

Mediterranean Programme and Musmine Project

Headscarf Controversies in Muslim and Non-Muslim Societies. Competing Narratives, Conflicting Norms, Clashing Body Politics

organised by

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Considering the last decade escalation of public debates discussing the legitimacy of the wear of the Islamic headscarf in European public spaces, this workshop invites to an hermeneutic reading of the controversies that have developed around it. It takes place in a European context where religion is going more and more public, where multiculturalism as a model of integration is being challenged. To some extent, in Western European contexts, membership to certain minority communities defined along religious/cultural/ethnic lines have recently become a marker defining what constitutes a threat to national security.

The workshop will include case studies from contexts where Muslims constitute minorities (France, Germany, Great-Britain, India) and from societies where they are the majority (Turkey, Egypt). In fact, the wear of the headscarf in Muslim societies cannot be taken for granted or legitimate, exactly as it does not per se constitute an offence to secularism, neither embodies ex ante a contradiction with secular values in the European context. Headscarf controversies cannot simply be reduced to a new interpretation of the 'clash of civilizations' between Western values and Islam.

The workshop invites scholars from different disciplines of social sciences (law, sociology, political science, anthropology) to analyse the formulation of normative conflicts between models of social organisation, the trajectories of narratives typifying identities and actions in each national contexts, and the way body politics are framed in both secular and non secular contexts, in particular when dealing with female citizens. In that respect, the headscarf works as a prism for reading the updating of an old conflict between religious and political moralities.

The way the public visibility of Islamic headscarf is discussed should be thought in articulation with the preservation/defence of national models of citizenship, of 'legitimate order'. What are the different patterns of public morality emerging in these various different contexts? Considering headscarf controversies as specific moments of test and reassessment of the tie binding individuals and collectives to certain norms and values that constitute polity, what do headscarf controversies tell us about gender relationships, racial issues, ethnicities, definition of citizenry ? Where is the locus of morality? To what extent does the judicial arena help us identifying the boundaries of female decency in both non-Muslim and Muslim societies?

Programme

- 09.00 Welcome of participants and Introduction
Valérie Amiraux
- 09.30-11.00 **The Collateral Damages of March 2004 Law in Postcolonial France**
Nacira Guénif
[background reading paper *Politics, Culture and Society*, Volume 24, Number 3, Winter 2006, pp. 23-41 (19) – [click here](#)]
The Veiled Artists in Egypt: An Islamic Sensibility
Valentina Frate
- 11.00-11.30 *Coffee break (Sala Bandiere)*
- 11.30-13.00 **Discourse Production and Its Ways into Lawmaking: The German Headscarf Debates**
Schirin Amir-Moazami
[background reading paper *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 3, December 2005, pages 267-286– [click here](#)]
The Purdah System and Secularism
Rajeev Barghava
- 13.00-14.30 *Lunch (Villa Schifanoia)*
- 14.30-16.00 **Beyond the Veil. An Ethnomethodological Analysis of a Debate within the Egyptian People's Assembly**
Baudouin Dupret
[background reading paper *Qualitative Sociology Review*, vol. II, issue 2, 2006 – [click here](#)]
'L'Affaire du Foulard': A British Perspective on Muslim Women and the Headscarf
Maleiha Malik
- 16.00-16.30 *Coffee break (Sala Bandiere)*
- 16.30 – 18.00 General and final discussion

List of Participants

Schirin Amir-Moazami	Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder
Valérie Amiraux	RSCAS, Florence
Rajeev Bhargava	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi
Baudouin Dupret	CNRS/IFPO, Damas
Valentina Frate	CEDEJ/Cairo
Nacira Guénif	Université Paris XIII, Paris
Maleiha Malik	King's college, London

Discourse Production and Its Ways into Lawmaking:
The German Headscarf Debates
Schirin Amir-Moazami

My contribution will focus on the discursive production in the public debates on the headscarf in Germany and its ways into lawmaking. I will mainly concentrate on the emerging self-referential notions of secularity and religion in relation to the rising importance of Islam. I will argue that the Constitutional Court's decision in the fall of 2003, resulting from the tradition of a "friendly separation" (Linz 1996) of church and state institutions in Germany, could be interpreted as a sign for a more liberal stance of dealing with the growing cultural-religious pluralisation than, for example, in France. Yet, the ongoing public debates informing, surrounding and following this decision, as much as the laws established by the federal states in the aftermath also for the German case indicate the failure of the widely held promise that the liberal democratic public sphere was a domain of inclusion, open to the formation and circulation of diverse arguments, and accessible to various actors and voices.

The Purdah System and Secularism
Rajeev Barghava

Not much work has been done on the purdah since the pathbreaking work of Papanek and others in the 60s and the 70s. The work of that period gently dismantled the common perception that the purdah always imposed a paralytic constraint on the freedom of women and reinforced relations of inequality. It did not deny that the purdah system reinforced female segregation from domestic and public spaces inhabited by men but it did emphasise that its role is more subtle and that it could also facilitate changes in the social situation of women. My paper examines that literature, draws attention to its cultural specificity and explores the normative implications of the ethnography of these practices in the light of developments in feminist and multiculturalist theories. A critical examination of the purdah system could provide both an interesting contrast with how the issue of veiling is played out in western societies and might also hold some interesting lessons for the debate in Europe over veiling. It is interesting that while this issue is debated widely and heatedly in contemporary Europe, it appears to have quietly slipped out of urban Indian imagination. My paper would examine if this impression is correct and also look into the explanation for this change/difference.

