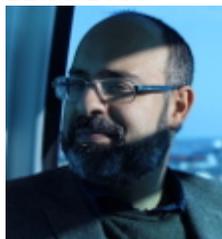


## Facing the veil: An Orientalist reprise

22.08.2018



Ali Qadir

Writer is Associate Professor in New Social Research programme



Kuva: Todd van Hoosear, Creative Commons.

**"By agreeing to the veil ban Finland will buy into the fascism lurking behind aesthetic policing; it will be a step toward totalizing normalization that allows only one way of representation and only one way of being European: Europe first."**

**Alustus!** It is more than likely that Finland will sooner or later ban face coverings, hijabs, niqabs, burqahs, or some such. Denmark enforced such a ban on face coverings from August 1. On August 3, the first person was charged for committing a crime by covering their face. It was a Muslim woman — details have not been released in the press, but it appears to be a woman of non-European origins. She was fined 1 000 Danish kroner for wearing her veil in a shopping center and was asked by a violent heckler and the police to either remove her veil or leave the public place: she chose to leave.

Denmark is only the latest of a number of European countries where face covering bans are being enforced or being mulled. France. Austria. Germany. Belgium. Netherlands. Italy. Spain (at least, Catalonia). Bulgaria. Switzerland. Fines range from €100 to €10 000. Typically, politicians on the “right” and the “left” unite to ban the veil. Finland and the remaining EU countries cannot remain isolated for very long from this trend: the synchronized nature of modern world society (Alasuutari 2016) and the tightly knit, hierarchical structure of the European polity make it easy to predict that the veil ban will lodge very soon and very firmly in Finland.

### What's at stake?

But there is more at issue here than mere unthinking conformism. Trends are never simply copied as what they are: they come along with a way of seeing the world, much of it implicit or repressed like in an iceberg. The policy is carried on top of a way of seeing the world in a certain way within which that trend makes perfect sense. The very fact that a trend is a trend, means that what is supporting it is very effective and speaks well to the way people conceive of the world and what makes sense to do in that picture (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014). We need to unpack what the Europe-wide policy trend of veil banning consists of, and what has been repressed when it is copied.

My argument relies on a perspective of social constructionism, in which the meaning and practice attached to the veil are not naturally occurring or permanent facts. Rather, the veil, just as the Muslim woman, are constructed in Europe to have a certain significance. What needs to be unpacked is how that construction has been formed, and what its ingredients are.

That is, when Finland does decide to ban the veil, what will Finnish society be buying into? This question is hardly ever asked, and there may be many ways to address it. Here, I want to outline two political layers through which Finland will face the veil: (a) purification of Europe through an aestheticization of ethics, and (b) continued subjugation of the feminine through exposing and colonizing mystery. I discuss each of these aspects below in a separate section. Taken together, they form a political position. Indeed, I might provoke that purification and penetration are generally what make up politics around Islam in the modern world.

The same elements are true of the many Muslims who promote the veil for different reasons. Their target too is, and for a very long time has been, the woman's body. Veil-enforcers also operate with an image of the world in which they are "liberating" women. Although the policy result is different for either case, both the veil-enforcers and the veil-banners are joined in pushing their agendas on and through women's bodies. Indeed, for all sides in debates on Islam, Muslim women's bodies and spirituality are the first targets of "liberation." Here, I will address only one side of the divide — the veil-banners — but will later show how purification and penetration are elemental to the politics of veil-enforcers too.

## (I) Purifying

The first aspect of the veil ban is purification, which boils down to exclusion of any way of presenting oneself not considered part of the Western European habitus. The same exclusion was evident in Sweden over the recent issue of Muslim men not shaking hands with women. In banning the veil, Finland will join Europe in establishing a purified environment that is alienating for most of the world's population originating outside the Atlantic zone.

The most elemental aspect to purity is aestheticism, by which I mean the extension of the use of purely aesthetic values to broader domains, at the expense of epistemological and ethical critiques. In this sense, aestheticism is fast becoming the defining feature of Europe and the veil ban is an instance of aesthetic policing. But **Walter Benjamin** (1936) in particular, as well as **Hannah Arendt** (1958) and others, already warned us decades ago that fascism lurks when the aesthetic replaces the ethical, as it did in Nazi Germany. Clean lines, white walls, cleared out public spaces, and the mass media, all aid fascism through a hyper-extension of alienation.

