



PROJECT MUSE[®]

Decentering Europe, Recentering Islam

Nilüfer Göle

WE NEED TO RENEW OUR WAYS OF THINKING and change our perspective on Europe, seeing it not as an autonomous and self-centered entity but as one that is influenced by increasing interdependencies in a multipolar world. Postcolonial and postbloc forces are having a transformative effect on Europe. Islam is among these forces. No longer an external reference point on the margins of Europe, it is becoming an indigenous and central factor in shaping processes of change and self-understanding. I suggest that the decentering of Europe is closely related to the recentering of Islam. Although my argument draws on critiques of Orientalism and postcolonial analysis, the new dynamics of encounter between Europe and Islam cannot be fully grasped by such approaches. This essay attempts to articulate an alternative conceptual and critical frame; it seeks to understand the displacement of Islam from the margins to the center, from the postcolonial past to the European present, as it follows various historical trajectories and creates new interpenetrations and mixings between different cultural codes, values, and practices.

The emergence of Islamic references in Europe is related, for the most part, to the phenomenon of migration, but there are also other facets of Muslim presence stemming from different historical trajectories and occurring in different time spans. The Islamic presence in medieval Spain, the migrations of the 1960s, and the political desire of a Muslim-majority country, Turkey, to become part of Europe—all these serve as examples of the interconnected histories of Muslims and Europe at different moments that raise issues of memory, identity, and religion. Muslims belong to Europe in a variety of ways; as original inhabitants, citizens of Europe, converts, migrants, or political candidates. In all these categories, the hyphen between Europeanness and Islam is under scrutiny, if not subject to tension. Muslims in Bosnia, as European-born Muslims, were victims of the policies of ethnic cleansing during the civil war and now feel dispossessed of their “Europeanness.” The Islamic presence in medieval Spain, often referred as a model for the cohabitation of diverse monotheisms, is today part of a contested heritage and memory. The Turkish candidacy to join the European

Union, which seemed, in the eyes of many Turkish citizens, to be an almost natural culmination of processes of Europeanization since the Ottoman Empire, is rejected and discredited by European publics on the basis of civilizational differences. The visibility of Islamic religion in Europe has become a controversial issue in the last three decades, and it has inspired public expressions of resentment and fear, leading to a legislative politics of prohibiting or excluding the religious symbols and practices of Muslims in many European countries.

Last but not least, the democratic upheavals and political transformations in some of the Arab countries, the so-called Arab Spring, indicate the changing pattern and choreography of relations between Europe and the Muslim world, placing Turkey on the agenda. These developments are decentering Europe, while democratic social imaginaries are being forged in different cultural and historical contexts. This opens up the possibility of reading democratic experience from a post-European perspective.

The Berlin Wall and the Mostar Bridge

The Islamic “factor” is often a matter of events, memories, and actors that are unrelated to each other, but that generate constellations by creating flexions and twists in a historical path, requiring a nonlinear reading of “Europe-making.” I depict the ways in which Islam irrupts into and reshapes the European mind and European history, albeit in unexpected and unacknowledged ways. If we ask whether it is the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989) or the destruction of the Mostar Bridge (9 November 1993) that characterizes a symbolic moment in the making of Europe, we will all agree that it is the former, and not merely from the viewpoint of Berliners and Germans. The fall of the Berlin Wall has become part of a collective memory for Europeans; it signals the fall of Communism and provides the most important marker of the unification of Europe and its expansion towards postbloc Communist countries.

This process accelerated the displacing of a European dynamic towards the countries that lay at its margins. The first flexion toward a post-European condition came from the dynamics engendered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of Europe to include ex-Communist countries—resulting in what Gerard Delanty calls a “post-Occidental” Europe that denotes a shift of weight from Western toward Eastern Europe. The two long-term civilizations that were ignored in the making of Europe, namely, the Eurasian Russian and the Mediter-

ranean Ottoman, are now entering into the picture and changing the dynamics of Europe.¹

The fall of the Wall—politically and aesthetically speaking a hideous structure—continues to offer a rich visual repertoire of images for the commemoration of Europe. By contrast, the destruction of the Mostar Bridge during the recent wars in Bosnia does not form part of the collective memory of Western Europeans; once the bridge was reconstructed, the event was simply recorded in the historical archives rather than being collectively commemorated. And yet the histories of the Mostar Bridge and the Berlin Wall are interconnected; the destruction of the Bridge followed the dismantling of Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall. We should also recall that the Bridge formed part of a European inheritance. Its architectural beauty, as well as its function of “bridging,” that is, bringing together people from different origins, ethnicities, and religions, made the Mostar Bridge a place of pilgrimage, not just for European citizens, but also for those around the world who admired its European radiance.

The fall of the Wall testified to the end of Communism, whereas the destruction of the Bridge announced the “Islamic problem” within European politics. One is turned towards the closure of the past, the other towards the opening of the future. One becomes a symbol for the commemoration of European identity, whereas the other is stored away in a file as a particular moment of history. To be sure, the writing of history depends on a repertoire of affects, selective memories, and lost traces—in this context, the fall of the Wall is celebrated as a joyful event, whereas the destruction of the Bridge is a dreadful memory. And yet a void can speak as forcefully as a plenitude in the making of history. The destruction of the Mostar Bridge did not leave a completely empty place; its reconstruction denotes its continued presence, but as an absent presence. It is present as a bridge, but it is stripped of its symbolic and historical significance, absent as a reminder of dreadful events.

