

Invisible Others: Muslims in European cities in the time of the burqa ban¹

Claire Hancock

Université Paris-Est, Créteil

Lab'Urba

Institut Universitaire de France

Abstract

This paper analyzes specific local forms taken by “burqa bans” in some European cities and looks at the ways in which *visibility* is used in different contexts, and with different meanings. It establishes a parallel between women wearing the veil and LGBTQ activists, and the similar ways in which their presence in public blurs established limits between the personal and the political. While feminism has often been enlisted to defend the bans, I argue that an authentically feminist position should lead us to take claims made by Muslim women more seriously. I do this both by using published research about women wearing the full-face veil in France, and by quoting interviewees who wear a simple veil, and who all point to the negative effects of the law on their daily lives and mobilities.

Keywords: visibility, European cities, Muslim citizens, burqa, veil, feminism.

Resum: *Els altres invisibles: musulmanes en ciutats europees en els temps de la prohibició del burca*

Aquest article analitza la forma específica en què certes prohibicions en l'ús del burca s'han desenvolupat a algunes ciutats europees i analitza com el concepte de visibilitat és emprat en diferents contextos i els seus significats. S'estableix un paral·lelisme entre les dones que empen el vel i els activistes LGBTQ, i les similituds que la seva presència en públic ocasiona, produint una dissolució dels límits establerts entre allò personal i allò polític. Mentre el feminisme habitualment s'ha mostrat a favor d'aquest tipus de prohi-

1. Claire Hancock va impartir la seva conferència a la SCG, el 12 d'abril de 2012.

bicions, jo afirmo que una posició autènticament feminista hauria de considerar seriosament les reivindicacions de les dones musulmanes. Faig això analitzant per una banda les investigacions publicades a França sobre l'ús del vel que cobreix sencera la cara, i a partir d'entrevistes a dones que empren un simple vel, i que assenyalen els efectes negatius que aquestes lleis tenen sobre la seva vida diària i la seva mobilitat.

Paraules clau: visibilitat, ciutats europees, ciutadanes musulmanes, burca, vel, feminisme.

Resumen: *Los otros invisibles: musulmanas en ciudades Europeas en los tiempos de la prohibición del burqa*

Este artículo analiza la forma específica como ciertas prohibiciones en el uso del burqa se han desarrollado en algunas ciudades europeas y analiza cómo el concepto de visibilidad es utilizado en diferentes contextos y sus significados. Se establece un paralelismo entre las mujeres que usan el velo y los activistas LGBTQ, y las similitudes que su presencia en público ocasiona, produciendo una disolución de los límites establecidos entre lo personal y lo político. Mientras el feminismo habitualmente se ha mostrado a favor de este tipo de prohibiciones, yo afirmo que una posición auténticamente feminista debería considerar seriamente las reivindicaciones de las mujeres musulmanas. Hago esto analizando por una parte las investigaciones publicadas en Francia sobre el uso del velo que cubre por entero la cara, y a partir de entrevistas a mujeres que usan un simple velo, y que señalan los efectos negativos que estas leyes tienen sobre su vida diaria y su movilidad.

Palabras clave: visibilidad, ciudades europeas, ciutadanes musulmanes, burca, velo, feminismo.

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The aim of this paper is to use some tools from feminist thought and feminist geography and apply them to an understanding of what seems to be going on in many continental European countries in terms of the acceptance of Muslim citizens. In a deliberately provocative way, I am going to use elements that have been put forward in the geography of LGBTQ² movement to read this issue in a different light, but I am going to try and show that this way of thinking is not as counter-intuitive as might be assumed, in particular because in both instances we are dealing with minorities.

In theoretical terms I am particularly indebted to authors such as Eric and Didier Fassin, who have done a lot to apply to the French situation an understanding of what they call the “minoritarian paradox” –the fact that for minority groups, there is in the process of claiming recognition an ambiguous need to “*speak up as in order to refuse being treated as*” (Fassin & Fassin, 2006). They draw on Joan Scott’s work on French feminism (1996), which clearly underlines the paradoxical situation of feminists who have to both assert and refuse difference as part of their political mobilization. I have also been inspired

2. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual i Queer (N. de l'E.).

by Nancy Fraser's work on issues of recognition (2000), and Jacques Rancière's work on the process of "political subjectification", which he describes as 'heterology', a "logic of the other", "never the simple assertion of an identity, always also the refusal of an identity imposed by another" (1998).

