A cross-perspective on categorizing Muslims in Europe

Perspectiva transversal sobre la categorización de los musulmanes en Europa

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Received 26/5/2023. Accepted 8/5/2024

Abstract

This article offers a methodological framework for the study of the sociogenesis of the use of the category “Muslim” as the main figure of otherness in Western Europe, and proposes some lines for comparison among the cases in this monographic issue, that is, Spain, Norway, France and Britain. It places our analytical outlook within a selection of the comparative literature on Islam in Europe, presents our rationale for an event-based and multiscalar perspective on the development of national public debates, discusses the impact of journalists and academics on the public experience, and opens questions on the degree of rigidification of the category and the configuration of polarization around it in each context.
Keywords: Category “Muslim”, International Comparison, Event-Based Perspective, Multi-Scalar Perspective, Polarization

Resumen
Este artículo ofrece un marco metodológico para el estudio de la sociogénesis del uso de la categoría “musulmanes” como figura principal de la alteridad en Europa Occidental, y propone algunas líneas de comparación entre los casos estudiados en este monográfico, es decir, España, Noruega, Francia y Gran Bretaña. Sitúa nuestra perspectiva analítica en el seno de una selección de la literatura comparada sobre el islam en Europa, justifica nuestra perspectiva multiescalar y basada en acontecimientos, discute el impacto de los periodistas y académicos en la experiencia de los problemas públicos, y abre interrogantes sobre el grado de rigidización de la categoría y la configuración de la polarización en torno a ella en cada contexto.

Palabras clave: Categoría “Musulmanes”, Comparación Internacional, Acontecimientos, Perspectiva Multiescalar, Polarización

A comparative perspective on the sociogenesis of the category “Muslim”

Since the 1980s, throughout Europe, the question of Islam has been increasingly discussed. But the use of the category “Muslim” to identify a part of the population is ambivalent and ambiguous and cannot be taken for granted (Alexander et al., 2013). The understanding of who is “Muslim” and to whom one refers to when qualifying part of his or her identity as “Muslim” remains contested. Nevertheless, Islam and Islamic allegiances are one of the most important key issues in contemporary public debates. Considering this issue, we pay specific attention in our research to the categorization process of the term “Muslim”.

Given their relative or relational rather than absolute nature of belongings and identities, we focus on the ways they shift and take shape in a context that combines an individual’s position in the social structure and the roles he or she may or may not play within it. It follows that situation and context are crucial to understanding why and how people move towards a certain form of self-perception within society. These insights set the scene for thinking about belonging and identity as situated and relational phenomena, which need to be located, contextualized and understood within a wider interactional and representational frame (Thomassen, 2017: 12-35).

In the wake of academic approaches which focus on the categorisation process (Bowker and Star, 1999), by critically looking at “the traffic between categories of analysis and categories of practice to adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards the categories” (Brubaker, 2013: 2), or by confronting different forms of classification – state-centred, academical and self-classification – (Beckford et al., 2005; Becker et al.,
2023), we take the category “Muslim” as object and not as tools of analysis (Statham, 2024).

The selection of the four countries that compose this European perspective on the categorization of Muslim populations enables to highlight the particular socio-historical dynamics that have contributed to shaping the debate on Islam and to resist the “space and time compression” (Harvey, 1990) in the use of global category. Our effort to retemporalize and respatialize this debate is embedded in the choice of two couples of countries. The first one refers to France and the UK which have been often used as a basis for comparison in the study of contrasted European religious scenes, and more generally as reversed models in the treatment of cultural, ethnic and religious differences (Hervieu-Léger, 2017). The long history of immigration, the colonial past and the long-lasting debate on Islam and Muslim populations in both countries give them a matricial dimension that needs not only to be updated, but also compared with other contexts. The second couple formed by Spain and Norway is an opportunity to bring to the fore two countries in northern and southern Europe where the debate on Islam has developed much more recently, on a historical and political basis that remains highly contrasted. Nevertheless in both cases, the focus on immigrant populations through the prism of Islam benefits from a spirit of openness that resonates more with the question of hybridity and conviviality.

This original configuration of national settings offers an opportunity to renew the study of Islam and Muslims populations that are particularly challenged by the turbulence affecting democratic governance.

The rise and flow of European panoramas on Islam

Our contribution to the academic debate should start by recognising the numerous studies that frame the approach of Islam within a European perspective, pioneered at the end of 1980 in Belgium by Dassetto and Bastenier (1988) and followed by Dassetto (1993, 1996) during the 1990s. In France, Rémy Leveau initiated, as early as 1998, the reflection on a European outlook on the question of Islam. However, academic interest in, and literature on, Islam and Europe expanded significantly following the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States. From this turning point, the number of studies comparing the development of the debate on Islam and Muslim in Europe has increased. The landscape of knowledge on the issue is varied, relying on different types of empirical research.

