The “Muslim Question”:
The Micropolitics of Normalizing Islam and Muslims

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The introduction to the special issue The “Muslim Question”: The Micropolitics of Normalizing Islam and Muslims outlines three dynamics at play in all four contributions: normalization, classification and micropolitics. Starting with Michel Foucault and his notion of normalization, I argue that Muslims are classified and problematized in specific ways depending on the particular socio-historical context. Every problem and every classification depends on an idea of the “normal” or on norms. These norms central to the dynamics of normalization are reproduced through practices in everyday life. From this perspective, norm-reproducing micropolitics shapes the social fabric of interaction.

The “Muslim Question” has served as a framework to discuss patterns, dynamics and phenomena that have emerged in recent decades in discourses relating to Islam and Muslims in secular societies. This special issue highlights and discusses three aspects that come together in the Muslim Question: the power of normalization, micropolitics and classification. I will briefly discuss these three aspects in this introduction in order to set the stage for the four case studies included in this special issue. The case studies analyze and discuss practices, subjectivities, and discourses that are at play in the specific historical contexts in which the cases are embedded. In addition, Paula Schrode’s response to the contri-

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butions zooms out of the local or national contexts in order to discuss some broader implications as well as pitfalls that may arise when using the framework of the Muslim Question.

Since well before 9/11, Islam has been problematized and questioned in so-called Islam debates across diverse publics in Europe, North America and Australia as well as other countries. Akin to the “Jewish Question” in nineteenth-century Europe, Muslims are scrutinized and under suspicion of harbouring loyalties hostile to the societies of which they are part. A specific insinuation lingers on and is, at times, expressed dressed in statistics: Muslims are accused of transforming their “host societies” due to their increasing numbers, either as part of a broader agenda or simply unintentionally, but nevertheless dramatically through the sheer presence of their assumed cultural difference. Muslims and Islam are perceived as (still) lacking appropriate secular and emancipatory attitudes and sensibilities, which supposedly bars them from participating as capable citizens in their respective societies. Underneath these debates lie specific concepts of Europe or the West—as, for instance, secular, Christian, liberal or ethnically defined—from which Muslims and Islam are set apart. In Europe and elsewhere, current policies aim at producing an Islam that is understood to be secular and liberal while eradicating elements qualified as inappropriate for a “good” and “legitimate” religion.

Meanwhile, Muslim communities have been the object of research that contributes to the efforts to identify, measure, and classify Muslims. The resulting knowledge(s) flows into apparatuses and mechanisms working on the so-called integration, secularisation and emancipation of Muslims and, thus, the normalisation of Islam. Normalisation entails power understood in a specific, productive way characteristic of Michel Foucault’s work. While Foucault does not negate the effects of repressive power encapsulated, for example, in the juridical system in modern democracies, he draws our attention to a power

whose task is to take charge of life [and which] needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm. (1978, 144)
Seen through the lens of normalisation, we can thus understand how the scrutinization, problematization, regulation, examination, classification, public discussion and evaluation of Islam and Muslims revolves around hegemonic norms concerning the good, legitimate subject and acceptable forms of being “religious.” Depending on the specific context, particular narratives of secular national identities play into these dynamics. After all, legitimate subjects are usually thought of as secular subjects. Shirin Amir-Moazami conceptualizes the meaning invested in the category of the secular in contemporary societies as a “liberal secular matrix” (2016, 22) describing the institutionalised yet dynamic forms of the separation and the cooperation of state and church. The liberal-secular matrix comprises separation practices, which define legitimate expressions of religion in the public sphere, as well as “secular embodiments” which cover the habitualized, bodily dimension of secularity (Amir-Moazami 2016, 22). Muslims become a site for the reproduction of hegemonic notions of (legitimate) religion and secularity. However Muslims feel or position themselves, they have to relate to the secular-liberal matrix.

In this sense, the contemporary “normalizing society” (Foucault 1978, 144) incorporates normalised ideas, practices, subjectivities and embodiments of this liberal-secular matrix. As such, society is interspersed with disciplining technologies working on bodies and populations. Distinguishing these technologies from the logic of power linked to transgression, repression and punishment, Foucault refers to these as a “technology of power centered on life” (Foucault 1978, 144). These technologies reproduce the norm and the normalizing society itself.

We might get a grip on the normalising impulse at work in the Muslim Question starting with what Laura Ann Stoler recounts as a striking trait in reference to colonial projects:

As populations were being enumerated, classified, and fixed, “peoples” were being regrouped and reconfigured according to somatic, cultural, and psychological criteria that would make such administrative interventions necessary and credible. [...] both conceptions [i.e., population and people] represent state-building and nation-building projects in which a racial grammar tying certain physical attributes to specific hidden dispositions played a crucial role (Stoler 1995, 39–40).

Colonial projects regrouped human beings in line with a specific racial grammar in which dispositions were linked to physical attributes. In our current context, Muslims are as well regrouped as “Muslims” in the sense
of a specific population in need of a specific intervention based on their allegiance or belonging to a specific religio-cultural entity called Islam. Rather than specific physical attributes (though they still do play a role), belonging to Islam is tied to allegedly hidden dispositions, loyalties and (ir-)rationalities. In this perspective, belonging to Islam becomes most visible in bodily practices like donning a headscarf or a face veil, which, in turn, are perceived as indicative of a specific culture different from the culture of the respective nation state. Muslims are thus in certain contexts racialized and put under “race regimes” (Wolfe 2016, 18–19) which mobilise and coordinate a set of resources, practices and doctrines. Patrick Wolfe describes race in this sense as “high-maintenance” and “quintessentially political, race being an instrument of overlordship” (Wolfe 2016, 18). The concepts of race and religion are therefore parts of regimes that through their classificatory power can easily serve to constitute the realm of the normal and the deviant in the processes of nation- and state-building and maintenance.1 The term “micropolitics” refers to the level of specific techniques, strategies and practices that (re-)produce norms and shape everyday life in specific contexts. It is through the manifold, repetitive acts of micropolitics that normalization, racialization and religionization2 take a firm hold of society and become part of the daily life of people. They embed race regimes or any other regime in the fabric of social interaction.

