Introduction
The principles of ‘equality’ and ‘difference’, two seemingly opposite principles, have been influential in shaping our modern social imaginations. On the one hand, modern nation-states homogenise and unify different ethnicities, cultures and languages, while on the other recognition and representation of differences becomes a test for democratic mediation. How can states strive for equality among citizens without imposing uniformity? How can equality be enhanced without stigmatising the differences among peoples? Can we live together, being equal and yet different (Touraine 1999)? These questions are not only addressed within the philosophical and political realm, but have also been raised by cultural and social movements that have been shaping the social make-up of European societies since the post-1968 period. The counter-cultural movements of the 1970s have brought issues of gender, race and ethnicity to the public realm, elaborated on the theme of difference and created a politics of identity against a politics of homogenisation and assimilation. The motto ‘black is beautiful’ inspired many social movements, including post-1968 feminism, whose proponents struggled against assimilation with masculine values and ‘humanist’ universalism. Protagonists of multiculturalism followed these ideas and tried to provide a political framework that recognised and included minority rights, cultural differences and ethnic claims within European democracies. In different ways, both feminism and multiculturalism have addressed a criticism of the politics of assimilation and cultural homogeneity and have changed our ‘universalist’ conceptions of gender, race and ethnicity. During the last three decades, however, the public controversies that took place around Muslim difference have raised new questions and put to the test established frames of thought. To what extent do multiculturalism and feminism fall short of providing an
inclusive scheme and to what extent do they have the potential to make us re-examine religious and cultural differences?

The present-day claims of Muslim actors bring to the fore of the European public agenda issues crystallised around gender, religion and sexuality. Women’s covering (veiling) that makes Islamic difference visible especially disturbs and challenges the established norms of European feminism. Secular feminism and some trends of multiculturalism not only resent Muslim difference and fail to include Muslims in their agenda, but also seek confrontation with Islam. Some protagonists of multiculturalism and feminism are confrontational with Islamic mores, which in turn secures them greater visibility and audibility, not to mention popularity amongst the European public. In this struggle with Islam, universalism gains ground against cultural relativism and gives rise to new tensions between feminists and multiculturalists.

Feminists such as Moller Okin (Moller Okin 1998), have criticised liberal multiculturalist thinkers for essentialising the notion of ‘culture’ and silencing other identity markers, such as gender, from where competing claims for recognition can be made. In spite of attempts at reconciling liberal feminism with multiculturalism (Phillips 2007; Young 1990), by underlining the multi-layered identities of members of oppressed minority groups, the dispute continues. Secular feminist voices have become prominent in European public discourses, making more complex interpretations of the relationships between gender and religion inaudible. These tensions reached their climax after 9/11, when Europe started to question its pluralist tradition and the benefits of multiculturalism altogether. The terrorist attacks that occurred in London and Spain as well as the financial crisis starting in the late 2000s have reinforced these concerns and have awakened nationalist feelings, with Muslims becoming the centre of political attention. Within these dynamics, feminist discourse has been used as a marker of an irreconcilable difference between ‘us’ (‘native white Europeans’) and ‘them’ (Muslims). In recent years, feminism and sexual liberalism have become discursive fields, on the basis of which Muslims – now identified in public discourses as Europe’s ‘others’ – can be excluded while multiculturalism has lost its impact even in countries where it used to be vibrant.

This chapter seeks to underline the shortcomings of multiculturalism and feminism as models that originally aimed at avoiding the marginalisation of minorities. We highlight the liberal roots of these two political paradigms, even though critiques from within these
traditions have also emerged. For defenders of multiculturalism in Europe, immigrants have also been the subject of attention as minority groups. Tariq Modood, for instance, has introduced the notion of ‘cultural racism’ for describing and transforming the perception of the status of Muslim minorities in the case of the UK. Such attempts, however, have dealt mainly with conditions of immigration and not with religious claims and gender issues. This chapter underlines how both Western multiculturalist and feminist theories have been derailed by the appearance of religious actors whose ways of experiencing the world fall outside traditional liberal categories.

We mostly focus in this chapter on the French case, although multiculturalism has never gained ground there as in the UK or the Netherlands (Wieviorka 2001: 110). The debates on laïcité (the ‘orthodox’ French version of secularism) in the past twenty years, however, have been particularly prominent in France and French feminism has been repeatedly mobilised in debates on the head-scarf ban in schools, and more recently in the ‘burqa/niqab’ debate. If at one point the French case was unique in Europe, nowadays this uniqueness that characterised the French approach to laïcité is spreading throughout Europe. The public debates that have emerged on the construction of minarets in Switzerland, the hijab in the Danish parliament, the construction of mosques in Italy and the accommodation of sharia practices in the UK all have this in common: the visibility of difference in public places is more and more perceived and debated as a threat to European identity.

The French universalist republican model has often been opposed to the liberal Anglo-Saxon one. By universalism, we mean a set of ideas and principles about human progress and justice rooted in the Enlightenment and destined to spread around the world. The comparison between French universalism and Anglo-Saxon liberalism has mostly led to sweeping generalisations, depicting the UK and the US as open and inclusive multicultural societies where difference has been celebrated. France, on the other hand, is perceived as an assimilationist, closed-off society in which difference has been considered as a threat to national cohesion. This binary way of describing the two models has fallen short in underlining the limits of liberal reasoning for a true politics of recognition inclusive of Muslims living in Western societies, not only as a religious minority, but also as a cultural one. The difference between French exceptionalism and Anglo-Saxon pluralism is therefore more blurred than it would seem at first sight.
This chapter is an attempt to discuss the reasons for the failure of the feminist movement and the limits of multiculturalism in producing appropriate frameworks for thinking through Islamic difference. One of the reasons that can be advanced are the secular and universalist assumptions that underpin the European traditions of feminism and multiculturalism, especially under their liberal versions. Within the liberal frame of mind, modernity is coupled with secularism and the critiques of modernity can only emerge from within. Islam appears as a relic from the past, deemed to disappear with progress. This teleological version of history describes Islam as an anachronism and denies Muslim actors’ capacity to exercise agency and be part of modernity (Göle 2005).