Amongst qualitative research, comparative work regularly includes France and the United Kingdom (Kiwan, 2012; Joly and Wadia, 2017) which are presented as two frameworks “based on contrasting understandings of core concepts such as citizenship, nationality, pluralism, autonomy, equality, public order and tolerance” (Favell, 1998: 2). Continuing the focus on contrasting models of immigrant policy (Lapeyronnie, 1993), France and/or England are considered as emblematic nucleus of the situation of the debate on Islam in Europe (Voguet and Troadec, 2019). The comparative framing with Spain is rarer (for exceptions see Khir-Allah, 2021; Álvarez-Miranda, 2009; Bugnot, 2012;
The wealth of studies on Islam and Muslim populations in Europe covers a large diversity of approaches. Although it is difficult in some cases to divide the different fields of study that have emerged from this growing interest, we can distinguish at least four main perspectives which scrutinize the issue of Islam in Europe.

The first one focuses on the experience of being Muslim in Europe after 9/11. Part of the studies consider Islam as a kind of European fact and explore the forms of Muslim participation in different European societies. For instance, moving beyond the issue of integration, Leveau shows that Muslim culture is an integral part of many European societies and questions the way in which a multicultural perspective seeks recognition of its legitimacy (Leveau, 2003). In this sense, he emphasizes the plurality which accompanies the “citizenship process of Islam” (Leveau and Mohsen-Finan, 2005).

Second, in the same vein, a number of works have been produced on the issue of the (in)visibility of whole sections of the European population, migrants, descendants of migrants, identified as Muslims and/or self-defined as such in the public sphere of diverse countries (Jonker and Amiraux, 2006; Fregosi, 2009; Göle, 2015; Nielsen, 2013; Salzbrunn, 2019; Brodard, 2023). If the question of Islamophobia and discrimination is sometimes mentioned in these works, it also constitutes a field of study of its own (Ramberg, 2005; Morgan and Poynting, 2012; Afshar, 2013; Lépinard, 2021). Ethnographic research on identities and experiences of Muslims’ minorities in Europe increasingly highlights the complexity of interpretations and recognition of their places and positions in Europe (Nachmani, 2009; Meer, 2012; Villechaise and Bucaille, 2018; Hamidi, 2023) and the representations which surround their “struggle for inclusion” (Ivarsflaten and Sniderman, 2022).

A third angle of approach consists in documenting the state’s role in the debate and regulation of Islam (Cesari and McLoughlin, 2005; Sinno, 2012; Fetzer and Soper, 2012; Laurence, 2012; Bowen et al., 2013; Behloul et al., 2013). This institutional perspective allows for the consideration of issues specific to different systems of State-Church relations in different countries, such as the tensions between national and local levels depending on national contexts, the capacities of actors to mobilize and participate civically and politically (Jackson, 2012; Burchardt and Michalowski, 2015; Tietze, 2018) as well as the responses of States to Muslims’ religious concerns.

A fourth field of studies on Islam in Europe refers to studies on terrorism and radicalization. Over the past decade or so, among the different approaches and studies, academic research has dedicated much attention to identifying the mechanisms leading to narratives and practices of “rupture”, which take the form of rigorist interpretations of Islam, and, in more spectacular cases, to violent extremism in the name of Islam. Radicalization refers mainly to terrorism, and its consequences for Muslim populations in the West. A large number of studies look at the resonance of the debates and measures following terrorist acts on the lived experience of Muslims (Poli and Arun, 2019). While some academics clearly distinguish Islam and radicalization (Khosrokhavar, 2014; Roy, 2016; Truong, 2017), Islam has been mostly studied as a problematic religion and Muslims as a problematic “population”, of which it is necessary to measure the degree of adaptability and integration in Western secular society, as pointed to by Eseverri-Meyer, 2021) and even rarer with Norway (Vogt, 1995; Amir-Moazami et al., 2011; Jacobsen, 2011).
Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016). In this regard, part of academic research has played an important role in legitimating political and media discourses that help frame Islam as a “problematic” religion and Muslims as the main category of “otherness” (Huntington, 1996; Lewis, 1988; Kepel, 2012, 2016). Research on the consequences of terrorism, and the associated policy measures, on whole Muslim populations emphasizes the individual or collective risk of being perceived as radicalized or likely to be radicalized, and denounces its social correlates, such as stigmatization and discrimination. However, this latter perspective is more developed in the US and especially in the UK. It is worth noting here the wealth of critical reviews of radicalization studies, and the growth of critical approaches to radicalization (Pilkington, 2023), which give the issue a wider scope.

These four main avenues in the study of Islam from a European perspective are not exclusive to each other. Similarly, they are of varying significance depending on their time frame and national context.

The questioning at the heart of our comparative project draws on the critical perspectives of the fourth avenue, which has demonstrated that Islam is seen more and more as a source of threat inside European societies, increasingly marked by processes of securitization and State control (Schmid, 2013; Kundnani, 2014; Ragazzi, 2016; Kapoor, 2018; Abbas, 2019). In response to this trend, we propose a reflexive approach to the use of the category Muslim through an analysis of the collective narratives that have shaped it over time.