To keep the emphasis cultural, I would call this alienation mass distancing: people setting themselves apart from phenomena in order to judge and to not act (at least, intentionally). In the words of Benjamin (1936), "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself."

While Benjamin was more concerned with man replacing gods, my purpose is to draw attention to the phenomenological distance required for contemplation, now not from Olympus but from the living room couch. Neither Benjamin nor others could have foreseen the extreme level of mediated consumption that even the most ardent critic has come to accept as the new normal. Today's culture industry accelerates and accentuates aestheticism through reinforcing distancing in cycles of presentation and re-presentation. Judgment replaces participation and aesthetic replaces ethic. For the aesthete, pollution is to be eradicated from the body politic, which means hygiene has to be defined as normal. Hygiene means "our" way of presenting: wearing trousers,

swimming in bikinis, shaking hands, greeting with “hello” and, of course, leaving the face open and free of veiling.

It should be noted that Europe’s defining feature of aesthetics is also the feature of Europe that sells. Geopolitically, as even **Slavoj Žižek** admits, Europe is sliding into insignificance. But tourism to Europe’s “historic” sites keeps growing. For example, [visits to Lapland to see Santa have grown year on year for the past decade](#). Europe, I would say, is becoming a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994) of itself. More exaggerated now than the replica of the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas is the Eiffel Tower in Paris, which has become a displaced caricature of itself — a dis-embedded spire teeming with selfie-sticks. Of course, a simulacrum is a perpetual process and so is never achieved but is always in a state of becoming, which means that efforts will always be in play to push aestheticism forward.

When Finland agrees to ban the veil, that will be a step further toward buying into a narrative of Europe defined by aesthetics and in which the aesthetic is the ethical. Finland will buy into all that goes into this narrative, such as selling “clean,” “truly Finnish” destinations to middle-class tourists or selling “neutral” meeting venues to politicians from non-EU countries. Face coverings in the high street do not help with distancing of reality from the European image that non-Europeans want to experience. Indeed, face veils also come in the way of Europeans distancing, and thereby experiencing, themselves through the tourist gaze.

By agreeing to the veil ban Finland will buy into the fascism lurking behind aesthetic policing; it will be a step toward totalizing normalization that allows only one way of representation and only one way of being European: Europe first.

## (II) Penetrating

The second aspect to the veil ban is one of penetration. It is significant that the veil is banned only in postcolonial European countries and in Francophone ex-colonies. As most of the voluminous literature on the veil has argued, the veil ban is a colonial issue. Colonialism was a crucial element in the modern formation of the veil as a significant symbol. Since **Edward Said**’s (1978) path-breaking analysis of the psychology of colonialism as Orientalism, it is now a truism that the “white man’s” fascination with the veil is layered with imperialist images of mysteries, depths, and folds of darkness. Veiled behind a new, patently absurd argument of national security is the old Orientalist impulse to penetrate the burqah (see Ahmed 2010 for a discussion on colonial “penetration”). The East has long been represented as “feminine,” “soft,” and “yielding” — making Europe “masculine,” “hard,” and “penetrating.” The colonial rape of the East was thus seen as the “natural” order of things. If Finland did not actively colonize the East, it was certainly complicit in colonialism and is complicit in postcolonial Europeanness (Vuorela 2009). The veiled woman is the symbolic epitome of the “mystery” of the feminine that Orientalist penetrating impulses seek to expose. When Finland decides to ban the veil, it will be continuing colonialism by banning any symbolic presence in the metropole of the feminine “mystery.”

So far, so postcolonial.