What this paper discusses is how visibility underpins subjectification, but also how difficult it may be to differentiate between visibility and exposure; exposure tending to lead to objectification, not subjectification. I'll be assuming that visibility is a geographic issue *per se*, following Michel Lussault's description of space as the "visibility regime of social substances" (2003). That I use both Francophone and Anglophone references is not to imply that language issues, or the national contexts within which these debates are embedded, are inessential, quite the reverse : I think we need here to pay great attention to the way things play out differently in different national contexts, and at very local scales.

Therefore I'll begin by looking at the way the question seems to be framed in the Catalan context, before drawing on research that has been carried out in France, where a wealth of material was produced prior to the 2010 law prohibiting the full-face veil which started being applied in April 2011. To date this law has led to 299 fines imposed on women wearing the full-face veil (*Le Monde*, April 12th, 2012), but I want to show that this law has had many more far-ranging consequences on the lives of Muslim women who do not wear the full-face veil. I will argue that we might dismiss as empty electoralist posturing on the part of politicians, in Catalunya as well as in France, turns out to have very material, exclusionary consequences on much wider sections of the Muslim community.

Abans moros que espanyols

Looking up on the internet for some information on the Catalan situation, I came across this short report on an event which took place in Barcelona in 2011:

«Durante un acto de ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya) en el Parque de la Ciutadella, (...) destacó el testimonio de uno de los intervinientes, (...) al señalar que "antes preferimos ser pobres que españoles". Cerca, un veterano militante de ERC, apostilló: "*I moros, volem ésser abans moros que espanyols*" (...), frase que fue sorprendentemente acogida con aplausos por una parte de los asistentes, muchos de los cuales eran inmigrantes magrebíes.»

This report, which was formulated in very critical terms on website *alerta-digital.com*, November 2nd, 2011, had me wondering whether there was something specific at play in the Catalan context with regard to relations with Muslim, Maghrebi immigrants: some degree of affinity deriving from the experience of being a minority culture in a wider whole, for instance. This, of course, contradicted several other reports, which underlined the fact that Cat-

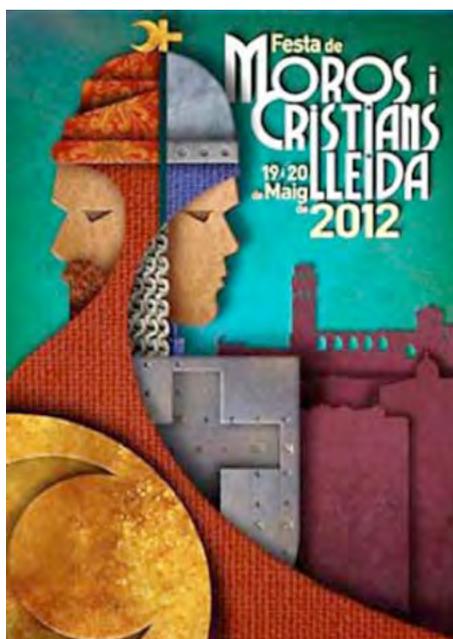
alan local authorities had been most active in proposing and enforcing bans on the burka (11 of the 13 local authorities who did so in the whole of Spain), and which showed that the rhetoric and arguments used to justify the bans were generally very similar to the arguments deployed in France:

«El Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Cataluña ha avalado el veto al entender que “en la cultura occidental” el velo integral puede “perturbar la tranquilidad” del resto de ciudadanos porque “oculta el rostro”. Y que no casa con los valores de igualdad entre mujeres y hombres que “defiende la sociedad española”.» (report in *El País*, June 10th, 2011)

The report also emphasized the leading part played by Lleida in the bans. Looking further into local specificities of Lleida, I was struck by the fact that this is a city that yearly commemorates its history of 430 years of Muslim rule (719-1149) by staging a very ritualized *Festa de moros i cristians*, during which, the city website explains, ‘Moors’ and ‘Christians’ in historical costumes fight for domination over the city. The outcome is also highly ritualized since ‘Moors’ and ‘Christians’ win on alternate years.

