

'The journalists of *Jyllands-Posten* are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs'

The Danish cartoon controversy and the self-image of Europe

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As the controversy over the Danish 'Muhammad cartoons' gathered momentum, the apparent ease with which the cartoons – or rumours about them – were able to mobilize 'civilization-speak', and occasional violence, around the globe was one of its most disturbing features. If one saw the angry crowds in Pakistan, Malaysia, Syria and elsewhere on the evening news, or read through pages of commentary in Europe's newspapers and blogs lambasting the intolerance of Muslims, it sometimes felt as if the Danish cartoons had indeed simply highlighted the clash of two hostile civilizations. While much evidence suggests that this is not the case, the public controversy about the cartoons has certainly pushed in that direction.

We now know that the images did not simply 'spread' but were initially distributed by a disgruntled Danish Muslim, who not only presented governments and organizations across the Middle East with the published cartoons but included in his portfolio especially offensive images that were not, in fact, published by *Jyllands-Posten*. But even if we allow for this and the fact that governments in the region had vested interests in promoting the issue, and if we also concede that the cartoons' religious offence probably didn't *cause* the torching of the Danish embassies but, like the 2005 Paris riots, provided disenfranchised groups of young men with an excuse to act – the ease with which a single publication in a provincial Danish newspaper could trigger massive global protests condemning Denmark or the West wholesale as enemies of Islam must set off alarm bells for those weary of civilization theories. What interests me here, however, is the no less troubling tendency, especially among continental European commentators, to view the affair as a conflict between Islam and 'the European value of freedom of expression'. What is perceived as Muslim intolerance has become a foil against which Europeans increasingly assert the notion of European culture.

Placing the cartoons

Given the overwhelmingly peaceful existence of religious Muslims in Europe and their largely measured reaction to the Danish cartoon saga, why does 'Islam' so easily become the object of European outrage? And why do so many Europeans across the political spectrum feel compelled to jump to the defence of our 'freedom of expression' over the publication of openly racist cartoons? With black eyes looking slyly from

underneath bushy eyebrows, the hooked nose, and the curved dagger already drawn, the figures that stare at us from some of the cartoons clearly betray kinship to those that populated the anti-Semitic cartoons of the 1920s and 1930s. Surely, this should cause liberal Europeans to reflect and be less sanctimonious in their condemnation of Muslim intolerance. The Danish cartoon controversy highlights a pincer movement that has increasingly come to characterize Europe's relationship with its Muslim minority. By depicting the most venerated figure of Islam as a bloodthirsty terrorist with clearly racialized features, the cartoons explicitly do the work that much public commentary in Europe does implicitly: linking dark-skinned people to the notion of irrational dogma and violence. No less damaging, however, is the blanket condemnation of Muslim protests against the cartoons as intolerant. To demand toleration from the targets of a racist slur coupled with blunt religious insult, and to brand those who refuse to be silent as fundamentalists – thus denying them any legitimate place within European society – is more than simply inconsiderate. It performs a double delegitimation of religious Muslims on the grounds of being both foreign and intolerant.

To find evidence that the drawings were not simply 'satire', as it is so often claimed, one only needs to read the article that accompanied the twelve cartoons when they were published by *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005.¹ Here, the journalist Flemming Rose frankly explains that the published cartoons were the result of a deliberate challenge sent out to all members of the 'Association of Danish Cartoonists', daring them to submit cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. The staging of this deliberate provocation, Rose insists, was important to counteract the creeping advance of self-censorship, increasingly preventing Danes from poking fun at Islam. It should be noted here that while some supporters of *Jyllands-Posten* now claim to defend 'free speech' in general, *Jyllands-Posten* clearly does not. When the same newspaper was offered a series of Jesus cartoons in 2003, the editor declined with the argument that they would provoke public outcry amongst its Christian conservative readership.² More importantly, the solicitation and publication of the 'Muhammad cartoons' was part of a long and carefully orchestrated campaign by the conservative *Jyllands-Posten* (also known in Denmark as *Jyllands-Pesten* – the plague from Jutland), in which it backed the centre-right Venstre party of Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen in its successful bid for power in 2001. Central to Venstre's campaign, aside from its neoliberal economic agenda, was the promise to tackle the problem of foreigners who refused to 'integrate' into Danish society. Venstre's electoral success highlights the fact that Danish society, with its traditionally strong ethos of equality and social proximity, has found it difficult to come to terms with the challenges of cultural heterogeneity produced by transnational migration. And while Fogh Rasmussen's own party has sought to avoid openly racist rhetoric, its minority government depends on the support of Denmark's notoriously racist Dansk Folkeparti, whose shameless attacks on foreigners regularly outflank Le Pen's Front National. In fact, one of the original twelve cartoons published by *Jyllands-Posten* eloquently makes this point in a remarkable act of genuine political satire. We see, pointing to a blackboard filled with Arabic script, a Danish schoolboy called Mohammed naughtily sticking his tongue out at us – or at the editor of *Jyllands-Posten* as the case may be. The boy sports the football shirt of a club called Fremtiden (The Future), suggesting that this little Mohammed represents Denmark's future. The writing on the board says, in Farsi: 'The journalists of *Jyllands-Posten* are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs.'

