Breaking Taboos and ‘Mainstreaming the Extreme’:

The Debates on Restricting Islamic Symbols in Contemporary Europe

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Introduction: How (Bad) Ideas Spread

Ideas can often travel fast and cross boundaries effortlessly. This is as true of positive ideas (e.g. a movement for political change like the one currently being witnessed across the Arab world) as of divisive ones (e.g. stereotypes, prejudices, exclusivist and discriminatory discourses). Yet, the mechanisms for diffusion in each case are essentially the same: first, charting an alternative perspective claimed to offer distinct advantages to existing ones; then, gaining traction by receiving new adherents, mobilising human resources, and spreading further through multiple nodes and channels of communication and interaction; finally, something akin to the proverbial ‘tipping point’, when the new idea gather enough momentum and support to challenge established thinking and quite possibly effect real change (Gladwell 2000). The above scheme applies to what could be called ‘successful’ ideas - i.e. ideas that developed a momentum and are judged by their impact, regardless of whether they were initially considered universally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in any sense of the words. In fact, very few ideas become truly ‘infectious’; most usually follow a path that leads from inception and initial propagation to limited diffusion and (sooner or later) entropy or supersession by other ideas. Once, however, an idea (or ‘frame’ of ideas, namely interpretive filters of perception and understanding of the world - Snow & Benford 1992; Johnston & Noakes 2005) has attracted public attention and has started mobilising human resources or effecting cognitive changes to its audience, then it becomes a fascinating terrain of further enquiry into the reasons behind its apparent ‘success’ and the dynamic of its further diffusion.

Extreme ideas, even those considered taboo in a particular context, are no different. They begin their life-cycle as politically and socially marginal and radical counter-propositions to established, ‘mainstream’ cognition. By transgressing widely accepted boundaries between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ premises or prescriptions, they are essentially attempting to remap these established cognitions and subvert the mainstream ‘frames’ that support them. In so doing, they invariably acquire adherents - people who are essentially ‘early adopters’, willing to accept and make the suggested transgression (Gladwell 2000: 30-87). The critical litmus test for their ‘success’ and wider propagation consists in breaking into wider political and social constituencies, well beyond the initial circle
of ‘early adopters’. For this to happen, social demand and supply intersect in a
number of unpredictable ways on each occasion. The more relevant and seemingly
convincing the new counter-framing to the perceptions, fears, and desires of a
particular audience, the higher their capacity either to tap into suppressed demand
or to appeal to, and activate, sentiments/attitudes that sustain or amplify such
demand in the future. This process involves ideas and associated practices being
transferred from a particular place and/or time to another - transformed, adapted,
and fused with other existing, context-specific elements along the way (Wodak &
Fairclough 2010: 21-5). When one looks at the diffusion of the ‘racial’ anti-Jewish
paradigm in 1930s Europe, it becomes obvious that the model pioneered by the
Nazi regime with the 1935 ‘Nuremberg Laws’ broke taboos and, in so doing,
activated and/or empowered pre-existing, yet latent or partly suppressed anti-
Jewish demand in other countries. This contributed critically to its reproduction - in
a ‘domino effect’ style - across other European countries in 1936-39. It also served
as both a legitimising (and viewed as ‘successful’) precedent and a ‘successful’
bold model for shaping similar ‘solutions’ to the so-called ‘Jewish problem’
outside Nazi Germany (Kallis 2008: 216-27).

At the same time, supply - in the form of social exposure, through public events
and/or ‘noise’ through traditional and new mass media - is of crucial significance in
accessing diverse social audiences and demonstrating tangibly the growing
appeal of the radical counter-frame. For example, Italian mainstream media
sensationalised over a long period of time the murder of Giovanna Reggiani by a
Roma immigrant in 2007, offering wide exposure to extremist views about
‘revenge’ against the Roma communities in Italy and expulsion of ‘illegal
immigrants’ propagated by figures of the far right (including many prominent local
and national politicians belonging to the Lega Nord - LN) (Sigona 2010). The
cumulative result of this demand-supply dialectic (for usually one reinforces the
other) is the ‘mainstreaming’ of either the entire counter-frame or at least aspects
thereof. This is both a gradual consequence and an escalating cause for further
diffusion. While initially the counter-frame enters the ‘mainstream’ because it
activates and validates suppressed social demand (and recruits from these
constituencies), it also has a powerful cyclical ‘demonstration effect’ on others
who may later on be more willing to endorse it as seemingly ‘mainstream’ and
legitimate.