Other multiculturalists have underlined the limitations of such an approach to understand difference (Modood 2007; Parekh 2002; Taylor and Gutmann 1994). They have shown how contemporary liberal philosophies (Kymlicka 1995; Rawls 1999, among others) tend to perceive ‘irrationality’ in actors whose way of inhabiting the world is not guided by liberal ethics but by moral values inspired by religion. As such this chapter mostly focuses on the liberal and exclusionary tendencies of some trends of multiculturalism. It does not aim to reject multiculturalism as a whole, but rather it seeks to identify some elements of its foundations that have contributed to the erosion of its inclusive potential.

5.1 Feminism revisited in light of Islamic debates

What are the distinctive traits of feminism that can help us to rethink gender, religion and Islam from a woman’s perspective? How is it possible to recapitulate the constitutive principles of feminism of the 1970s?

The early French feminists of the 1970s advocated a feminism of difference based on identity. This movement positioned itself against the egalitarian feminism initiated by the suffragettes’ movement that had struggled for women to obtain the same rights of citizenship as men by promoting women’s access to public life as a necessary condition of emancipation. In contrast, this trend of feminism based on the recognition of women’s differences (féminisme identitaire) brought forth the consciousness that women would never be like men and would always remain ‘under man’. For ‘identitarian feminists’ who criticised the masculine bias in Freudian theory, ‘the woman was not a (hu)Man like another’ (Mossuz-Lavau and Kervasdoué...
1997). Starting with the motto ‘the personal is political’, the locus of women’s oppression was not the public realm but the personal, the self-conception-deprecation of women, and the arenas where taboos were kept secret: sexual harassment, sexuality, abortion. Consciousness-raising groups became a mode of subjective exploration of these forms of stigmatisation that were common to women’s experiences but silenced in public. Feminism brought these issues not only to the attention of women but also to the general public through women speaking out about personal experiences and breaking taboos, as in the case of abortion. For the most radical feminists, emancipation required escaping from the gaze of men and, if possible, renouncing heterosexuality. The notion of sorority was central to the struggle against competition among women and to the rediscovery of relations of solidarity. In that respect, the Eastern way of life gained popularity in the feminist imagery; ‘hamams’ in European cities were invested as privileged places to enjoy women’s sociability and bodily care. The spatial segregation of men and women became the most militant expression of feminism. In the meantime, artistic, creative and scientific fields specific to women were rediscovered. For example, Hélène Cixous researched the possibilities of finding a feminine voice in literature (Cixous 1976) and Teresa de Lauretis theorised feminine film production and analysed its semiotics (Lauretis 1984). The universalist category of ‘human’ was deconstructed to reintroduce two sexes (Fouque 2004), not only in philosophical and psychoanalytical terminology, but also in the grammar of everyday life practices.

Feminist criticism and praxis gave rise to a flourishing literature on sexuality and politics and opened up a new field of study around gender issues. However, theories of feminism remained distant from the subjectivities and real-life experiences of women involved in the movement. A testimony of a French woman who describes in an interview her aspirations in life, her life trajectory and her rising feminist consciousness in the 1970s provides us with an opportunity not only to ‘repersonalise’ feminist discourse, but also to adopt a retrospective gaze on the meanings of feminism for a given generation of women. The interview became a play entitled Suzanne, une femme remarquable [Suzanne, a remarkable woman]. The play is based upon the narration of her life story and the feminist experience of becoming a professor of law. It compiles her life experiences and narrations of being an artist, a playwright, a scientist and a law professor. It depicts the position of women in a legal field as well as in
an artistic one. While reflecting on the narrative of the law professor, the playwright realised the commonalities between the experiences of a female actor and a female legal expert. The play is a documentary that attempts to find ways of relating feminism in the distinct life trajectories of two different types of women. It describes the difficulties of a woman who struggles to find a path towards freedom and equality. The prevalent symbolic representations of women – tyrannical mothers, monstrous spouses and fatal seductresses – make it difficult for individual women to find their own path of freedom and singularity. They have to break away from the private realm and the symbolic representations of women and conquer a world that is constructed around masculine norms and values. The norms that are reproduced as ‘universal’ are common for both men and women and yet impose the category of the masculine as ‘human’, thereby negating the female difference. Even when women manage to exist in a given professional or artistic field, they are not fully recognised. Women’s participation in societal life and the public world are marked by this shared experience of an ‘absent-presence’, meaning that they are present and absent at the same time since they are not acknowledged and recognised in their singularities. Feminists of the 1970s think of their lives as a personal and social experiment. They find themselves to be marginal, but they advocate their status as exemplary, as a ‘minority in the making’. They criticise the universalist logic of equality and make demands for parity that, according to the author of the play, acknowledges difference, singularity and experience.

We shall now turn to the current issues of gender, Islam and feminism and try to comprehend contemporary veiled Muslim women’s practices from the perspective of 1970s feminism. The idea that feminism is the consciousness-building of women who experience their lives as a ‘minority in the making’ can be extended to contemporary Muslim women. Veiled Muslim women constitute a minority in the same way as the law professor describes her minority status, a status that nevertheless is asserted and that does not upset her. On the contrary, this consciousness of marginality leads to new life experiences. Women who wear the Islamic headscarf are trying to make the best of their situation, like ‘Suzanne, the remarkable woman’. They follow their life trajectory in spaces where men are present: in schools and universities, in urban settings and in politics. They are a minority in comparison to traditional Muslim women who do not seek to mingle in the public space that traditionally has been (and to a
certain extent still is) a ‘man’s world’. Modern Muslim women are trying to escape from symbolic stereotypes of being docile, segregated and living among themselves, without permission to conquer public life. But they also find themselves in a minority position vis-à-vis the norms produced by secular feminism (Göle 2010), thus consigning them to a double minority position. They are involved in the public sphere – a sphere traditionally restricted to men only – yet they assert themselves as ‘Muslim’. They do not resemble their mothers, who conform to religious and traditional norms and whose lives are confined to female-only spaces. Instead these veiled women seek to conquer the world just as feminists did in the 1970s; however, they do not resemble them in their identification with secular norms of emancipation. They are looking for their own singularity.

