
Jörn Thielmann

Gerdien Jonker, Valérie Amiraux, (éds.), *Politics of Visibility. Young Muslims in European Public Spaces*

Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2006, 223 p.

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- 1 The book under review is the outcome of two workshops, held in Berlin 2003 and Paris 2004, and of collective ethnographic research between August 2003 and July 2005. The material is so far unpublished. The eight contributors are advanced Ph.D. students as well as experienced senior researchers, doing research in seven European countries (Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy).
- 2 In their introduction, the editors stress as their common starting point the “shared awareness of a quickly growing gap in the field of Muslim visibility in Europe through the emergence of a heterogeneous and – to all appearances – very resourceful group of newcomers in the public arena” (p. 9). The overall setting is that after 9/11 and the Madrid bombings. All over Europe, Muslims are confronted with the alleged incompatibility of Islamic and European values. Everybody having a migratory background in a Muslim country becomes stigmatised as “Muslim”, regardless of his or her degree of religiosity. The newcomers aim at publicly redefining what it means to be a Muslim in Europe, as a full – and not second-class – citizen. Be it on a local or national level, they “search for public recognition of a distinct identity that they themselves label [...] ‘Muslim’” (p. 10).
- 3 Due to the fact that the whole issue of Islam in Europe is commonly treated by policymakers and the general public alike through a terrorism and security perspective, the research group searched also for radicals (from hard-to-reach youth to jihadis). However, as they say this is an obscure domain which is avoided in public and rarely commented upon to outsiders, i.e. non-Muslims. Thus, the terrorists are the “eternal absentees”. Nevertheless, the papers intend to map the whole field of Muslim visibility. What is the space for action that is open to self-described Muslims? What are the rules, the specific arenas for hitherto hidden migrant communities, entering now as social and political actors the public space? Are they allowed – and by whom – to act in Europe according to their own definitions? The editors argue rightly that this is not a question of *halal* and *haram*. Instead, the papers focus on various grey zones of interactions between groups, communities and individuals as well as between self-described Muslims and the non-Muslim majority society, and examine the processes transforming the grey zones into accepted spaces.
- 4 All contributions are linked to each other through common themes and features. Pressure from within and without is put on articulations of Muslim visibility. Reacting to the stigma “Muslim”, some local religious communities withdrew from any exchange with majority society and distance themselves from non-Muslim society (Jonker, Fadil, Amiraux, Abdel-Samad). Then, the generational change in Muslim communities creates internal conflicts, where a new generation born or socialised in Europe take over, formulating an Islam of their own, sometimes very different from that of their parents (Frisina, Jonker, Fadil). And last, under security-related pressure and stigmatised as Muslim, groups and individuals distance themselves from others as more cultured or religious, the most secular, etc. Claims of representation and power are made: What is “real Islam”, who belongs and who does not (Fadil, Boender, Yurdukal, Amiraux, Frisina)?
- 5 All papers are empirically based on qualitative ethnographic research. The common conceptual language is “an analytical ‘public’ umbrella”. They aim at being relevant to a broader context of political sociology and the sociology of religion. The concept of public space – actually very much en vogue in social sciences – means at first instance a space in which social actors

play a public role and present themselves to others. It is here under the European conditions, that Muslims discover their internal plurality. Public space has also nonmaterial aspects as the site for elaborating on common values and projects. It has a visible and an invisible side. The editors underline the theatrical dimension in the sense of Erving Goffman which became important for the whole research group, looking at stages and roles, and thus introducing performative aspects in the inquiries. The ethnographic field approach allows integrating the subjective dimension of the formation of public engagement and the competing narratives in a public sphere. So, it is possible to bridge the gap between the biased perception of Muslims and Islam by the dominant discourse and the pragmatic analytical approach of social scientists. By all similarities, the editors stress the fact that all case studies are firmly rooted in particular context respectively, in a specific national and/or local setting.

6 Valérie Amiraux presents five French citizens who are self-described Muslims but not engaged in associations, and analyses how they try to be citizens and Muslims in an environment that is due to the French *laïcité* hostile to a religious articulation in public. These individual voices bring the silent Muslim majority to the fore, as private persons in public. Working on a group of young Muslims in Antwerp, Nadia Fadil shows how a positive presentation of Islam to the public not only challenges common stereotypes, but also frames identity and opens ways for recognition. Civic involvement is considered to be a religious duty. This leads to the emergence of Islamic political subjects. The contribution of Annalisa Frisina follows a similar line, examining discourses on citizenship among young Muslims in Italy. The young activists want to leave the defensive logic of the parental generation and to establish themselves as “ordinary citizens”, legitimately present in public space in a multireligious and multicultural country. Welmoet Boender looks at the role of imams in the Netherlands. The government is searching for Muslim representatives and wants home-grown imams. The private and not legally recognised Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR) trains imams and tries to enter the public sphere thanks to this quest for Dutch imams. Boender shows that the students of IUR are fully aware that their acting and speaking in public affect the way in which Muslims in general are perceived. Gerdien Jonker crosses the political discourse on Muslims with discourses in Muslim communities there. On the one hand, policymakers see terrorism as rooted in Islamic religious tradition and reacted to imminent terrorist threat by imposing security measures on all Muslims. On the other, Muslims denied the terrorist the right to call themselves Muslims and protested against the security measures. Jonker examines two Turkish communities: the Jamaatunnur, a pious Sufi lay community that wants to improve European society through Muslim conduct reformulated as a universal value. And Milli Görüş, an Islamist organisation that tries to realise its goals through legal and political claims-making, fighting for a pious Islamic lifestyle which is enabled through a secular legal framework. Gökçe Yurdakul’s contribution is also based on research in Germany, focusing on the headscarf debate. She presents the positions of two Turkish associations in this debate. The social democratic TBB opposes the promotion of wearing the headscarf in the German public sphere, where Milli Görüş protests against the headscarf ban. The question of who attracts more followers in this debate seems to be answered in favour of the latter who claims the constitutional right of religious and cultural otherness. Philip Lewis turns to Great Britain. Here, institutional space is provided for “religion” in public life, and this space makes now room for Islam. British ‘ulama are seeking to connect with young Muslims, alienated from the mosques. They have also to react to the demands of wider society eager to work with them, becoming more and more socially visible. The last contribution in this volume by Hamed Abdel-Samad returns to Germany’s young Muslims. He describes the alienation from society and the experience of marginalisation and non-recognition which lead to radicalisation. The young Muslims demand respect and want to self-define their identities.

7 The book is an important contribution to the field of Islam in Europe. Offering well documented case studies, it also opens up space for further research. Very much worth reading!

Pour citer cet article

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