‘Success’ is a word that has often - and more so in recent years - been used to
describe the rise of the radical populist right in contemporary Europe. The
apparent ‘success’ of the radical/populist right in contemporary Europe can be
gauged on multiple levels. The one most usually used as a benchmark is the
electoral success of extremist parties, on local, regional, national, and European
elections alike (Eatwell 2000: 407-25; Carter 2005). While, with a few notable
exceptions, far-right parties have rarely achieved a number of votes that could be
classed as electoral ‘breakthrough’ - and have been even less successful in
sustaining high levels of voter support in the longer term -, the overall trend in the
last two decades has been consistently upward in this respect. In addition, new
far-right parties have appeared in many European countries in recent years,
making the ‘new’ radical-populist right a genuinely trans-national political force
(Mammone, Godin & Jenkins 2009).
Beyond electoral performance, however, some far-right parties have been notably more successful in translating their poll ratings into (disproportionately higher) political and socio-cultural influence. In countries such as Austria, The Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, and Switzerland the far-right emerged (in the past or more recently) as a power broker, supporting, participating in or sometimes leading government coalitions only on the basis of onerous concessions from establishment parties. This kind of political influence is very difficult to gauge, for it goes well beyond the field of party-political bargaining and compromise. The initial political concessions made by so-called ‘mainstream’ (typically centre-right and centre-left) parties in order to lure, appease, and neutralise their far-right government or parliamentary partners may result in the gradual ‘mainstreaming’ of far-right parties or at least particular aspects of their programme, discourse, and outlook in ways that transcend (and potentially outlive) any particular cooperation agreement.

This latter element of ‘success’ - namely, the indirect diffusion and ‘mainstreaming’ of ideas and discourses propagated by the far right - may also be witnessed even if such parties remain politically marginalised (as has been the case in France and Sweden, for example). In this case, ‘mainstreaming’ involves the (partial or full) endorsement by political agents of the so-called political ‘mainstream’ and/or by broader sectors of society of ‘extreme’ (in some cases, even taboo) ideas and attitudes without necessarily leading to tangible association (namely, political cooperation or voter alignment) with the extremist parties that advocate them most vociferously. This is the most insidious and difficult to gauge scenario, as it may involve either a gradual ‘agenda-setting’ or ‘framing’ outcome (Price & Tewksbury 1997: 173-81); or indirect ideological-political concessions by mainstream actors that are not formalised through party agreements or quantified through corresponding voter support (Eatwell 2005: 101-20; Eatwell 2000: 416-18). This development has the potential of unleashing previously unthinkable levels of social demand for some extreme ideas that were originally considered taboo but have in the process become allegedly more legitimised and thus more acceptable to a wider audience.

In all three scenarios, the influence of populist ideas and outlooks is strikingly disproportionate to the actual levels of the respective parties’ electoral support. Whether as a pragmatic concession by mainstream parties in order to achieve short-term government stability or as a strategy of catering for growing electoral demand and a safeguard against voter alignment to extremist parties, the result is infinitely more worrying than the influence measured purely in election results (Ruzza & Fella 2009). There is, however, a further, equally insidious and alarming dimension to this phenomenon of ‘mainstreaming’ initially extremist ideas. The diffusion dynamic of such ideas and ‘frames’ is not confined to the specific national political and social contexts in which they originate; rather, through political communication, mass media exposure, and new means of interaction (e.g. internet and new social media), they cross borders effortlessly and may have an empowering/mobilising effect on other political and social constituencies in other parts of the world. Once again, ‘successful’ ideas tend to become trend-setters for new radical political thought and action across states and societies. The positive side of this story can be witnessed in the ways in which the apparent success of
the movements in Tunisia and then Egypt spread across the entire region, ushering in what has been described as ‘The Arab Spring’ (Beaumont 2011; CoFR 2011). But the transnational diffusion of ideas and practices can also involve negative, divisive and/or repressive ideas: this is precisely what happened in interwar Europe with the rise and spread of fascism, as well as the concurrent radicalisation of anti-Semitism in many European countries at the time (Kallis 2008: Chs 7-8). According to many commentators, in the past two decades we have been witnessing a comparable (in spread if not - at least yet - dynamic or devastating consequences) phenomenon of trans-national social and political ‘mainstreaming’ of extremist ideas in many parts of the so-called western world, particularly against immigrants and even more specifically against communities with Muslim background. Whether identifying Jean-Marie Le Pen, Joerg Haider (Wodak & Pelinka 2002), Filip Dewinter, Geert Wilders or any other far-right leaders as their maverick enfants terribles (Wodak 2005: 141), these extremist discourses have developed a menacing transnational diffusion and ‘mainstreaming’ dynamic, in the context of which developments in one (national) context strongly influence and shape associated responses in others, usually in rapid succession.

