

# European Journal of Women's Studies

<http://ejw.sagepub.com>

---

## **Spatialities of the Secular: Geographies of the Veil in France and Turkey**

Claire Hancock

*European Journal of Women's Studies* 2008; 15; 165

DOI: 10.1177/1350506808091502

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ejw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/3/165>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

WISE (The European Women's Studies Association)

**Additional services and information for *European Journal of Women's Studies* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://ejw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://ejw.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

# Spatialities of the Secular

## Geographies of the Veil in France and Turkey

Claire Hancock

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-XII-VAL-DE-MARNE

---

**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the debate about the Islamic headscarf in France and Turkey, with particular reference to the law passed in France in 2004. It aims to bring out the spatial dimension of the secular: first, by underlining how the issue of the veil collapses spatial scales, from the individual (female) body to global geopolitical tensions; second, by looking at the specific place granted to schools as the primary focus of the political rows; and third, by teasing out some of the implicit assumptions about the 'location', in both France and Turkey, of the threat to secularism. It concludes that in France, at least, the debate had less to do with religion as such than with the place, both physical and metaphorical, granted to the Other in French society.

**KEY WORDS** France ♦ *laïcité* ♦ *laiklik* ♦ place ♦ scale ♦ space ♦ Turkey ♦ veil

In October 2004, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan gave an interview to the French television channel LCI. The most widely reported item of this interview was Erdogan's comments on the fact that his daughters were attending university in the US, because there, unlike in their own country, they could go to classes wearing their headscarf (*Turkey Post*, 21 October 2004). While these comments may have been intended partly as a rebuke to the French law banning headscarves (and all ostentatiously religious forms of dress) from French public schools, and were indeed interpreted in that way, they also served to underline the common line on secularism of the Turkish and French states.

France and Turkey have their specific brands of secularism, known as *laïcité* in the former and *laiklik* in the latter. Both countries also experienced ahead of other European countries debates about where and in which contexts women of Muslim faith could or could not wear the Islamic veil. They also offer two of the most striking instances in Europe of 'men in power

---

*European Journal of Women's Studies* Copyright © 2008 SAGE Publications  
(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore), 1350-5068 Vol. 15(3): 165–179;  
<http://ejw.sagepub.com> DOI: 10.1177/1350506808091502

using women's bodies as battlefields' (Human Rights Watch, 2004b: 3), to borrow the phrase from Turkish feminist Pinar Ilkcaracan.

In the light of discussions of the Islamic headscarf in English-language literature, which tend to treat veiling as a personal choice, an expression of faith or cultural belonging to be dealt with respectfully, Turkish and French legislation banning headscarves from public schools looks like an incursion of the state into a private sphere regarding the individual, family or 'community' only, or indeed a breach of 'human rights' (see Human Rights Watch, 2004a, 2004b). The European Commission on Human Rights, however, upheld the French law, much in the way it has consistently rejected appeals against the Turkish ban on headscarves in universities (ruling of June 2004).<sup>1</sup> The European legal framework therefore upholds what can be called a 'geography of the secular', by mapping out spaces and places where the practice of wearing the veil is prohibited.

In this article, I would like to look at the spatial dimension of the debates about the veil, and the ways in which they revolve around a geography of the secular, but also of the challenges to secularism. My general point is that spatially confining the veil issue, in discourse, to certain specific scales, places and spaces tends to overdetermine the debate, and conflate veiling with other political issues. I attempt to show how, by challenging these implicit spatial assignations, one can contribute to opening up the debate. By setting the French and Turkish cases side by side, I also aim to displace assumptions about the centrality of postcolonial tensions in France. I discuss primarily the debate that took place in France around the time the contentious law was passed, and use the situation in Turkey as a parallel to shed some light on it.

One aim is to rethink the classical division of space between public and private, the centrality of which many feminist geographers have questioned (McEwan, 2003),<sup>2</sup> and which proves overly simplistic to account for the spatialities of the secular. Beyond this questioning of the private/public divide, I propose to scrutinize the implicit spatial assumptions present in debates about the veil in three ways: first, by underlining how the issue of the veil collapses spatial scales, and how the political discourse it generates seems to move effortlessly from the individual (female) body to global geopolitical tensions, though it pauses at length on the intermediate scale of the national; second, by looking at the specific place granted to schools as the primary focus of the political rows in France, and to universities in Turkey; and third, by teasing out some of the implicit assumptions about the 'location', in both countries, of the threat to secularism.

