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Ham, Mozart, & Limits to Freedom of Expression

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In September 2006 a distressed French high school teacher Robert Redeker wrote, in a leading newspaper, a virulent article about the “Islamic Threat” to the “Free World” (presumably Europe and North America). There the author maintained that Muhammad was a “merciless war lord, a plunderer, Jew-massacrer, and polygamous man,” and the Quran a book of “unparalleled violence” insidiously shaping the mindset of all Muslims.¹

The anxiety

The invective led to the swift prohibition of the newspaper in Tunisia and Egypt and attracted immediate criticism on *Al-Jazira*. The unfortunate French teacher later received death threats, forcing him to quit his job and change domicile. The unoriginal link postulated by the author between Islam and violence thus seemed to constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the following debate, the newspaper editors condemned—as they should have—the threats, and justified publishing the article on grounds that it contributed to “an in-depth understanding of current realities.” The initial shock on hearing about the threats was followed by collective outrage, and passions ran high in the Republic. A cartoon, appeared in *Le Monde*, perhaps best expressed the angst of large sections of French society: in a depressing and sombre modern city populated by menacing women covered in black, a white Frenchman gesticulates anxiously to a friend about to eat a sandwich: “What? Ham? Are you crazy or what?” (See image, published in *Le Monde*, dated 5 October 2006).

Pork may not be quite as important to contemporary (white) French identity as the cartoon suggests, but the feeling of ever diminishing freedoms in order to pre-empt Muslim anger certainly is. Although this particular example was set in France, debates across Europe increasingly share the psychological and emotional anxiety underlying the Redeker affair—an anxiety linked to the social uncertainty brought about by those globalization trends which have left culture as the last remaining domain wherein “fantasies of purity, authenticity, borders, and security can be enacted.”²

The holistic threat

Voices across the continent—of politicians, intellectuals, artists, and Churchmen—are rising to demand an urgent reconsideration of Europe’s position regarding Islam and Muslims. They refer to a series of recent events which have been widely interpreted as evidence of a fundamental and holistic threat posed by Muslims to European freedoms—including the violence unleashed by the publication of the Danish cartoons, the protests against Pope Benedict XVI’s lecture in Regensburg last year, and the Berlin cancellation (contemporaneous to the French affair) of a staging of Mozart’s *Idomeneo* in September. Together these events are glossed under the topical issues of freedom of expression, possibilities of criticism of Islam, and self-censorship, contributing largely, as the formula goes, to the social, and therefore very real, construction of a clash of civilizations.

The aforementioned events are important and the threats posed to the well-being and life of those targeted cannot be tolerated under any circumstance. This makes it all the more necessary to think about

Focusing on two recent controversies—the cancellation of Mozart’s *Idomeneo* in Berlin and the death threats against a French teacher for criticizing Islam—this article revisits the flawed construction of a clash between Islam and freedom of expression, and seeks to show how the debates are connected to a problematic vision of Europe which necessarily excludes Muslims.

the nature of this threat. Looking at the writings of those who call our attention to this threat, one finds that it is less its precise origin (a speculation about possible Muslim reactions; a tiny group of cyber jihadists; a handful of Muslim activists) than its scope which are emphasized, leading some observers to compare the present situation with that of the 1930s when appeasement

policies paved the way for a global tragedy.

The appeasement analogy needs to be recognized as a discursive stratagem that participates in the construction of a global and decontextualized Islamic threat. It gives added resonance to those calls for showing “strength” and “resisting”³—the kind of emotional language and politics of fear that are mobilized today in order to defend the legacy of the “Enlightenment.” Whenever conflicts do erupt, they seem to take on a heightened symbolism or, to put it differently, an “excessive religiosity.”⁴ This is unhelpful, as it ultimately serves only to delegitimize those voices which point to the mostly local and circumscribed character of conflicts about Islam in Europe, as well as to the sheer variety of Islamic ways of life—a variety which escapes easy categorization or predictions on future developments.

Block thinking

The recent cancellation of Hans Neuenfels’s production of *Idomeneo*—a staging of a Mozart opera which controversially included a display of the decapitated heads of Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Poseidon—provides an instructive case. The controversy was sparked by an act of miscommunication between the security agencies, Berlin authorities, and the Opera’s director. The fact that the Deutsche Oper grossly “misunderstood” the security threat was symptomatically dismissed in the following debates, with commentators focusing instead on the act of “self-censorship” to which it supposedly led. Clearly, however, both the causes of the affair and the course of the ensuing discussion were the result of “block-thinking”: fusing “a varied reality into a single indissoluble unity,”⁵ the perception of German Muslims is now primarily determined by terrorist violence occurring outside of Germany. The possibility that Muslims in Germany might blow up a public building in reaction to a perceived insult to the Prophet Muhammad suddenly acquired great political significance, notwithstanding its unprecedented and, according to German security agencies, rather unlikely nature.

There is an urgent need to debate why this type of unwarranted assumptions about European Muslims has become so widespread. Block thinking is seriously putting at risk the capacity to discern differences inside Muslim communities and, ultimately, to speak and engage with Muslims. It is rendering the political management of religious diversity in Europe a mere rhetorical device: one cannot seriously claim to work for the “integration” of Muslims or expect to engage in meaningful dialogue when one’s basic view on Islam is so laden; it would be more accurate to speak of a process of forceful assimilation as the sole policy aim. Once one starts reasoning with reference to entities as broad and vague as “Islam” or “Europe,” one disconnects from the world one lives in.

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Both the French and German examples mentioned here highlight a number of structural features of debates about Islam in/and Europe. They include a distortion of the social and political realities of Europe, an unashamed anti-intellectualism that seeks to stifle debate, and a problematic vision of the place of Muslims in the Old Continent.

