POLITIZATION OF ISLAM IN EUROPE

From "Politics of Recognition" to a Transnational Nation

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Since the 1980s, Islam has become an important political force and a source of tension in most western societies. In Europe public opinion projects the difficult process of assimilation onto a religion, Islam, by questioning its compatibility with the West and its ability to adopt Western "universal values. While such statements keep the Muslim migrants out of collective national identities in Europe, two "affairs" in the 1980s - the Rushdie affair in Great Britain and the scarf affair in France - have shown that the issue is not one of assimilation (as it used to be thought at least for other immigrants), but of recognition: the recognition of a religion, of Islam as a minority religion, in different European countries as well as in the European Union considered as a political unit in formation.

Recognition is precisely what is at the core of the politization of Islam. It is the basis of identity politics or politics of recognition or principle of multiculturalism in the countries of immigration. Its politization proceeds from the relationship to the state creating a power relationship between states and communities – ethnic or religious in the case of Islam as minority and leading to a relationship that is perceived as a competition for membership and loyalty in countries of immigration.

Furthermore, the emergence of Islam as a transnational political force has expanded the competition between states and communities – religious – beyond territorial setting. Its extension based on networks followed by a rhetoric and a mobilization trying to "recentralize" the internal diversity if Islam leads to the emergence of a "transnational nationalism" or a nationalism without territory that I see as a new step in the analysis of nationalism, Islam being one example.

Such developments lead to two questions:

(1) When the issue is raised in terms of representation and recognition challenging democratic states on equality between citizens, then the question is how can Islam be integrated into the institutional framework of the respective states, into their societies, and mentalities? Public recognition and representation of Islam challenges democratic states' approach to diversity and multiculturalism and counters a dichotomist view opposing assimilation and multiculturalism In this age of the "politics of recognition", I argue that it is impossible for democracies to dissociate multiculturalism from assimilation and to maintain boundaries between social, cultural and political domains. In order to resolve the conflicts that Islam brings to secularisms that have emerged in the public space and the political community, liberal democratic societies need to respond to two complementary pressures: one institutional and the other political. Institutionally, the secular state is under pressure either to reshape its institutions so as to provide for the general recognition of Islam or, as Biku Parekh suggests the extension of these institutions in order to include the newly emerging Islam in European societies. At stake here is the *institutional assimilation* of diversity. Politically, states must find the means by which equal institutional representation and individual national citizenship can be reconciled. How can Muslims be integrated into the political community? How can common membership be promoted and a common civic culture defined that allows citizens to find adequate identification, and inscribe Islam as part of Europe's historical continuity. The political approach strongly rejects the argument that Islam and western democracies are by definition "incompatible".

(2) When the issue is raised in terms of transnational nationalism that is a sense of belonging that transcends states' territories, and leads to mobilization beyond boundaries, the question is then how to re-territorialize membership and conflict and redefine the new terms of negotiations between states and communities. Yet another question is when the states acknowledges a transnational membership the question is how to combine belonging and loyalty.

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In Europe, since the 1980s Islam has become part of the discourse of immigrants as well as the public authorities, and a source of action for militants active in voluntary associations. For immigrants it has becomes a way of "reappropriating" an identity. It appears in the discourse as a source of "ethnic pride", of "self-enhancement", in a Weberian sense a communitarian feeling the elements of which are drawn from its practice, traditions and rituals, but also from its moral values and social usefulness. It is from these arguments that Islam confronts national institutions in a relationship of reciprocal suspicion behind boundaries perceived as communautarian by both side, boundaries drawn in religious terms, further more making of religion the main cleavage in the society.

Such a "re-appropriation" of identity has crystallized around the "veil affair". The issue shook French society for the first time in November 1989, when three teenage girls arrived at their public school all wearing Islamic headscarves. The event unleashed a flood of commentary on identity: the identity of the latest wave of immigrants and of the nation. The "affair" has situated Islam at the core of negotiations challenging the relationship between state and religion. The case publicized existing tensions between national institutions and Islamic institutions, introducing a balance of power between the law of the

Republic, and the "law of the Qu'ran", the first representing the society and the second the community, the first refashioned around *laïcité* and the second around Islam.

