The British Media, the Veil and the Limits of Freedom

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Abstract

The media in Britain have presented 'immigration' as the most significant crisis facing the country; they consistently present migrants, asylum seekers, etc. as a burden on national resources, and increasingly, as a security threat. Muslims in particular have been targeted, and have been presented as an alien 'other' who refuse to 'integrate' into the British 'way of life', and indeed who threaten it. This paper argues that, in this framework, the veil has become an iconic symbol of cultural difference, a sign of the perceived failures of multiculturalism and the 'problem' of tolerance. The context that shapes the 'debate' on the veil is the neoliberal restructuring of the British economy and welfare state; the consequences of this restructuring and its impact on the quality of public services are explained in cultural terms by reference to the intrusion of an alien culture (Islam). In order to 'protect' British 'culture', the state relies on the anti- Muslim sentiments whipped up in the media to push through a rash of anti-terror legislation that not only discriminates against the Muslim population of Britain, but curtails the very freedoms that it purports to protect.

Keywords

veil – culture – multiculturalism – security threat – neoliberalism

Introduction

The veil is a salient and perennial symbol in western constructions of Islam. The cultural connotations of the veil have shifted significantly in the past decade; in the early days of the War on Terror, the veil stood as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women and was a sign of victimization. However, today the veil symbolizes a refusal of Western modernity and is perceived as a dangerous threat. This paper explores this alternation in the meanings of the veil in the West by examining the iterations of the transformed meaning across the British press from 2001 to 2011,1 and by placing this press discourse not only in the context of the War on Terror, but also in relation to growing anti-Muslim racism which feeds into and justifies European attacks on multiculturalism. This article is split into three sections: The first explains the shift in the symbolic meaning of the veil—Muslim women wearing it have shifted from 'victims' to 'threats'— and examines the latter as it is articulated in the press. The second section explains how this reconfigured meaning is a significant force in the current culturalization of Islam. The final section of the article examines the relationship between these press representations and policy attacks on multiculturalism from the previous New Labour government and the current Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition.

The veil is partially a 'floating signifier' whose connotations in animating anti-Muslim sentiment are tweaked to fit the specific historical moment. It is '*sought out* for interpretation, and problematized, mediated and made to stand for a range of problems' (Lentin and Titley 2011: 93). Many scholars, for instance, point to the role of the veil in signalling women's oppression in Afghanistan and the Middle East and as part of a justification for the illegal invasion of Iraq and the bombing of Afghanistan. It was the Bush administration's identification of the liberation of women in Afghanistan from the Taliban as a key objective in its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan that 'brought gender to the forefront of global politics' (Thobani 2007: 170). The administrations of Bush and Blair used the veil as a symbol of unfreedom in their cynical attempt to use the Taliban's (previously ignored) disastrous treatment of women as an excuse to invade the country (Stabile and Kumar 2005; Sreberny 2004). It was at this moment that the veil became *the* most prominent symbol in discussions about gender equality. Annabelle Sreberny argues that during and after the invasion of Afghanistan, the burqa became 'the key symbol of women's oppression' (2004: 172). She points out that the West took no interest in Afghanistan and the plight of its women during the period after the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992 until the Taliban's rise in 1996: 'Western countries did little while an entire generation of girls and young women were removed from the education system and rendered illiterate and unskilled' (Sreberny 2004: 175).[i]

In this article, my core concern is to argue that the veil has more recently become a symbol of defiance and is thereby presented as threatening. This is not the first time the veil has taken on such connotations. For example, in the Algerian fight for independence, the veil represented resistance to French imperial power and was reworked in the French imagination as a rejection of Frenchness (Fanon 2003; El Hamel 2002). Contemporary constructions of the veil as a 'threat', however, are part of the growth of a pan-European anti- Muslim racism. At the time of writing, leading Liberal Democrat and Conservative politicians are calling for a 'debate' about whether or not to ban the full face veil in public in the United Kingdom. British politicians are shaping public debate in a manner that marginalizes Muslims' own ongoing discussions and sets a tone that feeds into attacks on multiculturalism. Commenting in the *Guardian* (17 September 2013), Maleiha Malik points out that it is likely that this 'debate' will exclude Muslim women just as it did in France and Belgium, where Muslim women were not consulted before either country passed criminal laws that restricted their freedom. In this context, it is essential to understand how the meaning of the veil has shifted in public discourse and how it feeds into a neoliberal, monoculturalist political agenda. Ironically, today it is precisely Muslim women's public visibility that is the cause for controversy, rather than their confinement to the private sphere. Those who supposedly fought for the rights of Muslim women to be visible now seem to be insisting that their visibility occur on 'European' terms. Thus current debates around the veil are part of a more general debate about assimilation.