## THE SECULAR STATE AND ITS RELIGIOUS OTHER

The key word for French and Turkish attitudes to the veil is *laïcité* or *laiklik* respectively, the Turkish term deriving from the French: the principle

whereby institutions should not in any way be influenced by any church or religion. Established in France by the law separating church and state in 1905, it was emulated by the Kemalist reformation of Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s because *laiklik* was seen to be a leading principle of modernity. Turkish secularism is different from the French brand (see Burdy and Marcou's introduction to *CEMOTI*, 1995): rather than an actual separation of church and state, it implies the subordination of the religious to the state, with imams becoming civil servants (Roy, 2005: 30, 95). I do not attempt here to give an account of the historical context in which these different forms of secularism evolved (for a discussion of this, see Çinar, 2005; Göle, 2003; *Hombres et Migrations*, 2005), but merely outline what seem to me to be the major points concerning the place given to women in these evolutions, and discuss what seems to form the basis of some misapprehensions, in Anglophone countries, about *laïcité* or *laiklik* and their spatial implications.

As part of the Kemalist modernization process initiated by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey in the 1920s, the adoption of western attire was strongly encouraged and the wearing of headscarves by women discouraged, and indeed banned in certain spaces; in parallel, the visibility of women in public was seen as the hallmark of the new, modern Turkey (Göle, 1997). As a result, a new dress code was established, beginning with a 1923 decree on dress; further laws in 1925 and 1934, updated in the early 1980s, stipulated that religious clothing should not be worn outside times of worship and established guidelines regarding the dress of students and state employees. The law has been enforced strictly since 1997 and wearing the headscarf in Turkey is therefore prohibited not only in public schools, but also in universities, courts of justice and official buildings generally.

In Turkey, the 'Islamization' of political life implies an active and symbolic part played by women, which both continues and subverts the traditional visibility of women in the public sphere in Turkey. Nilüfer Göle has shown that it is both the process of democratization of the regime and increased access to education for women that have rekindled the debate, since among those clamouring for the right to wear headscarves university students are foremost (Göle, 1997). In this specific context, headscarves signify both a challenge to the legitimacy of the traditional, westernized elites, and a critique of the state's secularist universalism. As Alev Çinar aptly summarizes: 'The unveiling of the female body was promoted by the Islamists as a sign of liberation of women and of the nation from the oppression of the secular Westernizing state that denied the Turkish nation its own true culture and identity' (Çinar, 2005: 74).

In France, a deeply entrenched secularism pervades large sections of society: for instance, a survey (conducted by opinion poll company Pew, quoted in *The Economist*, 28 October 2004) indicated that only 11 percent of French people considered religion 'very important', while the equivalent

figure in Germany was 21 percent, in Italy 27 percent – and as many as 59 percent in the US. The whole notion of *laïcité* revolves around the idea that religious beliefs, which anyone is free to hold privately, are not a legitimate part of public life: the division between private and public is therefore a central tenet of French *laïcité*, and the legitimacy of expressions of faith is not assessed per se but according to the type of space, or place in which they occur.

Olivier Roy, among others, has contrasted *laïcité* and secularization: while according to the latter, more common in Protestant countries, a society gradually frees itself from the sacred without formally forgoing it, the former results from the active eviction of the sacred, confined behind a legally defined boundary, mostly in Catholic countries (Roy, 2005: 30). This divergence within the West as to the importance of religion, as to its legitimacy as a reference in politics and as to the degree of 'sacralization' of the state itself (Roy, 2005: 123) probably accounts for some of the misunderstandings, or differences in assessment, between the French and Anglo-American intellectual universes. Thus, some of the arguments for 'toleration' put forth in Anglo-American journals patronize French intellectuals or politicians operating 'within their own cultural limits' (Galeotti, 1994: 676), as if Anglo-American views on these issues were not, themselves, constrained by any 'cultural limits'. Several scholars have more recently discussed the specific meanings of *laïcité* in French political thought and attempted to 'translate' French debates in order to make them understandable, or at least less easy to caricature and dismiss, from Anglophone points of view (see Kros, 2005; Laborde, 2002).

The Anglo-American view may be that French analysts tend to portray young Muslim women as 'passive victims of oppressive cultures' (Dwyer, 1999: 8) or 'under total control of their male relatives' or 'so immobilised by the significations of their clothing that the only statement they could possibly be making is a kind of inchoate plea for rescue' (Moruzzi, 1994: 662). Admittedly, colonizers focused on the veil as a symbol of Islamic backwardness and primitivism (Dwyer, 1999: 9), which made it 'an intense focus of symbolic struggle during the Algerian Revolution' (Moruzzi, 1994: 663; see also Shepard, 2004). There are, therefore, distinct postcolonial overtones in the French debate. However, as I try to show, it may be more relevant to think of it more generally in terms of the difficulty of accepting, in national political cultures strongly influenced by universalism and dominated by centralizing states, the presence of the Other – be it the figure of women as Others in male-dominated societies, of people of rural origin as Others in urban societies, or the figure of the religious believer as Other to the rational, modern citizen of secular states.

