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Enlightened fundamentalism? Immigration, feminism and the Right

LIZ FEKETE

Abstract: Anti-immigration, Islamophobic and extreme-Right parties have long been a feature of European politics. But, increasingly, the views and policies promulgated by such parties are being absorbed into a process of governmental policy and decision-making dictated by the 'war on terror'. National security agendas overlap with the immigration control programmes of the far Right and integration measures imposed by governments reinforce Islamophobia. 'Multi-culturalism' is seen as a threat to European values and even some feminists are being recruited to an anti-immigrant politics via aggressively promoted stereotypes of Islam.

Keywords: asylum, citizenship, clash of civilisations, Enlightenment, Eurabia, Hirsi Ali, integration, Islamophobia, Okin

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Anti-immigration, Islamophobic and extreme-Right electoral parties have long been a feature of the European political landscape. But the views and policies promoted by such parties are no longer on the political fringe. On the contrary, they mesh with the security agenda of the European Union (EU) and are braided into the policies of Conservative and Liberal governments throughout its member states. States' national security agendas overlap with the immigration control programmes of xenophobic movements, and integration measures imposed by governments reinforce the Islamophobia of the extreme Right. Today, in Europe, xenophobia and Islamophobia are the warp and woof of the war on terror.

In fact, the influence of xenophobic and Islamophobic parties, either as junior partners in coalition governments or as the recipients of the popular vote, is unprecedented, and reflects the major realignment of forces that has taken place as a direct consequence of the war on terror. With its aggressive call for 'integration' (meaning assimilation), to be achieved through 'the scrubbing out of multiculturalism',¹ the realigned Right – whose elements range from post-fascists to liberals and even some social democrats – is using state power to reinforce fears about 'aliens' and put into place legal and administrative structures that discriminate against Muslims. Most alarmingly, even some feminists and gay activists are now part of an overtly right-wing consensus that calls for immigration controls specifically targeted at immigrants from the Muslim world. Central to such a process is a generalised suspicion of Muslims, who are characterised as holding on to an alien culture that, in its opposition to homosexuality and gender equality, threatens core European values. Strict monocultural policies, besides, are seen as a necessary corrective to the multicultural policies of the Left that, in the name of cultural diversity, have turned a blind eye to patriarchal customs such as polygamy, clitoridectomy, forced marriages and honour killings.

Islamophobia moves into policy

Since September 11, every EU country has introduced citizenship reforms, revised integration policies and brought in immigration laws that limit the rights of existing citizens and long-term residents to family reunification.

Citizenship: from aptitude to attitude

Take citizenship first. An applicant's integration would, previously, have been measured by his/her basic language acquisition or knowledge of the host society and its political and social institutions. But, today, a new approach is emerging as more and more hurdles to citizenship are introduced. First, the language requirement is set so high in

some countries as to exclude all but the most highly educated. Second, applicants must submit themselves to a loyalty test. In one German state this has been extended to an attitude test that seeks to measure private beliefs, particularly on issues of sexuality.

Consequently, there is a rapport between government policies and the demands put forward by Islamophobic parties. The background to citizenship reform in Denmark, for example, was a debate on immigration and integration (focused on Muslims) that became so offensive that it moved the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Alvaro Gil-Robles, to describe Danes as 'primitive nationalists'.² But then, Denmark's coalition government, made up of the Liberal Party of Denmark (Venstre) and the Conservative People's Party (Det Konservative Folkeparti), relies on the backing of the openly Islamophobic Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti – DFP) to stay in power. (Since the 'cartoon affair' the DFP has become even more influential and is, according to opinion polls, on the verge of becoming Denmark's second most popular party.³) The citizenship test introduced by the coalition government, under pressure from the DFP, is so difficult that even some parliamentarians are unable to answer all the history questions, while the level of language proficiency demanded is equivalent to that in higher education. All new citizenship applicants have to sign a declaration of loyalty stating: 'I will work actively for the integration of myself and my family into Danish society.' The ministry of integration's website for those who want to become citizens stipulates: work, pay tax, don't hit your children and show respect for equal rights between the sexes.⁴ According to the UNHCR, the 'way the declaration is formulated creates anticipation that foreigners will not respect certain values that are fundamental in a democratic society, and that they will commit the type of crimes mentioned in the declaration'.⁵ Dismissing such criticism and warnings from the Council of Europe that the government's reform of immigration and integration legislation contributes to a hostile environment for minorities, Rikke Hvilshøj, the minister for refugees, immigrants and immigration, defended the loyalty oath on the grounds that she was tired of political correctness and the softly-softly approach to immigrants.⁶ DFP leader Pia Kjaersgaard suggested that immigrants should not only master Danish but should also be examined on their respect for Danish society and values.⁷ In addition, the DFP has sponsored a bill to make it easier for social workers to place immigrant children whose parents 'forbid them to integrate into Danish society' into foster care because the child's 'best interests are not being served by raising them to be hostile to Danish society'. The system must step in and remove these children, so that they can be raised 'according to democratic values'.⁸

