THREE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO IMMIGRATION:
LIBERALISM, NATIONALISM, & POSTMODERNISM

By

Peter O’Brien
Professor
Political Science
Trinity University
San Antonio, TX 78212-7200
Tel.: 210 999 8340
Fax: 210 999 8320
E-mail: pobrien@trinity.edu

DRAFT

INTRODUCTION

Culture wars are breaking out all around Europe. The most passionate of these tend to involve minority Islamic communities lodged in European societies as a result of large-scale immigration in the postwar era. The controversies over Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, the veiling of Muslim females (the so-called *affaire de foulard*), and most recently the printed caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad make for irresistible lead stories in Europe’s sensationalized media market. Beyond these headliners lurk less conspicuous but hardly less vehement or consequential disputes over such matters as whether to offer Islamic instruction in public schools, to permit mosques to erect minarets, to proscribe Muslim butchering techniques (*halal*), or to ban specific Islamic associations. Issues such as these have moved some analysts to characterize the incorporation of the European Union’s estimated 13 million Muslims as one of the most formidable tasks facing it and its member states in the new century. [Castles and Miller, 2003; Judt, 2005] Indeed, we may be witnessing within Europe itself a microcosm of the “clash of civilizations” Samuel Huntington [1996] has famously hypothesized for the entire globe.

The “clash thesis” crudely postulates cultural unity within vying civilizations. Even the casual observer of a topic such as the head-scarf debate has to recognize the fierce difference of opinion among Europeans (and among Muslims for that matter). Despite regular exposure to such pluralism, however, political actors often seek to justify their favored positions as representing and even defending some profound civilizational or at least national essence or ideal that exists prior to and therefore above the messy give and take of the political fray. This alleged apolitical realm is presumed to provide pure
and prudent guidance that if properly applied to the political world could tidy it up by supplying unambiguous solutions to controversies such as that surrounding veiling. The present essay explores whether such an overarching unity truly exists in Europe, or the West more generally. I start from the premise that if it does, philosophers – broadly understood as deep thinkers – would be most likely to discern and articulate it.

I locate no such unified understanding among Western philosophers. Instead, I find fundamental disagreement not terribly unlike that which characterizes practical politics. Indeed, I demonstrate that numerous opinions salient in the head-scarf affair can be quite compellingly justified by various strands of reasoning that are well established in the Western philosophical tradition. I delineate three distinguishable schools and label them liberalism, nationalism and postmodernism. Each reposes on the foundation of the works of eminent Western thinkers who almost all would agree deserve a place in the pantheon of great savants. Thus liberals can invoke the likes of Locke, Kant and Mill, nationalists Vico, Montesquieu, and Herder, postmodernists Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger. Furthermore, respected contemporary thinkers honor and maintain these schools by further developing and deepening their founding ideas in intriguing ways. Based particularly on the works of these later philosophers, I divide each school into “hard” and “soft” camps as far as the issues raised by immigration are concerned. “Hardliners” accentuate the conflicts between native and newcomer and deem them virtually insurmountable. “Softliners” recognize differences but work to reconcile them.

As regards civilizational unity, I show that most of these philosophical viewpoints – though persuasive in their own right – are in the end incompatible, even incommensurable and therefore irreconcilable one to the other. Our dilemma in the West,
I conclude, lies not in possessing a single, unified moral authority whose teachings are regrettably ignored by narrow-minded, self-interested political actors who fail to embrace the ethically superior solution. We possess rather too many right solutions to the kind of contentious issues like the head-scarf debate.

One caveat is in order before we launch our discussion. Few of the philosophers I review take an explicit position regarding veiling. Inversely, policy makers as well as political activists rarely if ever allude to the philosophers, let alone employ their arguments. This gaping chasm between theory and praxis is regrettable. [Benhabib, 2004: 143] I hope this essay can contribute to bridging the divide by showing how theories can justify concrete measures and how the latter can usefully reveal the formers’ practical consequences. Still, my central purpose remains to demonstrate the absence of concord in the theoretical realm.