In this perspective, reproduction is not made up of repetitive acts that simply repeat the practice, the sign, the strategy or the norm. There is much more flexibility at work. This flexibility and the shifts in the dynamics of reproduction may be grasped with the help of deconstruction, for instance with concepts like iterability, as developed by Judith Butler building on the work of Jacques Derrida (Butler 1997; Derrida 1988). In this line of theorization, a sign or a practice is a citation of an earlier sign or practice without being the exact copy. Every citation bears the opportunity to break with the context and, thereby, with its signification. Repetition thus involves the potential for a deferral or shift of meaning.

1. For a similar argument, see Robinson (2019).

2. Markus Dreßler differentiates between religionization and religion-making. Religionization refers to dynamics “where assemblages of knowledge (structures, practices, discourses) are being made sense of through the modern concept of religion.” Religion-making puts the focus on the interests and positions of power of actors involved in the process of religionization in order to “shed light on the multiple layers of agency” (Dreßler 2019).
Butler uses this concept in order to theorize and maintain the possibility of resistance against hegemonic power through wrong citation and skilful parody. Reproduction entails in this perspective potentialities for change—however subtle it may be and whether wilfully incited or not—and, concomitantly, perpetuation (see Becker 2021).

Set against the background of these concepts, the authors of the case studies discuss and analyse the manifold dynamics that keep unfolding from the framework of the Muslim Question. The contributions of Martijn de Koning and Annelies Moors analyse the Muslim Question from different angles in the Dutch context. De Koning highlights the impact of neoliberalism on the Muslim Question in order to understand how Muslim subjectivities constitute themselves in this framework and how Muslims navigate the ambiguities, powers and potentialities of the “racial neoliberal discourse of the Muslim question.” He introduces the concept of “representative responsibilization” as a mode of neoliberal responsibilization, which aims at mobilizing and channelling forms of individual responsibility within the Muslim community. It is part of a governmental technique to discipline excess among a community through their representatives. However, instead of putting a focus on the neoliberal governance through institutions, de Koning turns towards Dutch Muslim organisations and individuals who engage with the state and, therefore, take up the language of responsibilization. Based on ethnographic data, he carefully carves out how the tension between unruly and responsible subjects marks the Muslim Question in the Netherlands and how Muslim representatives engaging with the state are caught in a balancing act between strengthening racial neoliberal politics, being perceived as partners and responding to their constituencies.

Annelies Moors zooms into the history of public debates on face veiling and its ban in the Netherlands. Through the lens of gendered racialization with a particular focus on bodies, she argues that racialization involves patterns of perception, affective responses and sensibilities in addition to discourses. As a moral discourse, racialization involves secular passions and is highly effective. The division of the public sphere concerning face veiling does not run along the lines of Muslims vs. Non-Muslims but unites a diverse set of protagonists including Muslims against a small number of face-veiling women. In this sense, the debates contribute to the divide between more and less “acceptable” Muslims.

Matt Sheedy moves our attention to the US-American context and the meanings attached to the terms “Christian” and “Islamic” terrorism. He
starts with the presentation of six theses he formulated in 2015 and in which he teases out the difference of the symbolic economies attached to the expressions Islamic terrorism and Christian terrorism. The theses argue that the dynamics of racialization and religionization permeate the semantics of both terms in very different and unequal ways. Writing in 2022, he revisits these theses in the second part of his contribution. He adds five theses in which he takes into account the developments under the Trump presidency and the shift of discourses to include and merge additional identities into the realm of “Christian” and “Islamic,” such as gender, whiteness/blackness and the “migrant.” In doing so, he points towards the limitation of the (individual) rights discourses for addressing the Muslim Question, and brings some important differences between the Jewish Question and the Muslim Question to our attention.

The Lebanese secular, liberal state provides the setting for the last contribution. Alexander Henley discusses the Muslim Question and the attached notion of religious representation in the light of a case study on the creation and contestation of Druze Muslim religious leadership in Lebanon. His contribution counters the assumptions that the Muslim Question is “the sole preserve for North America and Europe.” According to Henley, we are actually dealing with a “Druze Question” as a specific Lebanese sub-set of the Muslim Question. Henley argues, that the Druze Question highlights additional challenges for so-called heterodox or “less-normative” Muslims. He carves out several important contradictions at work: (1) Representation produces the thing it actually represents; (2) Heterodox sects first need to make themselves recognised as Muslims, before they can embark on the adventure to become “good” Muslims; and finally, (3) Religious representation remains inherently ambiguous.

Paula Schrode’s response concludes this special issue by bringing the complexity of three elements of the “Muslim Question” to our attention: identification, agency and comparison. One main lesson emerging from her discussion is that the Muslim Question encompasses a diverse set of actors with varying levels of influence and power and employing discursive strategies for different aims. However, no matter what their positions and claims are, they all reiterate and appeal to the “powerful idea of Muslim identity.”

References


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