As in Denmark, the political landscape of the Netherlands – a country that takes pride in its liberal values – has changed dramatically under the

influence of openly Islamophobic movements. It was a liberal, Fritz Bolkestein, who, as the (then) leader of the opposition People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* – VVD), first introduced the anti-Islamic theme into national politics. In a speech in 1991, Bolkestein suggested that Islam was a threat to liberal democracy and a hindrance to the 'integration' of immigrants. In the late 1990s, a cruder Islamophobia was introduced into Dutch politics by the sociologist-turned-media-personality Pim Fortuyn. Author of *Against the Islamification of our Culture*, Fortuyn, who was gay, argued that he could not possibly be a racist because he had sex with Moroccan men. Following Fortuyn's assassination by an animal rights activist, the List Pim Fortuyn made a stunning electoral breakthrough at its first parliamentary attempt, polling 17.5 per cent of the vote in the 2002 general election. Fortuyn's death, followed by the assassination of the film director Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in November 2004, polarised the debate on integration still further, with Conservatives and Liberals relying on Islamophobia unbound to stay in power.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the 'integration contract' being introduced in the Netherlands is considered the harshest and most demanding in Europe. The Netherlands is the first European country to set a pre-arrival integration exam to prove assimilability, directed principally at applicants for family reunification and would-be spouses – mostly Moroccans and Turks. (Immigrants with a certificate showing they are officially integrated are exempt, as are those from EU member states, Switzerland, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.) The 'syllabus' includes a DVD entitled 'To the Netherlands', which illustrates Dutch life by showing gay men kissing in a meadow and topless women on the beach. Dutch officials deny that the basis of the integration test is to stop the flow of immigrants from Muslim countries, claiming that they merely want all applicants to consider whether or not they would fit into a permissive society (which would doubtless automatically disqualify orthodox Dutch Catholics).⁹

Islamophobia and xenophobia are now so much part of the cloth of everyday life in the Netherlands that the posturing of populist parties like List Pim Fortuyn is largely redundant. The governing Liberal party, the VVD, epitomised by the hardline stance of its former immigration and integration minister Rita Verdonk, has internalised xenophobia. Though some of Verdonk's most openly offensive proposals have been rejected by parliament – such as her plan to introduce integration badges, subsequently compared to the Star of David forced on Jews by the Nazis – she pressed ahead with the introduction of a general code of conduct for the public which emphasises Dutch identity. This, based on a seven-point charter on conduct introduced in Rotterdam, includes calls for only Dutch to be spoken on the streets and by immi-

grant families in the home. Verdonk's reworked integration plan also obliges residents up to the age of 65, who have had less than eight years' schooling in the Netherlands, to undergo a course on how to integrate into Dutch society.

No populist xenophobic party has emerged in Germany on the scale of those in Denmark and the Netherlands. But, then, Germany has never officially accepted cultural diversity as a positive feature of society. And in certain ultra-conservative and largely Catholic German states, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) have succeeded in marginalising the extreme Right by speaking to popular fears about immigration. Bavaria's interior minister Günther Beckstein (CSU) is the most prominent advocate of compulsory integration, demanding sanctions (such as the loss of social benefits) for anyone who refuses to take an integration course. But the state which has gone furthest in its attempt to measure and isolate the attitudes that supposedly threaten the host society is Baden-Württemberg (which was also the first German state to ban civil servants from wearing the hijab). There, applicants for citizenship from some fifty-seven Islamic countries now face a lengthy interrogation that includes questions on belief and attitudes towards religious freedom, equality of the sexes, homosexuality, promiscuity, freedom of expression, the concept of honour and forced marriages. 'When we came to Germany, they examined our teeth to determine our state of health. Now they're testing our feelings', said a Turk interviewed by the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.¹⁰ Among the questions asked are: 'Do you think a woman should obey her husband and that he can beat her if she is disobedient?' and 'Imagine that your adult son comes home and says he is homosexual and plans to live with another man. How do you react?' After protests from the Free Democratic Party (FDP – part of the governing coalition), particularly sensitive questions on matters of conscience, such as homosexuality, may be deleted from the questionnaire.¹¹

Baden-Württemberg officials justify their intrusive tests by citing research which indicates that Muslim beliefs on such issues as forced marriages and honour killing conflict with constitutional law. 'If there is a suspicion that the person who wants to become German does not share our fundamental principles and values', said a spokesman then, 'the new system of interrogation can find this out'.¹² The OSCE Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims, ambassador Ömür Orhun, warned that posing such questions to adherents of one religion only was an affront to their dignity, a violation of human rights and discriminatory.¹³ And the Social Democratic Party (SPD) mayor of Heidelberg appears set on a collision course with the authorities after declaring that the city would not administer the questionnaire because to do so would cast

fundamental doubt on Muslims' loyalty to the German constitution, thereby infringing the principle of equality enshrined in it. But no district is to be allowed to exempt itself: the mayor's refusal has been deemed 'inadmissible'.¹⁴ All of which goes against the writ of the German constitution, which guarantees the basic rights: the right to life, to human dignity, to freedom of expression and to religion.

Family reunification

Also being 'reformed' is the right to family reunification under immigration law. Across Europe, this is being undermined by measures that give civil servants greater discretion to deny requests for family reunification on the ground that marriages have not been freely contracted, but are the result of cultural practices such as forced or arranged marriage. A European Council Directive on Family Reunion has also created a much tougher framework for family reunification, with children as young as 12 being subject to an integration requirement.