**HARD LIBERALISM**

Let us begin with the most salient position, namely banning the head scarf. Naturally, one thinks of France, whose National Assembly voted by an overwhelming majority in 2004 to proscribe veiling in public schools (as well as the ostentatious display of religious symbols from any religion). The French are not without their proponents elsewhere. Former German President Johannes Rau, for instance, urged lawmakers to adopt a similar policy. Several German Länder have indeed passed recent legislation forbidding public school teachers to don the hijab at work. [Karakaşoğlu, 2005: 10] Holland outlaws veiling for judges, lawyers, and physicians. [Mushaben, 2005: 210] Though pilloried in some circles as culturally insensitive, even imperialistic, [El Guindi, 1999: 184; or

Hard liberals seek to defend, indeed revive, the unabashed universalism at liberalism’s core. They readily acknowledge and reject the racist assumptions underpinning many a past liberal project, such as Europe’s self-appointed mission to civilize the rest of humanity – the “White Man’s Burden” in Kipling’s immortal coinage. But they insist that far from perfect European men such as Locke, Voltaire and Kant nevertheless discerned and expressed certain invaluable, timeless moral truths. [Barry, 2000: 132-40] These include (in slightly updated formulation) first and foremost the fundamental equality of all human beings regardless of race, creed, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, etc. as well as the primacy of the moral autonomy of the individual against the claims of any wider community. Furthermore, all humans must be presumed to possess the capacity to reason and thus to improve themselves. These values are neither culturally, historically nor geographically contingent and therefore apply to all persons in all contexts. [See Gray, 1995: xii]

Nor are they self-evident and secure. Hard liberals criticize the smug complacency of their philosophical and political brethren who underestimate liberalism’s enemies. Kwame Appiah [2005: 145], for example, reminds his readers that the philosophes penned their ideas with a keen awareness of adversaries’ arguments and machinations. The original liberals philosophically expounded their creed, to be sure, but also prudently advanced it politically. In this spirit, Stephen Macedo [2000: 5-11] warns that “we cannot simply assume that people are good liberal democrats…we must recognize and respond to intolerance and other threats to liberal values” and grant the
latter “supreme political authority.” He prescribes “liberalism with a spine.” Hard liberals are not averse to tolerating some, though not all, forms of illiberalism, but under no circumstances should the liberal democratic state *encourage* such practices. [Griffin, 1986: 59] The state neither can nor should be neutral toward diverse ideologies. Attempts to make it so are futile at best and disastrous at worst. [Gutmann, 1992: 23; Macedo, 2000: 3-5]

State intervention on behalf of liberal values can take two forms: 1) to guarantee the moral autonomy of the individual and 2) to promote the political well-being of the commonwealth. Hard liberals refuse to settle for mere free choice; it must be informed choice. Government is obligated to mold its citizens into educated choosers who make good decisions and lead morally upstanding lives – a position that earns its advocates the epithet “liberal perfectionists.” [Wall, 1998] To exemplify bad choices a government should not respect, Cass Sunstein [1991: 12] points to the “voluntary” smoker who knows not the addictive and unhealthy consequences of nicotine consumption or the housewife who “chooses” to stay at home because this is the only role model she has. The former the state should inform about the risks of smoking, the latter about the alternative roles women successfully fulfill.

Opponents of veiling make a similar argument, even if unaware of the philosophers just mentioned. Muslim girls and women who claim to don the *hijab* voluntarily, it is alleged, more often than not do so as a result of either strict indoctrination at the hands of domineering fathers and clerics or intimidating peer pressure from friends and relatives. A veil-free school environment offers an escape from the ideological straitjacket, a directly experienced and therefore fully appreciated
alternative to covering as well as a critical perspective from which better to assess the inherited tradition. [For a thorough summary of such views in France, see Fetzer and Soper, 2005: 78-85; on Germany, Karakaşoğlu, 2003: 120-21] Claims to the effect that abrupt, compulsory exposure to unfamiliar ideas and practices can cause deep emotional trauma hard liberals dismiss as gross exaggeration. Brian Barry, for instance, maintains that for millennia humans have repeatedly encountered and embraced new ways of life. If it were so psychologically arresting, he infers, they would not do it. Furthermore, on balance the benefits of greater knowledge surely outweigh the comforts of ignorance. [Barry, 2002: 223]