But the issue goes beyond this postcolonial picture, to fascination with the veil as a broad, patriarchal projection of mystery onto women. Indeed, we could say that this projection found one mass expression in Orientalist colonialism. I mean, therefore, not just that the East was feminized and then raped by the colonial West; but I mean also that the feminine has been mystified and raped by the patriarchal West. Colonialism and patriarchy are thoroughly entwined, joined by their impulse to expose mystery, and neither is the sole cause of the other. The extension of colonialism today is not just in neo-imperialist economic and political subjugation of the East. It is also in the cultural association of East with feminine and therefore the continued justification for systemic colonization of the feminine. Unveiling, in this sense, is a way of keeping up the penetration of the feminine by laying bare the feminine, just as colonialism was a symbolic rape of the feminized East by laying bare the feminized East.

Penetration of the feminine mystery has two components: epistemic imperialism — establishing a yardstick to define the political as excluding mystery — and then exposing that mystery.

(A) *Epistemic imperialism* : During colonialism, “laying bare” meant bringing the East into (the libraries of) the West. As postcolonial scholars all agree, colonialism was built on knowledge of the East through Company Dispatches, diaries, memoirs, books and the like (Chakrabarty 2000, Cohn 1996, Nandy 1983). Of course, like **Edward Said** showed, a certain East was constructed and other possible descriptions of the East were overlooked in the process of laying bare the East to the gaze of the West. Over time the East, no less than the West, relied on this knowledge in their “tangential” self-identification (Qadir 2011).

So, even in the “East,” activists have tended to buy into the Western rhetoric of the veil as only a symbol of women’s oppression. For example, **Fatima Mernissi’s** (1975) famous and excellent analysis of gender relations in the Middle East still associates unveiling with women’s emancipation. Mernissi’s view echoes, even has shaped, a mainstream position on the veil amongst Muslim feminists and activists, meaning that it has become the dominant norm against which local Islamic feminisms are assessed. Yet, some commentators (e.g. Ahmed 1992, Zayzafoon 2005) have pointed out that Mernissi’s modernist view conforms with Orientalist representations of the “Muslim” woman and colonial interpretations of the veil. In these interpretations, hardly ever does the dominant Islamic or Western normativity see the veil as a resistance to the patriarchal gaze laying bare the feminine (East).

The veil in this sense is an example par excellence of what I would call epistemic imperialism: an external determination of the metric by which the Self holds a relation to itself, coupled with a limitation of critique to demarcated domains of superficiality. Epistemic imperialism is not just about the Empire determining what knowledge is authoritative, but rather about the Empire determining how all knowledge is situated by determining how the Self is situated. Another way of saying this is that epistemic imperialism defines what is political in terms of what is to be considered as public and what private. The veil ban thus extends epistemic imperialism by dictating to a person how to maintain a relation to themselves in certain spaces, thereby also affirming the sanctity of the public arena. In this sense, the veil becomes a public and political issue, and by contrast the public excludes mystery such as that symbolized by the veiled woman. As knowledge of the East was a symbolic unveiling of mystery in colonization, so the veil ban is a literal unveiling of a mystery today.

(Space does not permit me to discuss the essential Christianity inherent in how the political is defined as public and secular. See Ahmed 2010 for a discussion on "Christianization, Gow 2018 for a related concept of "Christiano-form" public secularism, Asad 2003 for the classic genealogy of secularism as Christian).

(B) *Exposé* : There is a double-movement involved here. At one step, mystery is projected onto women as it was on the East. At another step, “mystery” is seen as something to be exposed, that from which a cover needs to be lifted, and upon which the light of enquiry must be shone.

At a societal level, for **Jacques Derrida** (1995) the impulse to expose mysteries is at the very core of statehood notably in Europe. Derrida convincingly argues that what modern Latinized Europe is repressing is the never-fully-expressible, orgiastic mystery of Greece. The modern, European state is always trying but can never fully unveil this mystery, which rears its head in different forms from time to time. Perhaps one not-quite-exposed, irrepressible aspect of Greek Byzantine mystery is the Virgin Mary — indeed, one would be hard pressed to find an image of the Virgin without a veil or head scarf (Ahmed 2010). Another exposed, yet never eradicated, Greek mystery is the biggest secret cult of ancient Greece which lasted two thousand years: the Eleusinian mystery religion of women devotees to the fertility goddess, Demeter. The Olympian Demeter was veiled until she chased Hades as he abducted (and raped) her daughter Persephone. She later re-veiled as she roamed the Earth in her grief. Veiling was a common practice in ancient Greece for white, middle-class (non-Muslim!) women, including initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries.