In that sense, our approach questions the process of homogenization of discourses on Muslims by revisiting the major events that have contributed to fuel the debate on Islam and Muslim populations since the 1980s. The importance of the themes addressed by our comparative project – the emerging politics of threat and shifting identities and representations – is also reflected in recent concerns raised by scholars in the field about the way that Islam and Muslims have become the object of extensive discursive production and policies, which has turned “Islam” and “Muslims” into categories that can be investigated, interpellated and ultimately controlled (Roy, 2002; Allievi, 2005; Mandaville, 2009; Adamson, 2011; Amir-Moazami, 2016; Mattes, 2018).

For instance, the convergence of the contours of the category “Muslim”, when referring to the debates related to radical Islam, and the importance of the policies against radicalization in the different countries of our study have contributed to a standardization of the perspective on Muslim identities, producing even a capping effect on the experience of Muslims in the different societies concerned.

However, the fact that this general tendency is common to the four contexts does not erase the challenges of the comparative approach. We chose to lead desk research to explore the legitimacy of the category “Muslim” and its historicity and to (re)question some major turning points which have contributed to the construction of Islam, not only as a threat, but also as one of the main vectors of change in European societies (Göle, 2013). As Christophe Bertossi and Catherine Wihtol de Wenden (2017: 6) remind us, in a few decades, the “social question” has been considerably reformulated and the public figure of the Muslim now crystallizes most of the processes that build symbolic borders within European immigrant societies. However, even if global dynamics are at work, the
nature of the changes, their drivers and the consequences are not the same in the different contexts we investigate.

Drawing a map of the categorization process of Muslim populations in each context, over a relatively long period of time, enables us both to outline the proximities and distances between France, the UK, Spain and Norway and to illuminate a significant part of the polarization process at play in these four countries. To this end, we outline our rationale for engaging with the trajectory of the category “Muslim” in each context over the last four decades, rather than focusing on the orientations of the debate on Islam—whether political, academic or public—in order to try to grasp the shifts between different meanings of alterity that it carries. Our analytical wager is to observe the pairings and decouplings that occur between debates on Islam and the use of the category Muslim, in order to shed light on the forms of presence that this category outlines for Muslim populations in the four contexts.

This retrospective look has at least three main objectives. First, we focus on the evolution of the use of the term “Muslim”, sometimes referring to secondary or marginal elements of identity, sometimes presented as a major, even obvious, identity trait of certain populations, in order to deploy a series of hypothesis around (or to clarify) the idea of “shifting identities” of Muslims in Europe. Secondly, our approach aims at exploring the chain of events that have contributed to different narratives which articulate, or question, to varying degrees, the relationship between threat and Islam, and at gauging the room left for counternarratives. Thirdly, and more programmatically, part of our intention is to reflect on our own use of the category Muslim and invite others to an epistemological reflection that regularly emerges from fieldwork: “Why always the Muslims?” We are conscious that we, as researchers, often criticize the category but use it as well, placing it at the heart of our intellectual endeavors. In this sense, our approach is to preface a wider attention to the epistemological responsibility associated with the memory of the narratives concerning Islam and Muslims in Europe in the period of the last four decades.

Another important aspect to be taken into consideration about the studies that articulate Islam and Europe is the comparative configuration in which they are embedded. As noted above, some countries are much more recurrent than others. This is the case for France, England, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. However, the idea of Europe is variable in geometry, sometimes referring to the diversity of countries that make up the Council of Europe (including for instance Turkey, or Switzerland) or more limited to the member states of the European Union. In most cases, comparison consists of the juxtaposition of several national contexts as illustrations of a common, original and broad issue (Jonker and Amiraux, 2006). The national scale is often prior in this kind of European comparison, which stems from an a posteriori analysis (Geoffray et al., 2012). In other cases, a methodological approach guides in a systematic way the research in different settings (Göle, 2015).

Our ambition is to highlight elements of (non)comparability specific to the term “Muslim”. In this regard, our approach is grounded in one of the central arguments in comparison models, such as Histoire croisée (Werner and Zimmermann, 2006) or Societal Analysis (Maurice, 1989; Lendaro, 2012): the need to work on the social constructions and uses of categories and to make explicit the categorization “both in the
situations studied and in terms of the protocols of inquiry” (Werner and Zimmermann, 2006: 44). This perspective engages the researcher in making explicit her/his situated position in relation to the object, in a process of elucidation of specific issues of categorization. However, we are conscious that we are picking as methodological tools isolated components of these analytical models, which carry more in-depth and complex proposals, such as crossing spatial scales of analysis in order to limit forms of methodological nationalism and considering the paradoxical effects of globalization processes on analysis (De Verdalle et al., 2012: 8).