This yearly celebration of the hybridity of the city’s past, which was, quite literally, “Moorish before it was Spanish”, does not however seem to lead to greater openness to the Muslims actually living in Lleida: one estimate quoted in the *Guardian*, July 2nd, 2010, mentions 29.000 immigrants, 21% of the population of the city, but it is unclear whether all or most are Muslims.³ People interviewed in this article mentioned they had never, in several decades living in Lleida, come across a woman wearing the ‘burka’ or full-face veil. One interviewee had an explanation for the “burka ban” in the virtual absence of such clothing practices: “Catalan elections are coming up (...) election time is when they go after the foreigners and the Muslims” (Abderrahim Boussira, quoted in *The Guardian*, July 2nd, 2010).

Figure 1. The poster advertising the 2012 *Festa de moros i cristians* in Lleida



3. Segons dades del padró de 2011, elaborades i facilitades per Laura Aguilar (UdL), la majoria d'immigrants són magrebins (6.324) i altres 5.272 provenen de la resta d'Àfrica. La població total de Lleida és de 138.416 hab. (N. de l'E.)

It seems that electoralism, and the need to appear “tough on immigration”, has been one of the motivations of “burka bans” in many places: governments unable to solve economic problems, to deal with youth unemployment or housing problems, will use this sort of policy to divert political debate and attention from these embarrassing facts. They of course will claim that their only concern is gender equality, and that even in the absence of women wearing the full-face veil, it is appropriate to “send a message” that the practice will not be tolerated, in order to prevent anyone from taking it up. As to why Catalunya, in particular, has been prone to such posturing in Spain, there are several possible explanations: the French example is maybe closer than in other Spanish regions, or there may be specific cultural anxieties from having been a repressed minority culture under Franco, which triggers fears of cultural loss in the presence of Otherness. This political tendency should not, however, be confused with a widespread dislike of foreigners: the Facebook page “Catalunya sense burka” (Catalonia without burka) only had 42 *likes* as of April 2012...

(In)visibility

“... in European democracies, social actors become citizens by becoming public. Which implies a certain visibility. Political life thrives on affairs of a private, intimate order, intimate affairs considered as secret, buried or taboo until then, which are brought into the public arena by certain movements, as was the case with feminism in the 70s, or the homosexual movement.” Nilüfer Göle, in her hearing by the Parliamentary Commission on « the practice of wearing the full-face veil on the national territory, December 8th, 2009 (*Rapport d'information*, 2010)

As this quote by Nilüfer Göle aptly reminds us, ‘visibility’ was historically part of the claims formulated by feminist and by LGBTQ movements. The claim for visibility often takes form as a claim for a “right to the city”, with the organisation of yearly, highly publicized demonstrations such as “Gay Prides” or March 8th demonstrations.

Incongruous as the parallel may seem, it does a lot to illuminate the situation of Muslim citizens in countries where Islam has been stigmatised over the years, in particular since 2001. Specialists of the sociology of religion have used the metaphor of the “coming out” to describe how young Muslims in France, often of the second or third generation, are much more assertive about their religion and no longer feel the need to hide it as did their parents or grand parents. Nor is the metaphor necessarily as offensive to Muslims themselves as one might think: Valérie Amiraux reports having been congratulated by an imam she worked with for using the phrase “coming out” in an interview (Amiraux, in Amiraux, Jonker, 2006, p. 48). Others have talked of “Muslim hype”, as for instance Raphaël Liogier in his discussion of the full-face veil as “hyper-modern trend” (2010):

“If faith cannot be demonstrated, it can however be shown. In fact it is because, by its very nature, faith cannot be demonstrated, that it needs, as a compensation, to be shown, that it needs pomp, sparkle, decorum. To the point that the sacred is sometimes defined by decorum (...). Some areas, such as the one around the rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud in Paris, where there are Muslim accessory shops and «fundamentalist» bookstores all over the place, have become, as have some gay streets, places where one exhibits one’s style, shows oneself «more Muslim than thou», hype Muslim”.

This need for “pomp, sparkle and decorum” can easily be understood in a Catholic country such as Spain where very spectacular religious processions take place, for instance during the Easter period, such as the processions of *nazarenos con capirotas*, in which men with their faces covered by large hoods walk the streets in very colourful garb (in Lleida for instance, but also in many other cities).