Decentering Europe through a postbloc perspective requires a reorientation of one’s gaze from the present-past Wall to the absent-present Bridge. Recentring Islam in Europe means moving beyond the paradigm of immigration and acknowledging the question of religious and cultural difference. Many European intellectuals with a leftist, secular, and humanist viewpoint are critical of racial and ethnic discriminations against minority groups and immigrants, but they are reluctant to reflect upon religious claims and acknowledge the role of Islamic difference in reshaping European public spheres.

Reflecting upon Europe from the perspective of Islam involves an asymmetrical semantics. Europe points to a continent, Islam to a community

of believers.² Europe is a notion elaborated via the power of modernity and colonialism; in the present it also refers to a project of union that is being implemented by Europeans themselves. Islam is a monotheistic religion that provides moral, juridical, and political guidance in different spheres of life. But as a system of belief, *itiqad*, an *aqd* (that derives from the root *aqada*, meaning to put together), it also provides a contract among Muslim believers, a sense of social relationship.³ In its primary sense in classical Arabic, an *aqd* is the bond that commits the believer to God. When Muslims strive to live in accordance with their beliefs, they make their religion visible in different European public spheres and simultaneously enhance social ties among Muslims. The reproduction of a common imaginary and set of practices not only binds together migrant Muslims from different origins, nations, ethnicities, and races, but it also repairs the relation among generations. Many young pious Muslims defend Islam as the religion of their parents; Islam provides them with a source of resistance to acculturation and an opportunity to bind with their heritage, hence it can serve as a force of empowerment and a way of repairing the fragile identities and cultural losses of their migrant parents. Islam as experienced in Europe thus takes on different meanings and forms for Muslims experiencing migration. On the other hand European publics have difficulty in acknowledging the claims of Muslims as religious rights. The frames for dealing with difference—namely multiculturalism, the rights of minorities, and religious freedom—all fall short in capturing and responding to Muslim claims. Islam is not framed as an issue of minority religious rights or cultural diversity; rather, it appears as an “alterity,” an incommensurable yet monolithic reality against which Europeans try to distinguish and separate themselves.

How can we grasp the transformative forces of Islam in Europe on the one hand and Muslim experiences of secular temporalities and publics on the other? The idea of Europe as a secular site of modernity and Islam as a timeless and sacred reference point binding a community of believers implies two monolithic macroentities that are difficult to compare. In fact, the encounter between them brings about a destabilizing of the time-place matrix that frames social scripts and activities. The location of this encounter, namely old Europe, is becoming a site of novel experiences, where we can no longer speak of two distinct civilizations separated by time and space. The discourse of civilizational difference does not, in spite of its popularity, capture social realities and social imaginaries that are shaped by transgressions of geographic frontiers, by cultural borrowings and hybridity. As a religion of migration in late modernity, Islam expresses the lived experiences and new subjectivities of pious

Muslims who inhabit secular life-spaces in global cities, reinterpreting cultural and religious norms, and belonging to several communities of language and networks of communication.

Islam should thus be seen less as a theological and macrocivilizational entity of the *longue durée* than as a changing social phenomenon. No longer simply an exogenous reference, it is turning into an indigenous, European one. The contemporary controversies around Islam in European public spheres testify to the ways Islam is becoming part of the lived experience of Europeans; a series of controversial debates on topics ranging from veiling to gender equality, from martyrdom to violence, from blasphemy to freedom of expression illustrate zones of conflict but also those of contact. In different ways each debate contributes to how Islam is being anchored in the European public sphere, becoming part of new imaginaries and memories, but also being subject to new forms of legislation.

Islam as an Anachronism in Contemporary Europe

Islam is becoming contemporaneous with Europe, in other words, while also being anachronistic in terms of European cultural codes. The differences in question are manifested and experienced in close proximity in the public sphere. That newcomers and foreign-born individuals enter the same physical spaces (schools, cities, and so on) without sharing the same values and narratives can antagonize native-born Europeans who lay claim to anterior status and hegemony over a time-space matrix. This matrix, as it governs European public life, is not a neutral, value-free structure that is open to all, but is rather restrained by the disciplinary powers of secular modernity. The confrontation with Islam brings forth and exposes these tacit rules and regulations and thus opens up the doxa of European ways of being-in-public to debate.

The narrative of modernity was based on the sociological assumption—echoed by coercive colonial powers—that Islam, like other religions, would disappear from the historical scene, losing its transformative capacity and agency as Muslim societies entered the sphere of modernity. However, such a linear historical narrative, based on the hegemonic power of the secular, does not explain the new forms of articulation between religious and secular spheres. Not only has Islam become a source of reference for different social agents, but Muslim actors are in turn entering secular spaces and embracing secular experiences, unsettling the religious-secular boundary. Muslims are making their religious difference apparent in public life and in places not initially reserved

for them, thereby challenging the foundations and secular norms of modern ways of life. Through this process of social mobility, Muslims find themselves required to readjust their religiosity in the light of their lived experiences in a secular multireligious environment, and they reinterpret Islam both in discursive and performative ways.

In the present day, Islam—once thought to be a ghostly presence from the past, a relic that would fade away with processes of modernization and secularization—enters into the same time zone as Europe and becomes contemporaneous with it, albeit in an anachronistic fashion. As a result of immigration and globalization, Islamic issues are not confined to one geographic space, such as the Middle East, or to a Muslim-majority nation-state, like Turkey or Iran, but have become part of European reality. The presumed time lag in modern discourse between those who are advanced and those who lag behind disappears; the geographical separation between those who are considered to be civilized and the rest is no longer a source of reassurance. The contemporary nature of the encounter between Islam and Europe is supported by relations of proximity in time and in space that brings them in close contact and confrontation. Their different conceptions of temporality and a hegemonic control over the definition of the “contemporary and modern” buttress this confrontation.