The Press, Politics and the Symbolic Connotations of the Veil

The veil no longer connotes victimization. Today in Britain and across Europe, the veil is a signifier of refusal—a refusal to integrate into the British (and European) way of life and a threat to British culture. An examination of the UK press between 2001 and 2011 reveals that the transformation of the veiled Muslim woman from 'victim' to 'threat' occurred by constructing and linking four themes. The veil was presented as (1) a refusal of 'our way of life'; (2) a sign of 'our' excessive tolerance; (3) evidence that Britain is suffering from the

tyranny of a 'culture' imposed by a minority, and; (4) linked to the threat of terrorism. By 2006 the predominant theme was that the veil is a refusal of 'our way of life', which in turn was presented as part of an erosion of the 'British way of life'. Although the British press are not wholly homogenous in their reportage of the veil.[ii] This dominant construction works to present an inaccurate monocultural image of Britain and a singular picture of Islam and of the veil (Fekete 2006). Linked to this is a second theme related to the notion that British attitudes toward multiculturalism are excessively tolerant. From 2005, the UK press began to link the idea of the veil as an act of rejection and the veil as an act of resistance. In less than ten years, this discursive construction has overturned the meaning of the veil in the western imagination from a sign of 'victimization' to a dangerous threat to freedom. In the process, these reconfigured meanings of the veil act as a link between ideas about Muslim 'backwardness' and 'extremism', in order to justify the worrying growth of anti-Muslim racism in the tabloid and broadsheet press and in government pronouncements and legislation. In this new climate these interrelated themes function to erase previous depictions of Muslim women as victims and produce a new veiled image of 'fundamentalism', an image that contributes to the demonization of Muslims as a whole (Khiabany and Williamson 2008).

In the United Kingdom these specific connotations of the veil as a symbol of refusal and a visible threat were developed in the context of the then Labour government's wider attacks on multiculturalism and were dramatically thrust into the headlines in October 2006 by comments made by Jack Straw, then Labour Leader of the Commons and ex-Home Secretary. In his weekly column in the *Lancashire Telegraph* (5 October 2006), Straw called on Muslim women in Britain to remove their niqab in order to help community relations. His comments were moved to the front page under the headline 'Straw in plea to Muslim women: Take off your veils'. In his article, Straw suggested that he felt uncomfortable communicating with women wearing niqab and that he regarded it as 'a visible statement of separation and difference'. These comments were immediately taken up across the British media, which used them as an opportunity to whip up growing 'concerns' over 'Muslim problems' and to add to the increasing stock of articles and images depicting Muslims as 'alien' and 'extreme'. The backing he received by senior politicians (including Prime Minister Tony Blair) contributed enormously to the growing tendency in the media to demonize Muslims in Britain.

Straw's comments fit into an existing framework in the British media, which often constructs Muslims as a homogenous block: foreign, backward and outside of the historical process, tending toward extremism and refusing to integrate into British society (Said 1997). This is true not only of the tabloids, but also of the 'quality' broadsheet press, which selects stories in which Muslims are constructed as having 'problems of assimilating and relating to mainstream society' (Poole 2002: 88). Straw's comments altered the dramatic structure of the veil in the interpretive framework in the United Kingdom by borrowing from trends across Europe, where veils are viewed not only as a symbol of refusal, but also as a threat. Thus the political and media discourse on the veil was transformed: it was no longer a symbol of victimhood, but instead became a symbol of a stubborn refusal to accept 'our' culture or to embrace modernity; it became a sign of defiance and provides the press with an image of menace; it was marked out as a 'problem' that needs a national debate and potentially one that needs legal restrictions, despite the fact that a only minority of the female British Muslim population wear the full face veil.