The country with the strictest such measures in Europe is Denmark.¹⁵ The Danish Aliens Act 2002 removed the statutory right to family reunification on the grounds of wanting to secure 'the best possible base for integration'. Henceforth, applicants were to be individually assessed to establish, among other things, whether a marriage had been voluntarily contracted. Any administrative doubt on this score was sufficient to deny a reunification request. That marrying abroad was a barrier to integration was reiterated in the 2003 'Action plan on forced, quasi-forced and arranged marriages' which stated that arranged marriages militate against integration, not least because, traditionally, they have been contracted transnationally and result in increased immigration. The Danish Institute for Human Rights has pointed out that the new provisions, by removing family reunification from a rights-based framework, allow for considerable administrative discretion – enabling state officials to act unimpeded on their suspicions of Muslims.¹⁶

The then Danish immigration and integration minister Bertel Haarder justified the family reunification laws as necessary to protect Nordic values and human rights.¹⁷ But Denmark is not alone. In France, limitations were placed on family reunification and marriage rights after the urban disturbances of October and November 2005. In his new year's day address to the nation, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy cited his concern for the 'immigrant woman, trapped at home, who doesn't speak the language because her husband doesn't let her leave and doesn't put her in contact with literacy groups or French lessons'. Such an unequal partner, he said, 'cannot have the right to residence'.¹⁸ Similarly, in the UK, family reunification and marriage rights were limited following urban violence in the northern cities of Oldham, Burnley and Leeds. The then home secretary David

Blunkett argued that the riots were caused by young male South Asian immigrants who held 'backward' attitudes and perpetrated oppressive practices (like forced marriage) against women.¹⁹

The thinking behind such 'reforms' is that Muslims *per se* pose a threat to gender equality and human rights standards, which dovetails neatly with the Right's project to end all primary immigration from Muslim countries. Listen to the anxieties of former Dutch immigration and integration minister Rita Verdonk. Strict immigration controls directed at non-EU countries (principally Turkey and Morocco) were necessary, she said, to stem the tide of 'young females who are not allowed to go on the street, who do not get the same chances as Dutch women'. She added: 'We Dutch women fought for equal rights. What I will not allow, and will do my utmost to prevent' is the return 'to the time when women were inferior to men'.²⁰

If such legislation inherently discriminates against Muslims and erodes their civil rights, then so be it. First, we were told post-September 11 that new anti-terrorist laws were needed, and that, if necessary, we had to give up some of our civil rights in the name of preserving security. Now we are told that many of the principles guaranteeing equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights (including the right to a private life) need to be given up – in the name of equality. The bizarre logic seems to be that the best way to counter possible discrimination against women (brought about, it would seem, by the Muslim birthrate and increasing Muslim influence in society) is by bringing in laws that discriminate against ethnic minorities (i.e., Muslims). And when it comes to individual cases of Muslim men violating Muslim women (via forced marriages, domestic violence and the like), the solution is not for the state to offer Muslim women better protection and equal access to justice in the host country, but to deny them rights of residence or settlement via stricter immigration controls.

Cultural fundamentalism and the Enlightenment

The parliamentary and media debates surrounding these reforms constantly stress the 'alien culture' of Muslims, that Islamic and European values are irreconcilable and that, even in Europe, Muslims cling to their culture, refusing to 'integrate'. The discrimination against Muslims, therefore, is justified.

Cultural justification has taken the place of racial justification. The specific problems that Europe's Muslim citizens face – unemployment, discrimination, poverty, marginalisation – are now viewed through a cultural lens. This tendency to treat culture as the key analytical tool for understanding developments in European society accords with the French Arabic scholar Olivier Roy's observation that cultural

and religious paradigms are now being widely used in popular debate to explain societal and political issues. Besides, Muslim culture is no more a monolith than Christian culture, and, as Roy shows, there are as many Muslim cultures as there are Muslim countries. 'How', asks Roy, 'do we begin to isolate and categorise the complex and multilevel practices of more than 1 billion Muslims living in so many different social, cultural and geographical conditions? How are we to designate a specific attitude as "Muslim" or "Islamic"?'²¹

The anthropologist Verena Stolcke warned in the early 1990s that anti-immigrant Right parties and politicians had adopted a repertoire of ideas and a conceptual structure of 'cultural fundamentalism'.²² And they were using a 'political rhetoric of exclusion in which Third World immigrants' were 'construed as posing a threat to the national unity of the "host" countries because they were culturally different' – so shifting the anti-immigrant discourse from protecting one's race to protecting one's 'historically rooted homogenous national culture'.

More recently, the ideas of cultural fundamentalism have been strengthened by recourse to the Enlightenment as the foundation of western European culture, which therefore needs to be defended. Non-western immigrants must cast off their 'backward culture' and assimilate into the modern, secular values of the Enlightenment. If, for Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, the Bible and the Qur'an are sacred texts, not open to interpretation or adaptation, for cultural fundamentalists, the Enlightenment is an equally sacred, finished process. But, as Sivanandan has argued, the Enlightenment has yet to extend its remit of liberty, fraternity and equality to the non-white peoples of the world.²³ 'An Enlightenment project which excludes "the darkies" of the world is clearly benighted.'²⁴