Such processions also challenge the claim that “hiding one’s face” is necessarily disruptive of public order; in fact, in the French law there was a specific exception spelled out to allow “traditional religious processions” to continue taking place, since politicians from the South of France, in particular, had voiced concerns about the continuity of such celebrations in their cities (the French law bans “covering one’s face in public space” generally, and it was therefore necessary to include a list of exceptions, for medical or security reasons, or for more trivial reasons such as “Santa Claus disguises”...). This of course raises the question of why it is acceptable for Catholic men to walk the streets in such clothing, while it is deemed unacceptable of Muslim women: the fact that the former is *traditional*, while the latter isn’t, is probably not a sufficient explanation; that the former is but a one-shot display of “Christian pride” while the other is a daily practice is probably more convincing.

Visibility is key to what Muslim citizens are reproached with in European cities: veils, minarets are deemed ‘ostentatious’, *too* visible, akin to a claim for power. However, that visibility cannot be equated with power has been perceptively demonstrated by Peggy Phelan whose remark “if representational visibility equals power, then almost naked young white women should be running Western culture” (1993, p. 10) is much quoted. In this instance, and maybe also in the instance of European Muslims, visibility actually amounts to public exposure, and a form of exposure that points to a specific form of vulnerability to objectification: sexual objecti-

Figure 2. The Good Friday procession in Lleida



fiction in the case of young women, objectification as threat in the case of Muslims. Images such as these are all over the walls of European cities, making veiled women a potent sign with quasi-iconic value and resonance.

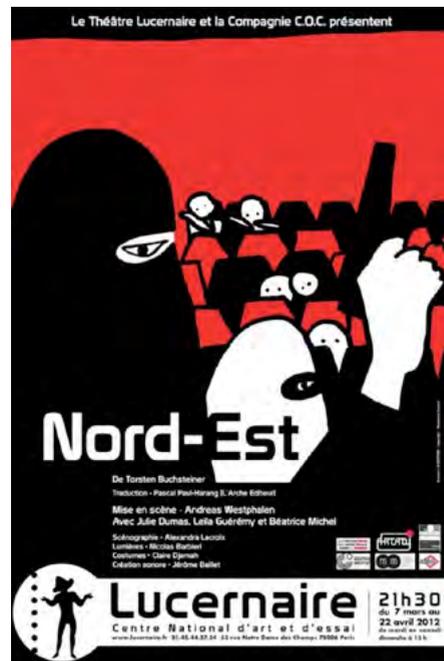
Again the sexual and the religious become conflated in unexpected yet compelling ways, with the link between the two clearly drawn out by Göle: “This demand in public space that we expose our face and body ever more freely, this spiral of secularisation is a source of oppression for many women and a pathological symptom of our own societies” (N. Göle, 2009 hearing, in *Rapport d'information*, 2010).

Muslim pride?

There is by now a consistent body of work on the views and experiences of women wearing the full-veil in France, among which the documentary films by anthropologist Agnès De Féo (to which Liogier refers in his article, see <http://www.agnesdefeo.book.fr/sous-la-burqa>) and a 2011 report by Naïma Bouteldja funded by the Open Society Foundation ; these are supplemented by regarded academics such as Farhad Khosrokar or Samir Amghar, who were also heard by the Parliamentary Commission in 2009 (*Rapport d'information*, 2010). What emerges from such research is that, far from being the embodiment of an “Islamist threat” in Europe, the women wearing the full-face veil in France are not a sign of the growing influence of Islamist movements, but quite the reverse: they embody a global trend, taken up in Europe, Australia, North America, by the same sorts of very committed individuals who want to assert their pride in their religion.

For Liogier (2010), the full-face veil is not proselytizing, it's a sign of distinction. The question of whether it is an *authentic* Muslim garment or prescribed by the Kuran is irrelevant, he argues, recalling that in Catholicism, there are no prescriptions for the Pope or priests wear robes, it's just part of the decorum. But women who wear the full-face veil are by no means respecting a tradition, they are innovating, and inventing a personal version of islam with no connexion to its history; they talk of a personal spiritual

Figure 3. Poster advertising a play in a Paris theatre, March-April 2012



quest, a voluntary personal transformation. While there appear to be several types of motivation, depending on age or family situation, the practice, according to Liogier, is never devoid of an erotic dimension: it has to do with preserving mystery, being the unavailable and unapproachable beauty, the highest prize that has to be deserved and is not freely bestowed. These women by no means renounce modern life, and still go shopping, to the cinema, to the restaurant, and practice sports. For some of them, islam symbolizes roots that they yearn for while they are effectively lost, a sense of nostalgia for something that has been lost, fantasized *origins*. Liogier compares their quest to that of neo-buddhists who shave their hair and walk barefoot in Western cities : in their case, tourists are amused; in the case of the full-face veil, tourists are scared, because of the associations with “Islamic fundamentalism”, “female oppression”, “war on the West”, etc.