The Western narrative of modernity, especially in its ethnographic form, is based, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian has argued, upon a particular construction of time that excludes others. The experiences of non-Westerners, of those situated on the peripheries, distant from the center, are not tagged as modern; they lag behind and do not partake of the contemporary nature of the Western world. Fabian explains this exclusion as “the denial of coevalness,” that is to say the denial of the sharing of the same historic time and space.⁴

In entering into the foreground of the contemporary European world, Islam unsettles modern secular narratives and organizations of temporality. Time is not the same at all moments in all societies; there are differences in the ways societies and their members represent and experience time.⁵ The Islamic presence in secular mundane life is a reminder of the immutable and the sacred. The power of the *longue durée* of religion collides with the modern worship of the present. Islamic actors create a new socioreligious imagination by engaging with the present moment and simultaneously fashioning chains of continuity with the prophetic tradition in a genealogical manner. *Sunnah*, which refers to the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammad, serves as a complement to divine revelation or the message of the Quran by providing a common matrix or repertoire that connects Muslims with the genesis of Islam and of-

fers them a guiding path through the deceptive labyrinths of modern society. Religiosity establishes a memory chain with past traditions as well as among Muslims; Islamic piety and its chains of transmission, which are broken under the conditions of immigration and acculturation, are thus reactivated by Muslim actors.⁶

Contemporary signs of Islamic actors in European public life bring forth issues related to belonging and believing. The individual stories and life trajectories of Muslim migrants reflect their heterogeneous experiences; they belong to several communities and transgress national boundaries. They are related to the country of origin of their parents via language and satellite television at home, but they also adhere to religious and transnational networks. Their eruption in the public sphere signifies a transgression of national borders and also functions as a source of perpetual suspicion with regard to where they belong and their loyalty to their host country. They are “here” and “now” in Europe, but they also cause realities to appear from “elsewhere.” Their family names relate them to the countries of origins of their parents and serve as a perpetual reminder of their migrant background. Their adherence to Islamic piety is perceived as a failure to integrate into the secular culture of their host countries. The transnational aspect of immigration is often seen not only as a symptom of failed integration, but also as a sign of reluctance to adhere to national values and thus a suspicious sign of a lack of loyalty to a national community. As a result, Muslim migrants are not recognized as full-fledged citizens and included in the community of the nation. Their mere presence signifies the transgression of national borders and hence the emergence of a “Middle East” in Europe. Transnational linkages include not only peaceful commerce, entertainment, communication, and humanitarian organizations, but also terrorist networks that escalate feelings of resentment and fear towards Muslims in Europe.

Islam in Secular Chronotopes

The presence of Islam disrupts the time-space constructions of secular modernity in European countries. All human and social action, we could say, unfolds in a defined “time-space,” which we can call a “chronotope,” following the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. The notion of chronotope brings together two words, from the Greek *χρόνος* (“time”) and *τόπος* (“space”), literally translated as “time-space.” In order to capture the meanings and consequences of the anachronistic presence of Islam in the European public sphere, we can adopt this notion of chronotope and extend it to

our analysis of European publics. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is the “essential correlation of spatio-temporal relations.”⁷ With reference to the literary domain, he defines chronotopes as sociocultural constructions that are essential for generating the plots and stories of history and fiction.⁸

This sociocultural and anthropological definition allows us to make use of his literary concept and adopt it in our approach to the public space. The notion of chronotope, which suggests a variety of competing presents embedded in different spaces, proves well-suited to exploring the complexity of modern experience and understanding the contemporaneity of social experience that is lived through different rhythms of time. If we look at social reality from a Bakhtinian perspective, we observe that time and space are social products and that diverse groups of individuals fashion qualitatively different ideas of time-space. In this sense, chronotopes serve as mediators of human experience, some coexisting harmoniously with each other and some contradicting each other.⁹

The public sphere can be read as mirroring a literary text, with different actors, plots, and stories appearing on stage. As a theatrical performance, it brings different actors together on the same scene and for a particular duration. Contemporaneity is not merely a chronological experience of time and space but also an enactment of a social drama between players, a political event of recognition between actors. It is an experience that draws people closer and makes them feel close.¹⁰ In this respect, the democratic public sphere has the function of bringing people together, but also of inciting them to find ways of relating to each other. In the European context, it is the site that brings Islam and local people together, pushing them to find a common script. The difference of Islam is deployed in the public sphere, where the comfort of spatial distance disappears and the issue of proximity with religious and cultural differences comes to the fore as a democratic issue. The European public sphere is put to a democratic test in terms of its capacity to draw people of different origins, beliefs, and opinions closer to each other and to familiarize them with each other’s differences.

The public sphere fosters democracy to the extent that it mediates between different human agencies, social experiences, and cultural differences, actualizing them in a common space and in the present time. The public sphere is the site that makes it possible for unwanted, unspoken, hidden, and taboo subjects to emerge into collective consciousness. A democratic public sphere is thus not static and homogeneous but open to unpredictability and innovation.

