical genealogy of the secular in Turkey starts with Atatürk republicanism; some aspects of the secular are part of the Ottoman state tradition and...
The gendered dimension of secularism has been an intrinsic feature of Turkish modernization from its very beginnings in the Ottoman period, when different literary and political currents of thought were in favor of education of girls, free love, gender sociability, and the visibility of women in public as against the religious and traditional morals of society, which confined women to interior spaces and established roles and imposed gender segregation and polygamy. Turkish laiklik meant that the republican state had a strong will to endorse a public sphere where religion would be absent and women would be present. The reforms of the republic, whether they provided legal rights (with the abolition of the Sharia law and the adoption of a civil family code), political rights (women’s right to vote and eligibility), educational rights (coeducation), or European clothing habits (taking off the veil, but also banning the fez for men), all underpinned the Turkish way of equating secularism and the “civilized” person, embodied by women’s rights and visibility from the very beginning of the republic.

The powers of the secular can be traced in its capacity to develop a set of disciplinary practices, both corporal and spatial, that are inseparable from the formations of the secular self. Secularism is about state politics, lawmaking, and constitutional principles, but foremost it permeates and establishes the rhythm of a phenomenology of everyday life practices. Secularism is not a “neutral,” power-free space and a set of abstract principles; it is embodied in people’s agencies and imaginaries. The powers of the secular can be traced in its capacity to develop a set of disciplinary practices, both corporal and spatial, that are inseparable from the formations of the secular self. Turkish laiklik illustrates well the didactic aspect of secularism: secularism as a learning process, as inhabiting a new space and learning new body techniques, forms a habitus of a secular way of life (considered to be a higher form of life, because of its equation with Western civilization). Ernest Gellner has referred to Turkish secularism as a “didactic secularism” in the sense that it was imposed by state authoritarianism. But it is also didactic in the sense that it becomes a learned practice, a habitus to be performed by new elites, men and

---

Islamic historical legacy. In order to locate the origins of Turkish republican ideology in the Ottoman past and to correct dualistic representations of the secular and the religious, see Şükrü Hanioğlu, A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

women who owe their status to the republican schools (that is, secular elites have been formed by means of the state monopoly over the educational system and the adoption of the Latin script in 1928). Secularism designates a habitus in the sense that it is a set of performative techniques and discursive practices (including speaking and writing in modern Turkish, from which Arabic and Persian influences have been eliminated) that are learned and interiorized; but it also designates a “colonized” lifeworld in the sense that it frames these realms in reference to Western notions of truth, ethics, and aesthetics.

The republic created its own secular elites but also its own secular spaces—schools, but also opera and ballet houses, concert halls, ballrooms (mainly in Ankara, the capital city, which seeks to distinguish itself from the cosmopolitan Istanbul), all the landmarks of a new way of life, women’s visibility in public life, and social mixing of men and women. Learning how to inhabit these new spaces—husband and wife walking hand in hand; man and woman shaking hands, dancing at balls, and dining together—characterizes acquiring a new habitus required by secular modernity. The modern secular life becomes a sign of prestige through its performative everyday practices, pictorial representations, and material culture.

The emergence of Islam in the post-1980 period addresses a challenge to the hegemonic control of the secular over public spaces and personal habitus. Muslim students’ desire to wear headscarves on university campuses meant that the secular was transgressed by the gendered religious. The Turkish and French headscarf debates, in spite of the differences, have some commonalities to the extent that in both cases gender equality and secular spaces framed the debate. The ban, both in Turkey and France, revealed the unwritten secular laws and social imaginaries that governed the “public” spaces. Spaces such as schools, universities, hospitals, pools, and the parliament became controversial once the secular rules had been broken by the transgression caused by religious signs and pious practices. The secular background picture of the public sphere came to the forefront both in Turkey and in France. In both

21 Turkey’s ban on headscarves at universities dates back to the 1980s but was significantly tightened after February 28, 1997, when army generals with public support ousted a government they deemed too Islamist. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) attempted to lift the ban, a move that was cited as evidence when a closure case was filed against the party on grounds that it had become a focal point of “antisecular activities.”
cases secularism endorsed a role of “assimilation” of Muslims into the Western lifeworld, a civilizing mission, and compulsory learning of the disciplinary practices of the secular in the public spaces. And in both cases religious visibility and femininity defied the hegemony of the secular over definitions of self, sexuality, and space.