This is not to suggest, in any way, that the political contexts in France and Turkey are identical; however, from an Anglo-American perspective, conceptions of the state and its relation to citizens in both countries have many

similarities, not least when it comes to the acceptance of difference, and in particular of the veil, which functions in both countries as what Claire Dwyer calls 'an overdetermined signifier of difference' (Dwyer, 1999).

#### AN ISSUE OF SCALE?

In Turkey, the *türban*<sup>3</sup> is said by Islamists to constitute a protection against the 'cultural aggression of the West' (CEMOTI, 1995: 23). In much the same way, a woman wearing a headscarf in France can be seen as expressing the resistance of a cultural and religious specificity in the context of a dominant, or hegemonic, culture. However, these interpretations take into account power relations on the global and national scales, but overlook the equally important power relations within the Muslim communities, and the fact that it is women, and practically exclusively women,<sup>4</sup> who are made to stand up to oppressive state measures or cultural oppression. In fact, what may have one meaning on one scale (i.e. veil as resistance to the state, or as identity-assertion against the West) works very differently indeed on other scales; and the closer one gets to the everyday lives and to the actual bodies of the young women wearing the veil, the less distinct such meanings become.

As Nilüfer Göle wrote, referring to Arlene MacLeod's idea of 'accommodating protest' in Egypt, 'a veiled woman may be delivering a political message to Western modernism, but simultaneously she is accommodating male domination based on her invisibility and her confinement to the space of *mahrem*'<sup>5</sup> (Göle, 2003: 158). Alev Çınar subscribes to the same idea when she writes that 'the new veiling has the effect of reproducing and naturalizing the power and authority of the male public gaze' (Çınar, 2005: 77). This raises the issue of female agency: when so many political issues, symbols and interpretations are projected onto a single item of feminine clothing, it seems impossible to ensure that it is indeed the intention of the wearer that is made manifest.

It is useful here to consider the body as a scale, following Linda McDowell, who defines scale as a 'boundary between different kinds of spaces' (McDowell, 1999: 40). The relevance of such a reading is demonstrated by Alev Çınar, who shows that in the Turkish context 'the body is metaphorically employed not only as a symbol of the nation and its boundaries, but also as a material space where the boundaries of the public and the private are drawn toward the construction of the national public subject' (Çınar, 2005: 53): the body of individual women is therefore obscured by the host of national symbols it is loaded with.

Bearing in mind this importance of scale, let us take a closer look at some spatial features of the French law, passed on 25 March 2004. Unlike the earlier ruling by the Conseil d'Etat, in 1989, that left decisions to

exclude pupils from schools to the *local* level of each school, and the similar ruling in Britain, in 2007,<sup>6</sup> about the right for pupils or instructors to wear a full veil at school, this law was to apply at the *national* level, across all French territory (including overseas territories such as La Réunion, which have large Muslim minorities).

It has been argued that this law was *out of scale* with the actual problems, which arose in a very small number of schools, mostly located on the outskirts of Paris. Jean Baubérot, who was a member of the commission established to study the issue and make proposals to the French president (known as the Stasi Commission, after the name of its president<sup>7</sup>), was the only member who refused to endorse the final report, for reasons he has repeatedly made clear (Baubérot, 2004a, 2004b). He has argued that passing a law seemed out of proportion with the actual extent of the problem, and has also suggested that the origin of the members of the commission, reflecting French centralism (19 out of 20 were Parisian, and only one from the provinces), may have influenced the outcome.

Furthermore, he has argued that the hypothetical need to uphold secularism throughout French territory was in fact used as an excuse, since a significant part of France, the Alsace-Moselle (the eastern area that was annexed by Germany between 1870 and 1919) retained a specific status, the Concordat, meaning the separation of church and state does not apply there.<sup>8</sup> Baubérot (2004b) has made the case that a *laïcité* that tolerates such a significant territorial exception isn't justified in disallowing the wearing of veils by a small number of public school pupils.