Ideas predicated on Enlightenment fundamentalism would never have achieved the dominance they are afforded today if it had not been for the war on terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the primacy subsequently given in political and media discourse to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilisations thesis.²⁵ Huntington's belief that civilisational conflict occurs not just between nations, but within those western nations which fail to control immigration and/or preserve civilisational coherence and homogeneity, has become the bedrock of the current debate on citizenship. Within days of the New York and Washington attacks of September 11, key players on the Right were popularising Huntington's themes by establishing a binary between western, European, Enlightenment values (based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition) and those of the 'other' (i.e., Islam). The then Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, stated that we should be 'conscious of the superiority of our civilisations'; Pim Fortuyn warned that Islam was a 'backward culture'; and the Danish populist leader Pia Kjaersgaard told parliament that September 11

was not the start of the clash of civilisations as ‘a clash would indicate that there are two civilisations’, when there is ‘only one civilisation, and that’s ours’.²⁶ The idea that a diversity of influences creates civilisations was dismissed. Different religions came to be viewed as fixed entities that could not possibly share common, universal values. And civilisation did not emanate from a shared humanity. If radical Islam posed a threat abroad, Muslim communities within western countries also needed to be strictly monitored. ‘Islam is the biggest threat to world peace since the fall of Communism’, commented the DFP’s Kristian Thulesen Dahl, comparing it to the cuckoo in the nest. ‘It is eating us [from within and] destabilising [our societies].’²⁷

It was in this intolerant climate, against a backdrop of anti-terrorist measures targeting the Muslim community, that the debate about citizenship and national belonging opened up across Europe. Its thrust was that a set of fixed cultural norms and values was needed to establish on what basis foreigners should gain access to, or be excluded from, the national community and its territory. Today, long-term residents in Europe – even those who have become naturalised citizens and have taken the loyalty tests and passed the integration exams, may find themselves under threat of expulsion. Under recent immigration laws, governments have granted themselves yet more administrative discretion to deport long-term residents or revoke the citizenship of naturalised citizens who display ‘unacceptable behaviour’ (UK); constitute a threat to public order (Germany); or espouse anti-western and anti-Enlightenment values (France).²⁸ In fact, what frames the whole citizenship debate, argues anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, is the constant reference to a ‘lack of belonging’ due to some ‘innate’ quality such as ancestry, a shared cultural heritage, and so on. Non-western citizenship applicants are being asked to ‘become European’ at the same time as it is tacitly assumed that this is something they can never really achieve.²⁹

Monoculturalising the nation

Cultural fundamentalists monoculturalise the nation. Their culturalist rhetoric, argues Stolcke, ‘reifies culture . . . as a compact, bounded, localized, and historically rooted set of traditions and values transmitted through the generations’.³⁰ And, for Gullestad, the debate on values falsely assumes that there is a single homogenised set of values, with the state as the expression of the collective identity associated with them. Immigration is ‘construed . . . as a *political* threat to the national identity and integrity on account of immigrants’ cultural diversity . . . the nation-state is conceived as mobilizing a shared sense of belonging and loyalty predicated on a common language, cultural traditions and belief’.³¹ Cultural fundamentalism, in other words, roots nationality and citizenship in a hereditary cultural heritage.

And the integration measures adopted by European governments following September 11 have allowed for culturalist notions of nationality to flourish. In the process of steering race relations policy away from multiculturalism towards monoculturalism, national cultures have been shorn of their contradictions, of their seamier side, and valorised. According to the new mantra, the shared Enlightenment tradition that shapes European national cultures ensures that Europeans are basically forward thinking, progressive, given to democracy and social justice. We children of the Enlightenment inhabit an imagined moral community wiped clean of fascism and authoritarianism. And if racism is mentioned at all, it is only to note its absence. If there is anything amiss in this, our European homeland, it is the consequence not of evil, but of too much goodness. Over-tolerance towards people from different cultures is our Achilles' heel. We must preserve our cultures at all costs and not let them be contaminated by what is alien. But, as Sivanandan has pointed out, cultures survive and flourish through bastardisation and hybridisation. Pure cultures, like that of the Nazis, die.³²

When extreme-Right and anti-immigration politicians attack multiculturalism, what they are really attacking is diversity, difference. Politicians like Peter Westenthaler, the leader of the Austrian Freedom Party's parliamentary group, are part of a cultural heritage that has nothing to do with Enlightenment values and everything to do with the far Right. Hence, when, after the attacks in Washington and New York, he declared that 'multicultural society was buried on 11 September', he was using multiculturalism as a code for attacking the culturally diverse societies that extreme-Right politicians traditionally abhor. Politicians from conservative and liberal parties have likewise sought to elevate multiculturalism into some sort of monstrosity that threatens national culture. Silvio Berlusconi was applauded by the Northern League's Roberto Calderoli for declaring on state-run radio in March 2006 that 'We don't want Italy to become a multiethnic, multicultural country. We are proud of our traditions'.³³ According to Calderoli, who had recently been sacked as reforms minister for wearing a T-shirt on state TV decorated with caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Our values, our identity, our history, our traditions must be defended against immigration.'³⁴