It is significant that since 9/11, the emphasis on reporting about Muslims has burgeoned throughout the press, as have the number of stories about the Muslim veil (Khiabany and

Williamson 2008). Yet this increased coverage has not led to a fuller understanding of the issues. Indeed Emma Tarlo (2007) suggests that instead, this 'barrage' of media representations has omitted the voices of Muslim women in Britain and has failed to address the longstanding debate about veil wearing among Muslims in Britain and around the world.

Instead, post 9/11, the reportage of the veil in the British press has been dominated by the four themes outlined above: refusal, resistance, excessive British tolerance, and threat. For instance, for *Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Philips the veil is 'an Islamist symbol which plays a role analogous to the use of the swastika by Nazism' (21 December 2006). And, Jenny McCartney, a columnist for the *Sunday Telegraph* comments that, '[t]he arguments over Muslim women's clothing have really been thinly disguised political battles, such as the 2002 attempt by the schoolgirl Shabina Begum to force her school to permit her to wear a cumbersome garment called the jilbab in contravention of school uniform' (3 December 2006). For McCarthy, wearing the veil is both 'absurd' and part of the agenda of Islamic fundamentalism. The theme of the veil as a threat to our freedoms and a symptom of excessive multicultural tolerance is expressed by Rose Hacker of the *Camden New Journal*:

> I object strongly to teachers wearing the veil. It is more than a choice of dress. It is a symbol of . . . everything our parents, grandparents, the suffragettes fought against and we have still not won complete equality and freedom for women. The veil is a disguise with no place in school. It may hide a highly educated professional woman, a wealthy woman wearing the latest fashions and marvelous jewelry, a poor woman subjected to clitorectomy, a woman beaten and bruised, a child married against her will, or a woman about to be murdered by her family for loving the wrong man. It could also hide a loving mother and a truly religious woman. Seeing a pair of dark eyes, you may be looking at a terrorist in disguise, a murderer who believes in jihad and fatwa. Which of the women behind the veil genuinely represents Islam? How do we know? It is anathema to free, Western thinking for children to be taught that it is wrong for a man to see a woman's face.

This article refers to the older conceptualization of the veil as a symbol of oppression, but finishes with the idea of the veil and terrorism, reminding us that the veil is a floating signifier, where dominant conceptualizations can take on new (or indeed old) contours. For example, in the current 'debate' about banning the full face veil in public, Liberal Democrat MP Jeremy Browne refers to protecting young Muslim women from external imposition, but does not acknowledge those Muslim women who choose to wear the veil and whose freedoms would be limited were a full ban to come into law.

Also, the repetitive effect of erroneously linking the veil with Islamic fundamentalism and Nazism, to the practice of clitorectomy, of 'child marriage' or 'murder', is to identify it as a symbol of barbarism; this contributes enormously to the currently inflamed anti-Muslim atmosphere. It associates veiling with barbaric and illegal activities that have nothing to do with veiling. According to Hacker the garment manages both to threaten the freedoms 'our grandparents' fought for and to hide a terrorist. A false opposition has been created in which backward Islamic practice is set against progressive western practice. This is an erroneous view of the West as the ultimate civilization. Across European societies, the veil—even where it is seemingly accommodated (as in the case of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Austria, on the grounds of religious freedom)—is treated as 'alien to our values' and ultimately a threat to freedom. Lentin and Titley suggest that 'veils are accommodated until they are politicised as requiring accommodation' (2011: 95). In the current climate, the view of the political mainstream is that the veil should not be accommodated. This politicized discourse around veiling is part of a European drive toward assimilation, in which racism is

justified on the grounds of 'cultural values'. What we are witnessing is the culturalization of Islam, where race is defined in cultural terms and the religion of Islam is seen as the unified culture of vastly differing populations. The veil in this context is an over determined signifier of cultural difference, in short: race.