Khosrokar also emphasizes the transnational, cosmopolitan nature of the movement; for Amghar, it is “hyper-individualistic” as well as “a sign of distinction” (*Rapport d’information*, 2010). All researchers agree on the fact that a significant proportion of the women are French-born converts, which was confirmed by French Minister of Home Affairs Guéant in a January 2012 interview with *Le Monde*: a quarter of the 237 women fined for wearing the full-face veil were in fact in such a situation, he stated, with more than a hint of surprise. He admitted that the “citizenship class” that was also provided for in the law had never, so far, been necessary, because most of the women are French-born or at least hold French nationality.

This remark underlines how bound up with issues of national identity the question has become, and how it is used to collapse and confuse geographical scales (Hancock, 2008): most discourse about this form of veiling, while emphasising nationhood and national values, in fact leaps deftly from the scale of a handful of female bodies, to that of global geopolitical issues, as exemplified in Nicolas Sarkozy’s June 2009 statement that “The burqa is not welcome on the territory of the Republic” –a strange formulation which seems to imply that it is in fact French national territory that is being covered by the burqa, rather than the heads of women. This resonates with political posters which frequently set a (veiled) female figure side-by-side with iconic representations of national flags or country outlines, making the dominion over women’s bodies as major geopolitical goal (Hancock, 2011).

This of course is strongly redolent of what Foucault called ‘biopower’, the exercise of the power of the state on bodies (Foucault, 1976) ; in the French instance, this idea has been built on by Elsa Dorlin in her influential 2006 book *La Matrice de la race* in which she shows that “Sexism and racism are not so much theoretically comparable as historically inseparable (...) dominant categories literally made bodies, sexed and racialized bodies, including the very body of the Nation” (Dorlin, 2006).

All hyped up and no place to go?

I want to argue that, while the issue of framed as one of national, if not global, importance, it has very material consequences on the lives of women at the local scale, by excluding them from certain spaces. This is clear from Naïma Bouteldja's report, which emphasizes the alarming frequency of abuse (mostly verbal but sometimes also physical) endured by women who wear the full-face veil in France. Verbal aggressions not only challenge the victim's belonging in France (with phrasings such as "Go back to your country" or "We're in France, here"), but also restrict their access to some parts of the city and inhibit their mobility because they feel more threatened in some areas than others:

"INTERVIEWER: Are there certain places you are scared to go with your niqab?"

TALIBAH: Yes, as it happens, there are some shopping centres which are more in central Paris.

FARAH: Well, [the insults] don't happen every day because, for example, if I stay in my neighbourhood there's no problem, people smile. If I go to other places, inevitably. ... when I take the train to go to Paris, for example, it's true that many people are going to insult me."

(Open Society report, 2011)

This sort of treatment, and their spatial consequences, is however not reserved to wearers of the full-face veil, and young women who wear a simple veil also report the same sorts of limitations on their mobility. The following are quotes from interviews carried out by Anissa Ouamrane, with whom I am conducting research about Muslim practices in a banlieue to the east of Paris:

"Are there places where you would rather not go, outside our neighbourhood?"

–Yeah, some parts of Paris... very... [laughs] once, at Haussmann, yeah Haussmann... I went shopping... I never went back... (...) sure, there are places I avoid (...)

And how do you know which places to avoid?

–Well, because I've been there (...) well, there are places... places that are really rich, there, I know, no thanks, I'm not going there, I prefer not to go..."

(Myriam –who wears a simple veil– interviewed by Anissa, Feb. 2012)

This testimony converges with those gathered by Naïma Bouteldja : regardless of the type of veil worn, Muslim women are made uncomfortable by the attention, usually hostile, they attract in wealthy parts of town, upper-class shopping districts, and thus confined to neighbourhoods close to their homes where people are familiar with them and less likely to display unpleasant or aggressive behaviour.