An event-based perspective

If the time scope of our research is the four last decades, we sought to identify within it key moments as event nodes around which different tropes associated to the category “Muslim” have been forged. This temporal coverage doesn’t have the same relevance in each country. In France and the UK, the 1980s constitute a turning point in the focus on the issue of Islam as a major feature of both societies – though in different ways – while this trend appears later in Spain and Norway, and to a lesser extent, especially in the latter case. In that sense our retrospective event-based approach aims both at grasping through which events Islam has been a relatively marginal feature of people’s identity as against those when it has become the main reading, but also to assess the saliency of the debate on Islam in the four public debates.

The concept of event has given rise to increasing debate in the human and social sciences over the last decades (Nora, 1974; Petit, 1991; Barthélémy and Quéré, 1991; Quéré and Neveu, 1996). In the wake of an increasingly refined critique of positivist approaches (Nora, 1986), the definition of the event has become more complex while being increasingly linked to its mediatic character, itself constantly challenged by technological transformations.

A major issue pointed at by different historians is the tension between event and temporality. As Farge notes (2002/2007: §26), we should pay attention to the complex temporalities of the event: “The event is a permanent construction that extends considerably over time. For historians, it is difficult to say when an event ends, because it is carried out through a network of relationships with structuring effects. Certain externally important events still structure our social and even economic behaviour. Thus, short time can have a long duration, and its meaning will change throughout this duration, encompassing with it mobile systems of representation which will inflect the first interpretation that may have been made”.

Our approach is based on mediatic events even if the expression appears as a kind of pleonasm, and it is challenged by the fact that some events take place over a relatively long period of time, and could appear repeatedly, while others seem to arise in isolation. We sometimes mobilize only one sequence of events as an illustration of a wider trend, emblematic of a turning point in the categorization process of the term “Muslim”.

Our selection of critical events anchors our research of the processes of cultural change that have brought to the fore the term Muslim in each national public debate. We take
these events as the propellers of new categorizations of social groups, and therefore of change in the public’s perception of and relation to them, as well as in their own collective identities and actions. Those in a social position to influence the framing of the events, like journalists and academics, engage in new interpretations of their nature, their causes and foreseeable effects, creatively combining tropes at hand in the cultural repertoire, in a process of sedimentation, partial substitution and partial interpenetration. Those being framed may come to see the events as symptoms of patterned social relations that call for reflection and reaction. Both perceive the event as a cleavage in time and are conscious of its effect, in the case of major events, but also strings of low intensity events may accumulate to transform attitudes and beliefs.

Events are happenings, unexpected and unintended by most social agents, that produce new interpretations of social phenomena, in our case, the presence of populations that have immigrated from countries of Muslim majority, either recently or several generations ago. Events violate the expectations taken for granted in a certain number of shared cultural structures, and demand a reshaping of those structures to accommodate the new information. In so doing, agents involved in their cultural reception can take resource to categories from other social structures, transposing them from one sphere of social life to another, and therefore resignifying them. They may thus conflate cultural tropes until then alien to the issue in focus onto those previously framing it, creating new cultural mixes. The shared mental structures mobilized to explain the event may originate in far-flung international debates which become grounded onto local social practices (Sewell, 2005: 218).

The current use of the term Muslim is the result of the different events through which the population object of labelling has moved, following which new combinations of cultural tropes have come to describe them, in a creative but path dependent process (Sewell, 1996: 262). Such tropes distinguish individuals into groups that relate to their ethnicity, their national or foreign origin, their social status, their gender, their observance of law and religion. By doing so they bring the population subject of classification into the social dynamics characteristic of such a category (Sewell, 2005: 216), impinging on processes of identity and alterity building across society, and therefore on their social history. From the point of view of the population object of classification, some events have the potential to become points of reference for collective action.

By focusing on the interpretation of events risk of historical constructionism, shifting the focus of historical work “from what happened to glosses of what happened” (Tarrow, 1996: 586-589), but this choice is justified because we are most interested in the cultural impact of events, since our aim is to trace and compare the socio-histories of the categorization processes involving the term Muslim in different national contexts. Although we approach the event from the point of view of its interpretation, in the sense that it is “a happening to which cultural significance has been assigned” (Abrams, 1982: 191), we do not assume that interpretation alone makes the event. We understand that the causal weight of interpretation remains open to case by case empirical observation, a task beyond our scope, since we aim to analyse the effects rather than the causes of events.
Journalists, academics and the public experience

By examining the process of problematization and publicization of Muslim populations in the four contexts from different angles, our contributions, in the wake of pragmatist, phenomenological or hermeneutic perspectives, aim at understanding how a public experience has been configured (Cefaï and Terzi, 2012: 23), in our case a public experience of categorization of Muslim populations in different European countries.

In the following articles we focus our observation of the framing and re-framing of Muslims in Europe on the mass media because they play a crucial role in identifying events as such and in generating their designation (Calabrese, 2013), and therefore in conditioning the public experience of them. Be them specific to one occurrence – “9/11” – or categorizing a series of occurrences – “Islamist attacks” –, the media coin and circulate the codes to be shared in everyday conversation. Such codes become part of the shared repertoire of linguistic sequences and condensate a great amount of objective information – New York, two planes, two towers, etc. – and intersubjective representations and emotions – fear, rage, war – that become tangled with personal memories of that day and that are rekindled every time the code, the date, is mentioned.