As it turns out, *Jyllands-Posten*'s provocateurs have found many vocal allies across Europe who argue that Muslim protests against the cartoons confirm the newspaper's initial proposition, and claim the right, even the duty, of the press in democratic societies to (re-)publish the cartoons in order to resist Muslim intimidation. Others have argued against this that the cartoons' racist and inflammatory imagery makes

them a case of 'hate speech' that should be punishable by law. While racist features are clearly evident in some of the cartoons, I am not sure that legal injunction adequately addresses the matter. Rather, the widespread (although by no means unanimous) support for *Jyllands-Posten* in Europe indicates the emergence of a political constellation that demands a political – and perhaps philosophical – response. For Europe's lingering xenophobia coupled with deplorable opportunism on the political Centre-Right does not alone explain the enthusiasm with which so many Danes and other Europeans have come to rally in support of the cartoons – and apparently feel so little sympathy for their offended Muslim countrymen and -women.

To understand why so many Europeans turn a blind eye to the stigmatization of Muslims in Europe it is important to consider that, over the past fifteen years or so, the critique of 'Muslim fundamentalism' has become a cornerstone in the definition of European identities. As well as replacing anti-communism as the rallying point for a broad 'democratic consensus' (and, in this shift, remaking this consensus), the critique of Islamic fundamentalism has also become a conduit for imagining Europe as a moral community beyond the nation. It has emerged as a banner under which the most diverse sectors of society can unite in the name of 'European values': feminists and Christian conservatives, social democrats and neoliberals, nationalists and multiculturalists, civil rights activists and consumption-oriented hedonists. The tendency to define Europe in contrast to Islam is not new, of course.³ But the deepening crisis of the European project, with its growing social inequality and the failure of the European Union to provide broadly convincing alternatives to national models of sovereignty and democracy, make it attractive once more. Amidst the dissolution of older social ties, the formation of transnational European elites, and the struggle of nation-states like Denmark to retain the semblance of national sovereignty, the perception of an Islamic threat to European values provides the opportunity for a dramatic call to arms, conveniently diverting public concern from more divisive issues.



Yet while the critique of fundamentalism provides a platform for demonstrating community, it also highlights the internal heterogeneity and tension that characterize the European response. While some lament the incompatibility of Muslim culture with distinctive national (and now increasingly European) culture(s), others criticize Muslims for failing to adjust to Europe's open and universalist civility. The latter response is often articulated in terms of modernization theory. Real or imagined Muslim intolerance here becomes more than the failing of individual Muslims or Muslim organizations. It becomes the emblem that marks religious Muslims as 'fundamentalists', and thus as categorically unfit for democratic society. To clarify this point, let me turn to Jürgen Habermas's influential intervention in the debate on multiculturalism.