By using the Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope as a mediator of human experience, we can recognize the heterogeneity of human ac-

tion and strip public space of its connotations of homogeneity, thereby opening it up to the reinvention of the social. Only then can we explore the potential of Islamic difference and engage in a critical reading of secular modernity—which has a distinctive capacity to mediate human experience by homogenizing space and flattening time. Islamic difference is disruptive to the extent that it alters the very foundations of modern space-time constructions. Muslim actors become familiar with secular chronotopes in the European public sphere, yet they are also composers of a different chronotope, reminders of the sacred in the public space and of a prophetic link between past and present. This notion of Islamic chronotopes does not stand for an unaltered civilizational difference; it emerges, rather, from the novel experience of Muslims who are no longer limited by historical continuity with past traditions and the values of the sacred. Islamic chronotopes can thus be read as the reminder of an alternative to a secular modernity that increasingly mediates human experience via present-day values and forms of public exposure at the expense of the values of the sacred, intimate, and private. Such chronotopes mediate human action through the prism of the sacred both in public life and in the present time, thereby leading to different juxtapositions of space and time, private-public distinctions, and constructions of past and present. Islamic difference can thus be conceptualized as the eruption of a disruptive and heterogeneous chronotope in secular modernity.

The European Public Sphere: Neutrality or Hegemony?

The hypothesis that Islam is becoming contemporary with, and an indigenous part of, European public life implies a framework of analysis that goes beyond the problematic of migrant integration and a multiculturalism of differences. In this frame of thought, Europe cannot be approached as a preestablished entity equipped with a given structure and narrative with which others are expected to comply. The emergence of Islamic difference in Europe engenders a novel story that can be read from different cultural perspectives and according to different ways of experiencing time and space. The decentering of Europe requires us to recognize, as a theoretical prerequisite, the transformations it is undergoing through its encounter with Islam. The same is also true for Islam, because it is being selectively interpreted and relearned by Muslim actors in a European chronotope. Religion is not a given and fixed category that produces the same notion of piety in all times and places. Especially in contexts of European migration, where the chains

transmitting religious learning and authority are interrupted, religion forms part of an “expressive individualism”—that is, it becomes important to find one’s way as opposed to following a model imposed from outside, society, previous generations, or religious authority—as well as part of a collective social imaginary, a horizontal tie and a contemporary bond among people who are not constitutive of the same national community.¹¹

Muslim visibility in the European public spheres highlights the issue of space and questions the assumptions of secular neutrality. The French debates and accompanying laws that forbade the covering of women, whether headscarves in public schools or total veiling (the burka) in the streets, were founded on two arguments that were supposed to protect and defend European values and the European way of life. The first argument was based on the presumption that space is neutral, if secular, and the second on the assumption that equality, and especially gender equality, requires secular belief and particular forms of clothing. The access of women to education as a primordial condition for their emancipation was no longer as significant in the eyes of those who saw the defense of the cultural foundations of public life as being of foremost importance, namely, the defense of a chronotope that fuses and ordains time and space in secular terms.

The burka debate reveals these issues in a more extravagant way. The semantic dimension, the way in which we label a religious practice and a mode of dress, is imbued by a particular regime of time. As Bakhtin would suggest, time and space are interdependent and they leave their imprint on each other. The word “headscarf” seems as if timeless, referring to a neutral piece of cloth. However “burka” brings to mind another regime of time and space; it carries with it the ghostly presence of Islam and its “medieval” practices, a regressive movement of the Taliban from Afghanistan onto the streets of Paris. In Afghanistan, however, the Urdu word *burka* is rarely used, as Afghans prefer to employ the Dari term *chadari* to refer to the full blue veil with a net that covers the eyes. In this region of the world the chadari/burka, before being turned into a compulsory religious prescription by the Taliban, was originally a garment used by upper-class women. The word “burka” appeared in the West after 9/11, when the liberation of Afghan women was used as an argument to gather support for the invasion of Afghanistan.¹² In this moral grammar of war, the burka became the symbol of women’s oppression.

The difficulties of naming this dress code, which is interchangeably called *burka* or *niqab* or placed under the umbrella concept of *voile intégral* (“full veil”), demonstrates the disruption of meanings that occurs when an object associated with the “outside” and the “foreign” appears in a different cultural context. The burka, after being identified with Afghan women’s oppression, is now entering European lands and is adopted

mostly by those converting to Islam. The semantic confusions between *burka* and *niqab* illustrate the power effects of time-space narratives and cultural identifications.

However, the subjective meanings that Muslim women give to their new covering practices cannot be captured in the light of anterior historical experiences or of different and “foreign” cultures, but must be situated in contemporary time and located in European experience. The practice of Islamic veiling in contemporary societies is a novel experience, adopted by women who are following new strategies of life, achieving cultural mobility, and accepting social mixing. In the light of their mundane experiences, Muslim women are reinterpreting their faith and practices of piety, trying to readjust their professional aspirations with their religious convictions, their desire to explore life with their commitment to Islam.

This novel experience searches for deep connections to the past and conformity to religious prescriptions. The subjective meanings that women give to their religious faith and Islamic covering do not always overlap with public perception; there is a discrepancy that requires a conceptual and even a linguistic readjustment. The difficulties experienced in labeling these new religious practices and gendered subjectivities stem from the boundaries that are being blurred between the past and the present, European experience and Islamic faith, traditions and novel interpretations. Often Arabic terminology that denotes different modes of covering, namely *hijab*, *niqab*, or *burka*, is adopted to label these practices. We may think we can capture the meaning of contemporary forms of covering by digging into their etymological and religious roots, but this is an illusion. It points, however, to the ambivalence of European publics, who are, at one and the same time, “othering” Muslim women living in Europe (by reducing them to their Arabic roots) and yet becoming “familiarized” with Islam and the Arabic language.