Myriam also describes the situation as deteriorating: "... I get the feeling people do that more now than before, it's gotten worse, in the past two years, it happens much more than before", she says, which tends to point to a correlation between the aggressive behaviour of some French people, and the public finger-pointing at Muslims which occurred in France in 2010, as part of the so-called "debate on national identity" and of the run-up to the 2010 law banning the

burqa in public space. It is therefore too facile to dismiss such political posturing as blatant electoralism, and unlikely to be taken seriously: blatant as it is, it still has very real consequences on the daily lives of many women who are not seeking attention, but merely conforming to their understanding of their faith.

What many participants in our research point to is particular resentment and aggression on the part of middle-aged women who define themselves as feminist and who blame veiled women for “selling out” or compromising feminist achievements. This is for instance what Myriam describes:

«Some of them go, “women’s oppression”, like, they fought for us to have the vote, the right to wear trousers... one day a woman said that to me, on the bus, she goes ‘what are you doing, have you forgotten everything they’ve done for us’... a Frenchwoman, pure breed, and all... it has nothing to do with voting or wearing trousers!»
(Myriam –who wears a simple veil– interviewed by Anissa, Feb. 2012)

While no one seems to ask whether (male) *pénitents* who choose to hide their faces under hoods to take part in Catholic processions, or Catholic priests who wear robes, are being in any way obliged to do so, the implication is that women wearing the veil are giving in to pressure from family or neighbourhood, despite the fact that many of them explain and argue very articulately that they are making a deliberate, personal choice (Chouder, Latrèche et Tévanián, 2008). I agree with Liogier’s remark, about women wearing the full-face veil, that:

“There is probably no worse form of male domination than saying that these women are unable to say what they think (...). Not believing them when they argue, explain, illustrate their choice, and repeating endlessly (and mechanically) that they are being manipulated, is a discrete, but nonetheless efficient, form of contempt.” (Liogier, 2010)

And indeed the research indicates that women generally choose to wear this type of veil against their husband’s, parent’s or environment’s opposition (Open Society report, 2010). These are not the weak, downtrodden creatures the media or politicians would have us believe, but, if one carries on the parallel between homophobia and islamophobia, these women are the “drag queens” of Islam, the most assertive and individualistic of believers, who are willing to put themselves on the line to challenge and subvert dominant norms. They may, as are drag queens, be disapproved of by sections of their own community who seek first and foremost to demonstrate their own normalcy and gain acceptance by conforming to norms and remaining *discrete*; they are however doing their utmost to fight invisibility (by choosing to remain invisible). Most importantly, they are agents, not victims.

Post or neo-colonialism?

Religious faith, after long being disregarded by social sciences, has enjoyed a revived interest in recent years, with prominent figures such as Jürgen Haber-

mas and Judith Butler taking part in a discussion about “the power of religion in the public sphere” (Mendieta & Vanantwerpen, 2011). In geography, this “postsecular turn” has been interpreted not only as a consequence of geopolitical events, but also as consistent with a renewed interest for emotions, and particularly religious emotion, in geography (Della Dora, Yorgason, 2009). Some contributions within geography (Gökariksel, 2009) as well as without (Saktanber, 2002, Bracke, 2003, Bilge, 2010) enable a better theorization of religious agency, in particular when it comes to Muslim women, who are often constructed as victims, or as merely reactive beings, in dominant discourse.

There are specificities to the French case which give a particular twist to debates in France. The culture of *laïcité* (“combat secularism” in the words of Olivier Roy, 2005), selectively as it may be wielded in public debates (Christian fundamentalists are hardly ever targeted), renders the adoption of the post-secular framework more unlikely than it is in Anglophone countries, or other European countries like Germany, the Netherlands or Spain where the separation of church and state has never been enforced with such stringency. In addition, French culture has historically constructed the display of female bodies as crucial to the emancipatory nature of the Republic, and systematically depicted religion as intrinsically sexist, secularism as intrinsically feminist, in ways that are profoundly misleading (Scott, 2009).