The Muslim woman is nowadays in the public realm and struggles to become contemporary with secular women. Muslims who are covered become more visible in the public eye yet are negated in their singularity and in their capacity to be active agents in charge of their own lives. They find themselves in a comparable position of ‘absent-presence’, like that described by secular feminists. The pious Muslim woman becomes publicly present, but her presence disturbs and is negated by both religious orthodoxy and secular feminism, thus her singularity is banned by two gendered powers. The world she seeks to escape is dominated by the norms and power of an Islamic patriarchy and the world she tries to conquer is closed to her by the norms produced by the secular egalitarian feminism that negates difference and the religious experience of singularity.

A secular universalist trend of feminism gains popularity in counter-distinction with Islam. This could appear ironic given that feminism has initiated a criticism and disrupted frames of universalist definitions of gender. Through deconstructing the commonly held idea that difference between the sexes has been mainly due to biology, feminists have highlighted the structural barriers that prevent women from achieving equality with men. They have shown that the abstract individualism used as the basis for citizenship and equality, especially in France, could not grant their active participation in society as autonomous citizens. On the contrary, they have argued that universalism has excluded women from the political arena, preventing their access to positions of authority.

Joan Wallach Scott (2004), among other scholars, has persuasively documented the history of French universalism. She has shown how the idea of social justice that has guided the democratic
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collection in France since the Revolution is based on the premise that no representative of the nation, as the expression of people’s will, could be a spokesperson for corporate interests. ‘The ability of any individual to stand for (to represent) the nation came from the fact that political individuals were understood to be abstracted from their social attributes (wealth, family, occupation, profession, religion)’ (Scott 2004: 34). This abstract version of citizenship was understood as the only guarantee for achieving justice and equality and for extracting individuals from the oppressive hierarchies put in place by the Ancien Régime. It is interesting to note that while French universalism is often associated with the secularisation process that followed the 1789 Revolution, in fact the concept of universalism is borrowed from Catholicism (from the Greek Katholikos, ‘universal’) (Schor 2001: 36). France’s privileged relationship with the Church made it an essential exponent of the universalist creed. The Revolution, instead of initiating a break-up with the old ethos, ironically inscribed itself in the continuum of the ‘civilising mission’. Inside its borders, regional differences were gradually suppressed while outside, France started its colonial enterprise, justified by the necessity to spread ‘the rights of man’.

So how – if at all – did feminism manage to challenge the oppressive abstraction of universalism and introduce notions of difference? An interesting example is the law on parité that was passed by the French parliament in June 2006 and that could have represented, at first sight, a major concession to the traditional anti-minority position. The legitimacy of such a law prescribing an equal number of male and female representatives in local, regional, senatorial and European electoral lists is no longer much discussed; however, its submission to parliament created intense and heated discussions at the time. Across the political spectrum some commentators, politicians, philosophers and intellectuals feared that the law would open a Pandora’s box of minority claims. They warned against the dangers of gender essentialism in creating an absolute difference between the sexes, in a way that would lead France towards a ‘puritan, pragmatic and individualist American model’, in total opposition to the ‘French humanist and universalist tradition’.

Examining the highly rhetorical dimension of the debate, Didier Fassin (2002) and Joan Wallach Scott (2005) have demonstrated that far from initiating a move away from universalism, in order to make their claim heard, French feminists had to anchor their plea in the universalist tradition. Gender difference had to be ‘universalised’, by
this we mean that it was presented as a universal difference, one that transcends other social categories of class, race, age and ethnicity, in order to become a valid public claim. This is not to say that supporters of the law on equality made a radical distinction between notions of difference and universalism, rather they used the ambiguity of the republican rhetoric at their disposal to open a space for asserting their claim to difference. By making ‘woman’ a universal category, supporters of the law sidestepped the fear of communitarianism (understood in France as the desire of a community to live on its own isolated from the rest of society).

The anchoring of French feminism in the Republican tradition, as a political tool to nationalise identity politics against France’s transatlantic neighbours, is not new. Such dynamics have occurred on numerous occasions, especially in the debate regarding the ban on religious symbols in schools. Egalitarian feminism imposed itself as ‘universal’ and thus became a standard through its identification with the majority. The narrative of ‘Suzanne, a remarkable woman’ criticises the universal logic behind the defence of equality and advocates for politics of parity. However, egalitarian feminism, which has become predominantly secular, homogenising and exclusionary, is imposing its norm on women’s emancipation. In time, the debate on parity disappeared, overshadowed by the debates on Islam and women.

It can be said that those who advocate parity could have seen that the situation of Muslim women had all the conditions for a minority in the making. We can therefore point to an intercultural emancipatory potential in feminism that failed to come to fruition. Secular feminists have failed to see the historical possibility of finding common ground with Muslim women. In the search for their own identity, veiled Muslim women experiment and look for their own voice by reconciling Islam and modernity, thus creating new ways of being female in public. The forms of experimentation they initiate are in many ways similar to those of earlier feminists: creating alternative public spaces, playing with their public appearance, testing the limits of the permissible. Is the encounter with Islam the catalyst that propels egalitarian and universalist feminism onto the front stage, relegating the other feminism of the active minority (Islamic feminism) to the margins?

Feminism was the work of a minority of women who in the 1970s in Europe became aware of their subaltern position and started the struggle for equality of the sexes. Since then, it has become an una-
voidable paradigm for all women who seek to conquer the world, assert themselves professionally or in public life, or advocate for equality between the sexes without renouncing feminine difference. Even though feminism was the position of a minority, it gradually gained ground in speaking in the name of all women. Feminist thought incorporated all categories of women, regardless of their educational level, class origin or nationality. Today, the ways in which religious, ethnic and racial differences are discussed in the public domain determine the trends of feminist thought, creating ruptures and divisions between Muslim and non-Muslim women. European feminism is being cut apart and transformed by issues linked to a colonial past, immigration and Islam. This union between women that shaped the feminist movement in the 1970s in Europe and the West is currently being torn apart by the emergence of Islamic feminism. The debate on the veil has become a women’s dispute between two femininity regimes: one could be qualified as feminist, the other labelled as Islamist, without the possibility of creating a bridge between the two.