Although the diffusion of these ideas and practices is the result of a series of very complex processes that involve strategies of appropriation and negotiation with national conditions and histories (essentially, processes of recontextualisation - Wodak & Fairclough 2010: 22-5), in this chapter I am particularly interested in how ‘successful mainstreaming’ in one place and moment in time functions as a licence to others to act in similar transgressive ways elsewhere. In other words, I focus on how particular, selective taboo ideas propagated by radical far-right on one occasion and appearing to have gained traction in a particular society can have a similar radicalising effect on much wider international (social and political) audiences, influencing them and being appropriated by them (Chioularaki & Fairclough 1999). I will discuss the example of the far right’s campaigns against Muslim religious spaces (mosques) and symbols (the Islamic female dress debate), focusing on how these two issues became the symbolic battlegrounds of contemporary Islamophobia and were recontextualised as ‘mainstream’ discourses and allegedly defensible legal measures in a number of European countries. I will illustrate how these two debates and associated landmark initiatives (namely, the 2009 Swiss referendum on minarets; and the ban on burqas in France and Belgium in 2010), while pivoting on a much broader anti-Islam/ Muslim ‘othering’ with a long pedigree across Europe, did generate a powerful ‘demonstration effect’ that very soon found adherents and supporters - both within each society and in many other countries.

**FAR-RIGHT ‘CONTAGION’?**

Before embarking on the analysis of the far-right campaigns against Muslim religious spaces and symbols, it is helpful to elucidate two key concepts that have often anchored this particular discussion. The notion that for some years now we have been witnessing an alarming ‘contagion effect’ involving the gradual ‘mainstreaming’ and diffusion of hypernationalist, ‘ethno-pluralist’ (Mudde 2003; Liang 2007: 146-8), and particularly anti-Muslim ideas is not without problems.
"Contagion" is the visible causal effect that illustrates both the strength of the "infectious" idea and the conditional vulnerability of the receptors (Lynch 1998). Arguably, the "contagion effect" of the new radical-populist right has been crucially propelled by previously concealed or suppressed social demand. This demand may not speak its name or may be (socially and politically) discredited as "extremist"; but it is very often receptive to external "confirmation" nudges that can re-activate and radicalise it. At the same time, the perceived 'success' of an idea, "frame" or practice usually has a powerful effect on others who perceive their problems as similar and the 'successful' precedent as useful/applicable to their own context. Earlier 'successes' not only activate whatever similar beliefs they may hold (but were reluctant to express before) but increase the temptation to follow the lead set by others (Conversi 1993). Yet, while the metaphor of "contagion" (not unlike other similar metaphors, such as 'domino' or 'wave') captures eloquently the trans-national reach and dynamic of the phenomenon, it is strikingly uni-dimensional. It attests to the power of particular "extremist" ideas but says very little about how and why others are (or are not) affected by them in particular ways or at particular points in time. These ideas do not simply "infect" people like in a haphazard outbreak of a disease. The schema of "contagion", "domino" or "snowballing" (Huntington 1991: 100-06) tends to both over-determine the outcome (diffusion and adoption/recontextualisation of the idea) and oversimplify the process (role of particular local/national contexts and agencies in this process).

Nevertheless, broken taboos and associated practices tend to have a strong psychological empowering effect on others who have come to regard them as "successful" and are eager to interpret this 'success' as confirmation of their already existing similar beliefs (Opp 2009; McAdam 1998: 48-51). A 'successful' idea, frame or practice not only confirms and reinforces similar preexisting stereotypes and beliefs in others but also 'liberates' them from the notion that such an idea is taboo, not widely shared, and not respectable enough to be openly communicated and acted upon. At the same time, aspects of the overall diagnosis and framing that support the extremist idea may appear as validated and thus appeal to new, broader social audiences even if they may still resist the overall framing or its wider programmatic prescriptions. For example, the current diffusion of anti-immigrant sentiment may not necessarily be nurtured by preexisting stereotypes and prejudices against particular ethnic, religious, cultural or indeed 'racial' groups; instead, it may be 'validated' indirectly in the eyes of growing social audiences because it becomes embedded in an already internalised narrative of existential self-defence against perceived competition and threat from 'others' (see below). Once this has happened, vulnerability to particular, more extreme ideas (e.g. targeting specific groups) or to the scaling of these ideas (e.g. from one particular group or sphere of policy to another) increases exponentially.