Secular and Islamic: Spatial Transgressions

The threshold for the tolerable is framed differently in the French and Turkish contexts. When and how does a religious sign cease to be “discreet” and acceptable and catch the eye, thus turning into a “conspicuous” sign that is troubling for public order? When does the headscarf cease to be perceived as a symbol of “authentic faith” and become a political symbol that provokes a public debate? The head covering of the peasant, the working-class migrant woman, or the grandmother is considered as a symbol of either faith or tradition and therefore is acceptable and invisible, whereas the young woman’s headscarf unsettles the secular divisions between pious and traditional, public and modern, and becomes “conspicuous”—that is, visible to the public eye. It provokes powerful emotions of the secular, anger and aversion to the extent that the temporal comfort (religion as a relic from the past) and spatial separations (personal and public) between secular and religious disappear. Today’s covered women, as compared with women in the past, who were segregated in private, are both pious and public. They become visible in leaving the traditional interior spaces reserved for women and entering public spaces such as schools, universities, and parliament, namely the spaces reserved for the secular elite. Women’s move represents a spatial transgression for both the religious and the secular. Women who are proponents of the headscarf distance themselves from secular models of feminist emancipation but also seek autonomy from male interpretations of Islamic precepts. They represent a rupture of the frame both with secular female self-definitions and religious male prescriptions.22 They want to have access to secular education, follow new life trajectories that are not in conformity with traditional gender roles, and yet fashion and assert a new pious self. The frontiers between the

traditional and the pious are unsettled, as is that between the secular and the public.

The symbol of veiling needs to be readjusted, given its meanings in the past and its contemporary appropriations by new profiles of Muslim women. The symbol of veiling is undergoing a change to the extent that it is adopted by Muslim women who are overtly and assertively pious and public. The veiling is in the process of being changed from a sign of stigma and inferiority into a sign of empowerment, in some cases by means of access to political power; a sign of distinction and prestige, by means of acquisition of social and cultural capital; and a sign of new aesthetics for Muslim women, by means of fashion production. It is certainly a challenge to secular conceptions of female emancipation, but also to male Islam, which identifies the veil with submission to its own authority. But at the same time, the transformation of the veil from a symbol of faith, religion, and stigma into a sign of power, prestige, and aesthetics calls for a composition of the religious and secular divide in new ways.

One can depict this process in the Turkish context as the formation of Islamic counterelites, which in many ways mirror the republican secular elites. The making of the elites follows similar paths: access (especially for girls) to education (both secular and religious); the unveiling and reveiling of women; the disciplinary practices of the secular versus religious habitus; transgression of gender roles from the interior/private realm to the exterior/public domain. Muslim women cover their bodies yet become visible to the public eye, and hence unsettle the religious norms of modesty and the secular definitions of the feminist self. They are searching for ways to combine piousness and publicness, Muslim and modern at the same time (either by double assertion or by double negation, or neither/nor), and hence transforming the meanings of both.

Islam becomes a source of capital for the ascension of those social groups and social classes that were deprived of social and cultural recognition in the past. Their entry into the spaces reserved for the secular middle classes (uni-

versities, parliament, and leisure and consumption places of distinction such as beaches, concert halls, and commercial malls) disturb the unwritten laws that exclude the religious. The refusal to lift the ban on the headscarf in Turkish universities and the French lawmakers' process to ban the headscarf in the public schools both illustrate the sensorial, emotional, and visceral aspects of the secular imaginaries. In spite of the fact that new legislation in Turkey to lift the ban on wearing the headscarf in the universities was formulated not in terms of freedom of religious faith but in the name of equal access of all to higher education and lack of discrimination, and that it therefore was in conformity with European norms and dress codes, it provoked fear and anger among secular women, the public, the media, and the establishment.26 Ending the ban is feared to provide a first step that will pave the way for the escalation of Muslim claims and the spread of the headscarf beyond the universities to public schools and parliament and among public servants and professionals. The same fear of the escalation of Islamic claims and visibility from public schools to hospitals and to public life in general was expressed in France. The Islamic visibilities in public provoked secular anxieties and mobilized feminist agencies. The headscarf ban revealed the implicit secular norms and imaginaries of the public spaces that were taken for granted as the background picture.