Through its confrontational encounter with Islam, feminism gained a new impulse, a new vitality that reshaped the feminist realm. Secular feminism emerged as the public voice of a combative feminism positioning itself against the Islamic headscarf. From then on, the feminist discourse developed through its dissociation from Islam. Yet women are divided between feminist, uncovered and emancipated and Muslim, covered and submissive. Hence, the major initial claim of feminism ‘speaking for all women’ is lost. Without the support of secular feminism, laws that prohibit religious symbols and ban veiled girls from attending school (while letting Muslim boys attend schools) would not have acquired legitimacy in the public eye. In the French case, secular feminists gave their total support to the republican legislative power. How then should we characterise the role of laws in the making of society? Are they vehicles for translating changes into societal norms? Can laws become a tool for social transformation or conversely do they represent an obstacle to change? We can argue, in light of the constitutive principles of feminism, that the law that bans veiled girls from attending school annihilates the possibility of social experimentation for a minority in the making. It denies veiled women’s agency by seeking to impose a hegemonic universalist model appropriated by secular feminists.

The Stasi Law⁴ unwittingly resulted in the legitimisation of veiled girls’ exclusion from public spaces. In the years that followed the passing of this law, incidents were regularly reported in the press...
where veiled women and girls were forbidden access to universities (Inizan 2009), swimming pools (Chrisafis 2009), public transport (TVBruits.org 2009) and other public spaces. This denial of public presence reached a climax during the feminist parade of 8 March 2004 in Paris. Mainstream feminist groups relegated all veiled women to the end of the march, with the other ‘unwanted’ feminists: the sex workers. The banner of the action group *Une école pour tout-e-s*5 (‘A school for everyone’), which rallied against the Stasi Law, read *Très putes, très voilées* (‘Very whorish, very veiled’). This is an ironical nod to the state-sponsored organisation *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (‘Neither Whores nor Doormats’6 founded in 2003 to tackle the issue of violence against women in working-class neighbourhoods and Parisian banlieues. These two figures – prostitutes and veiled women – were unexpectedly unified, marching next to each other as a symbolic reminder of their absolute marginality. During the march, the veiled women received the same sexist insults as their sisters in exclusion. A young woman heckled the activist carrying the ‘*Une école pour tout-e-s*’ banner: ‘I love your banner: you’re right! All veiled girls are whores’ (Bechoua 2004).

These episodes illustrate the tensions that run through contemporary secular feminism. But if France, because of its long republican tradition, remains a particularly explicit example of the current dynamics of exclusion, debates on the hijab and the burqa have also arisen in other European countries. The appearance of veiled candidates in local and legislative elections has divided the feminist movement in Denmark and Belgium, illustrating that once again the visibility of religious difference in public places has created a dichotomist mode of thinking by presenting veiled candidates as Islamists, incapable of incorporating feminist values.

What do these stories tell us about multiculturalism, which since 2000 has represented the legitimising paradigm of the European Union? Have some trends of multiculturalism ignored the issue of Islamic difference? Are divisive and exclusionary identity politics taking over the European ideal of pluralism? Or has Islam simply become a battlefield that highlights the limits and boundaries of multiculturalism itself? After 9/11, many Western countries embarked on a severe critique of multiculturalism, accusing its supporters of irresponsible and naive tolerance towards minorities. The dominant discourse nowadays is that multicultural politics should be replaced by integration policies, namely the establishment of specific criteria and goals for ‘minorities’ to gain citizenship rights. If these critiques
have been broadly used to reinforce nationalist feelings and exclusionary politics, one should nonetheless try to identify the reasons why the dismantling of the multiculturalist project and the singling out of ‘Muslims’ were so easily achieved.

5.2 Culture as a battleground

Over the past decade, debates surrounding potential tensions between multiculturalism and feminism have been particularly intense. The questions raised are related to the potential conflict of interests between the two political projects: if a state were to promote multiculturalism, would women remain unprotected against ‘minority patriarchy’? Or if feminism gained primacy, would pluralism disappear? Criticism of multiculturalism was initiated by Moller Okin in her now famous essay ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women?’ (Moller Okin 1998). Her work instigated an intense debate among European scholars. Political theorist Chandran Kukathas responded to Moller Okin’s assertion by turning the question on its head and asking: ‘Is feminism bad for multiculturalism?’ (Kukathas 2001).

But let us first define multiculturalism and its ideological framework. The term multiculturalism, both as a description of pluralistic reality in modern societies (cultural diversity) and as a project (the political recognition of cultural diversity), is primarily based on liberal notions of equality rooted in the recognition of difference. Theorists and supporters of multiculturalism, notably Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka (1996), whose writings became a major reference point in this discussion, have defined a notion of ‘culture’ as an essential component of any individual’s inner sense of well-being and self-respect. For Kymlicka, ‘freedom is intimately linked with and dependent on culture’ (ibid.: 75), because culture is a ‘context of choice’ (ibid.: 82); it ‘provides options’ (ibid.: 89), ‘determines the boundaries of the imaginable’ and ‘provides an anchor for [people’s] self-identification and the safety of effortless secure belonging’ (ibid.: 89). In this approach, culture is a resource that provides people with a sense of belonging and a context for making choices. This is inspired by liberal theory, especially that of American philosopher John Rawls who in Political Liberalism (1993) attempted to reconcile equality with difference, whereby multiculturalists advocate for group rights based on individualist choices, a position often labelled in France as communitarianism (communautarisme).