Thus, the apparent 'success' of the radical-populist right in contemporary Europe is the cumulative outcome of a series of discrete 'successes' on different levels. The most effective 'framing' of the discussion has been the psychological embedding of a 'zero-sum' mentality, both on the material and the identity levels. The notion of a fierce, almost existential competition for material prosperity and cultural self-determination against perceived outsiders has underpinned and
sustained anti-immigrant discourses across Europe for decades. This mindset rests on the principle that both prosperity and identity are more or less finite resources that the majority group should have privileged access to. Sharing them would involve a loss; but failing to safeguard them altogether could pose a serious existential threat for the majority group in the long run (Esses, Dovidio et al 2001). At the same time, the ‘zero-sum’ mentality extends to the symbolic capital of national society - its culture, traditions, embedded values, and ways of life -, fostering social reflexes that derive from a national and in some cases ‘European’ racist/nativist mindset (Messina 2007). Again, failure or reluctance to actively defend those values against ‘others’ is perceived as conducive to dilution, erosion, and eventually even extinction. To accept this kind of diagnosis/negative prognosis constitutes the first necessary and crucial step towards subscribing to aspects of the accompanying prescription - that national society should be aggressively protected, that the flow of immigrants must be arrested or even reversed, and that ‘integration’ devices deployed by the state towards ethnic/religious minorities must become more rigid and forceful. Even if the entire ‘ethno-pluralist’ framing put forward by wide sectors of the contemporary radical-populist right may not be endorsed in its entirety by wider ‘mainstream’ constituencies or its more radical prescriptions still rejected as ‘extremist’, its accompanying discourses may ‘succeed’ in embedding the perception of competition and insecurity between majorities and perceived ‘others’, thereby making wider social and political audiences more receptive to ideas derived from it and more willing to subscribe to its associated negative projections for the future. In this case, a dangerous ‘mainstreaming’ effect may take place that is essentially open-ended and may make further and/or wider slippages into (more) extreme prescriptions in the future far more likely.

Therefore, there is a misleading asymmetry between electoral support for the radical-populist right, on the one hand, and ‘success’ on the level of ideas and collective perception, on the other. Disproportionate emphasis on electoral performance and opinion polling of the radical right has obscured how its ideas, master-frames, diagnoses, and radical (negative) prognoses have succeeded in shaping a new, broader social ‘common sense’ that is accepted (in - growing - part at least) by wider political and social constituencies. The danger of this distorting viewpoint can be gauged by looking at the results of the 2007 presidential elections in France. In that case, the electoral contraction of the Front National (FN) was hailed (erroneously, in hindsight) as ushering in a period of decline for the party. Yet, a significant part of the voters who abandoned the FN in 2007 were attracted by the anti-immigration rhetoric of Nicolas Sarkozy, whose role in ‘mainstreaming’ selective ideas, diagnoses, and prognoses of the FN’s discourse has been correctly identified. Thus, the electoral contraction of the FN in 2007 was inversely analogous to the concessions made by Sarkozy’s ‘mainstream’ right to the ‘zero-sum’ framing of the discussion by the FN - his rhetoric of ‘common sense’, his alleged desire to address the relevant concerns of the people, and his legitimisation of some ideas and policies previously considered ‘extremist’ (Hainsworth 2008: 121; Mondon 2011). This strategy has in most cases produced a win-win scenario for far right populist parties: either their electoral contraction does not result in a stable re-alignment of voters with ‘mainstream’
parties, in which case voters soon return to the extreme parties that they perceive as more committed to their opposition to immigration (e.g. France, Austria); or it does result in the stifling of the electoral chances of far right populist parties - in the medium term at least - but only at the onerous price of a legitimation and ‘mainstreaming’ of their extremist discourse (e.g. Germany, UK).

There is a growing body of analysis that attempts to draw parallels between the diffusion of a radicalised, activist variant of anti-Semitism in 1930s Europe, on the one hand, and the growing mistrust and often belligerent animosity towards communities with Muslim background in the continent since 9/11. The latter phenomenon - commonly described as Islamophobia - is situated at the point of intersection between three major fault lines: one that taps into long-standing anti-Muslim prejudices in Europe (Meret & Betz 2009); another relating to the similarly enduring ‘nativist’ prejudice vis-a-vis immigrant groups and communities; and a third one exposing socio-economic, cultural, and existential insecurities that have deepened in the past decade or so (Betz 2007: 33-54). The cumulative result is the perception of a widening gap (psychological but often social and literal) between majorities and Muslim minorities in the continent, fuelled by inflammatory and divisive language from the extremes, sometimes culminating in violent encounters or at the very least resulting in tangible discrimination.