Baubérot was therefore the isolated dissenter in the Stasi Commission. Another member, Patrick Weil, an academic and specialist on immigration, has also written about his experience in the commission:

... our near-unanimous sentiment (there was one dissident among our group of 19) was that we had to understand and then address the issue at a *national level* rather than merely a local one.

The reason was plain: the wearing of a headscarf or the imposition of it on others is much more than an issue of individual freedom: it has become a France-wide strategy pursued by fundamentalist groups who use public schools as their battleground. (Weil, 2005: 47; emphasis in the original)

While making the point that a national scale was felt to be appropriate in response to a perceived 'France-wide strategy' on the part of fundamentalists, Weil also implies that public schools were chosen as the 'battleground' by these very enemies, a claim that deserves further scrutiny.

Tellingly, among other vociferous and influential voices heard both by the Stasi Commission and on French television, Weil mentions 'Iranian refugees' (Weil, 2005), among whom the most popular was Chahdortt Djavann, who had published a best-selling essay against the veil (Djavann,

2003). This is symptomatic of the way in which the French debate, while intensely *national* in the way it was framed or engineered, picked some *international* points of reference and could at times claim to resonate with worldwide geopolitical confrontations.

It appears therefore that the scale of the individual (female) bodies was completely bypassed in the debate, by the prompt shift to the local scale (discussed in more depth in the following sections), and the even swifter shift to the national and international scales. Arguably, this obscured crucial aspects of the debate, as much as it disregarded the effects on individual young women, who ended up being denied a public education for reasons unrelated to themselves and their choice of dress.

## THE SPACES OF THE SCHOOL AND THE UNIVERSITY

Weil explains why schools were singled out, among many other possible sites to combat fundamentalism:

... if the headscarf had been banned (for example) on the basis of discrimination against women, it would have been necessary to do so not only in schools, but across the whole of society.

The ban concerns only public schools because there, those concerned are minors. There is no question of forbidding religious display in universities or elsewhere in the adult world. Adults have means of defence that children do not. (Weil, 2005: 48)

Is it simply, then, because children are concerned that schools were so central to the French debate, and can that be the basis of the distinction between some public spaces that are key to the national identity, and others that are less so? Other aspects have to be taken into account, which tend to demonstrate that contrary to Weil's claim, it was not a choice of the 'fundamentalists' to single out the schools, but rather a result of some French cultural specificities.

The professional group most directly confronted with headscarf-wearing pupils, teachers in secondary schools, are intellectual heir to the tradition of *hussards noirs de la République*, the school masters sent out by the Republic to defend republican values against the encroachments of the clergy in the remotest areas of France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>9</sup> There is therefore much to suggest that it was the religious stepping back into the classroom (and the potential subjection of the female in such a religious culture) and not the fact that the religion in question was Islam rather than Christianity that triggered reactions among teachers.

Beyond this, it is necessary to give some thought to the significance of the school (and the university, in Turkey) as spaces. In the context of the debate around the 2004 law, philosopher Etienne Balibar, who opposed it,

has offered very perceptive elements to analyse the specificity of the space of the school, in the French republican context. He describes it as a 'place of transition between the space of "private" existence and "public" existence in "public" space, but situated *in the public space itself*' (Balibar, 2004: 20; emphasis in the original). School is a place which operates

... a relativization of social belonging, of beliefs, of ideologies, in order to facilitate the entry of individuals into the sphere of 'politics', of citizenship, therefore it has to virtually *detach* individuals from their primary *identities*. ... What is asked of the school is not that it be 'neutral', like the state, but that it *operate a neutralization*, that it constitute a *surplus of neutrality* between two 'spaces' that are *not neutral*, the so-called 'private', and the so-called 'public'. (Balibar, 2004: 20; emphasis in the original)

Therefore, if we follow Balibar, the space of the school is a form of 'third space', neither private nor public, and on which higher demands can be placed than on private space, obviously, but also than on public space in general. Hence, its crucial place in the French debate.

In Turkey, the focal point of debates has tended to be women wearing headscarves to university or claiming the right to do so, who are perceived as making a political statement, and not just as conforming to private beliefs. One of the reasons for this is that there too it is a very specific sort of space that is concerned: access to higher education for women was one of the tenets of Kemalism. That the young women's claim has a spatial component is made clear by Nilüfer Göle's enlightening analysis: she notes that these young women are using the 'space of opportunities' opened to the female part of the population by Kemalism (Göle, 2003: 164); and she goes on to add that these 'young women cause unease and confusion, because they appropriate the religious signs of female confinement, whilst gaining public visibility. What creates the problem is the intrusion of Islamic references in *spaces* created and ruled by the liberal and secular values of modernity' (Göle, 2003: 170; emphasis added).