The Veil and the Culturalization of Islam

Whereas just over a decade ago, the image of the veiled woman was sympathetically constructed in the British media as the 'victim' of extremism, and her 'liberation' was cynically offered as one of the key justifications for the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq after years of disregard for the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban (Srebreny 2004), now veiled Muslim women are racialized and marked out as irreducibly 'other' to 'free, Western thinking' and are part of the terrorist threat (Khiabany and Williamson 2008). The comment column in the *Daily Express* online on 19 July 2007 spells out the 'threat' of the burqa (the author meant the niqab) to the British 'way of life':

> The burka is becoming the Islamic equivalent of the mugger's hooded top or the armed robber's balaclava. Anyone sincerely wishing to integrate into the British way of life would never wear such an alien and threatening outfit. . . . Make no mistake, the proliferation of burka-wearing is a direct threat to the British way of life and in all too many instances is intended to be just that.

Again, this quote manages to equate veiling with illegal activities; the veil is likened to the balaclava of an armed robber or a mugger. Indeed the writer implies that one should not be allowed to participate in political protest while wearing a veil: What chance is there of any of the women involved in yesterday's vile display being prosecuted if their slogans are judged to be in contravention of the law? Answer: none at all because their outfits shielded their identities (*Daily Express* 2007).

The veil has come to stand as a key signifier which connects the 'war on terror' out there with the 'threatening' culture of Muslims here in Europe. Hence the veil must be constructed in imagery that is violent, threatening and everywhere, despite the fact that it is a minority practice of a minority of the population, and that use of both the burqa and niqab is limited to very small numbers of women in the United Kingdom and across Europe (according to the last census in 2001, Muslims make up only 2.8 percent of the British population and women who wear the full face veil are a tiny minority of that figure). The question, then, is why have the practices of a tiny section of the population become the center of so much political and media attention? The answer is that the veil has become iconic shorthand for Islam and a symbolic 'carrier for the nation's ills' (Tarlo 2007: 19). The role of constructing the veil in public discourse was partly a way of attributing to religion (Islam) questions which are actually political in nature, in order to distance the imperialist policies of the United States and the United Kingdom from any blame in the attacks of September 11 or the bombing of July 7th. However, as important as it is in relation to domestic politics, the image of the veil as a threat to 'our way of life' is a central component in the process of the culturalization of Islam.

Anti-Muslim racism predates immigration from Muslim majority countries to the United Kingdom and the 'war on terror'. The image of Arabs and of Muslim majority countries as being backward, atavistic, barbaric and fanatical emerged several centuries ago in the context

of imperialism and the colonization of the Middle East and North Africa by western imperialist powers, in order to justify their so-called 'civilizing mission' (Said 1978). But these ideas have been re-animated in the current climate in order to redefine Islam in entirely cultural terms. There have been several important elements in this process. The first is the reduction of diverse Muslim populations around the world into a single homogenized Islam. What is generally presented as the 'Islamic world' (or country of Islam as Australian election candidate, Stephanie Banister, would like us to believe) actually ranges across a vast geographical area from Indonesia to Nigeria and Sudan. There are also countries with large Muslim populations such as India and China. In other words, there is no singular Islam; instead there are 'as many Islam's as situations that sustain it' (Al-Azmeh 1993: 1). The perception of a singular Muslim identity is instead created by discursive political and media practices, not by the real diversity of geography, history, politics, language and the broader contexts of material life found in this broad ranging population. Rather than Muslims being a homogenous block that are hostile to democracy, tolerance, liberalism, individualism, etc., Muslims in Britain, Europe and elsewhere are differentiated on a variety of criteria including ethnic and national origins, class and generation, and levels of religiosity and the range of political affiliations are as diverse as the population itself (Zubaida 2003).