Of course history does not simply repeat itself. No matter how many similarities (in terms of the radicalisation of long-standing prejudices, growing alienation, increasing militancy, and escalating discrimination), modern (post-nineteenth century) anti-Semitism and (post-late twentieth century) Islamophobia vary substantially in terms of the alleged threat that they are perceived to represent. While the former fed into historical anxieties about national identity and ethnic/‘racial’ homogeneity, the latter taps into a broader trans-national reservoir of ‘European’/‘western’ civilisational Angst (Bunzl 2005: 501-02). Differences also exist on the level of numbers (Muslims represent a far larger - and growing - percentage of the population in Europe when compared to pre-1945 Jews in most countries) and perceived status (Muslims are perceived through the ‘immigrant’ lens, as “strangers in Europe”, whereas Jews were viewed as the perennial "strangers within" or “internal outsiders” - Kovács 2010; Kallis 2008: 28-30 ). In addition, the wider political and societal contexts have changed dramatically. Since the end of WW2, the achievements of European democracies in terms of institutional consolidation, cultural tolerance, and social inclusion of minorities make a repeat of the interwar tragedy appear unfathomable, not least because of the plurality and strength of the institutional and cultural checks to extremist behaviours. The danger, however, is once again two-fold. The populist right has not only sharpened its ideological framing of the contemporary discussion on immigration and Islam (not least by deploying a self-proclaimed ‘post-fascist’ rhetoric that attempts to distance it from the bitter memories of the interwar period and from discredited ideas associated with this period, such as race and authoritarianism) but also embraced increasingly sophisticated techniques of communication and networking, within and across countries (Ruzza & Fella 2009: 42-4; Laqueur 1997: 95-110). For more than two decades, far-right politicians and intellectuals have unleashed an impressively wide repertoire of anti-Muslim ideas and arguments, sometimes in the context of an overarching hyper-nationalist anti-
immigration narrative but increasingly singling out Islam as the new ‘existential other’ of national and ‘European’ identities. Their diagnoses (of alleged civilisational incompatibility - Allen 2010: 46-8 - and discourse of ‘zero-sum’ competition for finite resources) and negative prognoses (erosion of ‘European’ values/Islamification - Vossen 2010; Zuquete 2008- and heightened insecurity) found increasingly receptive audiences well beyond their electoral constituencies and national audiences. But they also served as the powerful foundation of ‘cognitive liberation’ for a number of symbolic, targeted battles fought by the populist right in the post-9/11 period. From the wider pressure for immigration restrictions (and indeed bans on particular categories of immigrants) to more blatantly anti-Muslim campaigns against mosques, minarets, and the Islamic traditional female dress, far-right politicians, activists, and media (Boomgaarden & Vliegenhart 2007) have broken one taboo after the other, set ever more radical precedents, and often forced ostensibly ‘mainstream’ political forces to at least take note - and often to even concede ground to them.

RESTRICTING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS: THREE ‘LANDMARK’ EVENTS

There were some defining moments for each of these anti-Muslim campaigns. For the issue of the construction and ‘visibility’ of mosques it was the 2009 referendum that delivered the shocking (and largely unexpected) ban on minaret construction in Switzerland. For the other high-profile issue, the restriction on wearing the burqa in public places, two landmark initiatives took place in very rapid succession - first, the Belgian and then the French bans in the first half of 2010. All these events deserve the appellation ‘landmark’ for three main reasons. First, they marked a leap from radical, divisive rhetoric against Islam to political exclusionary praxis (Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2009: 71-122). Second, by shattering the taboo of actively restricting religious freedoms within their respective societies (Switzerland, Belgium, France), they unleashed a previously concealed or institutionally arrested social and political demand for similar initiatives in other parts of the continent, thereby generating a wave of similar debates and proposals that are still under consideration but have been debated far more aggressively and openly since the events outlined above - even if on numerous occasions that have been found to contravene international and national human rights stipulations. Third, the galvanising effect that the 2009 and 2010 bans had on radical right parties and constituencies across Europe has been accompanied by an intensification of anti-immigration (and sometimes generally anti-multiculturalist or even openly anti-Islamic/Muslim) rhetoric derived from other parties conventionally seen as occupying (more) ‘mainstream’ spaces in the political spectrum. Taken together, the three shifts outlined here have amounted to something akin a political and societal ‘paradigm shift’. The dividing lines between acceptable and inaccessible language, as well as between desirable and inadmissible course of action, have been redrawn in ways that are yet to be fully appreciated but nevertheless constitute a dramatic transfer of previously fringe and extreme ideas into increasingly mainstream political/social platforms and discourses. Meanwhile,
an unfolding ‘demonstration effect’ from the initiatives in Switzerland, Belgium, and France appears to have gained trans-national traction, hijacking the debate from its initial framework of universal human right/respect for diversity and moving it onto the emotive terrain of (in)security, alleged ‘civilisational’ clash, fear, and self-defence.