Furthermore the mobilization of the political class around the headscarf issue has strengthened above all the role as interlocutor of the imams or leaders of Islamic associations, as representatives of a community taking shape around Islam. The imams, whether they are sent by the countries of origin within the framework of bilateral agreements, and hence with an official status recognized by both partners, or whether they represent political parties such the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria or the religious party in Turkey and its truly transnational organization in Europe called (Millî Görüs), set themselves up as spokesmen for their "community". But it is also the state which, by selecting imams of all ideologies as interlocutors in order to calm tensions and especially to convince families to obey the laws of the Republic, has increased the negotiating power of the religious associations by keeping out others (cultural and secular ones) or forcing them to place themselves within the Islamic sphere.

In response to the scarf, French society has been redefining *laïcité.* Until November 1989, this republican principle was self-explanatory, which is no longer true. L*aïcité,* an integral part of the institutional, legal and intellectual history of the Republic, has taken on the role of its founding principle. Islam represents a twofold challenge to it. First of all, it constitutes a minority, and a religious one at that. And second, this minority has a public expression. In this way, Islam challenges France's long national history of relations between religion and the state, starting with the emancipation of the individual from community constraints that were largely religious in nature. Islam, however, challenges public neutrality, which has become a source of ambiguity as the boundary between private and public has become increasingly fuzzy. Religious tolerance comes up against the question of cultural diversity, which is expressed in ways that are tied to

religion and blur the boundary between the private world and public space. The question of the recognition of Islam raises once again the old duality of religion and state, as a question that has remained somehow unresolved on the level of definition and principles. In short, Islam serves as a mirror.

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In response to the veil, again, French authorities are redefining the institutional organization of the *laïcité*. The separation of church and state in France effectively grants legal institutional status to the Catholic clergy, the Fédération Protestante de France and the Consistory, established under Napoleon as a representative body for French Jews. This "recognition" is intended as an expression of respect for freedom of worship and the neutrality of the *laïque* state. In the French government, responsibility for *cultes* – that is, religious institutions – falls to the minister of the interior. Since the first scarf affair, successive ministers have tried to establish a representative institution for Islam on the model of the institutions representing other religions.

In April 2003, the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) was finally established to give institutional legitimacy to French Muslims. The establishment of the CFCM is also viewed by Muslims as a form of religious legitimacy. The process has been denounced as authoritarian, and the artificial and pragmatic nature of the procedure for choosing the official representative of Islam in France has been subject to criticism. Nevertheless, it is to the CFCM's credit that it has brought into the open the tensions and power struggles among Muslims seeking representation, as well as the external influences that weighed on the choice of representatives.

The institutionalization of Islam is a response to a demand for recognition by the Muslim population. In this perspective, it leads to treatment of Islam by the state on an equal footing with other religions in France. Of course, this development raises a number

of normative questions. In particular, there is the question of whether recognition can be limited to institutional representation when other institutions, such as the schools, are not fulfilling their function of "assimilation" and the promotion of social, cultural and religious equality. At the same time, if religion appears as the main cleavage in European countries today, then perhaps its recognition can be seen as a path toward integration (I am more convinced with the extend of the mobilization of French Muslims for the liberation of the hostages). This kind of *institutional assimilation* may be the only form of assimilation possible in countries that are, de facto, multicultural. And it could encourage Muslims to identify with national institutions and thus help them to break free of external political forces – their countries of origin and international Islamic organizations seeking to promote Islam in Europe. These forces weigh on the choices of individuals, families and local communities in France as in other European countries.

It can perhaps be hoped that institutionalization of this kind, a step toward the nationalization of Islam, will succeed in stopping the penetration of networks that seek to reconstitute transnational Islam, a reimagined *umma*, in Europe. Such an *umma* could become a nonterritorial nation, and people's sense of belonging to it would be constructed under external influence over which states would have no control.

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I wonder, to what extend there is not a coincidence, then, that soon after the establishment of the CFCM, which brought into the open the internal power struggles and external influences that involve a portion of the Muslim community and whose effects include the politicization of Islam in France, President Chirac appointed his commission on *laïcité*. Especially in an era when its international context is becoming globalized, can the proclamation of a law be separated from its political environment?

