

Publications

Constructing Muslims as Ethno-Racial Outsiders in Western Europe

by Erik Bleich

Post-war migrants to Europe have often been greeted with indifference, skepticism, or hostility. While many immigrants experience such sentiments on an individual level, a few broad categories of people have emerged as Western Europe's predominant ethno-racial outsiders. These are groups defined primarily by skin color, country of origin, or immigration status: such as Blacks and Pakistanis in Britain; Turks and guest workers in Germany; Arabs in France; and illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers everywhere. Strikingly, religious identities were absent from this list in the early post-war decades. Over the past twenty years, however, Europe has witnessed the rise of "Muslims" as co-equal, quintessential, ethno-racial outsiders. Existing immigrant ethnic groups are in the process of being recast and re-categorized as Muslims, while the term "Muslim" is frequently used to identify clearly defined, low-status, dangerous strangers.

This shift in identity is momentous, but it is not unprecedented. Over the course of recent centuries, many groups have served as Europe's ethno-racial outsiders, from Jews and Gypsies, to the Irish and Slavs. Most often, such ebbs and flows of group status are subsumed in discussions of broad historical trends, or they are treated as givens rather than as objects worthy of explanation. I argue, by contrast, that identifying and constructing ethno-racial outsiders is a distinctly political process. Scholars, such as Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and Mahmood Mamdani have fruitfully analyzed racial formation in the US and the construction of Hutu and Tutsi identities in Rwanda, as projects that are political at their core. These insights can be applied and extended to European politics in order to highlight the construction, elaboration, and contestation of Muslims as Europe's newest ethno-racial outsiders.

To demonstrate the rise of Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders and to illustrate the politics inherent in this process, I first briefly define ethno-racial outsiders and discuss how they can be identified in a systematic way. Then I summarize the recent construction of Muslims as outsiders in Western Europe. I argue that the initial transition began in the late 1980s, but that the construction has picked up pace since the turn of the 21st century. Finally, I assess the situation of Muslims as today's ethno-racial outsiders and discuss prospects for the future. While the news is troubling, it is not all bad — there are at least as many hopeful signs as worrisome ones as we look ahead to the status of European Muslims over next ten years.

1. Identifying Ethno-Racial Outsiders

Ethno-racial outsiders can be defined around three theoretical axes. First, the boundaries between high status groups and ethno-racial outsiders are "bright" not "blurry," with "unambiguous" distinctions between them.[1] Second, they share "an essentialized negative identity as dangerous strangers".[2] However, it is also vital to recognize a third point, namely that "outgroups are rank-ordered in ethnic hierarchies".[3] In other words, there may be more than one ethno-racial outsider group in any given society, and there are degrees of outsidership. Ethno-racial outsiders, therefore, are groups defined

along bright primordial boundaries that are low on the ethnic hierarchy and widely perceived to be dangerous strangers.

One way to illustrate the concept is through the type of survey carried out in France in the mid-1990s in which participants were asked to state if they felt “sympathy” or “antipathy” toward various groups.[4] What emerges is a rank ordering of the feelings of French respondents. In this hierarchy of outsiders, Mediterranean Europeans are largely accepted without qualms, with 89 percent of those surveyed expressing sympathy, and only 5 percent antipathy. On the other hand, Gypsies and Maghrebis elicit almost as much antipathy as sympathy among survey respondents, with only 50 percent of respondents expressing sympathy, and 39 and 40 percent, respectively, admitting antipathy. Although there are many other measures required to understand the extent to which groups are viewed as distinct, unlikable, and dangerous, this survey suggests the utility of the ethno-racial outsider concept as one that captures societal rankings of categories of people.

This survey also implies that to be an ethno-racial outsider, one does not have to be a complete pariah. There does have to be a negative identity associated with the group; it is critical to be seen as a stranger and as dangerous. But what is equally important to determining outsidership is a group’s relative placement on the hierarchy. Moreover, seeing the sliding scale of outsidership should serve as a reminder that the boundaries that separate groups, a group’s “essentialized negative identity,” and its placement in the ethnic hierarchy are not fixed throughout time. They are subject to change through political action.