At an individual level, from a cultural psychology lens of post-Jungian archetypal theory, mystery is often met by a modern, heroic impulse to reveal by shedding light (Hillman 1975). The modern impulse is fed by an irrepressible conviction that everything can and should be brought to presence: brought to light, highlighted, brought out, lit up, and so on. Our very terms for “truth,” as indeed for science, as **Heidegger** (1959) showed, are

tied up with a conviction that all can and must be seen. And as Levinas pointed out, the face is the first space to be lit up for the European Self to project itself.

It goes without saying that any light shone on any object necessarily casts a shadow and thereby hides something, most of all what is not considered an "object" in the first place. In the case of the veil, the non-objects are the repression of the Eleusinian feminine and unacknowledged misogyny (bordering on symbolic rape), diffused through Europe. Every step of penetration leads to more denials that there could ever be such a dark shadow in Europe.

What has been repressed in Europe, and what Finland will affirm in time with its veil ban, is the colonization of women in particular and, by patriarchal association, mystery in general. Modernity, patriarchy (as misogynistic exposing), and the order of truth come together in an irresistible need to unmask.

The veil ban is policy. Policy is politics, and politics is culture. I have argued here that this culture comprises two significant elements in Europe: purification and penetration.

Of course, a cultural analysis like the one here does not mean that every person completely or consciously adopts these impulses. But cultural impulses like these get strengthened with every policy, every law, every step of institutionalization. The policy becomes the new normal, and the cultural impulses continue to find expression in other arenas. As I said above, impulses of aesthetic purification and imperial penetration are also part and parcel of veil-enforcers, a point I will discuss later. Let us just note for now that Muslim women's bodies are the first targets in contests around Islam. Veils on or veils off, Muslim women's spiritualities are caught between competing penetrations and purifications. At some level this has implications for Islam generally. At an immediate level: whoever wins the battle to liberate the Muslim woman ... it won't be the Muslim woman.

The author welcomes comments and responses on this article.

### Works cited

- Ahmed, Durre S.** 2010. "Penetrations: A Psychocultural View of Modernity, Fundamentalisms and Islam." In *Islam and Europe: Crises and Challenges*, edited by Jean-Yves Carlier and Marie Claire Foblet, 53-69. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Ahmed, Leila.** 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Alasuutari, Pertti.** 2016. *The Synchronization of National Policies: Ethnography of the Global Tribe of Moderns*. London: Routledge.
- Alasuutari, Pertti, and Ali Qadir.** 2014. "Epistemic governance: An approach to the politics of policy-making." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1 (1):67–84.
- Arendt, Hannah.** 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Asad, Talal.** 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean.** 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Original edition, 1981 in French by Éditions Galilée.
- Benjamin, Walter.** 1936. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by J. A. Underwood. 2008 ed. London: Penguin.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh.** 2000. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Cohn, Bernard S.** 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Edited by Nicholas B. Dirks Sherry B. Ortner, Geoff Eley, Princeton Studies in Culture/ Power/ History. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques.** 1995. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Edited by Mark C. Taylor, Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gow, Andrew.** 2018. "Othering the Middle Ages: Triumphalist Secularisms in the post-Reformation West." Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Regina, Saskatchewan, May 27.
- Heidegger, Martin.** 1959. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hillman, James.** 1975. *Re-visioning Psychology*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mernissi, Fatima.** 1975. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- Nandy, Ashis.** 1983. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Qadir, Ali.** 2011. *Tangential Modernity: Culture of Higher Education Reform in Pakistan*. D.Soc.Sc. Monograph, School of Social Sciences & Humanities, University of Tampere (Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 1683).
- Said, Edward.** 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Vuorela, Ulla.** 2009. "Colonial complicity: The "postcolonial" in a Nordic context." *In Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region* edited by Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sara Irni and Diana Mulinari. London: Routledge.
- Zayzafoon, Lamia Ben Youssef.** 2005. *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology*. New York: Lexington Books.

[Share 0](#)[Tweet](#)