Fundamentalism and republican citizenship

In a remarkable reformulation of his original concept of *communicative action*, Habermas's writing on multiculturalism makes the inclusion of the cultural 'other' central to the project of democratic society.⁴ Given the globalizing tendencies inherent in modern society, he argues, contemporary democracies can no longer define criteria of belonging in terms of ethnicity or cultural homogeneity.⁵ In these inevitably plural societies, criteria for citizenship must be tied to the acceptance of a *political* framework, defined by the constitution, rather than by the prerogatives of majority culture. In this reorientation from the culturally defined nation-state to a 'republican' state, Habermas argues, 'the majority culture must detach itself from its fusion with the general political culture in which all citizens share equally; otherwise it dictates the parameters of political discourses from the outset'.⁶ The emergence of the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II, he suggests, is an example of such a democratic framework. Habermas argues that in the postwar period a patriotic commitment to Germany's democratic constitution has replaced notions of nationality based on shared ethnic origins or a set of norms and values. In this perspective of *constitutional patriotism*, the inclusion of other cultural traditions in the national framework is both imperative and possible. Imperative because, in the context of Habermasian discourse ethics, any truth claim that does not open itself to the challenge of all competing claims within a discursive community automatically loses its legitimacy. Possible because once the identity of a political community is detached from a particular cultural tradition, the bond of a shared *political* culture is strong enough to hold society together. By differentiating the realm of 'general political culture' from that of the various cultural traditions from which individual citizens draw their norms and values, Habermas gains a dynamic model of a political community in which the basic rules that govern the community can change over time. This community is shaped not so much in direct negotiations between different cultural traditions but as the result of partially shared, if differently interpreted and discursively mediated, experiences.

Despite the persistent social marginalization that continues to plague many Muslim communities across Europe, and despite occasional acts of violence in the name of Islam, there are clear signs of such a process. José Casanova has called this development that has made Muslim communities and organizations increasingly active players in Europe's civil society a Muslim *aggiornamento*.⁷ On the whole, mature multiculturalist democracy theories, such as Habermas's or Seyla Benhabib's,⁸ are well suited to describe the trajectory of many sections of Europe's new Muslim minority. There is, however, an important ambivalence in the Habermasian model when applied to the relationship of European majority society to religious Muslims. Even though his model is in principle open to the inclusion of other cultural traditions, Habermas leaves no doubt that there are definitive limits to their inclusion in the European (or any other democratic) framework: 'integration', Habermas writes, 'does not extend to *fundamentalist* immigrant cultures' (my emphasis).⁹ In so far as this simply means that no

democratic society can work if some of its members refuse to participate in a dialogue over crucial controversial issues, it may be a necessary and uncontroversial caveat.

The concept of fundamentalism, however, does more work in this context than is initially apparent. A closer look at Habermas's historical reconstruction of modern society shows that it is central to his dramatic historical narrative of modernization. Philosophically, of course, Habermas's critique of fundamentalism derives from Kant's critique of religious orthodoxy, understood as the rationally unjustifiable foreclosure of critical inquiry and debate. But Habermas explicitly ties this philosophical critique to the Durkheimian model of the historical transition from traditional to modern society. In *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, for instance, he argues that the totalizing metaphysical world-views of traditional society (where religious orthodoxies apparently held sway) disintegrated in the complexities of modern society and gave way to 'decentralized' modern world-views.¹⁰ These decentralized world-views became, in turn, the precondition for the emergence of civil society and, eventually, democracy and republican citizenship. It is obvious, then, that in this scheme the charge of fundamentalism carries a political denunciation that could hardly be more serious. It marks the addressee as categorically incompatible with membership in democratic society. And yet, fundamentalism remains here largely an abstraction. In not only the Habermasian oeuvre but also in much public commentary, it does not (or does only superficially) derive from the critical analysis of actual Muslim concerns and social projects, but emerges as the theoretical backdrop against which the 'unfinished project of modernity' and its emancipatory potential can be elaborated.

This problematic conception of fundamentalism is tied to another ambivalence in Habermas's republican model of democratic citizenship: the distinction between the 'cultural' and the 'political'. Habermas is arguably over-sanguine about the ease with which a shared political culture can be shorn of particular cultural traditions, given that this includes a whole legacy of political values and historical narratives that have shaped the understanding of democracy and indeed politics itself. His own genealogy of democratic society is a case in point. For many religious Muslims in Europe and elsewhere, the reconstruction of *their* 'arrival' in modern (and now increasingly liberal democratic) society differs from mainstream European narratives. Crucially, their narratives hinge not on the rejection of revealed religion and orthodoxy but on a continuing reinterpretation of their place in society. In my own work on contemporary Turkish Islam and its transformation since the 1960s, I am continually struck by the growing openness and attraction to democratic and pluralist notions of society in many Muslim *cemaats*, and at the same time by their continuing commitment to an orthodox (in the eyes of their secularist critics: fundamentalist) understanding of Islam.¹¹ What we have here is an apparent paradox. There seems to be an increasing convergence between many religious Muslims' attitude toward democracy and civil society and those dominant in European publics. And yet this does not mean that religious Muslims in fact understand this Muslim *aggiornamento* in terms easily reconcilable with the historical narrative so central to Habermas's conception of republican citizenship. This is not to dismiss the model of republican citizenship as such, but simply to point out that new cultural traditions may not quite as easily be incorporated into European political culture(s) as Habermas seems to suggest.