Promotion of liberal values makes sense because it enriches not only the life of individual citizens, but also the collective well-being of the polity. In order to survive and thrive, democracies need publics which understand, cherish and practice liberal democratic values. The state has an existential interest in fostering a “degree of moral convergence,” a “public morality” that Macedo labels “civic liberalism.” [Macedo, 2000: 2-11] This need not raise the specter of a totalizing state that imposes some kind of asphyxiating liberal conformity on its citizens. In the first place, there are countless beliefs which have little or no bearing on the political health of society and which therefore merit no supervision by the government. Appiah [2005: 205] argues that the state should ignore a creed which teaches that dancing is sinful, whereas it must decisively counter one which teaches that voting is sinful. In the second place, multiculturalists overestimate the “fusion of horizons” that stems from totally unrestricted cultural interchange. In reality, the lion’s share of groups erect high border fences and deem any flirtation with differing views a form of treason. [Levy, 2000: 109] In the third
place, the “liberal soul maker” [Appiah 2005, 199] aims to rear citizens who crave and respect difference of opinion. Amy Gutmann has been an eloquent spokeswoman for preparing citizens to be deliberative democrats. Deliberation proceeds through rational debate and dialog. It need not result in consensus and can withstand “mutually respectful communities of substantial, sometimes even fundamental, intellectual disagreement.” [Gutmann, 1992: 20] However, those who disagree must acknowledge that their opponents have reasons for their position which are worth hearing. They further agree to honor decisions reached by the deliberative body. By contrast, irrational actors tend to demonize opposing parties and refuse cooperation and compromise with them. Rational debate opens discussion, while irrational posturing forecloses it. Liberal democratic education should teach citizens to recognize and to denounce irrational positions. [Also see Gutmann 1986; and Gutmann and Thompson, 2004]

It is just this type of irrationalism that critics see symbolized by the hijab. They allege that Islamic organizations clamoring for the right to veil permit no uncovered women into their ranks. Such groups supposedly teach that uncovered Muslims and non-Muslims alike are sinners with whom the pious should avoid contact. “Islam” means, after all, “submission” -- what critics interpret as blind obedience to (in practice male) authority that transgresses democratic tenets regarding the equal moral worth of all persons. Wearing the head scarf, then, cannot be separated from the validation or valorization of this brand of irrationalism. Veiling represents a threat to liberal democracy and therefore has no place in public schools charged with educating liberal democratic citizens. [Kaltenbach and Tribalat, 2002; or Altschull, 2000]
SOFT LIBERALISM

Opponents of proscribing the head scarf would do well to invoke soft liberalism. In all likelihood, the softer brand of liberalism originated with John Stuart Mill. The British philosopher arguably jettisoned the conviction of his predecessors that genuine liberty enabled men to discover absolute truth or a superior and singular form of the good life. Instead, freedom was essential because such truth, if it existed at all, lay beyond man’s capacity to grasp it. In On Liberty, Mill [1947] morally barred the state from imposing even the most widely accepted values on its citizens and restricted it to preventing individuals from doing harm to others (but not to themselves). He deemed mass conformity born of illusory human infallibility the paramount cultural illness of his times and the clash of the utmost difference of opinion in the “marketplace of ideas” the surest way to avoid error.

It fell, however, to his compatriot and greatest expositor, Isaiah Berlin [1958 and 1991], to work out the full consequences of this soft liberal position. The Oxford don argued that persons starting from completely reasonable premises could rationally arrive at incommensurable and incompatible conclusions. The life, for instance, of the aesthetician and the ascetic, though wholly commendable on their own terms, could not be reconciled. However, like Mill, Berlin held out gossamer hope that the dialog of contending ways of conceiving the good could somehow enrich humankind and that a tolerant liberalism could best enable such enrichment.