2. The Rise of Muslims as Ethno-Racial Outsiders

Until recently, very few people gave a second thought to Europe’s Muslims. Throughout most of the post-war era, it was far more common to define these individuals by their citizenship status (immigrants, asylum-seekers/refugees, or foreigners), by their economic function (guest workers), or by their race, ethnicity or nationality (Black, Arab, Kurd, Pakistani, Algerian, Turk, etc.). This was partly a result of state rules that automatically classified people by an established institutional logic, but also partly a result of migrants’ own organizational preferences. These facts also make estimating changes in Europe’s Muslim population over time a significant challenge. Even today, few countries keep detailed demographic information on religious groups; moreover, gauging the actual religiosity of people classified as Muslim is extremely difficult. With these caveats in mind, reasonable estimates suggest there are 960,000 Muslims in the Netherlands, 1 million each in Spain and Italy, 1.6 million in the UK, approximately 3.3 million in Germany, and roughly 4.5 million in France.[5] In no country are nominal Muslims more than 10 percent of the population, but in each of these countries they are more than just a few scattered residents.

The presence of a “Muslim” identity within Europe began to grow in the 1980s. After the oil shocks of the 1970s, most European countries curtailed their post-war guest worker programs. But human rights commitments prevented them from sending these “guests” home, even in the face of rising unemployment. Moreover, these same commitments compelled Western European countries to allow family reunification, which led to significant immigration of wives and children in the late 1970s and into

the 1980s. This may help account for Muslims' increased public claims-making along religious lines in recent decades.[6] Alongside this backdrop of increasing Muslim identity within Western Europe, events taking place primarily outside of Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s reinforced, for European citizens, longstanding negative images of Islam and of Muslims. Decolonization in North Africa, wars in the Middle East, the kidnapping and killing of Israelis at the Munich Olympics, the 1979 Iranian revolution and hostage taking, the 1981 assassination of Egyptian Prime Minister Sadat by Muslim fundamentalists, and the early 1980s hostage takings and executions of Westerners in Beirut all contributed to a perception of "an historical pattern of Muslim belligerency and aggression".[7] On the one hand, Islam outside of Europe seemed to be increasingly fundamentalist and violent, and on the other hand, migrants inside Europe appeared to be making more demands on the basis of their Muslim identity.

These two separate strains converged in 1988-89 in Britain and France to mark a major turning point in the construction of Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders within Western Europe. In 1988, Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses*, an event that led some British Muslims to decry it as blasphemous and to engage in protest activities. These acts fell on deaf ears, until a group burned copies of the book outside Bradford's city hall to attract media attention, and until Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death-sentence fatwa that was seemingly embraced by some — though very few — British Muslim leaders. British politicians and media commentators strongly criticized these actions, leading to a squaring off between "Muslims" and "the West." In late 1989, three teenage girls were sent home from a suburban Paris school for wearing Islamic headscarves. This event erupted into a national debate over the place of Muslims in French society and, more specifically, over the role of public schools in maintaining France's secular approach to religion. Muslims were seen to be calling into question the compromises that had been struck in the early 20th century over questions of religion.

These events highlight two prominent sources of tension surrounding Muslims in Western Europe. In its early days, the headscarf affair revolved principally around cultural concerns — the notion that Muslims may have different values from Europeans, and the fear that they might not be compatible values. The Rushdie affair signaled additional concerns about security — the fear that Muslims were willing to resort to violence by burning books and issuing death sentences. Although both of these fears have been overstated, each of these elements has served as a building block for the construction of Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders. Perceived cultural incompatibility signals "bright" boundaries between groups, while perceived threats of violence reinforce a group's "essentialized negative identity as dangerous strangers."

Over the course of the 1990s, national-level incidents continued to draw attention to the presence of Muslims in Europe, reminding Europeans of the two types of tensions. But there were also bigger shifts and trends that affected Muslims' location in the ethno-racial hierarchy. The end of the Cold War, the publicity surrounding Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, and the onset of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia each helped raise awareness of the potential salience of cultural and religious differences in the new world order. At the same time, the new economic health of Southern European countries brought increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants to Spain and Italy. Suddenly, these countries were net importers of immigrants; this expanded the presence of significant Muslim populations to more countries within Europe.

