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Breaking Taboos and ‘Mainstreaming the Extreme’: The Debates on Restricting Islamic Symbols in Contemporary Europe

Aristotle Kallis

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 claiming to offer distinct advantages over existing ones; then, gaining traction by receiving new adherents, mobilizing 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 gathers 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, that is, ideas that develop a momentum and are judged by their impact, regardless of whether they were initially considered universally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in any sense of those 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. However, once 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 to mobilize human resources or effect 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 counterpropositions to established ‘mainstream’ cognition. By transgressing the 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 of breaking into wider political and social constituencies, well beyond the initial circle of 'early adopters'. For this to happen, 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 its 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 – and 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 between 1936–9. It also served as both a legitimizing (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' from 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, over a long period of time, Italian mainstream media sensationalized the murder of Giovanna Reggiani by a Roma immigrant in 2007, giving wide exposure to extremist views about 'revenge' against the Roma communities in Italy and the 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 (since one usually 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 taken as a benchmark is the electoral success of extremist parties in 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 an 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 transnational political force (Mammone et al. 2009).

Beyond electoral performance, however, some far-right parties have been notably more successful in translating their poll ratings into (disproportionately stronger) political and sociocultural 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 parliamentary arithmetic. The initial political concessions made by so-called mainstream (typically centre-right and centre-left) parties in order to lure, appease and neutralize 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 cooperative 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 marginalized (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 scenario which is most insidious and difficult to gauge, 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 formalized through party agreements or quantified through corresponding voter support (Eatwell 2000: 416–18, 2005: 101–20). This development has the potential to unleash previously unthinkable levels of social demand for some extreme ideas that were originally considered taboo but which have, in the process, become, allegedly, more legitimized 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 to growing electoral demand and acting as a safeguard against voter alignment to extremist parties, the result is infinitely more worrying than the influence measured purely by 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. the internet and new social media), they cross borders effortlessly and may have an empowering/mobilizing effect on other political and social constituencies in other parts of the world. Once again, 'successful'

ideas tend to become trendsetters 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 radicalization 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 transnational 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 a Muslim background. Whether identifying Jean-Marie Le Pen, Jörg 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 *recontextualization* – Wodak & Fairclough 2010: 22–5), in this chapter I am particularly interested in how ‘successful mainstreaming’ in one place and moment 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 the radical far right on one occasion, and appearing to have gained traction in a particular society, can have a similar radicalizing effect on much wider international (social and political) audiences, influencing them and being appropriated by them (Chouliaraki & 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 recontextualized 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, generated 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 an 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 its problems. 'Contagion' is the visible causal effect that illustrates both the strength of an 'infectious' idea and the conditional vulnerability of its 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 it may be (socially and politically) discredited as 'extremist', but it is very often receptive to external 'confirmation' nudges that can reactivate and radicalize 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 thus 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 also increase the temptation to follow the lead set by others (Conversi 1993). Yet, while the metaphor of 'contagion' eloquently captures the transnational reach and dynamic of the phenomenon, it is strikingly unidimensional. 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 the haphazard outbreak of a disease. The schema of 'contagion', 'domino' or 'snowballing' (Huntington 1991: 100–06) tends to both overdetermine the outcome (diffusion and adoption/recontextualization of the idea) and oversimplify the process (the 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 (McAdam 1998: 48–51, Opp 2009). A 'successful' idea, frame or practice not only confirms and reinforces similar pre-existing stereotypes and beliefs in others but also 'liberates' them from the notion that such an idea is taboo, not widely shared or 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 to have been 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 pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices against particular ethnic, religious, cultural or indeed 'racial' groups; instead, it may be indirectly 'validated' in the eyes of growing social audiences because it becomes embedded in an already internalized political narrative of existential self-defence against perceived competition and threat from 'others' (see below). Once this has happened, vulnerability to particular and 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 identity levels. The notion of 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 to the majority group in the long run (Esses 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 – that fosters social reflexes deriving from a national and, in some cases, 'European' racist/nativist mindset (Messina 2007). Again, failure or reluctance to defend those values actively 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 large sectors of the contemporary radical-populist right may not be endorsed in its entirety by wider 'mainstream' constituencies or its more radical prescriptions are still rejected as 'extremist', its accompanying discourses may 'succeed' in embedding the perceptions of competition and insecurity between majorities and perceived 'others'. The result is that wider social and political audiences become 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 occur that is essentially open-ended and may make further and/or wider slippages into (more) extreme prescriptions in the future far more likely and acceptable.

Therefore, there is a misleading asymmetry between electoral support for the radical-populist right on the one hand, and 'success' at the level of ideas and collective perception on the other. The 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 and social 'common sense' that is accepted (and growing, in 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 proportion of the voters who abandoned the FN in 2007 were attracted by the anti-immigration rhetoric of Nicolas Sarkozy, whose role in 'mainstreaming' selected 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 legitimization 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 realignment of voters with 'mainstream' parties,

in which case voters soon return to the extreme parties that they perceive as being more committed to their opposition to immigration (e.g. France, Austria), or it results in a stifling of the electoral chances of far-right populist parties – in the medium term at least – but only at the onerous price of a legitimization and ‘mainstreaming’ of their extremist discourse (e.g. Germany, the United Kingdom).