The second element has involved redefining this homogenized version of Islam as a 'culture' *and* an ethnicity. It has been noted that terms such as 'Muslim culture' and 'Islamic' are now used in official welfare documentation as well as academic and journal articles as markers of identity and ethnicity (Alexander 1998; Wilson 2007). Amrit Wilson (2007: 31) observes that populations that were once identified by language or region are now identified above all else by their religion. Anne-Marie Fortier suggests that there has been a 'taxonomic shift in Britain, from "ethnic minorities" in the 1970s to "minority faith communities" today', which highlights 'beliefs, morals and values [as] the primary site for the marking of absolute difference' (2008: 5).

The third element sets a homogenized Islamic culture in opposition to another invention—Western culture—and, in the United Kingdom, 'British culture'. The most well-known formulation of this idea was offered by Samuel Huntington (1996) who, in his version of the realities of the post-Cold War era, located the main source of global conflicts in culture. In *Clash of Civilizations* he asserts that the iron curtain of ideology was replaced by the velvet curtain of culture. While the US policy of 'Shock and Awe' and the carpet bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq can hardly be called a 'velvet curtain of culture', Huntington and his followers are not alone in their exaggerated assumption of cultural essentialism; this notion, as we have already seen, has been taken up by politicians and journalists across the political spectrum. The result has been the definition of societies and communities in terms of some deeply embedded cultural ethos and the counterposing of a supposed rational Occidental culture against a rigid, stagnant Oriental culture and religion (Said 1978). A recent article in *The Economist* (27 January 2011) warns that Europe is in danger of becoming 'Eurabia' due to a projected 'surge' in the Muslim population. The article draws on recent research from the Pew Research Centre (which disputes the census figures) to claim that the world Muslim population will 'soar' by 3 percent in the next twenty years. While the article is ostensibly about the growth of the Muslim population around the world, it pays particular attention to the Muslim population and its perceived cultural characteristics in Europe:

> Europe's Muslims should, by 2030, have become articulate and effective political bargainers. But with nativism on the march, it is also highly possible that Muslims will come to feel they have less in common with their fellow citizens than with their growing band of co-religionists elsewhere. *The Economist* 2011

The article strips European Muslims of their 'Europeaness' by stressing deep and unchangeable cultural traits (i.e., coreligionists) and by insisting that their cultural identification lies in religious ties abroad. *The Economist* inverts European racism by claiming that Muslim 'nativism' is an obstacle to integration.

It is important to note that in pointing at Muslims and Islam as the principal threat to what Huntington calls 'Western Civilization' he was, in fact, not pointing at Islam or Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa, but rather at large Muslim communities (of all nationalities and ethnicities) who are living in the 'west'. Muslims make up about two percent of the European population, dispersed in predominantly seventeen European countries (Al-Shahi and Lawless 2003: 103). But not all Muslims in Europe are immigrants or 'foreigners'. A large number have become citizens through naturalization or marriage. Many, second- or even third-generation, were born in Europe and are European citizens. Hence what is presented in the press as an alien culture and a foreign threat is actually a European issue.

It is also significant that the national/ethnic composition of Muslims in different European countries is determined by the legacy of colonialism. It is no accident that the majority of Muslims in France are of Maghribian (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco) origin; in Germany they are predominantly of Turkish origin and in Britain of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. In the case of Britain and France, the Muslim populations were recruited as either soldiers or laborers and originate from countries which were part of the French and British Empires (Al-Shahi and Lawless 2003; Zubaida 2003). Diasporic Muslim communities therefore, rather than being detached, free-floating (and essentialized) subjects outside of history, are marked by colonialism and imperialism.

It is disturbing that the culturalization of Islam—that is, the reduction of diverse populations to a set of stable characteristics which privileges religion—is not confined to right-wing politics and commentators but has become an orthodoxy that spans the political spectrum from right to liberal left. Kundnani identifies a new 'aggressive liberalism' which targets not Islam per se as the problem, but 'Islamism', which is identified as a modern political movement akin to totalitarianism. Kundnani suggests that, '[w]hereas the neo-conservatives see Muslims *en masses* as inherently anti-modern, the new liberals see individuals choosing the wrong kind of modern politics' (2008: 42). This distinction enables new liberals to refute charges of racism on the basis that they are attacking Islamism and not Islam and 'extremists' rather than 'moderates' with the result that there is now a broad Islamophobic consensus in the United Kingdom, one that spans the political spectrum.