In a similar fashion, public demonstrations in Turkey against the legislation to lift the headscarf ban signaled the transformation of Turkish secularism from state politics to street politics. The form of secularism that has been implemented as a principle of the republican state has been widely considered as a “top-down” ideology, foreign in its roots (inspired by French laïcité) and destined to disappear if not backed up by the army’s power. But in the past three decades, secularism came to be expressed in women’s groups and associations advocating the defense of a “modern secular way of life.”27 Public demonstrations during the summers of 2007 and 2008 involved millions and spread from one city to another. The abundance of national flags and the


27 The Association for the Support of a Modern Lifestyle, (in Turkish, Çağdaş Yaşam Destekleme Derneği) was created in 1989 by leading intellectual and professional women and became a fervent defender of secularism and gender equality. The association played a crucial role against lifting the ban on wearing an Islamic headscarf in the universities.
slogans that were widely used in these demonstrations signified the state-oriented and nationalist features of Turkish secularism. But they also meant a new secular protest movement in the streets. The secular formed a mise-en-scène by numbers, by masses getting together, by symbols (oversized flags acquiring a new popularity), by photographs and the sayings of Atatürk, but also by new modes of secular clothing for women (in tune with the colors of the Turkish flag: red and white miniskirts, ties, and caps), accompanied by music and slogans. Secularism was performed in the public collectively and visually; the numbers mattered, to display that secularism was not in the hands of a minority; a new market of icons and clothing attempted to create a secular fashion; and the use of Atatürk’s pictures, deeds, and words provided a frame for commemorating Turkish secularism.28 In many similar ways secularism was mirroring and competing with Islam to create a repertoire of action. One can speak of a two-way transgression; while the religious broke the rules and moved into secular spaces of the republic, the secular descended from state to street politics.

In both France and Turkey, cultural confrontations and emotional tensions between secular and religious groups are unfolding in the realm of the actions of everyday life, involving a tacit process of mirroring and competing with each other. Both for the secular and for the religious, visual signs, gendered performances, and spatial divisions become the battleground for self-distinction and discipline.

European Secularity and Islamic Self

The powers of both secularism and Islam cease to be bound to given national state formations, distinctive civilizations, but become part of a cross-civilizational and transnational European public. The European public sphere cannot be thought of as the extension and addition of national publics, as a national public written large; genealogical, historical readings of its formation do not capture the present-day encounters between different language communities, cultural codes, ethnicities, and religions. On the other hand, readings of Islam confined to the national politics of migration or, in an op-

---

posite move, linked to global jihadist movements do not render the ways in which Islam becomes European.

The negative aspects of geographical and cultural displacements are often highlighted in the case of migration and the politicization of Islam. Conditions of migration are depicted in terms of economic precariousness, cultural alienation, and personal frustration caused by deficiencies of integration, leading to inward-looking communities, particularly ghettolike suburbs, which are taken to be the home of insecurity and the political radicalization of Islam. Islam is under the impact of dynamics of social mobility and modernity to the extent that it is no longer exclusively a reference for those groups who are attached to a place, to a territory, and to traditions. Olivier Roy points to the “de-territorialization” of Muslims, those who follow a global trajectory in their strategies and formations of neofundamentalism. But there is another aspect of social mobility that is often neglected in approaches to Islam yet is crucial to understanding the formation of new Muslim subjectivities. Social mobility is not only deracinating and alienating; it also opens up a realm for the elaboration of improvisations, adaptations, and inventions of subjectivities and a sense of belonging.