Spain, like Italy, is a country with a not-so-distant fascist past. Yet, in 2002, Spanish prime minister José María Aznar told a gathering of international Christian Democrats that multiculturalism posed a great threat to Europe. 'Multiculturalism is precisely what splits society. It is not living together. It is not integration.'³⁵ And here, according to A. Sivanandan, starkly presented is the fundamental (perhaps deliberate) error of conflating multiculturalism and culturalism, on the one hand, and assimilation and integration, on the other. It is not multi-

culturalism that ‘splits society’ but culturalism. Multiculturalism envisages a pluralist society abounding in many cultures enriching each other and seeking unity in diversity (as in India or Britain in the late 1960s and 70s). Culturalism envisages society as a conglomeration of ethnic enclaves, separate and ostensibly equal (as in apartheid South Africa).³⁶ Nor does integration equal assimilation. They are not interchangeable. Integration, in Roy Jenkins’ classic formulation, is ‘not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’.³⁷ To use the term integration to mean assimilation is therefore intellectually inept and morally dishonest, as it is to use the term multiculturalism to mean culturalism. But what makes such ‘thinking’ dangerous is the further conflation of the two misuses of language to produce the spurious thesis that cultural homogeneity is the *sine qua non* of a democratic society.³⁸

Not surprisingly, along with the emphasis on multiculturalism as one of the greatest threats facing Europe has come racism. Where once the archetypal Jew was seen as inimical to Europe, now it is all too often the archetypal Muslim. Unchanging across time and continents, Muslims are the sole carriers of patriarchy, the germ of which they transmit via a fossilised culture to successive generations. Multiculturalism was unacceptable to the Spanish immigration minister Enrique Fernández-Miranda because ‘With our democratic culture, we cannot accept the stoning of an adulterous woman, or the cutting off of a thief’s hand, or the existence of caste as the basis of social organisation’, things that, he claimed, multiculturalism approves of.³⁹

For the extreme Right, the ‘barbarous’ customs of Muslims have, for some time, been part of the argument of cultural fundamentalists to justify exclusion. In Denmark, Pia Kjaersgaard attacked multiculturalists for ignoring the fact that immigrants arrive in Denmark with ‘male chauvinism, ritual slaughtering, female circumcision and clothes that subjugate women, all of which belong in the darkest middle ages’.⁴⁰ Once such views were mocked, now they are accorded respect. For example, in the Netherlands, where Fortuyn asserted that Muslim attitudes were incompatible with individual rights, the Somali-born former MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali was applauded when she derided Islam as a ‘backward culture’ that subordinated women and stifled art, adding, helpfully, that the Prophet was, by western standards, a ‘perverse man’. The only possible answer to such moral backwardness is for immigrants to assimilate into the national *leitkultur* or leading culture – the yardstick of integration, according to Germany’s CDU.⁴¹

Anti-racists – like immigrants – are vilified for allowing barbarous customs to flourish because of their celebration of cultural difference. Fritz Bolkestein summed up the position of Dutch Liberals in a

speech in Rotterdam in 2003 in which he attacked those who failed to criticise the ‘wanton abuse’ of Muslim women in Muslim culture by glossing ‘over it with references to multiculturalism’. Multiculturalism, furthermore, threatened to erode the Dutch political tradition of equality since those who criticised reprehensible practices in other cultures were ‘tared with the epithet racist’.⁴²

Feminism versus multiculturalism

This ever more strident attack on multiculturalism has been associated with the leadership (usually, but not exclusively, male) of the Right. But, surreptitiously, another group has been jumping on the bandwagon: women, often self-proclaimed feminists, with an ideological axe to grind. The late Harvard professor of ethics and political science, Susan Moller Okin, was a feminist standard-bearer and defender of the national culture. Around the same time as Samuel P. Huntington was advancing his ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, Okin asked, in the pages of the *Boston Review*, ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women?’⁴³ Okin’s central thesis was that multiculturalism and concessions to difference now posed a threat to the fragile gains made by western liberal feminists over the decades. She criticised the western liberal tradition for recognising value in the very existence of cultural diversity, proposing instead an assimilationist model for the integration of immigrants.

But Okin’s criticisms of multiculturalism went further than those of the mainstream Right. She explicitly attacked multiculturalism as a form of state policy widely pursued by liberals who were accused of arguing for the protection of ‘special group rights’ or ‘privileges’.⁴⁴ Such a framework allowed a ‘special legal treatment on account of belonging to a cultural group’ to emerge. To back up her argument, Okin cited the French tolerance of polygamy. But Okin’s argument that tolerance of polygamy in France equals multiculturalism, equals group rights, is a clear misinterpretation to anyone with even a cursory understanding of the French tradition of an indivisible republic and its inherent hostility towards multiculturalism. A more logical conclusion would have been to equate French indifference to polygamous marriages with French indifference to immigrants *per se* – an indifference which is rooted not in multiculturalism, but in a *laissez-faire* racism that ignores the minority ethnic experience altogether.

In fact, Okin’s thesis is tendentious, elevating multiculturalism as it does into a philosophical doctrine and investing it with meanings which are not there, in order to show that special privileges afforded to immigrants threaten the fragile human rights of western women. Okin further argues that minority women locked in ‘a more patriarchal minority culture in the context of a less patriarchal majority culture . . . may be much better off if the culture into which they were born were

either to become extinct' (a sort of culturocide to help its members to become assimilated into the less sexist majority culture) 'or, preferably . . . be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women – at least to the degree to which this is upheld in the majority culture'.⁴⁵

The weak foundations of Okin's thesis did not go unnoticed by respondents to her analysis, who drew attention to her poor scholarship; paternalistic approach; tendency to stereotype the 'other'; viewing of patriarchy as the special domain of immigrants; and her casting of all immigrant women as the victims of their cultures. Okin was also accused of racism and of advocating the forced assimilation of ethnic minorities into a single dominant culture. As Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, president and founder of Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights put it: 'If Western women are now vying for control of the lives of immigrant women by justifying coercive state action, then these women have not learned the lessons of history, be it colonialism, imperialism, or even fascism'.⁴⁶

Despite such criticism, Okin had succeeded in legitimating in academic discourse the pitting of women's rights against immigrant rights (as though the battle for social justice were divisible) and allowing white western feminists to make sweeping claims about the incompatibility of non-western cultures with western liberal tradition. Okin's misrepresentation of multiculturalism was, in time, incorporated into the repertoire of the mainstream Right, the members of which began to exploit for their own ends issues of domestic violence in immigrant communities.

