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Contemporary Society and its Body Politics

The veil of contention

The presence of religious symbols in public space poses a dilemma for many European countries, and in particular the wearing of the Islamic headscarf (the hijab) has provoked a huge social and political discussion. If France has one of the strictest regulations (a general legislative ban on any conspicuous religious sign in public schools since 2004), the United Kingdom is one of the most permissive countries. Between these two emblematic extremes, there is a full range of regulations and practices which varies greatly from state to state (Rorive, 2009: 267). The headscarf debate has been discussed at great length both by the media and scholars in anthropology, law, and women’s studies. Therefore, I will only give a brief outline of the various standpoints in this conflict. I will focus in particular on the headscarf debate concerning pupils (Belgium) and not schoolteachers (Germany). Although I do not have the perfect answer to this problem, I believe that there is something missing in this debate.

The supporters of the ban on the headscarf in public schools argue that such a measure is necessary to guarantee equality among the students and to protect Muslims girls from the social pressure of their religious community. In fact, some girls say that they fear violence when they do not wear the headscarf. Still, there are also many girls who wear the headscarf of their own free will. The more radical proponents of the ban claim that these girls cannot judge for themselves because they have been indoctrinated by their religious community from childhood. In this way, the position of these girls is dismissed as ignorant and submissive. Such arrogance is often countered in the following way: what if the whole headscarf controversy is a part of the widespread
tendency to sexualize women under the guise of emancipation? What if the male politicians who are engaged in this debate are only worried about the fact that by covering themselves these women deny men the opportunity to marvel at their beauty (Ceuppens, 2005)? But how emancipated is a girl who lets herself be ‘admired’ by the whole world while appearing half-naked, let’s say, in a television programme on football? Why can Western girls choose to look and to feel sexy while ‘white men have to save brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1999: 287)?

The opponents interpret the ban as an attack on their religious freedom. They take it as a sign that they are not welcome in these countries. Some even claim that the prohibition of religious symbols in the public sphere is an act of racism. The problem with this latter position is that if one starts using the charge of racism to suppress dissent, one risks eroding this charge of its meaning. Although one should not be blind to the possible political motives behind the ban, a major portion of the proponents are concerned with safeguarding the civil rights of women.

Muslim girls who wear the veil of their own volition argue that the measure is an assault on the way they express their religion and womanhood. They say they feel *naked* when they are forced to take off their veil at school. Many feminist action groups supporting these girls argue that they should have the right to decide freely whether they cover their heads or not. The ban on religious signs is wrong because it deprives them of that right.

At first sight, there are considerable differences of opinion between the various parties to this conflict. Still, they all seem to focus on the headscarf as a cultural, religious, or political *sign*: the headscarf is believed to merely *reflect* an already stable religious, cultural, or political identity or a long-term condition of oppression. The various groups only hold a different view on whether (and when) the veil is a liberating or an oppressive sign. In this way, they reduce the entire headscarf debate to a conflict of rights, and more precisely, to a clash between the right of religious freedom and the right of self-determination, while ignoring what we have called the *symbolic* question (for the difference between sign and symbol see Visker, 2007: 28, 64–7, 107–10). In fact, the question is whether the uneasiness of the Muslim girl who has to take off her veil at school can be explained merely in terms of a violation of rights. It might be convincing to say that such a violation makes her angry, but does it make sense to claim that it makes her feel *naked*? What if this feeling is not (just) the result of the violation of her right to self-determination, but a consequence of the simple fact that she is without her veil? Let me try to explain what I mean by briefly discussing the