Therefore, it seems that in Turkey too, it is the construction of certain spaces as 'special', as playing an essential part with respect to values perceived as essential to the constitution of the national, that explains the focus of debates on institutions of higher education: here again the sense of 'spatial transgression' or intrusion of one sphere into another appears crucial.

We return here to the central question of the relation that citizens have with the state: Jean Baubérot contrasts the US view of the state with the French, as follows

In the USA, the emphasis is on the freedom of the individual vis-a-vis the state; in France, some tend to think that freedom – in the sense of liberation from prejudice and dogmatism – is obtained thanks to the state, the 'Republican state', and its leading institution, 'the Republican school'. (Baubérot, 2004a: 136)

This is how a tension described as of worldwide geopolitical importance, as essential to France's political identity, seems to narrow down to and focus on the very local space of public schools; more specifically, it appeared from the coverage in the media that only a small number of schools were in fact concerned by the issue, and that most of these were located in the *banlieues*.

## THE LOCATION OF THE ISSUE

The evidence from French *banlieues* tends to demonstrate that it is not the French state's encroachment on their freedom that young women find threatening, but the masculine control of their everyday behaviour (Coutras, 2003). As has been pointed out by Tévanian (2005), this evidence was given prominence in media coverage in the run-up to the discussion and the vote on the law. Young Muslim women's testimonies published in newspapers such as *Libération* at the time of the debate around the law often depict the wearing of the headscarf not as a free, personal choice, but as giving in to strong pressure, which may not originate within the family, but from an environment of misogynist, intolerant men, who will harass women not wearing the veil or behaving in other ways they disapprove of (going to cafes, smoking, befriending or going out with people from outside the community, etc.).

A political movement called 'Ni Putes Ni Soumises' ('Neither Whores nor Submissive') drew public attention to the difficult situation of women in the *quartiers*, the poor neighbourhoods of social housing with high proportions of people of foreign origin (for a discussion in English of the characteristics of French *banlieues*, see Dikeç, 2006). This movement, which began in 2001, is explicitly secular, republican and claims a *mixité* (a term used both to designate the coexistence of both sexes, and that of people of different cultural backgrounds) 'based on respect'; the statement of intent posted on its website depicts women in the *quartiers* as 'stifled by the machismo of the men of our neighbourhoods, who use a so-called "tradition" to deny us our most elementary rights' (for an in-depth discussion of the movement, see Guénif-Souilamas, 2004).

The leader of the movement, Fadela Amara,<sup>10</sup> was among the 'witnesses' heard by the Stasi Commission and was among the most vocal exponents of the idea that the issue of the veil, and of female oppression, is deeply embedded in specific parts of French cities, the *banlieues* (known also as the *cités* or *quartiers*):

I think that in order to win this battle in the *cités* – because this is happening in the *cités* – I sincerely believe that we cannot consider the issue of the veil or the debate about *laïcité* without taking into account the decline of the ghettos, not to mention all the parameters of the situation in the *quartiers*. (Amara, 2003)

In this account, which became hugely influential in 2003–4, the *banlieues*, where many people of foreign origin have become entrapped by economic difficulties over the years, are pointed to as the location of the problem, the site from which the threat to *laïcité* emerges. This was, however, a recent dimension to the debate, since, as shown by Deltombe, during the first 'headscarf affair', in Creil in 1989, there had been no reference to the *banlieue* whatsoever (Deltombe, 2005: 151).<sup>11</sup>

The *banlieues* have become, in French political discourse, shorthand for the presence of a stigmatized Other in the national body, or of 'barbarians at our doorstep'. In much the same way, there is in Turkey an implicit association between the wearing of the headscarf, the inroads of Islamist parties into municipal and national politics and the massive rural immigration that has settled in the *gecekondu* (informal settlements) on the outskirts of large Turkish cities. These settlements are often described as hotbeds of Islamist movements and the location of the threat to secularism (see, for instance, the interview with R. Çakir, 'La Ville, piège ou tremplin pour les Islamistes turcs', in *CEMOTI*, 1995). This resonates with the remarks of Nilüfer Göle, who analyses the tension as 'geographical': 'The türban transfers the Islamic fact from "periphery" to "centre". Geographically, it moves to the cities, becomes an urban phenomenon, and culturally, it enters the field where the central values and symbols of society are elaborated' (Göle, 2003: 100). She further expands on this common notion that with the unveiling of women, 'popular culture has started to infiltrate elite tradition. And indeed this is the reality underlying common complaints in Turkey, such as "cities have become villages"' (Göle, 2003: 155).