And, as the war on terror began to reshape domestic social policy, these tendencies became accentuated. Following September 11, and the furore over the nature of Islam it produced, a western agenda highlighting crimes against women began to emerge. Honour killing came to be cast as emblematic of Islam's problematic nature and its treatment of women. According to Purna Sen, programme director of the Asia region of Amnesty International, the contemporary 'discovery of, and subsequent opposition to, crimes of honour in the West have meshed together the perception of a "foreign" concept (honour), an alien and terrorist religion (Islam) and the bogey of violence against women into a politically potent mix'.⁴⁷

But it is in the supposedly liberal and freedom-loving Scandinavian countries, particularly Denmark and Norway, that Islamophobia and xenophobia have most successfully been woven into the campaign around 'forced marriages' (all too often conflated with arranged marriages). Denmark, as already noted, has the harshest family reunification policies in Europe, while in (non-EU) Norway, the xenophobic Progress Party has, for some time, polarised the immigrant debate by using gender issues. In addition, the Human Rights Service (HRS),

an 'independent thinktank' established in 2001 to examine 'issues and problems peculiar to multiethnic societies' has been influential in pushing the discourse further to the right in Norway.

Under the guise of concern about forced marriage, the HRS has fuelled an argument for stricter immigration controls. In *Human Visas*, HRS's information director Hege Storhaug generalised about cultural traits within immigrant communities, building, it would seem, on earlier research into ninety instances of forced marriage in which she found that, in all but three cases, the bride had been raped.⁴⁸ On the untested presumption that marriage is only a pretext for more immigration from such communities, she legitimated her call for immigration controls. Storhaug's research methods have been criticised as unethical and several interviewees have come forward and stated that, under pressure from Storhaug, they had exaggerated their stories.⁴⁹

But methodology aside, Storhaug's credentials as an independent and non-partisan observer on gender and immigration issues are, in any case, questionable.⁵⁰ In *Human Visas*, Storhaug claimed that immigrants from non-western (read Muslim) countries have imported into Norway 'patriarchal structures, values and traditions'. Unable to adapt to European values, these new immigrants live 'disconnected from civil society' in a 'kind of self-imposed isolation . . . largely imposed and enforced by anti-democratic forces' that 'prevent integration by controlling marriages and pressurising families to bring relatives from abroad, to the extent that children become "human visas".' While no-one should be against 'immigration to Norway from, say, Sweden or Denmark', the 'huge cultural gap between Western and non-Western countries' means that 'immigration from places like Pakistan or Somalia' should be considered far more problematic. 'The greatest challenge to integration in Norway . . . is posed by population groups from non-Western countries. And the reason for the challenge is cultural difference.' For the 'modern history of immigration in Europe has involved the importation of undesirable practices that simply cannot be reconciled with democratic values'. To 'prevent the children or grandchildren of immigrants' from being 'married off to persons in their ancestral homeland' in a 'modern form of human commerce', Storhaug advocated a new test of integration: an examination of the marriage patterns of immigrants.

Storhaug marshals feminist sentiment to support giving the state additional powers to enforce assimilation, adding yet another authoritarian layer to the body of ideas exploited by cultural fundamentalists. Like them, she represents the state as free from racism. For Storhaug, Norway is in a better position to shake off a false multiculturalism because, unlike France or Britain, it does not suffer 'an acute sense of historical guilt' over colonialism.⁵¹ The French and the British

have set aside ‘key democratic principles and values . . . out of a misguided sense of “understanding” and respect for culture’, she writes. In this, she reflects the dominant concept of Norway as an unblemished country with an ‘innocent humanitarian state with no colonial account to settle’⁵² which also explains its return to what Sivanandan terms a ‘primitive nativism’, uncontaminated and un-enriched by other cultures including that of the Sami people (the aboriginals of Norway), who continue to be dispossessed.⁵³

In other European countries, prominent feminists who attack cultural diversity also replicate dominant ideas about national identity. In Germany, Alice Schwarzer, the TV personality and founder of the feminist journal *Emma*, holds that multiculturalism is a threat to individual autonomy, equality and freedom. It is an inherently ‘dishonest’ ideology, she asserts, accusing those who disagree with her of averting their ‘eyes from the Muslim oppression of women in Germany’.⁵⁴ She repeats Storhaug’s claim that, due to their history, Germans are full of a self-hatred which leads them to ‘love everything foreign, with their eyes closed tightly’. Those who criticise Schwarzer’s views are judged traitors to the feminist cause. Marieluise Beck, the federal commissioner for integration policy, who disagrees with Schwarzer’s call for a ban on the hijab, is accused of ‘frenetically supporting the minority of Muslim women who demonstratively wear the headscarf’ by ‘stabbing the majority in the back who deliberately don’t cover themselves. Does the integration representative even know what kind of moral pressure a headscarf-wearing teacher can exert on a Muslim school girl and her parents? After all, the Islamists consider an unveiled woman to be a whore.’⁵⁵