The next major transition moment in the construction of Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders came in the 21st century. It is tempting to see 9/11 as the watershed moment of this decade, but it was preceded by another seminal event. The second Palestinian intifada had a significant effect on the domestic politics of a number of European states. In the days, months, and years following September, 2000, there was a notable rise in anti-Semitic violence in several European countries. It was especially intense and lasted particularly long in France, Germany, the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands. A controversial report commissioned by the European Union attributed part of the violence from the 2000-2002 period to Muslim perpetrators.[8] These actors were not viewed as blameworthy in all quarters, but the observation resonated in some countries, particularly in France, where official sources confirmed the finding. Of course, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings, the November, 2004 assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, and the July 7, 2005 London subway bombings all further contributed to a burgeoning sense of Muslims as unassimilable, dangerous, ethno-racial outsiders.

European attitudinal data demonstrates that from the 1990s on, Muslims tend to be at or toward the bottom of the ethno-racial hierarchy. In a 1999 European Values Survey, respondents were asked which groups they would NOT like to have as a neighbor. "Gypsies" are the extreme ethno-racial outsiders by this measure, with between 19 and 56 percent of those surveyed in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain replying they would prefer not to have Gypsies as neighbors. "Muslims" are the second group Europeans most wanted to avoid, above "foreigners," "other race," and "Jews" in four of the six countries and in second place in the other two countries, with responses ranging between 11 and 17 percent. In 2005, the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveyed people's perspectives on religion in Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. Unfavorable ratings for "Muslims" far outstripped those for "Christians" or "Jews" in each country, ranging from 14 to 51 percent. Moreover, when asked if they felt that "some religions are prone to violence," between 46 and 61 percent responded affirmatively, and of those that did, between 63 and 88 percent identified "Islam" as the religion most prone to violence. By contrast, only 1 to 8 percent of respondents in each country identified "Christianity," "Judaism," or "Hinduism" as the most violent religion.

Moreover, as might be expected, attitudes toward Muslims become dramatically more negative in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. A BBC poll of Muslims found that 30 percent of respondents felt hostility or abuse directed at them or at members of their family in the weeks following September 11th, 2001; following the March 11th, 2004 bombings, an astounding 19 percent of those surveyed in Spain said they favored expelling Moroccans from the country (compared to 7 percent in 1996); and in the Netherlands, a poll taken within ten days of the assassination of Theo van Gogh revealed that fully 40 percent of Dutch people polled expressed the "hope" that Muslims "no longer feel at home here." These strong reactions softened after the initial shock of the attacks wore off. Nevertheless, polls reveal that Muslims are now identified as significant ethno-racial outsiders in Western Europe.

3. The Politics of Images

Linking any historical narrative to Muslims' current ethno-racial outsider status suggests that events determine outcomes. Yet, the Rushdie affair, the headscarf affair, the effects of the second intifada, and

the terrorist acts each require interpretation to have a full effect on public perceptions. It is not immediately obvious after such events the extent to which a religious identity mattered to the perpetrators, as opposed to a national identity, a political identity, or to the psychological make-up of the actors. It is also not clear whether the perpetrators stand for a whole class of people—such as all Muslims—or just a small, marginal sub-set of individuals—such as fringe movements of radical, extremist fanatics who claim affiliation with Islam.

Events provide the raw material for European views of Muslims as “dangerous strangers” distinguished by “bright boundaries” and situated toward the bottom of ethno-racial hierarchies. To the extent that events resonate with established political culture and individual frames of reference, they are likely to be interpreted as consistent with those prevailing ideas. In previous work, I have defined a frame as “a set of cognitive and moral maps that orient an actor within a policy sphere,” and have suggested that such frames help actors answer Goffman’s question, “What is it that is going on here?”.[9] Given the prevalence of negative attitudes toward Islam in the West, it is not surprising that many Europeans are prepared to interpret recent history as confirmation that Muslims are different and dangerous.