The first scarf affair in 1989 occurred right after the Rushdie affair in Britain. In 2003, the Stasi Report emphasized the connection between a law banning the scarf and the increase in acts of violence in France's *banlieues* since 2000, attributed to the second Intifada in Israel-Palestine that began in September 2000. These developments show that questions of ethnicity and the position of minorities, which on one level are subject to classical analyses of cultural diversity as a phenomenon faced by liberal democratic multicultural states, are also increasingly linked to new expressions of identity that are taking shape outside national territories. This is a consequence of the emergence of so-called transnational communities, which connect local experience with external developments that take place in other territories but are felt as an extension of life in the *banlieues*, the best example of these spaces of resistance. The emergence of these communities leads to an upsurge of what could be called transnational nationalism, for which Islam constitutes the source of global identification.

The emergence of transnational communities is a logical next step of cultural pluralism and identity politics. The liberalism which favors ethnic pluralism has privileged the cultural activities that are guided by the association of immigrants, at the heart of which lie on "reappropriated" identities, organized and redefined, to place them before the state. Multiculturalism applied in Western democracies helped the fragments of national identity repressed at the time of the creation of the unitary nation-state that tends towards political and cultural homogeneity, to reemerge, to organize and publicly voice by the bias of associations recognized by the state. They have also acquired a political legitimacy in the countries of immigration that redefine these solidarities and attempt to institutionalize their links with the country of origin. Moreover their networks have been encouraged and legitimized by international organizations or supranational institutions, mainly the European Parliament. All together they create a transnational space, where new

solidarities and new forms of political participation are drawn, and transnational Islam characterized by its internal diversity – national, ethnic and linguistic emerges.

As diverse as Christians in origin, language, nationality, ethnicity and even denomination (Sunnites, Shiites, or Alawites), the loyalty of Muslims to the state of origin, therefore to national identities of home countries, characterize social and ethnic relations among them and limit their identity boundaries. Within the national groups, sects, brotherhood and regional allegiances and political ideologies provide identity repertoires for community organizations specialized in language teaching, folklore, or religion. Such organizations, subject to immigration policies and to legislation concerning social activities of migrants in host countries, have proliferated since the 1980s in all European countries. Despite of all this fragmentation from within by national belongings, Islam represents a unifying force among Muslim immigrants so far as collective interests are concerned.

The diversity is "recentered" around norms and values diffused by European supranational institutions and through the process by which these same institutions give the diversity a legitimacy on the international stage, especially via transnational networks and an inclusive discourse founded on human rights, the fight against racism or any other form of social, political and cultural exclusion etc. The same diversity finds itself "recentered" around a common identity Islam, the religion of the majority of post-colonial immigration in Europe. Religion has always been the origin of the most elaborate and institutionalized transnational networks. Such a unification through Islam does not mean the reconstitution of *Umma* even though according to the Qur'an "every Muslim is supposed to belong to Islamic *Umma* regardless of his or her ethnicity or location". It refers rather to a retranslation of Umma in a transnational nation, where old symbols look for new meanings to use Geertz's expression; in order to gain legitimacy in the

international arena. Besides, religion is better adapted to transnationalism, because of its multi-national and multi-ethnic by nature and Islam is nonetheless the identity of the non-European minority in Europe. Moreover, religious communities have always been stimulated by secularization to organize themselves in pressure groups and take action in the domain of international relations, as demonstrated in treatises governing minorities from the 1648 treaties of Westphalia until the 1878 Berlin Conference, partially resumed by the Leagues of Nations in the issue of World War I.

However, it is primarily with the case of Islam as a minority religion that communities are formed in Europe to legitimate their demands for recognition and to spawn a pluralist politics. In a transnational perspective, it is rather the countries of origin or international organizations which reactivate the religious loyalty of Muslim populations residing in different European countries. Their strategies seem contradictory, and at times even completely in conflict, insofar as the countries of origin aspire to a supranational recognition, and the international organizations seek to rise above the national cleavages of Muslims in Europe in order to create a single identification, that of being Muslim in Europe, and from there, the recognition of Islam by European institutions.