The emotional and psychological power of the precedent (that is, of the broken taboo) can be gauged most effectively in the immediate aftermath of the three landmark events mentioned above. The Swiss November 2009 referendum produced such a dramatic majority (57.5%) in favour of the minaret ban (and through the ostensibly most democratic of electoral devices) that left little doubt about the level of popular support for the initiative (Meyer 2011). The SVP itself interpreted the outcome as a further, open-ended mandate to introduce further restrictive measures in the future, both with regard to Islam in particular and to immigration as a whole; a year after the minaret ban vote, the SVP forced and won yet another referendum, this time allowing the automatic deportation of immigrants convicted of criminal activity (NYT 2010). Furthermore, it came as little surprise that politicians from various populist right-wing parties saw the Swiss initiative and ‘successful’ outcome as a legitimising, liberating precedent for similar actions in their own countries. The result resonated across Europe, receiving instant and enthusiastic support from radical right-wing parties from Denmark (the Danish People’s Party, third largest in the country’s parliament and supporting the government coalition between 2001 and 2011), France (FN), and Austria (both the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs - FPÖ - and the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich - BZÖ) to the Low Countries (predictably both the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid - PVV - and the Vlaams Blok - VB) and Italy (the Lega Nord, which was a primary member of Silvio Berlusconi’s governing coalition since 2008). In Italy, the then Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni, and the senator Roberto Calderoni (both members of the Lega Nord) expressed their satisfaction with the outcome and saw it as a model for future initiatives in Italy and other European countries (IW 2009); their call was endorsed by others in a wide circle of European countries (Garel 2009; HRW 2009).

The ensuing debate once again caricatured Islam as an extremist religion-based ideology of cultural aggression, expansionist aspirations, and fundamental contestation of putative ‘European’ values of individual and gender freedom. This kind of discourse was by no means a novelty in the development of the European radical/populist right. Ever since the 1990s parties such as the VB, the FN, and other populist parties shaped a distinct anti-Islamic narrative that was both part of their wider anti-immigration agenda and distinct from it (in growing intensity and power of its negative diagnosis/prognosis) (Todorov 2010: 8-9; Stuessi 2008). In the post-9/11 period the added layer of securitisation of strong Muslim ‘immigrant’ presence in Europe strengthened the negative appeal of the message and emboldened the political entrepreneurs of the populist right across Europe to go further and further in the direction of making Islamophobia a cornerstone of their negative political programmes (Cesari 2009). Yet, the Swiss referendum result (the critical moment of transition from rhetorical to political-plebiscitary transgression) anchored the debate about Islam and immigration in Europe on a new semantic domain of allegedly legitimate national and legal-constitutional defence of individual and cultural freedoms for the European ‘native’ majorities. The campaign
posters produced by the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) for the referendum (showing a Swiss flag pierced by black caricatured minarets made to resemble missiles and the silhouette of an equally caricatured Muslim woman in niqab) transformed the image of a particular space of worship into a cultural, ideological, and indeed national security existential threat and weapon of ‘civilisational’ warfare (Gole 2011: 8-9). This was in itself a bold teasing of the boundaries of ‘common sense’ and societal tolerance; but the verdict from the polls turned the message into an empowering precedent for others to follow. Far more alarming, however, were two further indicators in response to the Swiss vote. On the one hand, some high-profile mainstream politicians reacted to the widespread condemnation of the measure by arguing that the underlying fears that led to this outcome must be respected and taken on board by politicians (Sarkozy 2009; Focus 2009). On the other hand, a series of opinion polls conducted in the wake of the Swiss referendum in many European countries revealed either majorities or very strong minorities in favour of similar restrictive measures against Muslim places of worship, including outright bans on the construction of further mosques (Allievi 2009).