Beyond the veil. An Ethnomethodological Analysis of a Debate within
the Egyptian People's Assembly
Baudouin Dupret (CNRS/IFPO)

The declarations made by the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, who reminded with some nostalgia the time when his mother walked out of her home without feeling compelled to wear the veil ignited a fierce controversy within the People's Assembly, the lower chamber of the Egyptian Parliament. This contribution aims at detailing excerpts of this debate. Considering that parliamentary debates constitute a specific institutional activity, endowed with its own discursive and procedural constraints and taking place within a dialogical site, but also embedded within a dialogical network, we analyse how the constituents of a public scandal unfold in context and in action. In the ordinary world, the other is constantly the object of normative assessments. Brought to the public, these assessments strengthen his/her reputation, when positive, or throw discredit on him/her, when negative. Most often, it is the media that give a reputation process the dimension of an affair. We can decipher the sequential organisation, the categorical mechanisms, the protagonists and the audiences involved in the progress of an affair of this type. Beside, when reaching the tribune of the Parliament, such an affair fits into an institutional context which is both part of the media dialogical network and specific, i.e. constituted in and by its own practical purposes. The debate therefore reveals the double orientation, internal and external, of parliamentary activities. The close attention to the debate makes it possible to demonstrate, step by step and piecemeal, the mechanisms specific to an issue related to public morality. Beyond the debate on the veil, it is the functioning of Egyptian politics and media that comes to understanding in the empirical detail of its contextual practice.

The Veiled Artists in Egypt: An Islamic Sensibility

Valentina Frate

The Islamic headscarf in Egypt, a former traditional and then political marker in the world of visual arts, has become more the sign of a process of cultural transformation even if it also continues to represent a religious engagement in the popular imagination. Through the adoption of the Islamic headscarf, some agents, such as the veiled artists, give support to new Muslim collective identities and challenge the dominant categories in the established aesthetic genres. Acting with the veil is a new phenomena among artists in Egypt (2004). Whether progressive or reactionary, it leads to a process of reconstruction of a mass-mediated public sphere. I will focus my paper on the veiled artists in Egypt, not only because they are tied with the new-born pious middle and upper class, but because of their attempt to show Islam as a universally symbolic alternative to transform arts and to enhance female artistes status and lives. They confirm the importance of the entertainment products in television, their role in transforming Muslims into consumers and in defining a new Islamic trans-national culture based on a new self controlled and self disciplined body.

The Collateral Damages of the March 2004 Law in Postcolonial France

Nacira Guénif

March 2004 is the date of the vote of the law banning ostensible religious signs in the public schools. It may be considered as a moment of inflexion in the French conception of public and private spheres separation, as first expressed by the 1905 law on the separation between State and Churches. For the last three years, the impact of this banning law has gone far beyond its initial scope (the restricted space of public schools). It has reached hospitals, public administrations and more broadly collective imaginaries not only by ways of the medias, but also with the vote of other more recent laws. The repressive, suspicious and sexist subtext of this law has led to abuses, excesses and the development of increasingly unequal regimes of governance. The purpose of this contribution will be to describe and analyze examples and samples of discourses and statements in order to illustrate the extent to which collateral damages have become necessary counterparts of the so called preservation of "laïcité" in France. They constitute the new mean for reinforcing the abstract egalitarian universalism of the French republic.

'L'Affaire du Foulard': A British Perspective on Muslim Women and the Headscarf

Maleiha Malik

This paper argues that one of the ways in which the debate surrounding Muslim women, of which the controversy over the veil is an example, is that it uses a reductionist view of 'simple equality' which requires a choice between different equality grounds such as 'religion, race or gender'. This paper argues that the issue of the headscarf needs to be analysed within the paradigm of 'complex equality' that recognises the way in which categories such as gender and religion need to be reformulated to take into account this intersectionality. European liberal democracies have increasingly adopted 'equality' and 'non-discrimination'. These are foundational principles that give priority to both gender and religion but treats these as separate and unrelated concepts. This provides a conceptual structure for constitutional and legal equalities frameworks which encourages a 'single axis' definition of equality: i.e one that requires a choice between gender and religion. However, some women (e.g Muslim women) fall within more than equalities ground. This 'intersectionality' between gender and religion in the lives of minority women has a number of consequences. Most importantly, it means that the experiences of these women can be marginalised, distorted and excluded by definitions of concepts that ignore issues of the allocation of power. For example, 'gender' may exclude the particular religious experiences of minority women who are also 'religious believers'; and 'religion' may reflect the needs of men within a minority religious community thereby excluding the viewpoint of 'minority women'. Once we move from 'single axis' towards 'intersectional' and 'complex equality' a number of issues open up for analysis. In the context of Muslim women and the headscarf this analysis suggests that the view that the 'headscarf is a form of gender inequality' will need to be reformulated to take into account the fact that in some cases the 'headscarf' may in fact be a valid choice that needs to be respected as part of what is required to guarantee the principle of 'complex equality' for individual women.