Studies have brought evidence of the ambiguous effect of headscarf wearing in Turkish cities: on the one hand, it facilitates women's mobility in urban space, enables them to enter the public sphere while conforming to their personal beliefs (Ilyasoglu, 1998). On the other hand, however, it may cause women to be treated condescendingly, because headscarf wearing is also associated with poor education and rural origin (Secor, 2002). Therefore, there are also ways in which wearing a headscarf in Turkish cities can function as a sign of Otherness, underlining not just a gender divide, but a social one, and maybe a generational one, too.<sup>12</sup>

The issue is no less complex than in France, since many Islamist party activists in large Turkish cities are women, for whom this political activism becomes a form of entry into public life (Secor, 2001). This resonates with Sarah Bracke's plea for a wider recognition of feminine forms of agency in fundamentalist religious movements (Bracke, 2003). However, Alev Çınar, writing about the specific Turkish context, argues that

Just as the public visibility of 'modern women' in the early years of the republic had served to vest the state with political agency and to deny agency to women themselves, the headscarf had the exact same effect for

the women wearing it. It served to vest the Islamist leadership with political agency at the cost of agency for the wearers of the headscarf. (Çinar, 2005: 87)

It seems that the very intensity of debates in France and Turkey about the wearing of the veil may have deprived women of what Claire Dwyer analysed in Britain as the possibility of manipulating and challenging the meaning of dress, and left them mostly with the 'difficulties involved in subverting dominant discourses' (Dwyer, 1999: 21).

## CONCLUSION

I would like to suggest that a key to understanding French attitudes around this debate is universalism: there is a strong resistance to the idea that differences in the national body deserve recognition,<sup>13</sup> and a sense that entrenching these differences in political life, in any way, is a form of 'differentialist racism'. One young woman, Nadia, interviewed by *Libération* in January 2004, as she watched the demonstrations against the law banning headscarves in French schools, commented: 'I came to see how we are obliged to become a caricature of ourselves' (*Libération*, 19 January 2004). Nadia opposed both the law and the wearing of headscarves. Her remark echoes the reflection by Etienne Balibar: 'individuals and collectivities that are prey to racism (its "objects") find themselves constrained to see themselves as a community' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 18). The French obsession with *communautarisation* as anathema to French political principles (Roy, 2005: 62) is thus projected onto minority groups.

Polls taken in 2004, however, showed Muslim French people to be deeply divided over the law, with 53 percent of Muslim men opposed to it (42 percent in favour), 49 percent of Muslim women in favour (43 percent opposed in one poll, quoted in *The Economist*, 21 January 2004). The same polls showed overwhelming support for the law across French society as a whole, regardless of the political affiliation of respondents (69 percent were overall in favour of the law, 66 percent among supporters of the left, 75 percent among supporters of the right).

Despite the many French specificities at play in framing the debate, there is a sense in which foreign public opinion, for instance British, has edged closer to the French position, maybe as a result of the trauma of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. Since the uproarious indignation at the French law that was expressed in such forums as the European Social Forum in London in 2004, Britain has experienced its own debate about Islamic veils, triggered by Jack Straw's comments in October 2006 and inflamed by the *Daily Express's* strident calls to 'ban the veil' in the following weeks.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the French debate was tremendously one-sided and that French 'public opinion' was strongly influenced by a campaign in the media, as has been documented by Tévanian (2005). It also appears, in retrospect, that the hearings of the Stasi Commission, that were supposed to represent all sides of the argument, were probably partial.

Furthermore, the case has been put convincingly that the whole 'headscarf affair' was in fact little more than a diversion, staged to distract French public opinion from two real problems in French society: a persistent misogyny, that the rhetoric of Muslim oppression of women conveniently projected onto a minority group, while implicitly exonerating French society at large; and a persistent failure to integrate people of immigrant origin, which a focus on the headscarf no less conveniently allows to be blamed on the very victims (Terray, 2004). On the basis of this acute analysis, the question hardly appears to concern religion or secularism, and seems to revolve more around the domination of French political debate and media by white males. In much the same way, the confrontation in Turkey between Islamists and secularists seems to be steeped in questions of acceptance of 'Anatolian peasants' as a legitimate part of Turkey's political and urban elite.

A spatial reading of the French debate, and a brief overview of the Turkish one, allows a displacement of the 'headscarf ban' from the framework of religion to that of politics: as seen through various scales, through a focus on the space of the school or the university and through the underlying assumptions about the 'location' of the issue, it tells us more about the way states and societies deal with the Other, and the place they grant the Other, than about any spiritual matter.