There is a growing body of analysis that attempts to draw parallels between the diffusion of a radicalized activist variant of the anti-Semitism in 1930s Europe, on the one hand, and the growing mistrust and often belligerent animosity towards communities with a Muslim background on the continent since 9/11, on the other. 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-à-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 on 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 radicalization of long-standing prejudices, growing alienation, increasing militancy and escalating discrimination) may be detected, 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 transnational reservoir of ‘European’/‘Western’ civilizational angst (Bunzl 2005: 501–2). Differences also exist on the levels of numbers (Muslims represent a far larger – and growing – percentage of the population in Europe as compared to pre-1945 Jews in most countries) and perceived status (Muslims are perceived, through an ‘immigrant’ lens, as ‘strangers in Europe’, whereas Jews were viewed as the perennial ‘strangers within’ or ‘internal outsiders’ – Kallis 2008: 28–30, Kovács 2010). In addition, the wider political and societal contexts have changed dramatically. Since the end of Second World War, the achievements of European democracies in terms of institutional consolidation, cultural tolerance and the 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 on extremist behaviours.

The danger, however, is once again twofold. 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 has also embraced increasingly sophisticated techniques of communication and networking, within and across countries (Laqueur 1997: 95–110, Ruzza & Fella 2009: 42–4). 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 hypernationalist anti-immigration narrative but increasingly singling out Islam as the new 'existential other' of national and 'European' identities. Their diagnoses (of alleged civilizational incompatibility (Allen 2010: 46–8) and discourse of 'zero-sum' competition for finite resources) and negative prognoses (erosion of 'European' values/Islamification (Zuquete 2008, Vossen 2010) and heightened insecurity) have found increasing reception well beyond their electoral constituencies and national audiences. But they also serve 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 traditional Islamic female dress, far-right politicians, activists and media (Boomgaarden & Vliegenhart 2007) have broken one taboo after another, set ever more radical precedents and often forced ostensibly 'mainstream' political forces to at least take note – and often even to concede ground to them.

Restricting Islamic religious freedoms: Three 'landmark' events

There have been some defining moments for each of these anti-Muslim campaigns. On the issue of the '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 occurred in very rapid succession – 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 and France), they unleashed previously concealed and/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 which have been debated far more aggressively and openly since the events outlined above – even if on numerous occasions they have been found to contravene international and national human rights stipulations. Third, the galvanizing effects that the 2009 and 2010 bans have had on radical-right parties and constituencies across Europe have 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 amount to something akin to a political and societal 'paradigm shift'. The dividing lines between acceptable and inaccessible language, as well as between desirable and inadmissible courses of action, have been redrawn in ways that are yet to be fully appreciated but which, nevertheless, constitute a dramatic transfer of previously fringe and extreme ideas onto and 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 transnational traction, hijacking the debate from its initial framework of universal

human rights/respect for diversity and moving it onto the emotive terrain of (in) security, alleged 'civilizational' clashes, fear and self-defence.

The emotional and psychological power of the precedent (i.e. 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, ostensibly, the most democratic of electoral devices) that it left little doubt about the level of popular support for the initiative (Meyer 2011). The Swiss People's Party / Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) itself interpreted the outcome as a further open-ended mandate to introduce additional 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 legitimizing 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, the third largest in the country's Parliament and supporting the government coalition between 2001 and 2011), France (FN), Austria (both the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ)), 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 from 2008 onwards). In Italy, the then interior minister, Roberto Maroni, and senator Roberto Calderoni (both members of the Lega Nord) both 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 2009a).

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 had shaped a distinct anti-Islamic narrative that was both part of their wider anti-immigration agenda and distinct from it (growing in the intensity and power of its negative diagnosis/prognosis) (Stuessi 2008, Todorov 2010: 8–9). In the post-9/11 period, the added layer of securitization of the strong Muslim 'immigrant' presence in Europe strengthened the negative appeal of the message and emboldened political entrepreneurs from 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 in a new semantic domain of allegedly legitimate national and legal-constitutional defence of individual and cultural freedoms for the European 'native' majorities. The campaign poster produced by the 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 a niqab) transformed

Figure 4.1 SVP Minarett Poster. © GOAL AG

the image of a particular space of worship into a cultural, ideological and indeed national security existential threat and weapon of ‘civilizational’ warfare (Gole 2011: 8–9) (see Figure 4.1).

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 (Focus 2009, Sarkozy 2009). On the other, 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, in all public spaces, all forms of female dress that partially or fully cover the face. Then, in July 2010, the French National Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of a ban on wearing the burqa or the 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*), which 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 criticized 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 a 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 transnational audiences. In particular, the instrumentalization of gender issues in this debate (the ban being presented as a matter of gender equality, choice and defence against patriarchal oppression) has also attracted support from particular sectors of the left, as well as from some women's rights and feminist organizations, 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 restrict immigration from outside the European Union (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 United Kingdom, 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 of choice, the percentages of those in favour of the ban dropped significantly to minority (albeit sizeable) levels. 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 banning particular mosques – Allievi 2010), that on the Islamic female headscarf and dress has always been situated on a major fault line between the '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 radical left, again for very different reasons) a matter of individual choice. Although in France and Belgium this distinction has, since 2010–11, resulted in 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 explicitly targeting Islamic dress (Shahid & van Koningsveld 2005, Scott 2007, Kılıç et al. 2008, Joppke 2009). 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 the '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' (Salvatore 2004, Asad 2005). Other countries have adopted a different approach to the controversy, generally 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 16) 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 varied from case to case. In Baden-Württemberg, the legislation 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 by the 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 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 that 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 legitimized the notion of 'public' restriction on 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, being now 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 (Krzyżanowski & 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 been supported by, broad political majorities including increasingly 'mainstream' parties, even if their ideological provenance can be unambiguously traced back to the discourses of the far right. Other similar initiatives currently under consideration have followed the same trajectory of initial pressure by populist-right constituencies being translated 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' to be 'dead' or 'failed', and as the discussion moves steadily away from human rights/individual freedoms towards the allegedly 'neutral' terrain of security, integration and 'European' cultural identity, so 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 usage that goes beyond 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 mobilize 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 and robust defence of the very principles underpinning the vision of an open, plural, multilayered, intercultural society that opposes extremist challenges.

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