The debate on the prohibition of the burqa reached its climax a few months after the Swiss referendum. In April 2010 the Belgian parliament approved a new law banning all forms of female dressing that covered partially or fully the face in all public spaces. Then in July 2010 the French National Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of a ban on burqa and niqab in public. In some ways, this measure was an extension of the earlier (2004) ban on "conspicuous religious symbols" in state schools - the culmination of a much longer debate about religious traditions and secularism under the French republic. Yet, while the earlier law was restricted to specific educational environments and was predicated (controversially) on the French republic’s norm of ‘secularity’ (laïcité) that in this instance prohibited all symbols regardless of creed, the 2010 vote (and the subsequent law that came into effect in April 2011) pertained specifically to full Islamic dress - and has therefore been widely criticised as discriminatory. And while the particular French discourse of ‘laïcité’ had rendered the 2004 law less pertinent to other European countries or far-right movements (especially those with strong commitment to ‘Christian values’, such as the Lega Nord in Italy and the
National Orthodox Rally in Greece - Karatzaferis 2010), the 2010 parliamentary votes in Belgium and France focused significantly on the aspects of national security and women’s rights - both of which resonated far more strongly with wider social, political (for different reasons both radical and mainstream, left and right), and indeed trans-national audiences. In particular, the instrumentalisation of gender issues in this debate (the ban presented as a matter of gender equality, choice, and defence against patriarchal oppression) has attracted support also from particular sectors of the left, as well as from some women's right's and feminist organisations, including ones representing Muslim women.

Unsurprisingly again, the French public debate and eventual approval of the ban ushered in a ‘demonstration effect’ on other countries (both at the time of the vote itself and in the wake of its implementation a year later), at least on the level of political rhetoric and legislative initiatives. In October 2010 the agreement between Dutch mainstream parties and Geert Wilders’ PVV to form a new coalition government contained an explicit reference to a law banning the burqa in The Netherlands, in addition to promises to strict immigration from outside the EU. In Italy, politicians of the Lega Nord seized the opportunity to propose a bill emulating the Belgian and French precedents. The proposal was approved by a parliamentary commission in August 2011 and was forwarded to the parliament for discussion. As for public opinion across Europe, it seems that different types of questions produced rather divergent results. When people were asked about their reactions to the French legislation in terms of either security or ‘integration’, strong majorities in the UK, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy declared their support for the measure. When, on the other hand, the question was linked to broader issues of freedom to choose, the percentage of those in favour of the ban dropped significantly to minority (albeit sizeable) level. It is nevertheless illustrative of the hardening of public opinion against a caricatured Islam that a strong majority of those supporting the ban on the burqa and the niqab remain reluctant to extend the prohibition to all prominent religious symbols (including Christian), as the French 2004 law had done (and this trend includes the French public itself) (Blitz 2010).

Unlike the debate on restricting minarets (and on banning particular mosques - Allievi 2010), that on the Islamic female headscarf and dress has always been situated on a major faultline between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, the former viewed by state authorities as the terrain of ‘integration’ par excellence while the latter remaining (in spite of growing opposition from both the populist right and the radical left, again for very different reasons) the arena of individual choice. Although in France and Belgium this distinction has since 2010-11 produced a full separation of the two spheres in respect to the wearing of the burqa/niqab, the overall picture across the continent is far more volatile and complex. For more than a decade (particularly in the case of France), the issue of wearing headscarves in public has divided those opposing religious symbols in general and those targeting explicitly Islamic dress (Joppke 2009; Kliç, Saharso & Sauer 2008; Shahid & van Koningsveld 2005; Scott 2007). While the 2004 French law was predicated on the principle of secularism and was therefore religion-neutral, the 2011 ban was specific to Islamic dress. Conversely, the 2004 law adopted a very specific and limited definition of ‘public sphere’ by restricting the force of the prohibition to
state-run schools; by contrast, the recent ban extended to the entirety of the ‘public sphere’ (Asad 2005; Salvatore 2004). Other countries have followed a different approach to the controversy, rejecting national legislative arrangements but in some cases allowing regional and local authorities to implement their own measures in the direction of restricting either religious symbols in general or particular kinds of Islamic dress. The federal structure of Germany has enabled eight (out of a total of sixteen) Länder to introduce some form of restrictive legislation in this direction, starting with Baden-Württemberg in 2004 (Joppke 2007). While this initiative broke a taboo within Germany and was emulated in rapid succession in other Länder, the framework for the ban has differed from case to case. In Baden-Württemberg the legislation has specifically targeted Islamic dress in educational spaces, allowing Christian and Jewish symbols to be worn in public schools - a model also followed by Hessen, Saarland, Nordrhein Westfalen, and Bayern. By contrast, in 2005 Berlin introduced a ‘neutrality’ law that forbade all religious symbols to be worn by a far wider selection of public employees (in education, the justice system, and police). Two states (Niedersachsen and Bremen) have followed an intermediary approach, restricting the force of the measure to state schools but following the ‘neutrality’ principle in terms of banning all conspicuous religious symbols (i.e. including Christian and Jewish ones). Of the rest of the German Länder, three states (Brandenburg, Schleswig-Holstein, and Rheinland-Pfalz) have considered but explicitly rejected any legislative restriction in this domain (HRW 2009b). Meanwhile, in the wake of the Belgian and French bans on the burqa, Hessen has followed suit, passing a law explicitly restricting the wearing of veiled Islamic dress but adopting a limited definition of ‘public space’ as “areas of public service”, thus stopping short of an outright public ban like in France (Allen 2011: 49; BBC 2011).