The veil is a key symbol in this equation of Islam with unfreedom. Writing in the *Guardian* in 2001, Polly Toynbee sums up the liberal feminist version when she comments that 'Islamic fundamentalism flourishes because it too suits modern needs very well in a developing world seeking an identity to defy the all-engulfing west. And the burka and chador are its battle flags' (Toynbee 2001).

One typical conservative example comes from David Sexton of the *Evening Standard*, 15 June 2007, who states: 'We've all been too deferential, for example, about the veil, the hijab, the niqab. I find such garb, in the context of a London street, first ridiculous and then directly offensive. . . It's abusive, a walking rejection of all our freedoms. And we don't dare say so'. In this new consensus, neoconservative and liberal approaches reinforce each other and are often conflated. The celebrated author Martin Amis offers one particularly revealing example:

There's a definite urge—don't you have it?—to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan. . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs—well, they've got to stop their children killing people. It's a huge dereliction on their part. *Times Magazine*, 9 September 2006

It is no accident that Amis' attack is focused on Muslim youth. The Muslim population of Europe is very young and predominantly European born (Al-Shahi and Lawless, 2003: 116). If, as is claimed by Amis and others, the problems of 'extremism' lie with 'Muslim youth' then this is a European population, not a foreign one. Rather than pointing to a 'foreign threat' or to the elders of 'foreign' Muslim communities in Europe, the question of the politicization of Muslim youth must be discussed in relation to the experiences of European Muslims in their countries of birth. Many come from poor and marginalized backgrounds (although living conditions and levels of citizenship vary), and many suffer racism as a direct result of politics of 'us' versus 'them'. Attacks on European Muslims have been on the rise since the terrorist attacks in September 2001 and every new incident generates yet more of a backlash against Muslims.3

The Veil and Attacks on Multiculturalism

As I have argued, there is a long history of situating and justifying racism in relation to cultural difference. In the United Kingdom the Thatcher era invoked the idea of 'cultural difference' with the rise of a new racism which hid old ideas of western superiority behind the claim that British culture was being 'swamped' by alien cultures. At the time, Norman Tebbit, a conservative MP, argued for a "cricket test" to find out which national cricket team British Asians supported in order to determine their loyalty and cultural affinity to Britain.

The timing of Straw's intervention on the niqab in 2006 was no accident. It came at the moment of New Labour's attack on multiculturalism and[iii] links the meaning of the veil to that political strategy. Not long after coming to power New Labour introduced language test for immigrants and David Blunkett, the then Home Secretary, harks back to Thatcherite race relations politics in a *Guardian* article entitled 'It's not about Cricket Tests' (*Guardian*, 14 December 2001), when he insisted that practices such as forced marriage and genital mutilation had been allowed to continue because of an over emphasis on cultural difference and 'moral relativism'. This signals an important shift in New Labour's thinking on race relations and spelled the death knell for multiculturalism policies. Kundnani argues that from the point of view of the state, 'the multicultural settlement, which has dominated race relations thinking for two decades is no longer working' (2002: 68). New Labour's return to Thatcherite race relations was also a response to violent confrontations between the police and young British-Asians from April to July 2001 in the northern cities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley. Only two years before these riots the McPherson investigation into the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence had declared the police as institutionally racist. The report had prompted a soul-searching mission within the police hierarchy that was all but forgotten in dealing with the riots and in reporting them. New Labour officials, including Blair, simply dubbed the riots as an act of thuggery and commissioned the Cantle Report on Community Cohesion (2001). The Cantle Report was the New Labour response to the riots; rather than

examining the racism which provoked the riots, it instead diagnosed the problem as the failings of multiculturalism, in a classic case of blaming the victim. Kundnani argues that the Cantle Report was New Labour's 'race manifesto; it signalled New Labour's shift from commitment to multiculturalism to policies demanding community cohesion' (2002: 70). For Kundnani this new climate means that 'racism is to be understood as the outcome of cultural segregation, not its cause and now segregation is seen as self-imposed rather than a response to government policy and racism' (2002: 70).