If multiculturalism and feminism have in recent debates been
presented as in a state of tension, they nevertheless have some similarities and this is where the universalist tendencies of both projects are most noticeable. Liberal multiculturalists (and this is particularly true for political philosophers like Kymlicka, as Cowan (2006) rightly argues) describe culture as something fixed and stable, which can be defined according to certain criteria. For instance, Kymlicka’s definition of ‘culture’ refers specifically to the ways of life and practices of national minorities. For Kymlicka, ‘Culture is that meaningful common life based on shared heritage that defines and establishes boundaries for a group – a group that always already exists, awaiting the state’s recognition – and that minority rights and multicultural policies must protect’ (Cowan 2008: 12).

Secular feminists’ understanding of ‘culture’, in spite of their disagreement with liberal multiculturalists, retain comparable liberal patterns. While the two parties disagree with what culture means to real people in real life (for example, Okin suggests that ‘culture’ is a prison while Kymlicka conceives it as enabling individuals to have the choice either to embrace it or to leave it) there is a tendency in these discourses to reify ‘culture’ as something that can be fully grasped. Both positions assume that cultures exist in essence and that they are not influenced by the specific socio-political contexts in which they are necessarily entangled. In the end, the main response of Kymlicka and other like-minded scholars to feminist critique results in an impasse – that of excluding Islam for its non-liberal approach to individual agency while refusing to acknowledge its cultural and therefore necessarily contradictory dimension.

Indeed, Kymlicka suggests that only liberal cultural groups should be recognised and receive state support while groups imposing restrictions on their individual members, such as that implied by ‘patriarchy’, should be deprived of that support. In Kymlicka’s proposal, as well as in Moller Okin’s, the state remains the guarantor of equality, the ultimate decisional institution of delivery of justice. The limit of both proposals is that their primary reliance on the state obstructs the history of oppression and alienation that characterises certain groups (Spinner-Halev 2001), while positioning the state as an impartial, ‘a-cultural’ political entity. This centrality of the state in mediating relations with minorities is perhaps the main weakness of the multicultural project. Such a top-down approach leaves little room for social experimentation within groups that have endured oppression and for which a certain degree of autonomy is necessary to recapture self-respect and a sense of pride and dignity. As
philosopher Jeff Spinner-Halev (2001) rightly argues, the problem of the feminist critique – and, we would add, of the liberal multiculturalists’ response to this critique – is that it is grounded in a model of ‘secular and liberal citizenship’, which is blind to the fact that states have oppressed and still oppress certain groups. Ideals of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ that represent the cornerstones of liberal thought and of multiculturalism at large cannot be considered as neutral or value-free, for the sole reason that they have served (and continue to serve) imperial projects that have significantly shaped the personal experiences of post-colonial subjects now living in Western societies.

Many Muslims living in Europe carry with them the scars of the post-colonial burden, a sense of political exclusion that can, in some cases, be overcome if, and only if, they assimilate within mainstream society, thereby becoming secular liberal individuals. In this respect, the headscarf ban in France offers an interesting insight into the nature of the secularism the French state is striving to impose. Talal Asad has stated that the pressing argument to defend laïcité used by the state implied not only a top-down definition of an external corporeal sign such as the veil but also an interpretation of the psychological (private) motives of the actors under the law’s jurisdiction. Asad interprets the banning of the veil as ‘an exercise in sovereign power, an attempt to dominate the entirety of public space’ (Asad 2005: 3) and to impose an exclusionary version of secularism that in many ways contradicts earlier versions of laïcité. Jean Baubérot, a French historian and specialist in laïcité, shares a similar point of view and criticises the new turn laïcité has taken in the debate on the headscarf in public schools. He was the only member of the Stasi Commission who discussed secularism in France and the conditions under which it could be undermined. Contrary to the dominant view that served as a working hypothesis within the Commission, that ‘the veil is a threat to the core values of the Republic’ (Bowen 2007: 115), Baubérot tried to relocate the debate within its historical context, showing the multiple interpretations the concept of laïcité had undergone through time. He eventually remained the only Commissioner to abstain from voting.

Muslims who express their ‘Muslimness’ in the European public domain through their clothing, lifestyle or certain demands for rights (halal food, prayer rooms in public administration, Islamic marriage) present an image of ‘non-liberal’ agency that challenges some of the fundamental values of Western democracies. They are achieving a sense of self-worth by adhering to a certain life discipline that, in
addition to its assumed cultural dimension, is part of a broader social movement for self-reform and public recognition. Covered Muslim women, far from being either excluded from or victims of these dynamics, participate through their spatial and corporeal practices in the making of that ‘culture’ while attempting in sometimes ambivalent ways to preserve a sense of faith and individual agency. These non-liberal forms of cultural experimentation can also be seen as a means of the self-empowerment of a ‘minority in the making’.

In that sense, the recent debates on the burka/niqab highlight particularly well the limits of liberal multiculturalism and secular feminism. Indeed, niqab-clad women have started to appear in the public domain in Europe and in spite of their extremely limited number, have become the object of intense political attention, dividing both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The difficulties of naming this all-enveloping robe, interchangeably called ‘burka’ or ‘niqab’, or placing it under the umbrella concept of voile intégral (‘full veil’) demonstrates the disruption of meanings that occurs when an object associated with the ‘outside’ and the ‘foreign’ appears in a different cultural context. For instance, the word ‘burka’ appeared in the West after 9/11 when – in an all too well-known contemporary version of ‘feminist colonialism’ – the liberation of Afghan women was used as an argument to gather support for the invasion of Afghanistan. It was argued that the West, in order to free women from their ‘mobile prisons’, had the moral duty to launch a military operation in that country. In this moral grammar of war, the ‘burka’ became the symbol of women’s oppression while the war turned into, among other things, a global symbolic instrument for women’s emancipation. It is interesting to note that in Afghanistan, the Urdu word burka is rarely used, as Afghans prefer to employ the Dari term chadari to refer to the full blue veil with a net that covers the eyes. In this region of the world the ‘chadari/burka’, before being turned into a compulsory religious prescription by the Taliban, was originally a garment used by upper-class women wanting to mark their class distinction by appearing fully covered when venturing outside their homes (Billaud 2009). In the West, the semantic confusion between ‘burka’ and ‘niqab’ (the full black veil worn by the women of Saudi Arabia), accentuated by the apparition of hybrid forms of swimwear like the ‘burkini’,7 highlights the shifting of meanings that arises when the ‘full veil’ travels from one cultural area to another (Göle 2005).