## NOTES

The author wishes to thank the editor and two anonymous referees for their encouragements and very helpful suggestions to improve this article. Thanks also to Béatrice Collignon and Jean-François Staszak for their support and help with an earlier draft, and to Mustafa, Elif and Félix for their assistance with the revisions.

1. See Editorial, this issue, for the February 2008 ruling of the Turkish parliament which lifts the ban on headscarves being worn in universities.
2. In the case of Turkey, the relevance of the private/public divide cannot be taken for granted, since, as Nilüfer Göle has shown, the notion of 'private' in its European sense has no equivalent in Turkish (Göle, 2003: 171). The first term of the *mahrem/namahrem* duality, often rendered as private/public, refers to the sphere of intimacy, that of female sexuality, and therefore carries connotations of the forbidden absent from 'private' (Göle, 2003: 103).
3. In this article, I use the terms 'veil' and 'headscarf' indiscriminately, not only because in the French context *voile* and *foulard* are used synonymously, but also following Alev Çinar's authoritative discussion of veiling and unveiling in Turkey (Çinar, 2005). See her Chapter 2 for a full discussion of different styles of veiling, Islamic fashion and couture.

4. In the case of Turkey, the equally symbolic wearing of beards or facial hair by civil servants, for example, is also frowned upon. However, I subscribe to Nilüfer Göle's interpretation whereby women were symbolically central both to the Kemalist revolution (Göle, 2003: 178) and to its present contestation by Islamist movements (Göle, 2003: 183).
5. See note 2.
6. I refer here to Education Secretary Alan Johnson's decision ('Minister Gives Schools the Right to Ban Muslim Veil', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2007).
7. For a full discussion of the context and work of the Stasi Commission in English, see Kros (2005) and Thomas (2006).
8. Religious education exists in primary schools and *collèges*, and clergymen (of the three religions recognized at the time of the Concordat, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism) are paid by the French state.
9. Olivier Roy describes French *laïcité* as a '*combat laïcité*', based on anti-clericalism and verbal violence, and also believes that 'most professors who refuse veiled pupils would show just as much intransigence if confronted by seminarists wearing religious garb' (Roy, 2005: 56).
10. Fadela Amara became a junior minister in the 2007 Fillon government, responsible for *politique de la ville*, or urban policy.
11. By 1995, the *banlieue* setting is completely taken for granted: see, for instance, Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar's (1995) account, the foreword of which begins with a stereotyped and bleak depiction of the *quartiers*, despite the fact that the interviewees in their book report on practices in a number of environments both urban and suburban.
12. Nilüfer Göle's fieldwork with young university students claiming the right to wear the veil confirms that a large majority have modest social backgrounds and are of rural origin. However, they are representative of their family's social ascension, and their choice to wear the veil, frequently regarded negatively by their own family, often has to do with their arrival in major cities (Göle, 2003: 95).
13. There is, for instance, a strong movement against the inclusion of 'ethnic' or 'racial' data in the national census, led by a large number of academics and intellectuals: see *Libération*, 23 February and 7 March 2007. The French census only includes data about nationality.

## REFERENCES

- Amara, F. (2003) Testimony at the Stasi Commission, 10 October; at: [www.communautarisme.net/commissionstasi/Audition-de-Mme-Fadela-Amara,-Presidente-du-mouvement-Ni-putes,-ni-soumises\\_a31.html](http://www.communautarisme.net/commissionstasi/Audition-de-Mme-Fadela-Amara,-Presidente-du-mouvement-Ni-putes,-ni-soumises_a31.html)
- Balibar, E. (2004) 'Dissonances dans la laïcité', pp. 15–27 in C. Nordmann (ed.) *Le Foulard Islamique en questions*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.
- Balibar, E. and I. Wallerstein (1991) *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London and New York: Verso.
- Baubérot, J. (2004a) 'La Commission Stasi vue par un de ses membres', *French Politics, Culture and Society* 22(3): 135–41.
- Baubérot, J. (2004b) 'Laïcité, le grand écart. Pouvons-nous, en la matière, tout concéder aux Alsaciens-Mosellans et presque rien aux Musulmans?', *Le Monde* 4 January.
- Bracke, S. (2003) 'Author(iz)ing Agency. Feminist Scholars Making Sense of Women's Involvement in Religious "Fundamentalist" Movements', *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 10(3): 335–46.