An assimilationist, monocultural society needs its feminist cheerleaders. The struggles of minority ethnic women who have long campaigned against domestic violence are ignored if they fail to regard gender as the only contradiction and campaign also against societal racism. Governments look to minority ethnic women, like the prominent German-Turkish lawyer and SPD member Seyran Ates, who do not criticise dominant narratives, but validate them. Ates argues that ‘It is certainly not exclusively but largely the “wrong” implementation of the multicultural society that we have to thank for insular and hardly accessible parallel societies’ where ‘forced marriages, honour killings and human rights violations are endemic’.⁵⁶ Yet post-war Germany has never officially accepted that it is a country of immigration, let alone followed explicitly multiculturalist policies.

Another servant of the cultural fundamentalist cause is Hirsi Ali. The *Reader’s Digest* woman of the year and recipient of countless other awards, she has emerged as a cultural icon of the new Right.⁵⁷ For many Dutch Muslims, as well as feminists and anti-racists, Ali’s stock-in-trade would seem to be ‘stirring up Islamophobia on behalf

of a cabal of right-wing politicians and columnists'.⁵⁸ Hirsi Ali's twelve-minute documentary *Submission* was made with the film director Theo van Gogh (a man who once described feminists as 'ossified vaginas' and Islamists as 'goat-fuckers').⁵⁹ In *Submission*, episodes from the lives of four fictional Muslim women who suffer violence at the hands of men are related to verses from the Qur'an, calligraphed on to the skin of the actresses' alluring, whipped and semi-naked bodies. The implication is that, if you do away with the Qur'an and Islam, violence against women will be done away with as well! *Submission* is, in essence, little more than the age-old Orientalist sexual fantasy – a call to white men to save Muslim women from Muslim men.⁶⁰ Historian Geert Mak believes it is even more dangerous than this. The techniques used to essentialise Muslims are, he explains, similar to those used by Goebbels in his infamous Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*.⁶¹ Certainly the film appears to condemn Muslims for their original sin – of beating their wives and daughters – until they, like Hirsi Ali, renounce their faith. For Hirsi Ali, there is only one route to personal liberation for Muslims – her way – by compulsion if necessary. It is of a piece with her advocacy of a state ban on the hijab.

Feminist paternalism?

It is, indeed, via the debate on the hijab that feminists – to paraphrase Azizah Y. Al-Hibri – have sought to justify coercive state action and control the lives of immigrant women. The most divisive measure to compel Muslims to assimilate into the dominant culture is, despite all the rhetoric about 'women's rights', targeted *against* Muslim women, with the support of other women. What an irony! Hasn't feminism been built on resistance to the male control of women's bodies? Muslim women, though, such feminists argue, are too passive or enslaved to resist the power of Muslim men, who seek to control female bodies by enforcing the wearing of the hijab. So the state has to act as the liberator of Muslim women by stepping in and *forcing* them to unveil. In both Germany and France, state bans on the hijab are seen as necessary both for the liberation of Muslim women and the protection of women's rights generally.

There is no federal ban against the wearing of the veil in Germany, but specific Länder (Berlin, Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Baden-Württemberg and Saarland) have acted to prohibit civil servants from wearing the hijab – initiatives that have been loudly endorsed by prominent conservative female politicians. The ultra-conservative state of Baden-Württemberg was the first to ban female teachers from wearing the headscarf – on the grounds that a teacher's behaviour should demonstrate his or her commitment to human dignity. Baden-Württemberg's interior minister Annette Schaven argued that the hijab was a 'symbol

of cultural self-isolation and a part of the history of the oppression of women'. The Bavarian education minister Monika Hohlmeier also evoked this view to justify a similar ban in Bavaria.

Although the French ban was instituted ostensibly on grounds of secularism, covering all religious symbols including the Sikh turban and Christian crucifix, the issue of women's emancipation was used to justify the ban on the hijab.⁶² An open letter addressed to president Chirac, signed by dozens of prominent women, appeared in the glossy magazine *Elle*, expressing support for the ban on the grounds that the 'Islamic veil sends us all – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – back to a discrimination against women that is intolerable'.⁶³ Before this, the doyenne of French feminism, the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, had argued that the *foulard* represented the 'oppression of a sex'.⁶⁴ Choosing to wear the veil, she argued, was tantamount to renouncing one's personal autonomy. Even if Muslim girls might appear to choose this practice autonomously, that did not mean that they were autonomous. This is because the content of their cultural norms – namely, the Muslim values of female restraint, modesty and seclusion – are opposed to personal autonomy.

Badinter, then, knows the inner state and thought processes of any Muslim girl better than she does herself. Her paternalist justification of coercive state action is redolent of a colonialist, imperialist western tradition. She has essentialised Muslim culture and deemed that, as it prevents Muslim girls from realising their own individuality, anti-veil measures are benign and in the best interests of the child. The state has to act as the 'good father' to liberate the Muslim child from her bad, biological and cultural father. Indeed, issues of child protection are often invoked to justify state bans. Hirsi Ali, too, called for a ban on the hijab on the grounds that children are not autonomous and need to be protected from the reactionary cultural practices of their parents (as well as from Muslim men in general).