Turkey and European Frontiers of Civilization

We have already mentioned that the Islamic presence in Europe is not a matter of a single aspect related only to immigration, with only one historical trajectory. Since 2005, the reopening of negotiations over the Turkish candidacy for EU membership has brought attention, in an unexpected way, to not only the Muslim dimensions of Turkey but also the frontiers of European identity.

This has been, in a sense, one of the major events that has had an impact on, and changed the course of, European history. The debates over Turkish candidacy, which were originally confined to the realm

of international relations and European bureaucrats, have moved into the scene of European public spheres and became part of domestic political life. Independent of right-left distinctions and conservative versus liberal politics, including feminists and progressive intellectuals, this candidacy created controversy about rethinking the “frontiers” of Europe, both in geographical and civilizational terms. The debates over Turkish membership in Europe were independent of problems of migration, as illustrated by the fact that these debates first broke out in France and not in Germany, where there is an important Turkish immigrant population. In addition, the arguments against Turkish membership were not addressed to the usual dossier of problems that Turkey is expected to solve, such as human rights violations, the recognition of Kurdish claims, the Armenian past, the diminution of the role of the army in the political life, the crafting of a constitution, and so on. Rather, debates over Turkey turned into a societal debate over the definition of Europe. In France a debate over the legitimacy of Turkish candidacy broke out the moment Turkey started to do the “homework” stipulated for accession. Once again, we should note that it is Turkey’s rapprochement to European criteria that triggered an anxiety about proximity with the “Other.” A desire for boundary maintenance led to a public debate about the “frontiers of Europe” defined in relation to its geographical and civilizational differences with respect to Turkey.¹³ In this sense, it became a catalyst in debates about European identity and frontiers. The issue of whether Turkey’s geographic frontiers allowed it to be included in the European Union was the main subject of debate. The long-standing candidacy of Turkey (which had existed since the 1960s) was even ridiculed via such questions as “why not Morocco?” and “what about Russia?” From the perspective of Turkish citizens, their desire to belong to Europe extends back to the cultural transformations of the late Ottoman Empire and the creation of a secular republican state in 1923. However, the Turkish “desire for Europe” was called into question by European publics and appeared deeply suspect. Some rejected the membership of Turkey as a “forced marriage” that was being imposed by the European political fathers. Others feared that Turkey as a “Trojan horse” would bring Muslims to invade Europe. But at the end of these debates, “identifying Europe meant ‘othering’ Turkey.”¹⁴

We see here how time-space dimensions are blurred once more and the Turkish presence in Europe unsettles the established narratives of past history. As some have argued, accepting Turkey into Europe would imply, for instance, forgetting the Western victory over the Ottoman army when the siege of Vienna was lifted in 1683. Indeed it would mean rewriting the history of past encounters with the Ottoman Empire—part of a

European ideal of creating peace by changing the image of the enemy, just as the initial foundation of Europe was based upon peacemaking between France and Germany.

Turkey helps to decenter our reading of Europe in several aspects, calling for a politics of memory, but also complicating the postcolonial legacy in Europe. As neither a postbloc, nor a postcolonial country, it highlights the issue of Islam in conjuncture with issues of migration (Turks make up the majority of migrants in Germany) and membership (Turkey as a Muslim-majority country). The unspoken tacit equation between Europe and its Christian heritage thus becomes more apparent. Not just religious figures, such as Pope Benedict XVI, who in his 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg invited citizens to embrace their Christian heritage, but also a wide range of intellectuals from different backgrounds have become more welcoming to religion and have turned towards the defense of Christian values. In his controversial speech, the Pope claimed that, in contrast to Islam, the tradition of Christian faith has the virtue of using reason and cherishing rational values; a tradition that stems, in his view, from the harmony and the “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.”¹⁵ Turkish candidacy has thus exacerbated the ambivalent relation between secular definitions and the Christian roots of European identity.

Turkey has embraced European values as secular universal values. The transformation of Turkish civilization in the early twentieth century meant an engagement with processes of secularization and westernization, a process that was called *çağdaşlaşmak* in Turkish. The word *çağdaş* means contemporaneous, but the verb *laşmak* points to a process of “becoming,” such that *çağdaşlaşmak* literally means “becoming contemporary.” It is an oxymoron to the extent that one is, by default, in the present, and cannot therefore become contemporary. The invention of such a word stems from the very nature of the project of modernization; for a non-Western country to modernize implies a desire to “catch up” with Western time. The narrative of modernity defines a regime of time that prioritizes the present, but it is not a neutral present. Modernity takes its definition from the cultural practices of the West which claim to identify modernity with their own contemporaneity. We can reverse the question and ask: whose contemporaneity is modern? How are certain values and practices hierarchized and labeled as “modern,” therefore as “superior,” and claimed as ideal models? One of the arguments for banning Islamic veiling in Turkey lay in it being considered a “noncontemporary” practice, even though the act of Islamic veiling took place in the present time, in contemporary Turkey, and even though the headscarf was readopted by young university girls in modern secular spaces such

as university campuses. A taxonomy of the veil as a “noncontemporary” form of female conduct is a way of reproducing the equation between modern and Western. The debate on Islamic veiling illustrates how Islam is resurfacing in a Muslim-majority country in which the narrative of modernity took over and changed the chronotopic regime through which the contemporary and the modern are defined as a mirror of European cultural codes.