The relationship between events and media makes “the event monstrous” (Nora, 1974). Mass media contribute to an insatiable “hunger for events” and constantly produce new ones through a system of detection of everything that can attract public attention. However, according to Nora, even if the media produce the events, that does not mean that they have been artificially created by them.

Quéré (1997) notes that the constructivist approach is based on the idea that events presented by the media are not pure and simple pictures of what is happening in the world, but a socially organized and regulated process of shaping, staging and making sense of information. In that sense, we could note a conflation between public events, as they are drawn on in our work and “public issues”. As Cefaï (1996: 51-52) so powerfully attests on the basis of authors such as Gusfield (1981) and Strauss (1993): “‘Public issues’ only exist and impose themselves as such, as issues of both definition and control of problematic situations, and therefore issues of controversy and confrontations between collective actors in public arenas”.

If events become events – publicly shared and signified – mostly because of the work of journalists, who coin them as such, other opinion leaders of diverse kinds impact the media, among which academics make a particularly articulate contribution to their interpretation. The impact of each kind of writing and the relationship among the two varies in the different national contexts. Their terms, tones, and arguments create and sustain in time the discursive atmosphere in which social actors may participate in the debate on Muslims. In that sense, the role of the media in contributing to the construction of identity based groups is both overt and subtle (Hopkins, 2011: 110).

The mass media may feed on academic work, sometimes quoting books or articles, most often inviting researchers to contribute opinion pieces or be interviewed, so that research and commentary on the events filter on to public debates, with varying productivity, intellectual sophistication and impact on the different national public
spheres. In return, academics focus their commentary on the issues primed by the press, and use it as primary source, engaging in content and trend analysis, often from a critical stance.

**Selection of sources and events**

The challenges surrounding the study of the categorization process of the term “Muslim” in each national context differ greatly in terms of knowledge production, amount of data available, orientations of the debate on Islam and background of the researcher(s). In this respect, it is necessary to specify the limits of our work. On the one hand, our approaches are based on relatively distinct methodologies in which the selection of events leads to different challenges depending on the national context. On the other hand, our effort to synthesize large amounts of written material has led us to necessarily bend certain elements of temporality.

For instance, the intense debate on Islam in media discourses and the extensive literature produced on the subject in France and the UK multiply the set of options for analysis and call for a further discussion on its rationale and on the impact of the categories used. Our common approach translates differently in the different national contexts.

In France, the chain of controversies related to the debate on Islam exacerbates a stalemate effect on the uses of the category Muslim and places the researcher in a series of dilemmas as to the viewpoint and the amplitude of the support of reflexivity. The multiple interpretations of secularism as a matrix for resolving issues specific to ethnic and religious differences in France have embroiled the debate on Islam and vice versa. In this confusing context, Poli, Mameri-Chaambi and Conti focus on the fate of the “Muslim” category in the press of two daily newspapers over the last 40 years by favouring an approach that allows for the exploration of a corpus of primary sources, admittedly limited but over a relatively long period of time, to understand the dynamics of the aggregation of news and debates that this category carries over the decades.

In the UK, Hussain draws on the abundant humanities and social science studies on Islam and Muslims to critically trace the prominent epistemological approach involved in the production of an atmosphere that has continued to position Muslims as exceptional citizens.

In Spain, Álvarez-Miranda and Eseverri-Mayer draw on a contrasted description of the discursive stances coined by academics and journalists during the last forty years to explore how and when the term “Muslims” has been used in the public debate, and to design a broad picture of Islam in the history of present time.

The Norwegian case stands out in yet another way. Vestel and Rosten draw on a stimulating model of polarization which is structured around three forms of radicalization. Through a parallel analysis of academic and media debates around key events, they reassemble the puzzle of this triangulation within Norwegian society while
A multiscalar perspective on national debates

The national debates we analyse in the following articles may have originated as such or may result from processes of upscaling from local issues or downscaling from the range of representations and logics of action that coalesce around the Muslim category.

The methodological approach adopted for both the selection and the treatment of events in each of the four national-based analyses is also significantly distinct. The papers on Spain and Norway deploy an approach in which the selection of events is on the fore scene and highlights the consistency of key tropes in the designation process of Muslim populations. In the British and French cases, events are more on the background and come as an illustration of different “topos” of the narratives about the presence of “Muslims” in each context. These two styles reveal the varying tension that marks the selection of events in the different national contexts, even if we assume that inductive and deductive approaches intersect in both cases. Events are markers for a better understanding of the strength of certain tropes that sketch the social imaginary associated with this category. However, as mentioned above, the isolation of an event is complex because of the chain of other events in which it is potentially embedded and of which it itself becomes the source. In France and the United Kingdom, the plethora of controversies associated with Islam has led to their aggregation into topos or types of atmospheres. In Spain and Norway, where the debate on Islam is both less systematic and tense, the weight of certain events in the evolution of the uses and meanings of the category Muslim is in some ways more palpable and gives a more circumscribed expression to its narrative.