When the Deutsche Oper reversed its decision and decided to stage *Idomeneo* in December, the event was conspicuously attended by Germany's elite. Although they had opposed the cancellation of the opera, representatives of two of the main Muslim federations in Germany (Islamrat and Zentralrat der Muslime) did not attend the performance, but neither did several leaders of Christian churches as to do so would—in the words of the president of Germany's Central Council of Catholics—express a “lack of self-esteem,” rather than an act of tolerance.⁶ While this view may not be shared by all German Christians, it demonstrates that these debates are largely internal to Europe. They point less to an Islamic threat than to the often unacknowledged but nevertheless constant need to renegotiate secular and political arrangements in democratic contexts.

The attempt to construe, as matter of principle, Muslim dissent illegitimate was particularly clear in the French case. There, in a high-profile petition “in favour” of Redeker, a number of prominent intellectuals made surreptitious links between the death threats and various other forms of Muslim protest against “provocations” to what were simply characterized as “foreign sensitivities.”⁷ The mobilization of deceptive self-evidences (such as the myth of an absolute right to free speech, when in practice it is regulated by a multitude of social, legal, and political considerations) is required in order to project a vision where Muslims as such can only be foreign and external to Europe.

While Muslims in both countries condemned the death threats and criticized the cancellation of the opera due to security concerns, the media construction of these debates as civilizational clashes necessarily marginalizes these voices—independently of their actual media presence, which, more often than not, is limited. Setting the terms of the debates in this way evacuates in turn any question about the functioning of media institutions and their role in the dissemination of Islamophobia (for example through the publication of Redeker's diatribe) and allows intellectuals to discursively enact the exclusion of Muslims from Europe in guise of “defending the continent.” The politics of intolerance that is articulated here works through the current deadlock of integration policies, where an increasing gap has opened up between social and political visions bent on promoting illiberal attitudes and actions (concerning the headscarf, transnational marriages, even the use of foreign languages) in the name of a culturally homogenous nation-state on one hand, and the legal and constitutional order, which often obstructs these projects, on the other.

Brushing over differences in the policies of incorporation of Islam in Europe—policies that, incidentally, can hardly be described as “soft”—these writers misleadingly depict past approaches towards Islam in Europe as the result of “cowardice” or lacking political determination. The caricature of Islam, which is so central to these writings, is thus paired by an equally distorted presentation of Europe's modes of engagement with Islam and European Muslims in the past decades. While this type of binary thinking is insufficient for understanding positions towards Islam, it is a necessary means for establishing as proper intellectuals a group of writers whose media fortune both enables and is enabled by the current orientation of policies towards Islam in Europe.

Such intellectuals typically construct a world where criticism of Islam becomes an act of heroism—as if these are lone voices railing against the odds.⁸ Such claims are surprising, not least because today in Europe on the topic of Islam and Muslims one can precisely say almost everything—and, more often than not, turn it to one's advantage. In France, Claude Imbert, a prominent intellectual and member of the very official Haut conseil à l'intégration, recently declared himself to be “a little islamophobe” since “Islam, not Islamism, carries a certain debility”—a sentiment he perhaps not incorrectly asserted to be shared by many of his contemporaries. The fact that his intellectual reputation



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was left untarnished speaks eloquently of the banalization of Islamophobia in France. Elsewhere, the case of the late Oriana Fallaci—whose pamphlets became bestsellers in French, German, and other European languages—is only the most notorious case of what has become a proliferating literary genre.⁹ The content of such books is sometimes so excessive as to render the call for reasonable debate ludicrous; their success—as gauged for example by market sales, prizes, and other intellectual distinctions—rendering hollow ideas of a European “political correctness” in the face of Islam. Given the ubiquity of radical critics of Islam in media and public debates—and the regular exclusion of alternative voices of experts, not to mention those of Muslims themselves—one should inquire instead about the ways through which Islamophobic discourses contribute, along with the death threats, the libel cases, as well as the assaults on Muslim persons and institutions, to a vicious circle of violence not-always-symbolic, thus partly producing the hostility which they seek to denounce.

It seems more fruitful in this context to reflect about what the constant reference to self-inflicted restrictions tells us about the power distribution between Muslims and other Europeans. It is of course ironic that only those who have free access to public media bother to engage in long debates on “self-censorship.” What is most problematic here is not the inequality itself, but the fact that it has effectively led to a situation where debates on Islam all too often turn into a monologue and any real or imagined demand by Muslims is automatically considered a threat or an act of censorship. Whether interaction in the public sphere should function along these lines or can be understood in such terms is a question which begs an urgent answer.

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Cartoon by Plantu published in *Le Monde*, 5 October 2006

Notes

1. Robert Redeker, “Face aux intimidations islamistes, que doit faire le monde libre?” *Le Figaro*, 19 September 2006.
2. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Duke University Press, 2006), 23.
3. See, among numerous examples: “Kein Ton zurück!” *Die Zeit*, 28 September 2006; “Nur Mut!” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 September 2006; “Une fatwa au pays de Voltaire,” *Liberation*, 21 November 2006.
4. We take this formula from Tayob, “Reading Religion and the Religious in Modern Islam,” *ISIM Review*, no. 15 (2005): 57.
5. Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor, “Block Thinking and Internal Criticism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 3 (2006): 453–455.
6. “Duch die Sicherheitsschleuse in die Oper,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 December 2006.
7. “Un appel en faveur de Robert Redeker,” *Le Monde*, 2 October 2006.
8. See also Annelies Moors, “Submission,” *ISIM Review*, no. 15 (2005): 8–9.
9. In *The Rage and the Pride*, Fallaci famously describes Muslims in Europe as “Terrorists, thieves, rapists. Ex-convicts, prostitutes, beggars. Drug-dealers, contagiously ill.”