It is no doubt legitimate when Habermas and others 'draw a line' between what they see as admissible and what for them is beyond the pale of democratic society. To make 'fundamentalism' the dominant term in the public debate, however, is unhelpful. It suggests that we know *in principle* all that needs to be known about religious Muslims in Europe, in the absence of any real engagement with the concerns and aspirations of communities that have often come to embrace democratic society along different historical trajectories. It becomes crassly tendentious when, as for instance in André

Glucksmann's commentary on the cartoon affair, the apparent modernity–tradition hiatus between the 'West' and 'Islam' is the excuse for a verbosely self-satisfied secularism caught up as much in dubious metaphysical certainties as the discourse of any Muslim 'fundamentalist'.¹²

Undoubtedly, the encounter of European societies with their increasingly self-confident Muslim minorities is beset with serious conflicts and hard processes of adjustment. As the controversy over the Danish cartoons highlights, what makes this process of integration particularly difficult and unwieldy is that it takes place amidst two powerful and often converging claims that the Islamic tradition and liberal democratic society are mutually exclusive. The wholesale condemnation of Denmark or the West by sections of the Muslim movement shows that Islam can provide powerful ammunition in polarizing the debate. But so do European discourses that use distorted representations of Islam as the foil against a bogus 'European culture'. For those on the Left, the challenge is not to be drawn into these false oppositions.

Amid the current excitement it should be remembered that the frictions that today accompany the process of integrating religious Muslims into European society are by no means without precedent. What is European history other than a long and arduous process of integrating diverse ethnic groups, countless waves of migrants, political projects and religious traditions? It is a history as ripe with successes as with ongoing tensions and, let us not forget, with ugly and sometimes genocidal policies against demonized minorities. Much would be won if rather than seeing in the encounter of Europe with Muslim communities a clash of civilizations or a confrontation with Europe's own less enlightened past, we could see it simply as a new chapter in the European history of integrating new social projects. Raymond Williams developed the model of a society in which different social projects – most importantly those of the bourgeoisie and the working class, but also a number of residual and emerging projects – competed with one another for hegemony. The cast in the current drama may have changed. Perhaps it is now Habermas's republican notion of society that is solidly entrenched as the dominant social project in Europe, while Christianity, socialism, neoliberalism and, of course, numerous nationalist movements compete as secondary, perhaps residual, projects partially incorporated into the overall republican framework. Muslim movements are not yet part of this hegemonic configuration, and what is currently at stake is whether they will be in the future.

Notes

1. F. Rose, 'Muhammed's ansigt' [Muhammad's face], *Jyllands-Posten*, 30 September 2005, p. 3.
2. P. Reynolds, BBC News, 13 February 2006.
3. See A. Pagden (ed.) *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.
4. J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, Heinemann, London, 1984; 'Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State', in A. Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1994; *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1998.
5. Here Habermas's argument intersects with his position in the famous *Historikerstreit* that galvanized public interest in West Germany in the 1980s.
6. Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, p. 144.
7. J. Casanova, 'Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections on Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam', *Social Research*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2001, pp. 1041–80.
8. S. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2002.
9. Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, p. 229.
10. J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1992, p. 39.
11. H. Henkel, 'Rethinking the dâr al-harb: Social Change and Changing Perceptions of the West in Turkish Islam', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2004, pp. 961–77. See also M.H. Yavuz, *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Islam, Democracy, and the AK Parti*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2006.
12. A. Glucksmann, 'Choc des civilisations? Non: des philosophies', *Le Monde*, 4 March 2006, p. 20.