What are the implications of decentering Europe for our readings of modernity and democracy? Do they reveal any emancipatory potential? Postcolonial critiques instigated a process of gaining autonomy from Western modernity and liberated a potential freedom in ways of interpreting and “habiting” subaltern forms of modernity.¹⁶ The decentering of and from Europe invites a new critical turn—one that cannot be fully grasped in the mirror of the postcolonial, insofar as Islam and Europe exist face-to-face in the present time, relating and confronting their experiences in the same chronotope.

Turkey, the Arab Spring, and Post-Europeanity

It is surprising to see how Turkey, as the most debated, the most visible, and the least desirable candidate in the eyes of the European public, has acquired a new posture. The advent of the Arab Spring instigated the emergence of a different face of Turkey, endowing it with a new kind of visibility and especially with a new desirability. It is in these new historical manifestations that we can explore the emancipatory potential of decentering Europe by recentring Islam. This is not to suggest a linear and alternating model, a notion of history that would oscillate between the alternative projects of Europeanization and Islamization, but it is rather to trace the interstices, interconnections, and interpenetrations that have the potential to rearticulate the divide between Europe, modernity, and Islam. The notion of post-Europeanity seeks to grasp the emancipatory potential of non-Western modernities as implying a two-way change. In contrast to postcolonial narratives, the post-European approach frames the encounter between Europe and Islam as contemporaneous, taking place in the same chronotope.

The German word *Anverwandlungen* (the German translation of the title of my 2008 book) conveys this sense of a two-way change, of a metamorphosis that leads to closer contact between two sides.¹⁷ As sociologists constantly tell us, there are no symmetrical egalitarian relations that are exempt from power. The act of decentering requires an awareness of European *doxa* that naturalizes and hides power relations

and the hegemonic impositions and narratives of the secular modern. Bringing the disruptive forces of Islam into the picture will help us to think “beyond” Europe. The new interest in the Arab Spring and references to a Turkish “model” stem from this hope and an accompanying desire to explore indigenous codes and practices of mixing and involving Islam in cultural pluralism, personal freedom, and economic wealth.

This new place for Turkey on the mental geopolitical map was not won immediately or overnight, but thanks to a series of events that set the empowerment of Turkey vis-à-vis the Western world into motion, enabling its integration in the region by transforming its relations with neighboring countries. Turkey had begun to gain ground and legitimacy amongst Middle Eastern nations well before the events of the Arab Spring, which gave Turkey, as a regional player, a new position in the eyes of different publics and nations.

A first moment of empowerment in Turkish politics took place during the war in Iraq. In March 2003, the Parliament of Turkey rejected a motion that would have permitted American troops to launch an invasion of Iraq from Turkish soil. In an unexpected manner, but through a democratic process, specifically a parliamentary vote, Turkey, as the unfailing ally of the United States, now found itself in opposition to American politics in the Middle East. This lost the trust of Americans but won respect on the Arab streets. As the Syrian intellectual Sadik Al-Azam has written, this Turkish stance was highly regarded by Arab nationalists and also won popularity for Turkey more widely amongst people who asked themselves: “What Arab king, president, or ruler could go to the president of the United States and tell him, ‘My parliament rejected your government’s request’ without the American president either laughing him off the stage, or even yelling back at him ‘Go to hell you and your parliament, we know what kind of an assembly you have at your disposal?’”¹⁸ Turkey appeared to be a country capable of standing up to the United States and no longer willing to be seen as a regional American police force. A second shift concerns Turkey’s relations with the EU. On October 3, 2005, the EU decided to open negotiations for Turkey’s membership in Europe, even though both sides were convinced that the integration process would not succeed. Negotiations were in play, but the door was closed to Turks. Those two historical moments represent the distancing of Turkey from two distinct aspects of the West: Turkey lost its privileged status as a loyal ally of the United States, and it also lost the illusion of being a natural candidate for the EU.

A third episode concerns relations with Israel, with whom, as is consistent with its alliance with the Western camp, Turkey has had historically stable relations. Turkey had begun to play a mediating role between

Syria and Israel, until the Israeli offensive against Gaza in January 2009 put an end to negotiations. It was at the annual summit in Davos that a landmark confrontation took place between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his counterpart Shimon Peres over the Gaza assault. Erdoğan became the spokesperson for injustices committed against the Palestinians, angrily leaving the debate after trying several times to speak. The incident became known in Turkey as “one minute,” a tag that came to stand for protest against Israel’s politics in general. A second incident concerned the humanitarian convoy that sought to protest the blockade but ended in a humanitarian tragedy in Gaza in May 2010. The attack of Israeli troops on the flotilla on the high seas, killing nine passengers on the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*, provoked a deep and longstanding crisis between the two countries. As a result, Turkey finds itself more and more actively involved in the Palestinian cause.

On a different scale, the initiative taken by Brazil and Turkey to persuade Iran (in May 2010) to abandon its nuclear armament program was crucial, even if it did not convince Western powers. Without a doubt, this initiative demonstrated the emergence of new players on the global stage and marked the possibility of mediating between civilizations. In addition, “the Alliance of Civilizations,” a forum created within the framework of the UN in 2005 at the initiative of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and another affiliation between Turkey and the Latin world, indicates the existence of configurations striving to overcome binary oppositions in terms of religious, civilizational, or East-West divides.