A further specificity is the one underlined above by Dorlin: the postcolonial resonance of the issue of the veil, in France, is maybe more pronounced than anywhere else. There are historical precedents to the veil debate that played a crucial part in French colonisation of North Africa, with the unveiling of women being granted a central place, in particular, in France’s domination over Algeria (Shepard, 2004). A no lesser figure of Algeria’s struggle for independence than Frantz Fanon wrote eloquently about the way the veil became a major stake in the war: “The situation of women was taken as theme for action. The colonial administration proclaimed it would defend the humiliated, set aside, shut away woman... (...) To the colonialist offensive on the veil, the colonized answers by a cult to the veil” (Fanon, 1959, p. 19 and 29).

Colonial history resonates also in the ways *banlieues* in France are depicted and run as *threats* to the Republican state (Dikeç, 2007), as well as in the very frequent implication that *banlieues*, and their Arab and African residents in particular, are *the* location of sexism and homophobia in France (Guénif-Souilamas & Macé, 2004). This particular framing of the issue as *geographic*, linked to certain, specific spaces, and hence as geopolitical, as a question of governmentality over certain parts of the national territory, tends to deny the effects at the level of individuals, or even the humanity of people involved, as Nadia, another young woman who wears a veil, points out here:

“I was with veiled sisters, I remember once someone threw us an egg... (...) Once a truck tried to run us over on the pavement, I was traumatized (...) In the end it’s our faith that is targeted. Because our faith is made visible by acts, some claim it’s ostenta-

tion (...) In the end they're bothered by islam, but they're bothered by our clothing, and that's really ridiculous, because there's someone behind the clothing, he wants to hide, it doesn't change the fact that there's a human being underneath who deserves respect, honestly, you don't attack someone for, because of his choice of clothing, frankly it's, it's ridiculous!" (Nadia –who wears a simple veil– interviewed by Anissa, March 2012)

Concluding remarks

“An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard”
(*Living Room dialogues on the Middle East*, quoted in Brown, 2006).

So what, exactly, is made invisible, and what is made visible by the desire, on the part of some women, to wear a full-face veil in European cities, and the legal obstacles some municipalities and countries decide to put to that practice?

What is made invisible is the female body, the visibility of which was historically constituted, in France at least, as a symbol of emancipation from conservatism; however, as has been pointed out by Joan Scott who coined the term *sexularism*, this constitution was based on the fallacy that secularism would necessarily entail an equal status for women and men that religion denied (2009). That the *burka* may in fact express a disapproval of, or at least discomfort with, the injunction in Western culture to expose and objectify female bodies, is part of Nilüfer Göle's compelling, yet little heard, argument in the *Rapport d'information* handed in to the French National Assembly (2010). In that sense, the burqa makes visible forms of objectification of women intimately bound up with Western, commercialized cultures, of which feminism used to be very critical before it made the situation of Muslim women its primary concern (on ways in which the Othering of Muslim women has contributed to the emergence of *postfeminism*, see Scharff, 2011).

What is also made manifest and visible, is the presence of Islam in Europe, a presence that no longer accepts injunctions to remain discrete and invisible, but actually uses visibility to make a political point, much as other minorities have in earlier decades (Amiriaux & Jonker, 2006). “The personal is political” for Muslim citizens of Europe as it was, and is, for feminists, LGBTQ activists, and despite *laïcité* principles religion can probably no more remain confined to the private or intimate sphere than sexuality or gender when it leads to forms of discrimination and structural inequality in access to the public sphere, or public representation.

If we follow the Fassin, what minorities want to have recognized is not a specific identity, but the reality of the discriminations they encounter (2006). Or, in Nancy Fraser's words, they are just claiming equal status and “parity of participation in social life”, not the recognition of a group identity that

would be problematic to define anyway (Fraser, 2000). A similar distinction is made by Rancière, who emphasizes the difference between the sociological (identity) and the political (subjectivity) and explains that new forms of racism and xenophobia have arisen from the tendency to see Otherness in purely sociological terms, and not as a political issue: hence, for him, “the new visibility of the Other in the nudity of his intolerable difference” (Rancière, 1995).

Finally, what also becomes visible, in the debates about veiling in European countries, or, if we follow Tévanián, “what is being unveiled”, is the true nature of our democracies, which turn out to be far more sexist, racist and authoritarian than they want to appear (Tévanián, 2012), by promoting exclusion and condoning aggression of a religious minority. That feminism has lent a hand to such tendencies is not to its credit.

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