They nevertheless operate in concert with the countries of origin or with the assistance of international organizations, or both at once. The countries of origin rely on family ties consolidated by cultural, commercial and associative exchange between their citizens' different counties of residence and support the initiatives of immigrants for native language education or the opening of religious ties or community schools. Because of the density of communications, a religious identity begins to form and a culture is expressed as "different" within the networks. As far as international organizations are concerned, these transnational networks promote a European Islam which seeks to "homogenize" national differences. Taking advantage of religion's importance to the

immigrants, and of its ability to mobilize, organizations seek to overcome the national diversity of Muslims residing in Europe to publicize a unique identification based on a common religion. This creates a transnational solidarity founded on Islam, despite the opposition of countries of origin who reject the politicization of Islam (the source of conflict with the government) which its organizations endeavor to promote. This coexists with a "global Islam" as O. Roy describes a product of networks where countries of origin lose their controlling role and become nothing more than a long-distance reference. The new actors who construct themselves as protectors, advocates or financiers of minority Islam around the world are not even necessarily themselves products of immigration. It is the individuals who act on behalf of the promoting countries of Islam in the world, i.e. Saudi Arabia, or even Islamic NGOs who make the shift from charitable actions to political mobilization[1].

Such a "recentralization" of identity is non territorial. As a matter of fact, the rhetoric of mobilization recentralizes, in a non-territorial way, the multiplicity of identities –national, religious, ethnic or linguistic - that are fragmented yet represented in such a structure. Together they point to the existence of a new type of nationalism that is transnational, that is a nationalism that has not a territorial claim, that is expressed and developed beyond and outside the borders of the state and its territory, and returns to arouse to nationalist sentiments in the country – home and host; creates new expressions

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[1] The coordination of networks around Islam in Europe is also a difficult case, not just because of associations which seek a common identification through collective action. Firstly, because Islamic associations, while autonomous compared to the Welfare State of different European countries, adapt to the national play of their country of residence in the same fashion as the so-called cultural associations. Their strategies of action are guided by their relationship to the respective state of residence. Together the activists construct a discourse underlining "the importance of faith for better social integration" in the welcoming countries. Another difficulty stems from the diversity of nationalities, sects and ethno-cultural groups that represent the Muslim population in Europe. This diversity is reflected in the multiplicity of local and national associations and in the presence of numerous religious associations in the various countries of residence. Each of the organizations generally consolidates a national group (Turkish, Indian, Moroccan, Algerian) or a religious sect (Sufi, Alevi). Concerning willful representation at the European level and beyond, certain groups present themselves as both "multi-national", since they attempt to reassemble multiple nationalities, and transnational, since they are represented in different countries, see R.Kastoryano, Transnational Networks and Political Participation: The Place of Immigrants in the European Union, in M.Berezin and M.Schain, *Europe Without Borders*, *op.cit.* pp. 64-89.

of belonging and a political engagement that reflects the nationalization of communitarian sentiments guided by an "imagined geography".

"Pan-Islam", "pan-religiosity" or *umma* (community of religious) reinterpreted as "reframing" all internal diversity into an "imagined community" which loses its religious content in order to define itself as a single cultural nation, giving rise to a nationalism which defines itself more as a cultural nationalism than as an ideological state nationalism?

These types of organization reflect the notion of modernization dear to Gellner and his theory of nationalism. To him, modernization in this context is "the passage from a closed, stable and culturally diversified community to a society of mass anonymity, standardized and mobile". This implies organizational changes and the adoption of different modes of functioning, but nevertheless remains a quite radical conception of the nation.

The politicized modes of organization in Islam concern only one infinitesimal part of the Muslim population in Europe. But Islamic associations play an altogether larger role in the development of an "ethnic" pride, a sense of community whose attributes are drawn out of Islam, essentially creating out of Islam the foundations of a "moral identity." Its administrators also become the principal speakers of public government, as the recognition of Islam in the name of other religions in various European countries lends legitimacy to their actions and organizations. The debates on Islam as religion, as philosophy, as doctrine, the debates on "the present questions concerning Muslims, like the Rushdie affair or the headscarf affair, or even broadly, the Israel-Palestine conflict", are as much a part of their activities as studying the Qu'ran or learning Arabic. Islam thus becomes a "refuge" or source of identification with the causes that "trouble the world" at the local as well as transnational or global level. Mobilization around the Israel-Palestine

conflict has reunited not only Islamist and religious associations, the most secular factions of Muslims as well. Other political groups consequently align themselves with their cause. This opening towards "the universal" gives a greater legitimacy to a "recentralization" around Islam.