These events, very schematically evoked, help us to compose a new cartography that resituates Turkey within Europe and beyond, anchoring it in the region and making it appear as a global player. The political scientist Kemal Kirişçi explains what is behind this Turkish model, which exercises, he argues, a demonstrative and a teaching effect on three major levels: a “just” foreign policy, a “commercial” state, and democracy as a “work in progress.”¹⁹ On these three levels, Turkey has brought about more interaction with its neighbors; together, they are exploring the potential for a new vision of democracy. This vision is not limited to politics between states but also includes scientific, industrial, commercial, and cultural exchanges between citizens.

Movement is taking place in both directions: Turkey is moving towards its neighbors, and the Middle East is discovering Turkey. The proliferation of private universities and art and music festivals is creating new opportunities and attracting intellectuals and artists. Istanbul is becoming a new cosmopolitan city, but this time it is a cosmopolitanism that springs from the East and from those that live there. It does not function as the cosmopolitanism of elites but of migrants, diasporas, those searching

for a place of refuge, those who have fled despotic regimes, civil wars, ethnic cleansings, or the ravages of economic crises. Turkish, Iranian, Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese intellectuals and artists, whose gaze was always turned towards Europe, are now turning towards each other, exploring and drawing on their differences within common frames of reference and producing new artistic and political languages.

The Turkish experience is thus being appreciated in the Arab world as a “model of proximity.” It epitomizes a certain success in bringing together democratic freedoms and secularism with Muslim society. As Sadik Al-Azam has written, unlike Arab nationalism and Islamic radicalism, the Turkish version of the representation of Islam tells a story that is widely admired. According to him, Turkey represents a “counterexample.” The fact that it is a non-Arab country undermines the widespread conviction among Arab peoples that they are not only the heartland of Islamic civilization but also represent *de jure* and *de facto* its ideal model.²⁰

The fact that Turkey appears as an exemplary reference point demonstrates two things at once: that it has a historically singular experience, and that it can be a prototype for other nations. In contrast to treatises that describe Turkey as being more or less “torn between countries,” pulled between two paradoxical civilizations, as Samuel Huntington has written,²¹ this notion offers the possibility of mediation between one culture and another, carrying a resonance that goes beyond national boundaries. Turkey serves as an example, illustrating a novel possibility for other nations. It is possible to speak both of a singular experience and of the mimetic effect that it can inspire in others. For centuries, this is the manner in which European history was established as a model; European countries succeeded in realizing the development of individual freedoms, and this historical particularity also resonated with and inspired others, acting as a stimulus in non-Western contexts. The notion of a “model” thus refers to the singularity of historical experience and also to its strength as an example for other nations, and, accordingly, its influence beyond its own borders. This is not to think of the model as a prototype that can be reproduced to the letter and in an identical manner; on the contrary, each reiteration signifies a different historical trajectory with its own cultural form and framework. For example, the Turkish form of “laicity,” while inspired by the French model of *laïcité*, follows neither the same trajectory nor the same cultural configuration, but has instead produced a singular form of Muslim secularism. Instead of measuring a divergence or deviance from the original model, we should understand the singularity of the experience while showing relations between connected histories.

In a similar fashion, the Turkish model of laicity became a reference and an archetype for other Muslim countries and, in particular, for Tunisia. Atatürk reformism inspired other leaders of the Arab world, such as Habib ben Ali Bourguiba. At the time, Turkey was singled out in the eyes of the Arab and Western world by the onset of its nationalism and its laicity—both backed by the army. The democratic transition that took place in Tunisia on October 24, 2011 revisited the Turkish experience of electoral pluralism in the presence of a Muslim party.

What are the constituent traits of Turkey that have an exemplary effect on other groups, nations, and regions? Answers differ according to the opinions and perspectives of particular persons. Without a doubt, the coming to power of an Islamic movement (the AKP, in power since 2002) through free elections in a country proud of its *laïcité* constitutes the most important paradox; Turkey is also thought by Western observers to represent a “moderate Islam,” in contrast to Iran; its secular army seems like an advantage to many intellectuals, including those of the Muslim world; and finally the existence of a strong middle class is considered (in contrast to the rest of the Arab world and, above all, to Egypt) as a pillar of democracy.

For each of these perspectives, however, we can offer counterarguments. The notion of a moderate Islam is problematic, even if it has a sedative effect on Western publics anxious about the rise of Islamic forces. It is problematic because, in the first place, it reduces the Turkish experience to its religious characteristics and thus ignores its pluralistic dimension. Secondly, the notion of “moderate” is arguably an instrumentalized approach to religion as part of a larger political program put in place by the United States for the “Greater Middle East.” It is also rejected by pious Muslims, for whom the very definition of Islam is “The Middle Way”—describing certain representations of Islam as “moderate” implies the existence of a “violent” Islam, as if violence were somehow intrinsic to the essence of the religion rather than the result of actions or interpretations by social agents. Therefore, the very name of the political movement is a source of debate and controversy: is it a form of conservative democracy, Muslim secularism, reformist Islam, or even neo-Ottomanism?

While the presence of a secular army represents an advantage to some, it is also riven by tensions and caught in a vicious circle of democratization and Islamization. What distinguishes the current Turkish experience is not the fact of its army, but rather its marginalized status. Recent efforts by the AKP government, with the support of some liberal and democratic intellectuals, indicate a desire to prevent the army from interrupting parliamentary life, in the name of safeguarding secularism

from the inevitability of an Islamic alternative. Here the question of democracy is posed in terms of pluralism: how to permit the manifestation of both individual freedom and religious beliefs in public life and how to guarantee the rights of both Muslims and of nonbelievers or those who simply do not want to live according to religious norms? And finally, with regard to the advent of the middle class, we can briefly note it does not constitute a precondition for democracy; rather, it is in and through democracy that it finds means of social integration—through the market economy, access to education, and political representation.