Yet events, even coupled with widespread political culture and individual frames, are not sufficient to determine attitudes. Just as in the world of industry, so in politics it is possible to use raw material to generate a number of finished products. A variety of actors often compete against one another to monopolize the interpretation of events and thus to place various groups “properly” on status hierarchies. Some argue that the Rushdie affair exposes the truly nefarious goals of Muslims, while others view it as a protest that is eminently consistent with Western democratic values. Likewise, France’s headscarf affair can be interpreted as a fundamentalist challenge to secularism and to women’s equality, or as a quest for tolerance of religious pluralism that is at the heart of the European human rights regime. Debates such as these reveal that events do not dictate interpretations, and that ethno-racial outsiders are indeed constructed through a politics of images.

Media, political, and civic elites are central actors in defining and re-defining ethno-racial outsiders. Media outlets have the ear of audiences at the local, national, and international levels. In particular, the Italian media has come under fire in recent years for characterizing Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders. Both the EU and the Open Society Institute (OSI) observed that after 9/11, coverage of Muslims was notably negative, in that it “reaffirm[ed] Islamophobic stereotypes”.[10] In its overview of the Italian media, the EUMC report stated, “Some articles in the press were highly inflammatory and sensationalist,” and that “extremist Muslim voices were being disproportionately represented”[11], while the OSI discussion noted that “on occasion the religious affiliation of Muslims has been reported without justification”.[12]

This critique highlights three types of decisions the media can make: to print inflammatory as opposed to sympathetic or neutral articles; to publicize the words of extremists, as opposed to moderates, or some balance of the two; and to gratuitously identify as Muslims people whose Muslim identity—if it exists at all—is not a meaningful motive for their actions, especially when those actions involve petty crime (as has often been the case). To further illustrate this point, take the example of FOX News analyst Bill O’Reilly’s labeling the November 2005 disturbances in France as a “Muslim insurrection.” This was

clearly an inflammatory statement; he uncritically excerpted quotations from Islamist websites that falsely claimed credit for the violence; and he grouped disaffected youths who were angry about a wide variety of factors under the banner of “Muslims.” The construction of the French situation as a Muslim insurrection would be comical except that FOX News is the primary source of information for millions of viewers, who are thus highly likely to be influenced by O’Reilly’s rhetoric.

Politicians also set the tone for acceptable discourse in the public sphere. A 2005 Council of Europe-commissioned report details political portrayals of racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. It concludes that politicians make a wide variety of statements, not all of which are negative, but that there are enough troubling ones to have earned the special report. At the national level, some far right parties more or less openly express the argument made by France’s Mouvement National Républicain that “immigration is the nest of Islam in France, and Islam is the nest of Islamism”.^[13] This claim demonstrates a conscious effort to link immigration and Muslim fundamentalism in the public mind.

In most European countries, however, there are significant restrictions on speech that incites racial or religious hatred. Politicians are thus generally more prone to use coded language to make their point. One way they convey their message is by focusing on particular issues. In December, 2004, for example, the far-right British National Party’s “Voice of Freedom” newspaper ran a story about ritual slaughter of animals. The article included a photo of a bearded man forcibly pinning down a sheep while holding a long knife. The story quotes Halifax BNP councilor Adrian Marsden’s speech before a public panel: “The vast majority of people want this barbaric practice banned. Animals are slaughtered without stunning, by cutting their throat and leaving them to bleed to death.” The subtext is not subtle: it depicts Muslims, literally and figuratively, as butchers.

The role of civic elites is also critical in defining ethno-racial outsiders. Civic elites include teachers, preachers, and other beseechers. These are leaders that have an opinion about where different groups stand on the ethno-racial hierarchy, and that convey that opinion to others from a position of authority. At times, they operate uniquely on the local level, in classrooms, parishes, and pubs. At times, their rhetoric is conveyed to larger audiences through conferences, media coverage, or through the rhetoric of politicians. These three sets of actors—media, political, and civic elites—do the lion’s share of constructing ethno-racial outsiders. They can “brighten” or “blur” boundaries, they can cast groups as “dangerous strangers,” or the opposite, and they therefore contribute greatly to where different groups stand on the ethno-racial hierarchy.