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The question of community becomes more urgent when the sense of belonging is nourished by external developments such as wars and conflicts that take place "elsewhere." These developments transform old grievances into new aspirations, in which colonial relations give way to a desire for, and an expression of, local and transnational autonomy. One such expression is violence in the name of a "cause" that directly or indirectly affects Islam, which is perceived as "victimized on a global scale." This image is reinforced by activists' rhetoric emphasizing humiliation and Western domination, referring especially to the war between Israel and the Palestinians. September 11 and the war in Iraq produced heroes and victims for young Muslims in France, influencing their dress, speech and action in a kind of localized "revenge."

The rhetoric of transnational actors, the main architects or geographers of this such a transnational nation, criticizes the "inadequacy" of states in human rights and of citizenship as a foundation for democratic equality, tolerance and freedom of worship. They seek to redirect people's loyalty from the territorial political community to a non-territorial political community, thus redefining the terms of belonging and allegiance to a "global" nation that finds comfort in Islam as a basis for belonging that transcends the national boundaries of both countries of origin and countries of immigration. However, by using extraterritorial references, they paradoxically contribute to re-localizing the conflict in the zones of urban concentration. They define new enemies who are geographically and

culturally near, but on the "other side" because of their religion – Jewish. These enemies thus also become associated with an extraterritorial identity, but a different one.

Of course, extraterritorial identities are not generated only through wars and conflicts. It is not only in immigrant situations that Islam involves both local and non local elements of identification. Nor is it only Islam that develops non territorial modes of belonging. Non-territoriality is part of the process of globalization and affects all religions, although perhaps Islam more strongly because of the politicization of Islam since the 1980s, which is expressed in a variety of ways in different parts of the world. Even in countries where Islam is the religion of the vast majority of the population and people's sense of belonging has a strong territorial base, similar kinds of rhetoric transcending national boundaries can be heard. The rhetoric surrounding Islam, both with and without a territorial base, is now used as the foundation for a "liberation" movement, like a sort of a new movement for the emancipation of nations. Its effect is to create a form of identification with a new unity that seeks to create a power relationship with states on both the local and the international level, both in national institutions – including ones that are as important for the transmission of the national ideology as the schools – and in supranational institutions.

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It would seem that a normative response to this new constellation should come from the state. States still constitute the framework for the individual's citizenship and democratic representation. True, they have become more fragile inside their borders by "embryonic nations" whose expression of nationalism is transnational, non-territorial and resistant to "state nationalism" because they rely on external political forces. At the same time, they have become more fragile outside their borders by globalization, which limits their independence. And yet, anyone who undertakes nationalist, religious or transnational

action targets the state. Whatever the means and methods, war strategies are always directed at the state, at its vulnerabilities or its strengths, and at its national symbols such as *laïcité* in France. In my view there is a clear relationship between September 11, and the renewed debate about *laïcité* and the need for a law to assert the power of the state around the veil affair.

The veil affair, then, raised a number of questions, and therefore requires several levels of analysis: how society is evolving, how to adapt its principles such as *laïcité* to new realities, what role institutions should play in reestablishing social ties and which institutions should be involved, how to deal with the influence of transnational solidarity networks and the new nationalist expressions that they generate.

The fundamental question has to do with the capacity of states to negotiate both inside and outside their borders. Inside their borders, the negotiations have to do with the de facto pluralism that characterizes civil society, the terms of recognition of the communities that are emerging within it and the limits of their political legitimacy. In other words, the state needs to negotiate the terms of citizenship. External negotiations have to do with degrees of institutional and decision-making interdependence with other states and especially with NGOs and other supranational institutions. Of course, the option of negotiation appears a priori to be a moderate solution. But that it is because the conflict it is responding to is itself moderate. The demand for recognition of religious specificities is simply a step toward recognizing a "right to difference" as a new foundation for democracy.

But how can the terms of negotiation be defined when the nature of the conflicts changes because of extraterritorial developments that have repercussions within the state's territory? How can allegiances, identities, even the conflicts themselves be "re-territorialized," and the limits of negotiation established? When issues have become

nonnegotiable because of their scope, transcending national boundaries, and because of their effects on individual freedom in local communities within the territory of the state, by what mechanism can they be made negotiable again?