The Cantle Report presented a decisive shift away from multiculturalism as public policy, by replacing 'celebrating diversity' with a new strategy of 'community cohesion', in which multiculturalism was now openly deemed to be a failed project. This is the context for the reconfigured conceptualization of the veil. Echoing the government, the press blamed the riots on those who 'refused' to integrate, rather than on racism, discrimination and poverty. And while politicians had regular access to all media to offer their condemnation of young British-Asians, and the columns of popular papers such as the *Sun* were open to ministers such as David Blunkett, Asians themselves remained voiceless and faceless. The feat was repeated again after the riots in North London and elsewhere in the summer of 2011. The blurring of the distinction between tabloid opinion leaders and politicians (as more and more politicians write tabloid columns) should not be underestimated. This is of particular importance because the tabloids are able to use inflammatory language and factual inaccuracies in opinion and editorial columns—practices that are not permissible in reporting. As Petley rightly suggests 'many of the views on race and ethnicity aired in British newspapers are based almost entirely on inaccuracies of one kind or another' (2006: 54).

It is in this context that the debate about veiling is taking place. The key shift in the presentation of veiled Muslim women has been from an image of oppressed victim without agency who needs to be 'saved' by the West, to the image of an aggressor who has been granted too much agency by western liberalism. It has become a key component in attacks on multiculturalism across Europe. In the United Kingdom, this begins with the view promulgated among the political class in the press, that British attitudes toward multiculturalism are excessively tolerant. What has been a failure of the state to address the needs of its population (rather than pursuing neoliberal economic strategies and cutting state welfare provision) is presented as a failure of multiculturalism that is amplified by commentators in the press. For instance, Minette Marrin wrote in the *Sunday Times* on 7 October 2007:

> For at least 20 years there was a debilitating fog of moral relativism in the air, a miasma of guilty self-loathing. . . Even the phrase 'host culture' was considered unacceptable. We have moved on since then, supposedly, and surprisingly suddenly. Many prominent multiculturalists, including the Commission for Racial Equality itself, have recently performed swift U-turns and the bien-pensant orthodoxy now is that multiculturalism has been a divisive failure. . . Marrin 2007

Anti-Muslim racism today coincides with a wholesale attack on multiculturalism and the drive to assimilation. The question is, why is anti-Muslim racism anchored in these attacks on multiculturalism? As Gary Younge has recently pointed out, multiculturalism and racism have long co-existed. He asserts that 'in this debate there are two types of multiculturalism: one rooted in fact, the other in fiction'. The first is 'the lived experience of most people in Europe and the world. Cultures are dynamic, and emerge organically from communities. None exist in isolation or remain static. So the presence of a range of cultures in Britain or

anywhere else is not novel, but the norm' (Younge 2011). This multiculturalism is the product of constant negotiation and has little to do with government policy. The second, the multiculturalism currently under attack from politicians across Europe from Merkel to Cameron, is a fiction. For Younge, this fictional multiculturalism

> [. . .] evokes a liberal, state-led policy of encouraging and supporting cultural difference at the expense of national cohesion. It champions practices, we are told, that have caused segregation, alienation and ghettoization of racial and religious minorities. This, the argument continues, has laid the basis for an acceptance of abhorrent and barbaric practices, such as honour killings, forced marriages and female genital mutilation, that sacrifice the basic tenets of western, liberal civilization and universalism at the altar of cultural tolerance. Younge 2011