While blurring the categories of religion and culture, niqab-
wearing women question the liberal norms that regiment interactions between men and women in public. In contrast to the ideal of openness, transparency and availability of women’s bodies, they offer to the external gaze closure, darkness and deliberate withdrawal. The confusion becomes even greater when the woman underneath is a native European convert to the Salafi branch of Islam, as is often the case in European countries. In recent debates, both secular feminists and liberal multiculturalists have been caught off guard by this new social phenomenon. Unable to read the intrinsically ambiguous and provocative nature of such a corporeal sign, they proposed a literal reading of this phenomenon based on their own liberal standpoint: the integral veil was necessarily a sign of women’s oppression by men. The ‘full veil’ could only be the patriarchal expression of mouvements intégristes (fundamentalist movements).

Both secular feminism and liberal multiculturalism, by suggesting non-contextualised definitions of ‘culture’, remain deeply rooted in the universalist heritage. Positioning the state as ‘a-cultural’ and ‘a-historical’ and therefore an impartial guardian of justice, multiculturalists find themselves entrenched in their old liberal bastion when confronted with the complex phenomenon of the ‘full veil’ in particular and Islam in general. By failing to acknowledge the inner heterogeneity and the multiplicity of voices that are part of the making of culture, they end up rejecting Islam as a monolith. On the other hand, secular feminists, by placing themselves in the universalist ‘ethos’ that considers ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ as necessarily oppressive to the individual in general and to women in particular, refuse to acknowledge alternative forms of self-assertion that do not follow their own path. By doing so, they may strategically gain some kind of public recognition (parity), but they also lose their initial purpose: speaking for all women regardless of their class, religion and ethnic origin.

In this respect, the emergence of feminist voices of young girls from the migrant suburbs of Paris (les banlieues) was an important turning point. The rise of the ‘Ni Putes Ni Soumises’ (NPNS) movement in 2003 was an opportunity for ‘les filles des quartiers’ (girls from the deprived neighbourhoods) to raise and deal with the issues of sexism and gender violence in their everyday lives. However, the movement was later instrumentalised and appropriated by mainstream politics, propelling the heads of NPNS (Fadela Amara and Mohammed Abdi) into important political positions within the Sarkozy government. This reinforced the stereotypes about the war between the
sexes supposedly taking place in *les banlieues*. As sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souilamas argues, instead of proposing pragmatic and self-defined solutions to the multi-layered and complex problems of the suburbs, NPNS has promoted ‘statements whereby young Arab men are sexist, violent, anti-Semitic, homophobic and sectarian’ (Guénif-Souilamas 2006: 35), all the while showcasing the feminine figures of unveiled and emancipated ‘*beurettes*’ (second-generation girls of North African descent) that fit the republican model as an example of successful integration.

At the centre of these dynamics, we can observe the rise of new spokespersons of universalist secular feminism (a self-proclaimed label) who have achieved a high degree of public recognition by entering into the public debate on Islam. They enter into confrontation not only with protagonists of Islam but also with those they consider to be too tolerant and liberal, namely multiculturalists. In France, the well-known and highly respected philosopher Elisabeth Badinter has been at the forefront of the battle to extend the ban of the headscarf in state schools to the full veil in all public places. In her talk at the Gérin Parliamentary Commission charged with investigating the phenomenon prior to drafting the law, she warned of what she saw as the serious consequences of the appearance of the full veil, which for her indicated ‘the disappearance of a common humanity’. Her talk, quoted thirty-seven times in the Commission’s final report, was soon to be considered as a major reference for understanding *le voile intégral*. She argued that the full veil was contrary to Western civilisation, which values the ‘face’ and in which interactions among equal citizens are necessarily ‘unveiled’. The visibility of the ‘face’ was for her the condition sine qua non for the perpetuation of the republican principles of *Liberté*, *Égalité*, *Fraternité*. She concluded:

> With this opportunity to be watched without being seen and to look at the other person without their being able to see you, I can perceive a threefold perverted pleasure: the pleasure of one’s supremacy over the other person, the pleasure of the exhibitionist and the pleasure of the voyeur . . . I think we are dealing with very sick women’ (Gérin and Raoult 2010: 335).

The feminist relegation of fully covered women to the status of ‘insane’ and perverted individuals supported the idea that the state had to intervene in order to ‘liberate’ them from the false consciousness of their distorted psyche. Much like the debate on ‘religious signs in public schools’, Badinter denied the possibility for women targeted by the law of being active agents capable of choices.
Along the same lines as Badinter, other secular feminists have appeared in French public debates and occupied the public scene. For instance, Caroline Fourrest, who recently gained popularity as a journalist and author in prestigious, left-oriented media, endorses religion-free republicanism, criticises the cultural relativism of the multiculturalists and defends secular feminism against what she perceives as an Islamic ‘threat’. Her constant reiteration of stereotypes on Islam, personified in her regular attacks against European Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan, who opposed the ban of ‘ostentatious religious signs in schools’, has allowed her to attract media attention and to be recognised as an ‘expert’ on Islam and a courageous voice of feminism in the public arena. In spite of her obvious lack of academic rigour, her choice of the ‘enemy’ and her reiteration of dominant discourses have widened her public horizons and gained her an ever-increasing following.

These discourses were especially welcomed when they were repeated and taken over by voices of Muslim-born, women of Algerian origin. The propulsion of these new public figures in the debate proved, in the eyes of many, the existence of secular Muslims. It also reinforced republican ideals and legitimised state intervention in banning religious signs. In her book Una femme en colère (‘An Angry Woman’), published in 2009, Wassyla Tamzali accuses ‘disabused Europeans’ and left-wing intellectuals of ‘cultural denial’, restricting their universalist ambitions to European countries and failing to support non-Western feminists in their struggle against ‘Islamic fundamentalism’.