- CEMOTI (*Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*) (1995) special issue 'Laïcité(s) en France et en Turquie', No. 19 (January–June).
- Çinar, A. (2005) *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places and Times*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coutras, J. (2003) *Les peurs urbaines et l'autre sexe*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Deltombe, T. (2005) *L'Islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l'Islamophobie en France, 1975–2005*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Dikeç, M. (2006) 'Badlands of the Republic? Revolts, the French State, and the Question of Banlieues', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24: 159–63.
- Djavann, C. (2003) *Bas les voiles!* Paris: Gallimard.
- Dwyer, C. (1999) 'Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women and the Negotiation of Differences', *Gender, Place and Culture* 6: 5–27.
- Galeotti, A. (1994) 'A Problem with Theory: A Rejoinder to Moruzzi', *Political Theory* 22–4: 673–7.
- Gaspard, F. and F. Khosrokhavar (1995) *Le Foulard et la République*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Göle, N. (1997) 'The Gendered Nature of the Public Sphere', *Public Culture* 10(1): 61–81.
- Göle, N. (2003) *Musulmanes et modernes. Voile et civilisation en Turquie*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Guénif-Souilamas, N. (2004) 'Ni pute ni soumise ou très pute, très voilée. Laïcité d'en haut et féminisme d'en bas', pp. 81–8 in C. Nordmann (ed.) *Le Foulard Islamique en questions*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.
- Hommes et Migrations* (2005) special issue 'Laïcité, les 100 ans d'une idée neuve', No. 1258.
- Human Rights Watch (2004a) 'France: Headscarf Ban Violates Religious Freedom', HRW Press Release, 27 February.
- Human Rights Watch (2004b) 'Memorandum to the Turkish Government on Human Rights Watch's Concerns with Regard to Academic Freedom in Higher Education, and Access to Higher Education for Women Who Wear the Headscarf', HRW Briefing Paper, 29 June.
- Ilyasoglu, A. (1998) 'Islamist Women in Turkey: Their Identity and Self-Image', pp. 241–61 in Z.F. Arat (ed.) *Deconstructing Images of 'The Turkish Woman'*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Kros, C. (2005) 'Secularity in a World "Torn by Difference": A Consideration of the French Headscarf Affair from South Africa', *Politikon* 32(1): 1–16.
- Laborde, C. (2002) 'On Republican Toleration', *Constellations* 9(2): 167–83.
- McDowell, L. (1999) *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McEwan, C. (2003) 'The West and Other Feminisms', pp. 405–19 in K. Anderson, M. Domosh, S. Pile and N. Thrift (eds) *Handbook of Cultural Geography*. London: Sage.
- Moruzzi, N. (1994) 'A Problem with Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity', *Political Theory* 22–4: 653–72.
- Roy, O. (2005) *La Laïcité face à l'Islam*. Paris: Hachette.
- Secor, A.J. (2001) 'Toward a Feminist Counter-Geopolitics: Gender, Space and Islamist Politics in Istanbul', *Space and Polity* 5(3): 191–211.
- Secor, A.J. (2002) 'The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Women's Dress, Mobility and Islamic Knowledge', *Gender, Place and Culture* 9(1): 5–22.
- Shepard, T. (2004) 'La "Bataille du Voile" pendant la guerre d'Algérie', pp. 134–41 in C. Nordmann (ed.) *Le Foulard Islamique en questions*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.

- Terray, E. (2004) 'L'Hystérie politique', pp. 103–17 in C. Nordmann (ed.) *Le Foulard Islamique en questions*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.
- Tévanian, P. (2005) *Le Voile médiatique. Un faux débat: 'l'affaire du foulard Islamique'*. Paris: Raisons d'agir éditions.
- Weil, P. (2005) 'Lever le voile', *Esprit* January: 45–53. (English pub. 'A Nation in Diversity: France, Muslims and the Headscarf'; at: [www.open-democracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=5&debateId=57&articleId=1811](http://www.open-democracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=5&debateId=57&articleId=1811))

Claire Hancock teaches geography at the Université Paris-XII-Val-de-Marne and has published extensively on geographical approaches to gender issues, in France, Mexico and Turkey. She co-edited a special issue of the French journal *Géographie et Cultures* titled 'Le Genre, constructions spatiales et culturelles' in 2005. Address: Département de Géographie, UFR de Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Paris-XII-Val-de-Marne, 61 avenue du Général de Gaulle, 94010 Créteil, France. [email: [hancock@mercator.ens.fr](mailto:hancock@mercator.ens.fr)]