Public attacks on the second, invented multiculturalism, serve to justify an increasingly violent and authoritarian state. As the economic crisis, the downturn, the regressive attacks on public spending and the increasing gap between rich and poor eat away at the existing legitimacy of the state, the image of a 'great nation under threat' has been nurtured in the media and in the world of politics in order to attach the public to a new authoritarian state, by providing an anti-Islamic 'common purpose'. Yet the wholehearted attack on civil liberties and measures introduced by European security states has effectively meant that governments have begun to suspend democracy with the excuse of saving it. The focus on 'culture' and the attempts by some European states to resolve 'the Muslim question' has been part of an effort to justify an increasingly authoritarian state by substituting cultural difference for the class divisions and antagonisms which underlie the current crisis. For Liz Fekete, this 'marks the first stage in Europe's assumption of a fundamentally different authoritarian paradigm of the state [that] is based on a concept of national security that is shot through with "xeno-racism"' (2006: 4). Muslims are the main target here; they are treated as the 'enemy within' and their very presence in Europe is now supposedly threatening European values, legitmizing the introduction of a raft of new legislation that curtails civil liberties and shifts attention on to the significance of security.

   Since 2000 the British state has introduced eight major new pieces of anti-terror legislation that increase the power of the state to detain citizens. The Terrorism Act (2006) is particularly pernicious. It created a number of new offenses, such as Acts Preparatory to Terrorism, Encouragement to Terrorism, Dissemination of Terrorist Publications and Terrorist Training Offences. It introduced warrants to enable the police to search any property owned or controlled by a terrorist suspect, extended terrorism stop-and-search powers to cover bays and estuaries, extended police powers to detain suspects after arrest for up to twenty-eight days, extended search powers at ports, increased flexibility of the proscription regime, including the power to proscribe groups that glorify terrorism. This is a major violation of human rights to liberty and personal security.

The security state, as Iris Young suggests, is 'one whose rulers subordinate citizens to ad hoc surveillance, search, or detention and repress criticism of such arbitrary power, justifying each measure as within the prerogative of those authorities whose primary duty is to maintain security and protect the people' (2003: 8). She argues that the security state has two aspects, one internal and one external. Externally, such a state defines itself in relation to an outside, unpredictable, savage enemy which challenges the very essence of the nation, civilization and the core values of the West. This is what the war on terror is about. But the enemy also has a root 'inside', so that officials must 'keep a careful watch on the people within its borders and observe and search them to make sure they do not intend evil actions and do not have the

means to perform them' (Young 2003: 8). Ironically, this move to make citizens into grateful dependents of the security state happens at a time in which citizens are also lambasted for being too dependent on the state for jobs, housing, health, education, etc. It is within this context that by focusing on 'culture', the alien is transformed into an enemy. It is for that reason that Balibar suggests that the 'reduction of the figure of the stranger to that of the enemy is perhaps one of the clearest signs of the crisis of the nation-state' (2010: 319).

There are obvious contradictions in the functions of the neoliberal state. For despite the theoretical commitment to the downsizing of the state and proposals in favor of a 'small state' and 'big society', it is clear that European states are increasingly using their coercive powers not to monitor the power of capital but to punish those who have suffered most from it. David Harvey points to the contradiction between 'authoritarianism in market enforcement' and the ideals of individual freedom'. He suggests that as 'neoliberalism veers towards the former, the harder it becomes to maintain its legitimacy with respect to the latter and the more it has to reveal its anti-democratic colours' (Harvey 2005: 79).

Strong support for individual property rights in neoliberal states has gone hand in hand with suppressing the individual freedom of citizens. The current 'debate' about the full face veil looks set to a further raft of legislation that curbs the rights of citizens. The privatization of public assets has happened at the expense of collective rights and of collective forms of association and protest; the withdrawal of the state from public concerns such as health, education, jobs, pension and welfare has been replaced with more aggressive policing and elevating security (nationally and internationally) as the most significant role of the state. In short, the emphasis on a more 'liberal' economy has led to very 'illiberal' politics. The media demonization of the practices of veiling adopted by some Muslim women in the United Kingdom must be understood in this wider context.

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[i] This includes the presentations of tabloid and broadsheet papers.

[ii] Maleiha Malik, Ronan Bennett and Gary Younge, for example, are commentators and journalists who oppose anti-Muslim racism.

[iii] For example since the murder of Lee Rigby in London the number of attacks on mosques and Muslims has increased rapidly. According to a published report by the MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) project, anti-Muslim crimes in the United Kingdom have risen by 61 percent, comparing July 2012 to July 2013.