Altogether, possibilities for cross-national comparison among our selection of events are multiple, although our presentation in the following articles in this single issue is bounded within national case studies. A comparative reading on the interpretations of terrorism may be based on discussions of preventive policies, reactions to Islamist attacks in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005), to European Muslims joining the Islamic State in Syria (as in the case of Shamima Begum in Britain 2015), and to extreme right terror in the Breivik (2011) and Manshaus (2019) cases in Norway. Public debates over gender issues may be compared around events related to the wearing of veils in schools, paramount in France (see our discussion of the Law on Separatism, 2020) but also in Spain (see the Najwa Al-Mahla 2010 affair), or the undercover documentary on genital mutilation by Kadra Yussuf in Norway (2020). A cross-national comparison of public reactions to events interpreted as questioning the right to freedom of expression would involve the 1988 Satanic Verses affair in Britain, the attempted murder of their Norwegian editor in 1993 and the 2010 threats over a cartoon featuring the Prophet as a pig in 2010, the Charlie Hebdo 2015 attacks and, again, the 2020 Law on Separatism in France. Not exhaustive or systematic, these proposals for a thematic comparative reading go hand in hand with those in the following section, regarding how such comparisons are impacted by the different geographical scales of the public debates generated by events.
international affairs. Most often all three levels intermingle when interpreting a single event, so that the cultural repertoire that is mobilized includes terms and arguments that range from the geographically particular to the global. The event itself may take place at home or abroad. Our purpose is to focus on events occurring within the national territory and on the singular repercussions of events taking place elsewhere within the national public sphere.

To understand how events elsewhere become part of the national debate we may borrow concepts like exogenous shocks and demonstration effects from the field of economics, or think in terms of cultural diffusion. In all cases, collective identities that cross national borders intervene to selectively engage the social groups’ attention and emotions in issues developing in the geographical areas they relate to, be them imagined as “Europe” and “the West”, “the Ummah” and “the Muslim world”, or a hybrid combination of both inherited from colonial history and migration trajectories.

The plane crashes on the World Trade Center on 9/11 provide the best example of a shared exogenous shock that transformed the way Muslims were perceived and spoken of in all our case studies, even if they took place neither “here” in Europe nor “there” in the countries of origin of Muslim migrants, but “elsewhere”. In this sense, migrants live on a geopolitical tapestry of relationships that link them to the countries they emigrated from, but also embed them in the complex web of international relations. The attacks in New York critically linked Muslims in Europe to the perception of an external threat in the eyes of the majority (Shams, 2020: 4-6, 42). Later, bombings in London, Paris, Madrid and Barcelona reinforced the demonstration effect of 9/11.

Several of the events considered in the following articles can only be understood within this complex international relations tapestry that links the Western and Muslim worlds. When youth of Muslim descent mobilized against the Gulf War in Britain in 1990, or against the Gaza War in Norway in 2009, they grounded in Europe a global Muslim discontent against US/Western interference in the Middle East, a symbol of animosity towards the Muslim world and reluctance to give up postcolonial influence. The issue of blasphemy against Islam in Europe spilled over from Britain to Norway when a yet not fully identified group attempted to murder the editor of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in the second country in 1993, following the fatwa dictated by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini after they became public in the first in 1988. Cartoons published in Norwegian *Dagbladet* and French *Charlie Hebdo* later led to new and alarming manifestations of the international tension over freedom of expression in Europe.

Cultural diffusion allows for terms and arguments developed in one country to be transposed to events happening in another. Or not yet happening: public debates taking place in one national setting may build expectations in another that similar events shall take place in the territory. We may conceive of these as “expected events”: occurrences that otherwise may have gone unnoticed to journalists and opinion leaders become national events because their framing as such is readily available in other countries’ media discourse. Participants in the debate on Najwa Al-Malha’s expulsion from a school in the suburbs of Madrid in 2010 for wearing a veil imported arguments from the French debate on religious symbols in public spaces. Had it not coincided with the raging issue over the burkini in the neighbouring country, it is doubtful that Najwa’s picture would have been in the national media.
From an international scale, cultural diffusion, exogenous shocks and demonstration effects help us understand how events happening elsewhere and tropes coined abroad influence the framing of Muslims in each national context. But the local scale is also relevant for several of the events discussed in the following contributions: the virulence of some protests against mosques in Catalonia has been explained in terms of previous internal migrants’ aspirations to social respectability; the very particular social history of the banlieues needs to be considered to understand the specificity of the French public attention given to the experience of being Muslim in these areas; and trends in deindustrialization and ethnic segregation in Manchester and other mill towns are relevant to explain the Northern Riots. Although our case studies focus on public debates at the national level, these international and local influences are present throughout.