It could reasonably be argued that, where Muslim parents have acted oppressively by forcing girls to adhere to a specific dress code against their will, then the state is justified in intervening in the best interests of the child. Yet, even in such cases, French policy has done exactly the opposite in terms of freeing children. For it has led to the removal of children from state schooling altogether. Souad Benani, founder of Les Nana Beurs, a French organisation of women of North African descent, had warned of precisely such dangers when she argued that if the state were to exclude 'twelve or thirteen year-old girls from school' on account of their wearing the veil, then it would deny them 'the opportunity to learn, grow and make their own choices'.⁶⁵ Saida Kada – the only veiled woman invited to give testimony to the Stasi commission and founder of the organisation Activist French Muslim Women – argued that the ban fans the flames of extremism.

Indeed, it has led to a situation in which orthodox religious families in deprived communities who have removed their children from state schools then find the children removed from them. In January 2006, four girls – aged 4, 10, 13 and 14 – were placed in care after a court in southern France stripped their mother and father of parental rights. The father (whose name was not made public in order to protect the children) refused to let the girls attend school on the grounds that they would be made to remove their veils.⁶⁶

Ironically, the call to ban the veil in the name of individual autonomy relies on essentialist arguments about Islam that deny any personal autonomy to Muslim women and girls: the reasons for veiling have not changed since the time of the Prophet; and those who wear the veil, whether in Kabul or Paris, do so for exactly the same reasons (with the addition, in the case of French girls, of the internalisation of oppression). A debate claiming to be about the furthering of Enlightenment values leads to the exclusion of Muslim women and girls from the culture of civil rights. Because veiled women are not, in the eyes of their ‘liberators’, autonomous beings (they are either representatives of, or victims of, a fundamentalist culture), they are denied political agency altogether.

Creating a new feminism

As Islamophobia and xenophobia are woven into the war on terror, sections of feminist opinion have bought into the incorporation of discriminatory anti-terrorist measures aimed at Muslim communities into criminal and administrative law. But, the very tensions generated by the war on terror have given rise to the emergence of another feminism. Some European women are beginning to resist state measures which create enemy images and isolate Muslim women. In the words of Next-generation (a network of feminist academics and scholars) ‘we will not allow’ these ‘self-proclaimed “guardians of women’s rights”, whom we have never encountered as participants in nor supporters of our women’s movements and struggles over many years’, to ‘use “the emancipation of women” for anti-immigrationist, assimilationist, Islamophobic and ethnocentric policies’. ‘We say to them a determined NOT IN OUR NAMES.’⁶⁷

In Germany, around 780 women from across the political and cultural spectrum (from the Green Party to the CDU) have signed a petition opposing state bans on the hijab.⁶⁸ And, in a separate but related move, a European Muslim feminist voice is breaking through the cultural and religious confines of mainstream debate to demand civil rights, particularly a woman’s right to choose whether or not she wears the headscarf. For European Muslim women speaking

from *within* their communities, the challenge of combating the sexism they face in their daily lives, while also confronting mainstream Islamophobia, can be exhausting. Yet some feminists, who seem to believe a woman can only be liberated by travelling the fixed pathways of western feminism, respond to the predicament of their Muslim sisters by vilifying and demonising them. The German feminist Alice Schwarzer, one of the most offensive in this respect, explicitly links campaigns against the headscarf to the war on terror, warning that the headscarf has been 'the flag of Islamic crusaders'.⁶⁹ And, in France, Saida Kada was personally humiliated by feminists who successfully sought her exclusion from a human rights association run by the mayor of Lyon on the grounds that, by wearing the veil, she was an 'accomplice to gang rape'.

Some feminists are resisting the campaign by the Right to link the issue of forced marriage to stricter immigration controls targeted at the Muslim world. One of the canards propounded by the supporters of Hirsi Ali and Hege Storhaug is that it was only through their brave interventions that the problem of forced marriages was ever discussed in Europe.⁷⁰ But this is a self-serving myth. Minority ethnic women's organisations were combating forced marriages long before Hirsi Ali wrote *The Cage of Virgins*. However, because such organisations did not racialise forced marriages or sensationalise the issue in the media or with policy-makers in terms that accorded with the dominant Islamophobic discourse, their message was neither popular nor marketable. Indeed, such campaigns were often also simultaneously critical of discriminatory immigration controls, which were seen as part and parcel of state racism towards immigrant communities.⁷¹ A thoroughgoing realisation that violence against women cuts across race, class and religion (and not just a token acknowledgement of this truth) entails dismissing the myth of western moral and civilisational superiority and of the Enlightenment as a completed project at its heart.

It is around precisely these arguments that a new feminism, free of racism, needs to be built – a feminism that roundly rejects the Islamophobia and xenophobia built into the war on terror, and its underlying claim that patriarchy has nothing to do with 'us' (white, Christian, European) and everything to do with them ('aliens' from an Islamic culture). Such a feminism would clearly scorn the absurd liberatory pretensions of conservative and extreme-Right parties (the bastions of white male heterosexual privilege and the purveyors of traditional values about a 'woman's place' for decades). The new feminist voice is breaking through: these new Enlightenment crusaders for women's rights are certainly not *our* champions.

References

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