Concomitant with the move into modern life spaces, religion and traditions cease to be prearranged entities; Islam no longer appears as a norm that is taken for granted, transmitted from one generation to another, socially embedded and institutionalized, but on the contrary faces discontinuities in its transmission and claims of authority. Islam, a binding force among those who belonged to a locality, to a particular confession, and to a nation-state, becomes a reference going beyond the local frontiers, providing an imaginary bond between Muslims, and enabling Muslim self-fashioning.

In exploring the literary genealogies of Renaissance self-fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt draws on the sociological work of Daniel Lerner to remind us of the positive and complex relations between mobility and the elaboration of modern personality. Greenblatt argues that a person’s identity, while determined by external circumstances, is subject to improvisations and hence remains partly fashionable. He views this form of mental mobility and agility (which Lerner calls “empathy,” namely the capacity to project oneself into

30 Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958). This book was subject to criticism for the outmoded duplication of binary categories of Western modernity and the traditional Middle East.
another person’s situation) as characteristic of the rise of modern individuals. However, Lerner’s notion of empathy, as an act of “imaginative generosity,” disinterested and exempt from the exercise of Western power, is incomplete. For Greenblatt, modern individuation is not boundless, and the fashioning of the self takes place through mechanisms of “discipline, restraint and a partial suppression of the personality.”

We can speak of Islam as providing the mechanisms of discipline, restraint, and empowerment for a new self-fashioning of Muslims; they adapt and improvise their faith under new conditions of social mobility and cultural displacement. There is an element of “invention” (of traditions) in the self-fashioning process that is not separated from disciplinary practices of self-restraint (control of sexuality, mind, and self, called “nafs” in Islam). The notion of self-fashioning helps us move beyond the category of “identity” that remains equated with authenticity and emancipation. The notion of self-fashioning is helpful in conveying the visual and corporal aspects of personal identity; additionally, self-fashioning resonates with the disciplinary powers of both the secular and the religious idioms. The headscarf expresses the self-fashioning of Muslim girls with disciplinary categories of Islam, but for them faith is not a prearranged category and enters into the domain of improvisation, adaptation, and invention. It is a sign of self-restraint (hijab means modest behavior and dress) and self-fashioning, including, in literal terms, the production of Islamic fashion.

The “faith” cannot be taken for granted, as if the Islamic faith were carried in the luggage of the migrants as they arrive from villages and small towns in their home countries. Social mobility, on the contrary, means distancing oneself from one’s country of origin and living under conditions of displacement in which the ties with the traditional, institutional forms of religiosity are cut off. Social groups that are undergoing social mobility are those that distance themselves from the family background, local authorities, and institutionalized traditions in which Islam was a prearranged norm. Piety is established not as a once-and-for-all category, handed down from one generation to another, or carried from the hometown, but in movement, in improvisation, and in acquisition through religious knowledge and self-fashioning. Islam becomes part of “disembedded,” imagined forms of horizontal solidar-
ity. Charles Taylor describes social disembeddedness as a condition for a different kind of social imaginary—that is, “horizontal forms of social imaginary in which people grasp themselves and great number of others as existing and acting simultaneously” (VR, 83).

In contexts of migration, Islam becomes part of an “intellectual learning” endeavor rather than learning by recitation and imitation from previous generations. Contemporary actors in Islam very often make the distinction between those who are Muslim by tradition and those who are Muslim by education, valorizing the second. Acquiring religious knowledge means learning how to interpret the Quran; achieving fluency in the Arabic language, but also engaging in collective prayers and conversations as a bond-making practice (sohbet); and building a community of believers. The acquisition of Islamic knowledge combines religious norms of virtue and disciplinary practices of body; praying, dietary habits, and sexual modesty become practices that require continuous surveillance and rigorous application in a secular environment. Learning Islam by attending seminars and youth institutions but also by means of performative practices requires an alternative space—an alternative to both secular hegemonic and traditional religious “counterpublics.” Pious Muslims have to deal on an everyday basis with the incongruities between their faith and their secular public lives. In a Muslim-minority context, everything that is considered “natural”—for instance, the ritual of the ablution before prayer—necessitates a particular reserved “space,” and the purification ritual becomes a complicated matter in its absence and disturbing in its visibility in public restrooms. Similarly, praying five times a day in a society organized according to secular time and in working spaces with instrumental rationality brings forth the question of praying rooms; use of secular spaces for religious observance will also bring conspicuous, disturbing visibility. While praying, a Muslim woman covers her hair; if she does so in a workplace, she becomes instantly visible, recognizable as a “Muslim.” There are therefore strategies for visibility as well as for dissimulation of