**Convergences and divergences in the meaning of the category Muslim**

As mentioned above, a comparison among our four socio-historical case studies allows us to identify several transversal themes that are relevant in the four contexts, although acquiring different salience and meaning in each. Across borders, the category Muslim has become fixed around issues of immigration, gender relations, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, citizenship and public security. The timing of the development of these tropes varies since they originate from events at the local and national scales, although shared external shocks allow for common historical junctures. Events selected in our analysis refer to different lines of public discussion in which the category “Muslim” is framed as legitimate, often signalling the start of the debate.

The cultural tropes that sketch the contents of the category Muslim constitute the discursive atmosphere in which individuals designated by it breathe and place them within the different axis of social relations (gender, ethnicity, religiosity, native/migrant, etc.). They thus affect processes of identity and alterity building, and mutual trust, shaping social and political relations in the long term. The intensity of these effects depends on the degree of structuration of the category at different points in time.

In this way, our synthesis approach facilitates the construction of a general landscape, understood as a general *Muslimscape*, from profoundly contextually embedded data and allows for not only commonalities but also differences to be elucidated and for the retention of a significant amount of contextuality.

The category becomes more structured and powerful when the different tropes coincide and intersect, so that their negative connotations of Muslims reinforce each other. In all our case studies we observe an oscillation in time between the naming and non-naming of Islam, but in some countries at some times the category crystallizes most. The current French public debate provides the best example of how it becomes rigidified and emotionally charged when religious difference is conflated with differences of social status, ethnic origin, gender and respect for public order, ready to be built up into new categories like that of “communautarism” and mobilized in the politics of threat.
Malleability versus rigidification of the category

The term Muslim is primarily related to ethnic groups framed by migrant populations in the four contexts under study. The following papers remind us of the different motivations, origins and timings of immigration in each case, but everywhere migrants have been essentialized as Muslims. However, the categories “migrants” and “Muslims” reverberate through each other (or merge) in different ways, since they are formulated in societies that have quite distinct historical, social and political experiences of reception of migratory flows involving different types of attention to Muslim populations.

The history of the categories is part of complex articulations with the debate on immigration in each country: the figure of Muslim in France is linked to that of the immigrant worker, even though the category of “French Muslim” has for a time carried a narrative of France’s colonial history. In Britain, it resonates much more strongly with the country’s colonial history. The fact that a large part of migrants from Muslim backgrounds were considered Commonwealth subjects/British citizens created a singular place for Islam in British society. Nevertheless, this context, which might be thought to be more favourable to a diversity of narratives about Muslims, has not prevented the idea of considering Muslims as separate citizens.

In Spain, the figure of the migrant and especially of the Moroccan migrant remains a major one in the conceptions of otherness. Ethnic, religious and cultural differences – even if negatively instrumentalized by a far-right that has been renewed in recent years and that contributes to the diffusion of stigmatization logics in the public debate, as demonstrated by the case of Fatima Hamed’s headscarf – maintain a form of fluid intertwining and leave space for a wider range of representations. In Norway, where most descendants of Muslim migrants – mainly from Somalia and Pakistan – are still young, the paradigm of integration dominates the debate, especially through the prism of gender issues in line with the Nordic Welfare State’s perspective on gender equality and children’s self-determination.

The evolution of the use of the category in the four contexts shows two distinct trends in the interpretation of the immigrant/Muslim couple. In Britain and France, the term “Muslim” has been progressively placed at the forefront of the public attention about ethnic, cultural and religious differences. The increasing use of the category Muslim locks individuals into a relationship of foreignness to society by referring to all sorts of conditions of belonging, and tends to standardize individual allegiances to religion and then deport those different on the religious dimension. In contrast, in Spain and Norway, the growing debate about Islam and Muslims has not completely absorbed the ethnic and social dimensions.

In the first dyad of cases – Britain and France – the term Muslim reflects an encapsulation and fossilization of the tensions particular to migration and religion, whereas in the second – Spain and Norway – it is characterized by a relative fluidity between ethnic, religious and social dimensions.
The different turning points also show a growing tension between understanding Muslims, on the one hand, as a separate, minority group and, on the other hand, as a constituent part of the so-called majority society. It is interesting to note here the contrast between the long history of settlement of Muslim migrant populations in France and the UK and the rigidification of meanings associated with Islam.

In contrast, in Spain, and in Norway, the category “Muslim” is not coloured in the same way by debates on Islam, allowing more flexibility in its link to ethnicity. It retains a synonymic relationship with the idea of migrant or ethnic background and is applied to a variety of profiles of “Muslims”, potentially cultivating extremely different relationships to belief and practice. In this case, the term “Muslim” retains a strong resonance with ethnicity and the hybrid arrangements it cultivates with religion.

In France, the progression of debates tends to erase this diversity by placing Islam in binarized perspectives more in a frontal relationship with society than within it. In England, the inclusion of Muslim populations, which suggests more fluid forms of circulation between the different dimensions – ethnic, social and cultural – is embedded in narratives of loss that have tended to perpetuate the figure of Muslim as a normative outsider.