4. Conclusions

The news about Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders, while bad, is not catastrophic. It is true that Europeans have more negative attitudes toward Muslims than they did twenty years ago. However, one undeniable fact emerges from the 1999 World Values Survey: Muslims are nowhere close to being considered pariahs within Europe. One way to read this survey data is to note that roughly 86 percent of the Europeans questioned had no objections to having a Muslim neighbor. In addition, Muslims, while worse off than the category “foreigner,” “other race,” or “Jews” by this measure, are not clearly worse

off than these other groups by many other yardsticks. People identified as foreigners, of another race or ethnicity, and to a lesser extent, Jews, suffer roughly equivalent amounts of physical attacks, discrimination, and negative stereotyping in the public sphere. Moreover, “Gypsies” stand out as the true pariah group within Europe, with on average two to three times as many people wishing to avoid to Gypsy neighbors compared to the next most objectionable category. In other words, Muslims are ethno-racial outsiders, but they are not the only ones, and they are not even lowest on the ethno-racial hierarchy.

That said, there are still many troubling signs when considering the future of Muslims in Western Europe. Most of these are obvious: politicians may be tempted to cast Muslims as dangerous strangers because fear-mongering can generate votes; the media may do the same because it sells copy. Who had heard of the *Jyllands-Posten* before the cartoon controversy? Who hasn’t heard of it now? Its editor Fleming Rose has published an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* and garnered an invitation to a high-profile roundtable at the Brookings Institution. Whether through intent or accident, the controversy catapulted the paper and its editor to international prominence. Clearly, there are media, political, and civic elites who stand to benefit from creating and exploiting tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

But there are hopeful signs too, and these are important to highlight because they are often under-emphasized by experts who arguably also have a vested interest in doomsday scenarios that drum up interest in their area of expertise. Most significantly, there has been remarkable restraint among many European leaders in light of the events of the past five years. The majority of politicians, media leaders, and civic leaders have been quite moderate in their public attitudes toward Muslims. There is a widespread desire to avoid clash of civilizations outcomes within Europe. There have been innumerable examples of inter-faith initiatives at the local and national levels. And crucially, a November, 2005 EU report lauded the responses of politicians, the media, and civil society groups following the 7/7 London bomb attacks, stating that “The lesson of 7 July is that strong, coordinated action by all stakeholders works effectively”.[14]

Even as many countries have come to grief over the depictions of the prophet Muhammad in the *Jyllands-Posten*, it is also important to remember that not all of the images were negative. Two of them can be interpreted as particularly inclusive in nature. The first is a straightforward image of Muhammad as a shepherd-figure. Seeing this drawing, one could be forgiven for thinking it was Moses or Jesus. This image puts Muhammad squarely in the Abrahamic tradition, signaling, one could easily argue, the compatibility of Islamic heritage with Judeo-Christian heritage. A second image is not of the prophet, but of a schoolboy named Muhammad in Western dress who has written on a chalk-board, “*Jyllands-Posten’s* journalists are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs.” This cartoon depicts an immigrant child who is cheeky and savvy enough to thumb his nose at the media. Coupled with the boy’s choice of clothes, this image suggests that he is not sheltered, conservative, or fundamentalist. In other words, he is probably a relatively well-integrated Danish child who just happens to be named Muhammad.

The bottom line is that today’s Europe provides a mixed-bag of signals about the status of Muslims. There is some cause for serious concern, but also some cause for hope. Right now, Western Europe is at

a cross-road; things could get worse for Muslims, or they could get better. This reinforces the point that ethno-racial outsiders are constructed categories, and that how they are constructed or deconstructed is a political process. It is therefore vital to keep an eye on who is doing the work of casting Muslims as ethno-racial outsiders, who is fighting those images, and who is winning and losing these political battles.

Notes

1 Alba 2005: 22

2 Zolberg and Long 1999: 6

3 Hagendoorn 1993: 27

4 See *La Lutte contre le racisme et la xénophobie* (1996) conducted by the Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme (CNCDH)

5 See the U.S. Department of State's 2004 International Religious Freedom Report, available on line at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/>. The German and French figures are the mid-points of estimated ranges.

6 see Koopmans et al. 2005: 146-79

7 Esposito 1999: 96

8 Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung 2003

9 Bleich 2003: 26-7

10 EUMC 2002: 22

11 EUMC 2002: 22-3

12 EUMAP 2002: 232

13 Camus 2005: 9

14 EUMC 2005: 4

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