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Feeling at Home on the Margin

In the current debate on migration to Europe, a central concern has emerged over the “marginality” of Muslim communities, in other words, their seeming failure to “integrate” into the mainstream life world. Migrants congregating in mosques or Muslim community centres, attending Islamic schools, wearing headscarves and exotic “traditional” clothes, and turning to non-European television programmes are seen as an anomaly in the social body of European societies. Underlying this anxiety is the implicit assumption that Muslim peoples have an exceptionally primordial attachment to “tradition”—some immutable “Islamic ways of life”—that is incompatible with modern European values and which stands in the way of their integration.

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If by “integration” is implied the expectation that minorities should become just like the majority, that they should assimilate, this can neither be realistic nor just. But if “integration” means, as I take it to mean, a two-way process of give and take between different cultural collectives, then any real integration would involve movement from both minority and mainstream communities. The minorities are expected to interact with the mainstream, and engage in the economy, civil society, and the state institutions while the mainstream is expected to facilitate such exchange and engagement, recognizing “minorities” as a part of the national citizenry.

Given this perception, how much can the claims of “Muslim non-integration” be justified? I like to suggest that “integration” is not simply a voluntary “matter of will” process where individuals “choose” or “refuse” to integrate; nor are “cultural groups” uniform collectives whose members supposedly hold the same aspirations, orientations, and capacities. Rather “minority groups,” whether Muslim or non-Muslim, each possess differential capacities for mixing and exchanging with the mainstream; they hold varied resources to cope with the exigencies of integration. While segments of the European Muslims have indeed succeeded in this path, others are in the throes of a protracted struggle.

Recent studies confirm that the Muslim minority in Europe represents a mixed entity differentiated by ethnicity, class, educational background, and religious inclinations. In terms of integration, at least three patterns can be roughly observed.¹ First, “secular Muslims” who seem to be fully integrated as they try to reach out to the majority culture, economy, and social interaction, even though they are occasionally frustrated by incidents where many natives refuse to recognize them as “Europeans.” Indeed there are some 2,000-3,000 influential Muslims leaders who are active in politics, media, business, religious and civil society organizations, and who represent the core of an expanding Muslim professional class whose participation in the political process, as a new interest group, may affect the European politics. These Muslims embrace liberal democracy, resent religious radicals, respect human rights as a God-given gift, and wish to build a “European Islam.” Possessing the necessary resources—higher education, respectable jobs, information, and relevant knowledge—the group is enabled to handle and live a European life. They enjoy and take advantage of what their adopted societies offer and know how to manoeuvre within them.

The second strain within the Muslim minority consists of very small numbers of young radicalized groups, about which we know very little for certain. Roughly, they tend to be mainly second or third generation Muslims, well versed in the local

vernaculars, and linked to transnational networks. Yet detached from the governing values of ancestry, but engulfed by the multiplicity of lifestyles and flow of information, the truth of which they can seldom ascertain, these youngsters tend to resort to an imagined “authentic” reference—a trans-local, global, and abstract Islam stripped of cultural influences, one that can serve as vehicle for resentment and dissent.

And then there is a significant third group of Muslims which includes largely the first generation immigrants who while struggling to speak the European languages, striving to hold regular jobs, and establishing the props of a normal life are still oriented to practicing many aspects of their home culture—food, fashion, rituals, or private religious practices. Most of them struggle to survive and to live in peace and with dignity, invest in their children to get by in the societal settings they often find too complex to operate. So they tend to restore and revert to their immediate circles, the language and religious groups, informal economic networks, and communities of friends and status groups built in the neighbourhoods or prayer halls. They feel at home on the margin of the mainstream.

As such, this “feeling at home on the margin” is hardly a thing of Islam, nor a sign of resentment against the mainstream, or a primordial desire for “tradition.” Rather, it represents a familiar trend—a typical coping strategy that lower-class immigrants often pursue when they encounter complex foreign life-worlds. It reflects the paradoxical reality of peripheral communalism that enables the members to get around the costs, to endure the hardship, and to negotiate with the mainstream in an attempt to be part of it. Because to immerse fully in the mainstream requires certain material, cultural, and knowledge capabilities that most plebeian migrants, Muslim or non-Muslim, do not possess, which in turn compels them to seek alternative venues. Thus, being part of an organized economy demands regular payment of various dues and taxes; if you cannot afford them, then you go informal. When a migrant cannot afford to pay for the cost of fixing his kitchen through regular firms, then he or she will look for, or generate, a network of friends, relatives, and locals to mobilize support. If he cannot afford to shop in the mainstream modern supermarkets, or to borrow money from regular banks (because he does not have the credit and credentials), then he resorts to ethnic street bazaars to get his/her affordable supplies, and to informal credit associations to secure loans. When he lacks the necessary information and skill to function within the modern bureaucratic organizations—which do not accommodate flexibility, negotiation, and interpersonal relations—he relies on the locals with whom he establishes flexible transactions based upon mutual trust and reciprocity. If people cannot operate within the cultural settings that are perceived to be inhospitable, too formal and strict, then they are likely to get involved with the ones that allow them to fit.²

An unintended consequence of these economic and cultural processes is the likely revitalization of “negative integration,” in parallel and peripheral communities, where ethnic networks or religious rituals are revived and reinforced to serve as structures of support and survival. It is no surprise that “ghettoization” is especially more pronounced among lower-class British Muslims where unemployment remains three times higher than among other minority groups. This process of “feeling at home on the margin” represents a way of coping with the imperatives of modernity embodied in the bureaucratic arrangement, the discipline of time, space, fixed and formal contract, and the like. As such this process is not specific to Muslims, but includes all comparable migrant communities. Nor is it limited to international migration. Rural migrants in Cairo, Tehran, Istanbul, or Casablanca undergo more or less similar experiences (and receive similar levels of hostility from their national elites) as many residents with Turkish or Moroccan origin in Germany or in the Netherlands. However, the hostile sentiments of the mainstream political and intellectual circles in Europe serve as an additional factor to push such Muslim minorities to seek sanctuary within themselves to build a life-sphere on the margin which they can call home. Otherwise, they yearn for an integrated status of relief and recognition, while they strive to manage and minimize its detriments. “Feeling at home on the margin” is not necessarily the antipode of integration, but can instead serve as an antidote.

Notes

1. Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and the United States* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Jytte Klausen, *When The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
2. A. Bayat, “When Muslims and Modernity Meet”, *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 6 (November 2007): 507-511.

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