In line with mainstream public perceptions, now widespread throughout Europe, these new secular feminist figures depict Islam as an intolerant and inherently patriarchal religion trying to gain ground in countries where Muslims live in order to impose their ‘archaic’ rules. Such voices have gained prominence in public discussions because of their adherence to the discourse of power (republicanism) and their silencing of post-colonial criticism and contextual readings of Islam, which highlight the predicaments of power entangled in Western modernity. It is by means of their polemical confrontation with Islam, their demonisation of a consensual enemy, their adherence to dominant republican discourses and their denial of all kinds of cultural and religious difference that they participate in reframing and perpetuating the political debate. The public recognition they acquire illustrates the reinforcement and the closure of republican secular discourse.
5.3 Sexual liberalism and neo-nationalism

Public resentment of Islamic religious signs and their visibility in European countries is increasingly expressed in defence of Western values and national identities. Consequently, the debate on ‘national identity’ in France initiated by the Sarkozy-founded Ministry of Immigration and National Identity coincided with the debates for a proposed law against the full veil.9 The criminalisation of veiled (headscarf and burqa) women and their exclusion from public places is celebrated as a reinforcement of secular feminist norms and republican values of the nation. One can also point to the fact that the political determination to cleanse the public sphere is not limited exclusively to Muslim actors and religious signs. This desire to cleanse has been extended to other groups, namely in the expulsion of clandestine European Roma migrants, and also to sex workers through a new law against ‘passive touting’.10 Such politics indicate a conflation between the assertion of national identity, politics of sexuality and security.

The rise of neo-nationalist politics across Europe is intimately related to Islam. The veiled Muslim woman’s body, as the symbolic marker of a specific religion, has become the battlefield upon which categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ can be reinforced. As in earlier colonial encounters, the forced unveiling of women operates not only as a reaffirmation of the norms that distinguish Western women, but also as a reassertion of a ‘civilisational project’ that promises to emancipate women in spite of themselves.

This movement confirms a transition in European nationalism from discourses of exclusion based on racial grounds towards an identity-based discourse around values, moral universes and lifestyles construed as contrary to European democratic principles. In this framework, liberal notions of sexuality as well as universal notions of gender equality are becoming the benchmarks upon which Muslims’ capacity to be incorporated into Europe is being measured.

Judith Butler, in her recent move against what she identifies as ‘homo-nationalism’, which led her to turn down the Berlin Pride Prize in June 2010,11 explains that this new form of racism is all the more dangerous in that it constructs conflict over various definitions of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’. These definitions, according to Butler, are instrumentalised to coerce Muslims and wage cultural assaults against Islam (Butler 2008). Such claims relate to certain ideas...
regarding sexual freedom, which are presented as unerringly clashing with Islam.

New nationalist actors have emerged everywhere in Europe, instrumentalising LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights and sexual freedom to serve their anti-Islamic agenda. In the Netherlands, Pym Fortuyn, an extreme right-wing and gay politician who was gunned down by a radical environmentalist in 2002, had made the fight against immigrants and Muslims whom he considered as inherently homophobic, the theme of his political campaign. In the same country, Somali refugee and MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali used her personal drama to access the political scene and to wage a cultural war against Islam. At the heart of her argument is the irreconcilable nature of Islam with liberal European societies, because of the abuses it supposedly imprints on women’s bodies. Hirsi Ali collaborated with the Islamophobic film director Theo Van Gogh in 2004 to produce a film called Submission, which uses the same narrative of women’s subjugation within Islam: verses of the Koran on the bare bodies of women in agony, submitting to Allah in spite of their suffering, in a provocative staging of the ‘Muslim woman’ as a failure of a psycho-cultural development. The appearance of veiled Muslim women on the political scene in Belgium, France and Denmark has provoked moral panic in the media, announcing the end of secularism and flagging the threat of cultural dilution. In all these countries, veiled candidates have had to make an extra effort to convince the public of their allegiance to women’s and gay rights, as if their hijab was the symbol of some kind of religious fundamentalism irreconcilable with democracy.

The resulting representations are not only monolithic images of the suppressed Muslim woman and her misogynist oppressor, but also a new form of bio-politics that positions liberal democracies as more ‘advanced’ and therefore legitimating their definitions of the rules of exclusion and inclusion of minorities. As sociologist Jasbir Puar and philosopher Judith Butler rightly argue, new configurations of sexuality, race, gender, nation, class and ethnicity are realigning in relation to contemporary forces of securitisation and nationalism. In this reconfiguration, sexual freedoms are being instrumentalised to assert Western exceptionalism, to define the preconditions of citizenship and to shape the image of the ‘a-historical’ ‘other’ bound to remain untouched by modernity. Even though these critiques have been effective in underlining the sexual dynamics that underpin the re-emergence of nationalist politics in the West, they have tended to
privilege the categories of race and ethnicity over that of religion. These analyses have thus been weak at highlighting a new form of political exclusion based on cultural and religious difference – that of ‘Islamophobia’. According to sociologist and Islam expert Vincent Geisser (2003), the growing dislike for Muslims and Islam in France cannot be understood without taking into account the bitter colonial history of France in Algeria and in other Muslim countries. This burdensome history that France is reluctant to revisit is kept alive by the million settlers who came to France after the French colonies gained independence and, more recently, by a wider conservative movement that has acquired new force since 9/11.

The post-1968 movements, while proposing new ways of reconciling equality and difference, overlooked the category of religion and cultural difference in which multiple and complex ways of subjectivity and agency can emerge. Both feminism and multiculturalism have fallen short in rethinking non-Western conceptions of modernity and ‘civilisational’ difference. They have remained mainly Euro-centred and have ended up participating in the establishment of new forms of exclusion based on the very liberal notions that were originally supposed to support diversity. The simultaneous liberal deployment of multiculturalism and feminism and their short-sighted denial of other forms of agency have legitimised politics of exclusion. What is seriously lacking in these concepts is a more subtle understanding of the ways in which individuals who are caught in between post-colonial forces try to make sense of the world and lead meaningful lives. These individuals navigate within a broad range of constraints and opportunities that are the product of often conflicting interactions between secular multiculturalism and feminism. Without the recognition of Islamic difference as a contemporary of European societies, both feminism and secular multiculturalism will remain complacent in perpetuating the supremacy of Western values over those it continues to exclude, in the name of national unity. In order to overcome the continuance of these values and avoid the self-closure of Europe, one needs to acknowledge the critiques addressed by Islamic agencies to the universalist claims of mono-civilisational modernity.