33 For an elaboration of the notions of space, publicness, and counterpublics in the cultural politics of displaying differences, see Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone, 2002).
faith. The Islamic covering is one distinctive representation of piety that creates immediate recognition for male and female citizens. But there are pious Muslim women who do not adopt the veil but for whom the relation to a secular way of life—modes of address with non-Muslim men, dating, and alcohol consumption—becomes fuzzy in the absence of a clear-cut frontier, a visible religious marker.

The public sphere becomes the site where the importance of the visual is played out. Especially where issues of Islamic religion and gender are in question, the gaze and spatial conventions acquire a greater salience in mediating power relations. When Muslim women cross the borders between inside and outside, the arousal of multiple senses—sight, smell, touch, and voice—and desires requires the preservation of decency and control of public morality. The visibility of Muslim women in public life means crossing and transgressing the interior, intimate, secret, gendered space, forbidden to foreign males’ gaze (mahrem). Veiling suggests the importance of the ocular (avoiding the gaze, casting down one’s eyes). The notion of sexual modesty (edep) underpins the Muslim self-fashioning. Such Islamic behavior—the aesthetics of edep, the valorization of the mahrem with retained body exposure and self-protection, controlled gender sociability, and gender-differentiated modes of address—enact ways of being Muslim in secular publics. These behaviors are not alien to Muslim memory and culture. They are rooted in past traditions and memory, in the religious habitus. But they are not simple conventions that have always been there and that are unconsciously handed down from generation to generation. The habitus provides, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, a source of improvisations; it allows for a process of continual correction and adjustment. Islamic public performances reinvent religious traditions, correct and improvise them in counterdistinction to secular norms and disciplinary practices.

We can speak of what Victor Turner calls “performative reflexivity,” “a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members, acting representatively, turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, and codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which

---

34 Jouili, “Devenue pieuse.”
make up their public 'selves.'” Islamic performance has a reflexive character to the extent that the codes and symbols embedded in the religious culture are critically appropriated and distanced from the traditional culture. It also has a reflexive feature in being engaged with a series of issues that are raised when one is a Muslim in a secular and Christian-majority society, ranging from spaces for practicing faith to public modes of self-presentation, sociability of men and women to competition with secular definitions of liberty and femininity. Muslims enter into common spaces of everyday life experience with Europeans that in turn calls for mutual transformations and reflexivity—a reflexivity that is translated not only in discursive terms but also in the transformation of the material culture.

One can suggest that European Islam is following similar dynamics to what Charles Taylor calls the post-Durkheimian situation, in which faith is not connected, or is only weakly connected, to a national political identity. But as the author argues, the human aspiration to religion does not disappear, and does not become a trivialized and utterly privatized spirituality. Similarly, Islam offers a sense of “believing,” yet without “belonging” either to a national community or to an institutionalized religion. Islam becomes personally pious and publicly visible, disembedded from its institutionalized forms but more voluntary and mental; it is learned, performed, and imagined socially. Hence Islam is shaped by the secular age. As Taylor argues, religious and antireligious people in modernity have more assumptions in common than they often realize. But in distinction from what Charles Taylor calls the “expressive revolution,” in which the ethic of authenticity is accompanied by a sexual revolution and undercuts the close connections of religious faith with a certain sexual morality, Islamic habitus brings forth alternative notions of self, morality, and piousness. That is why the discord with Islam is carried at the forefront by secular feminists, by those who are committed to the imperatives of the expressive revolution and sexual revolution, the cultural legacies of the 1968 movement. The Islamic presence in Europe defies the secular norms of individuality, gender equality, and sexuality. Mono-civilizational readings of both the secular and the religious fail to account for this ongoing process of mutual transformation.