THE POVERTY OF THE MAINSTREAM

The ‘demonstration/confirmation’ dynamic of all the above initiatives has already been amply felt - and its future trajectory remains unsettlingly unpredictable. After a series of bold legislative initiatives - on the local, regional, and national scale - and landmark court rulings upholding the restrictions, the taboo of introducing restrictive legislation that targets (either explicitly and singularly or indirectly) Islamic religious symbols has been essentially breached. Public support for these measures has revealed a surprisingly high degree of social ‘demand’, either previously concealed/suppressed or fed by a master-narrative of insecurity and ‘zero sum’ competition - but in either case strengthened by the ‘demonstration effect’ of ‘successful’ initiatives elsewhere. The examples of Switzerland (with regard to minarets), Belgium (burqas), and France (headscarves and burqas) have legitimised the notion of ‘public’ restriction to Islamic spaces and symbols of faith in an otherwise liberal, humanistic, and ostensibly ‘multicultural’ Europe. Even more disconcertingly, however, these restrictions have now shed their original ideological and political association with the far right, increasingly endorsed by ‘mainstream’ political and social actors. The effect of this powerful ‘mainstreaming’ trend raises disquieting questions about the future place of universal human rights norms and freedoms in European states/societies, about the meaning of
interculturalism in the post-9/11 era, as well as about the *differentia specifica* between radical-populist and ‘mainstream’ political spaces (Krzyzanowski & Oberhuber 2007).

The debates on Islamic symbols and places of worship in the last decade have exposed the poverty of Europe’s ‘mainstream’ values and the waning resolve of its main political-social actors to defend the integrity of their professed ‘multicultural’ vision against the increasingly bold and vicious attacks from the populist right. The three landmark legislative initiatives discussed in this chapter (the 2004 and 2011 laws in France; the 2011 ban in Belgium) have emanated from, and supported by, broad political majorities including increasingly ‘mainstream’ parties, even if their ideological provenance can be unambiguously traced in the discourses of the far right. Other similar initiatives currently under consideration have followed the same trajectory of initial pressure by populist right constituencies translating into ‘mainstreaming’ social demand and party-political endorsement on the local/ regional or national level. As more and more prominent ‘mainstream’ political and intellectual figures across Europe have proclaimed the current model of ‘state multiculturalism’ as “dead” or “failed” and as the discussion moves steadily away from human right/individual freedoms towards the allegedly ‘neutral’ terrain of security, integration, and ‘European’ cultural identity, the ‘demonstration effect’ of initiatives for more (and more restrictive) measures against Islamic practices and symbols gathers momentum across many countries in Europe. This trend has often been presented by using the over-deterministic language of political and social ‘contagion’; but, the term (even in its most sophisticated usages that go beyond the simplistic medical metaphors) both over-determines the outcome and oversimplifies the etiology/dynamics of diffusion. Instead, the most insidious driver of the ‘demonstration effect’ of Islamophobia in contemporary Europe lies (in striking similarity to the 1930s) in a lethal intersection - between the growing ability of far-right populist parties to mobilise social and political resources on a transnational basis in support of their dystopian ‘zero sum’ diagnoses; and the waning commitment of ‘mainstream’ political and social constituencies to an active, robust defence of the very principles underpinning the vision of an open, plural, multilayered inter-cultural society against extremist challenges.
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