From the perspective of universal secular feminists, contemporary forms of veiling mean a return to the past and a threat to the present. We have argued, however, that another way of approaching feminism, based on the distinctive traits of the 1970s, could have helped to build a bridge instead of creating a schism among the two types of women. To summarise, we have seen how feminist women in the
1970s considered themselves a ‘minority’ to the extent that they were neither following the ideals of egalitarian feminism nor accepting the masculine norms of public order. They were a minority that forged a new path and experimented with new ways of being a woman and of conquering the world. Veiled Muslim women are also marginal but do not follow the ideals of secular feminism, rather they try to escape patriarchal Islam and seek to invent new ways of being both a Muslim and a modern woman. These women are today’s ‘minority in the making’. Like the feminists who carried the personal category of gender to the political realm, veiled women manifest religious difference in public and redefine the private–public, secular–sacred distinctions. They find themselves in socially mixed places, in cities, schools and public transport, and yet also claim separation from men, such as in hospitals or in swimming pools. They are experiencing the outside world in experimental ways. European contexts of pluralism and freedom give Muslim women the opportunity to find their own singularity. Feminists have criticised the universal category of ‘humankind’ because it meant that ‘mankind’ excluded women and erased their individuality. The appearance of veiled women in Europe questions the norms of liberal emancipation and the Western claim for modernity. Our point is not to establish a similarity between two minority figures of women, secular and religious, but to provide a reading that enhances familiarity and illustrates the parallel logic between two different quests for singularity. Certainly religious faith constrains more than it emancipates; it imposes norms of modesty, self-discipline and control of sexuality. It can, however, also lead to self-reformation and social change, or self-closure and social stagnation. In spite of the complex nature of the exercise, freedom makes room for singularity to be explored, whereas dogma, whether religious or secular, imposes norms and values that maintain uniformity and forbid social experimentation.

Notes

1. For instance, Modood (2007: 8) argues that ‘multiculturalism presupposes the matrix of principles that are central to contemporary liberal democracies but multiculturalism is also a challenge to some of these norms, institutions and principles. . . . Multiculturalism is the child of liberal egalitarianism, but like any child, it is not simply a faithful reproduction of its parents’.
2. The distinction between egalitarian and difference-based feminism is
more accurate than the distinction between ‘first-wave’ and ‘second-wave’ feminism, in the French case. Indeed, first- and second-wave feminism mostly refers to developments that took place in the Anglo-Saxon world. What we aim to underline here is a new trend of feminist thought in France that emerged in the late 1960s and advocated for sisterhood, women’s consciousness and empowerment through the promotion of a positive image of feminine difference. We have to mention, however, that *The Second Sex*, written by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, remained marginal in the French feminist movement. The book used the argument of the complementary nature of men and women based on biological difference to advocate for equal citizenship rights. See, for instance, the writings of the feminist group Psychology and Politics. Beauvoir’s work, on the contrary, was influential to the feminist movements in the US and the UK, where individualist arguments prevailed. The arguments used to interpret difference varied according to the specific social and economic contexts of the countries in which the feminist movement emerged.

3. *Suzanne, une femme remarquable*, a play written by Laurence Fevrier. The text is based on an interview with Francine Demichel conducted in May 2007 by Laurence Fevrier and Brigitte Dujardin. The play was staged at *Le Lucernaire* theatre in Paris from 26 August to 18 October 2009. The script of the play was published by L’Harmattan Publishers in 2009. Nilüfer Göle participated in a discussion on feminism and Islam that was held after the play.

4. The Stasi Commission borrowed its name from Bernard Stasi, an ex-minister who was the president of the Commission. The law passed in 2004 forbids the wearing of all ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols in public schools. Presented as a measure to protect the French principle of laïcité, the law was later remembered as the ‘anti-veil law’. Alain Touraine, a sociologist specialising in social movements, Gilles Kepel, a political scientist of Islam, and Patrick Weil, a specialist on immigration laws, were among the members of this Commission and supporters of this law. Each of them found different reasons for its utility and implementation.

5. Christine Delphy (2000) has been one of the very few feminist scholars in France to distance herself from exclusionary feminism and to campaign against the Stasi Law banning headscarves in schools.

6. The organisation has been very much criticised by Muslim organisations for demonising Islam as the main reason for violence against women in deprived neighbourhoods.

7. A burqini (or burkini) swimsuit is a type of women’s swimsuit designed by Lebanese- Australian Aheda Zanetti under the company name Ahida. The suit covers the whole body except the face, hands and feet (enough to preserve Muslim modesty), while remaining light enough to allow the wearer to swim.
8. Talk given by Elisabeth Badinter, 9 September 2009 (Gérin and Raoult 2010: 334).

9. Following the vote in parliament, France’s constitutional court approved the law (8 October 2010) that bans the wearing of the Islamic full veil in public.

10. The Law on Internal Security (Loi sur la Sécurité Intérieure) was adopted in March 2003. Among other measures taken to tackle delinquency, the law has created a new crime: ‘passive touting’ (racolage passif), which punishes any activity, even in a passive form, that encourages a person to have sex for money. The law targets sex workers and aims to reduce their visibility in public places.

11. In 2010, Judith Butler was awarded the Zivilcourage Prize by Berlin Pride, a major network of LGBT activists. Denouncing the marginalisation of people of colour within the movement, she explained that she had to ‘distance herself from this complicity with racism, including anti-Muslim racism’ and that she could not accept the prize.

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