These issues invite the reader to pay attention to the various forms of conflation between ethnicity and religion, which shed light on the background of identity and interest group formation in multicultural societies. In view of what the following articles show, one could ask if the reality of Muslim presences has not been impoverished by the endeavour to grasp a Muslim world as a separate entity within European societies. This special issue indeed shows the composite forms of multiculturalism at work, some of which perhaps too often escape study. The polarization processes of recent years have led us to focus on those individuals who do not want to see differences – or no longer want to see them – and who align themselves behind rigid positions. Is this a majority trend? Is it not undermined by new forms of activism and participation that have a greater or lesser say? On this point, the role of the State appears crucial.

The figure of the Muslim as an increasingly durable feature of the populations of Britain, France, Spain and Norway is associated with numerous debates on the compatibility of Islam with these societies, contributing to a major identity framing of the category “Muslim”. The analysis of the selected events – it is important to remind here that we did not try to coordinate between national teams in order to find convergences prior to the analysis of similar events from one country to another – underlines the transversality of several tropes around which different narratives are played out, revealing not only the part played by the debate on Islam in the wider public debate, but also its role in the polarization process that marks the countries studied to different degrees. The possibility of placing the four European cases side by side underlines the pervasiveness of the paradigm of loss crystallized by the presence of Muslim populations: a loss of place in terms of space, social status, identity and values.

The specific historicity of the category “Muslim” that emerges from the four papers allows us to highlight very different configurations of actors and a variation in the intensity of these forms of threat in the debates. In particular, the conflation of religious symbols and terrorism finds different degrees of both resonance and resistance in the public debates of the different countries. In this respect, the role of the State is different.
from one national reality to another. In France, the republican tradition, which the institutions must guarantee, has placed the State in an increasingly firm approach to the principle of indifference to differences, leading it to maintain an ambivalent power relationship with the recognition of Islam as a component of French society. Furthermore, this trend contributes to erasing the traditional political cleavages that remain more vivid on the issue of immigration. In Spain, as well as in Norway, the spreading of the category Muslim in the political debate is largely mediated by the negative discourses of the extreme right, which instrumentalize it in polarization strategies over migrants and their descendants. This trajectory seems to leave more room for the expression of activism, since it is less controversially linked to Muslim and immigrant populations in these two countries, allowing for linkages between different types of activism. In Britain, the developments of the War on Terror have simultaneously increased tenfold the media and public attention on Islam and Muslims and raised new barriers to the inclusion of Muslim populations in mainstream British society.

**Different configurations of polarization**

The four papers underline how the different tropes and degrees of crystallization of the category relate to different configurations of polarization. The “politics of threat” as a common trait acquire different intensities and meanings. In this respect, our work has brought to light a tension between representations of Islam as a threat and the experience of the threat by Muslim populations and/or those identified with Islam. The four national contexts differ concerning the greater or lesser elasticity that plays out between the two.

The increase in knowledge and debate related to the presence of Muslims in the four societies demonstrates a shift towards cultural and political issues. Social exclusion is increasingly reduced to issues of identity. National situations show the extent to which the dimension of community, nationality and identity is supplanting the social dimension that used to frame comparison in terms of social classes (Dubet, 2010). This raises questions about the way in which the relationship between inequality and identity is framed in our societies. In this respect, our cross-national comparison is particularly illuminating. In Britain and France, the diverse configurations of the intertwining between social exclusion, religion and ethnicity tend to create a dialectic between the threat produced and the threat suffered which makes the debate on Islam and Muslim populations the core of polarization. This raises the risk of reducing a range of important social issues – such as inequality, marginalization, disaffiliation, discrimination, racism – to a problem of values associated to Muslims (Aycaç and Yilmaz, 2012). The gender dimension plays a fundamental role in this process.

Polarization patterns are relatively different in Norway and Spain. In the first, Islam finds a relatively marginal place in the triangle that characterizes a space of polarization dominated by far-right violence. The third pole defined by radical conviviality shows the possibility of a federative perspective of de-polarization in which the idea of a war between Islam and the West is clearly dismissed. This space of de-polarization is not marked by a specific type of actor. The State, different profiles of Norwegian and non-
Norwegian citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims can meet there. In contrast with the three other contexts, Spain presents a case of lower polarization where, for instance, the negative consequences of the profiling in the preventive model of terror have fuelled a new kind of democratic participation by Muslim youth who have a chance at recognition as potential actors of de-polarization (and not only of an interactive or cumulative polarization as in the French case).

The threads of reflection that link the debates that have shaped the category “Muslim” over the last 40 years in the four contexts interrogate how multicultural patterns emerge and reconfigure along a continuum of tensions that have progressively placed Muslim populations as central actors in the debates. In this sense, the crucial insights that provide the following papers set the scene for thinking about the context in which the shifting identities of Muslim populations have been structured. Beyond this aspect, they invite us to renew, in a programmatic way, our reflection for future research on the uses we make of the category Muslim.

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