The Arab Spring brought the Turkish model to attention. Two well-known European figures, Tariq Ramadan and Abdelwahab Meddeb, the former originally from Egypt and an Islamic intellectual, and the latter from Tunisia and a spokesperson for secularism, in spite of their differences, arrived at a certain agreement in interpreting the Turkish experience of relating Islam to democracy. The success of Turkey in moving from a secularism guaranteed by the army to a pluralistic society in which Islam came to power via free elections without overthrowing the state of law, offers an example of realizing the “unthinkable,” that is to say, of combining Islam and democracy and breaking the vicious circle of “secular authoritarianism” versus “Islamic radicalism.” According to Ramadan, younger generations, even among Islamists, are taking Turkey as a reference point and not Iran, with Turkey’s strength coming from the fact that it functions as an endogenous democracy, yet without negating its Islamic references. The Turkish and Tunisian states, Meddeb argues, were originally structured according to the hegemonic model of the French Republic, but to the detriment of democracy. Today, however, Turkish society is managing to reverse this dynamic in order to put democracy in the first row.²² As historian Jocelyne Dakhliya puts it, democratization in the present day demands the overcoming of “the false divide between the secular and the religious.” Commenting on the new era in Tunisia, she writes, “in the political moment in which we live, we see that there are many ways to be democratic, as there are many ways to reclaim the politics of Islam in a blurring of dichotomies.”²³ The Tunisian people, Dakhliya argues, in using the French word *dégagé* (“get out”) as a slogan to overthrow the political regime, signaled a new era not only for democratic politics but also for the legacy of the third world and colonial anger.

Europe and the Western world were not at the epicenter of the political mobilizations of Arab countries. Rather, the Arab revolts expressed a new democratic imaginary, based on a corporeal and linguistic performativity. These movements did not turn their backs to the West, but they turned their faces toward each other, inspired one another, circulating slogans,

graffiti, and symbols, establishing a common public space and a new vision of democracy whose core is located in the Middle East, but which is also linked to its migrant European diaspora. Decentering Europe involves such a shift of the locus of democratic imaginaries beyond Europe and yet in connection with it. We can thus see a reversal of the mimetic desire between Europe and the East; the Arab Spring awakened European publics and European youth in Madrid, Lisbon, and Athens, who were inspired by the repertory of the Arab Spring to express their own indignation, discontent, and revolt.

To think Europe anew means to become aware that the hegemony of European chronotopes over the definition of modernity is weakening. There are different, competing time-space constructions that interfere with European experience and self-understanding. Decentering Europe means recentring Islam from within (that is, in relation to migrant history as well as its medieval legacy) but also from a distance (as in the models of Turkey and the Arab Spring), allowing us to see Europe and Islam as connected histories, yet with competing narratives, cultural values, and time-space constructs of modernity.

ÉCOLE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES

NOTES

- 1 Gerard Delanty, "The Making of a Post-Western Europe: A Civilizational Analysis," *Thesis Eleven* 72 (2003): 8–25.
- 2 Franco Cardini, *Europe et Islam: Histoire d'un malentendu* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).
- 3 Talal Asad, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, and Wendy Brown, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 42.
- 4 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Cambridge: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983). See also Göle, "Global Expectations, Local Experiences, Non-Western Modernities," in *Through a Glass, Darkly: Blurred Images of Cultural Tradition and Modernity over Distance and Time*, ed. Will Arts (Boston: Brill, 2000), 40–55.
- 5 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).
- 6 Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Polity, 2000).
- 7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 235–37.
- 8 Bernard F. Scholz, "Bakhtin's Concept of Chronotope: The Kantian Connection," in *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998), 141–73.
- 9 Peter Good, *Language for Those Who Have Nothing: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Landscape of Psychiatry* (New York: Kluwer, 2001), 21.
- 10 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 161–62.
- 11 Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 83.

- 12 Julie Billaud, "Malaya's Sisters: Women's Public Visibility in 'Post-War/Reconstruction' Afghanistan" (PhD diss., University of Sussex and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2009).
- 13 Nilüfer Göle, "The Making and Unmaking of Europe in its Encounter with Islam: Negotiating French Republicanism and European Islam," in *Varieties of World Making: Beyond Globalization*, ed. Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2007): 173–92.
- 14 Göle, "Europe's Encounter with Islam: What Future?" *Constellations* 13, no. 2 (2006): 248–62.
- 15 Benedict XVI, "Papal Address at the Univ. of Regensburg," *Zenit: The World Seen From Rome*, September 12, 2006, <http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english>.
- 16 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002).
- 17 Göle, *Anverwandlungen: der Islam in Europa zwischen Kopftuchverbot und Extremismus* (Berlin: Wagenbach Klaus GmbH, 2008).
- 18 Sadik J. Al-Azam, "Turkey, Secularism and the EU: A view from Damascus," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 4 (2011): 449–59.
- 19 Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's Demonstrative Effect and the Transformation of the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 33–55.
- 20 Al-Azam, "Turkey, Secularism and the EU," 453–55.
- 21 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash Of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: S&S International, 1997), 138–51.
- 22 Tariq Ramadan and Abdelwahab Meddeb, "La religion dans les révolutions arabes," *Le Monde*, April 22, 2011.
- 23 Jocelyne Dakhlia, *Tunisie—Le pays sans bruit* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2011), 118 (my translation).