Working in the long shadow cast by Mill and Berlin, Jürgen Habermas [1983] and John Rawls [1971] sought to rescue the Kantian liberalism they admired from this sea of liberal doubt. In different but ultimately compatible treatises they argued that human
beings facing what Rawls termed “reasonable pluralism” could hypothetically and rationally agree on a set of principles to govern their differences. The German proposed “the ideal speech situation,” the American the “original position” -- both philosophically postulated but empirically infeasible circumstances in which free, equal and self-interested persons come to consensus on the rules or procedures to negotiate their pluralist ways. Because these institutional arrangements are formulated in ideally rational and egalitarian circumstances separate from or theoretically prior to specific notions of the good life, they can be safely assumed to be fair to and morally binding on all members of the community regardless of their specific worldviews.

We need not here rehearse the intricate arguments of these two titans of postwar liberalism other than to note the inspiration they afforded subsequent liberals interested in a more suitable liberal strategy to cultural diversity. This new breed of liberal ceases to view robust affiliation with a cultural community as a problem to be overcome and instead welcomes “belonging” and “rootedness” as integral elements of authentic individual autonomy. According to Joseph Raz, [1994: 133] “individuals find in them [encompassing groups] a culture which shapes to a large degree their tastes and opportunities, and which provides an anchor for their self-identification and the safety of effortless, secure belonging.” In so far as this rooted comfort zone of cultural connectedness endows individuals with a reassuring perspective from which to engage the wider world, it represents one of the “preconditions of personal autonomy.” [Tamir, 1993: 7] Will Kymlicka [1989: 167] adds that strong group affiliations enrich and deepen the human experience and therefore prepare persons to make more meaningful choices.
Minority cultures, in particular, also offer valuable refuges from the pressures of mass conformity.

If cultural identity and pride are integral to personal autonomy, as is for example private property, then the liberal state should protect them as well. [Kymlicka, 1989: 167] “We should aim at insuring that all national groups have the opportunity to maintain themselves as a distinct culture.” [Kymlicka, 1995: 113] “All” is the key word. The soft liberal state operates not as the representative and guardian of a particular nation, ethnicity, religion, or political ideology (including liberalism itself). In what Raz [1994: 174] terms “liberal multiculturalism,” the state “consists…of diverse communities and belongs to none of them.” It acts as the facilitator and guarantor of equal and fair relations among diverse groups. This neutrality need not and most often should not entail identical treatment of cultural communities. Underprivileged cultures, for instance, may need greater protection and promotion from the state in order to survive and thrive than does a dominant culture. Naturally, liberal theorists take countering stances in regard to the prudent degree of state intervention in cultural matters as much as they do when it comes to regulating the economy. In the minimalist tradition of Robert Nozick [1974], some worry that all but the slightest intrusion on the part of the state is likely to be overbearing and biased. Chandran Kukathas [2003: 8], for example, prescribes a “liberal archipelago” “of different communities operating in a sea of mutual toleration” whereby the state exercises no more authority over persons’ lives than many other associations. By contrast, Iris Young [1990], working out of the social democratic tradition, advocates highly interventionist measures to promote vibrant minority communities. These include state subsidies for exclusive cultural associations, preferred hiring, reserved legislative
seats for minority representatives, and even limited veto power to thwart legislation deemed life-threatening to disadvantaged groups.

The question naturally arises of how far soft liberals are prepared to let cultural communities pursue their specific interpretations of the good life. The answer is unambiguous. The line must be drawn at the violation of personal autonomy. In this vein, Raz [1994: 189] writes: “Liberal multiculturalism” as “a normative principle that affirms...a political attitude of fostering and encouraging the prosperity, cultural and material, of cultural groups within a society, and respecting their identity, is justified by considerations of freedom and human dignity.” “The preservation of their culture is justified only in terms of its contribution to the well-being of people.” [186] Soft liberals, despite the many disagreements with their hardliner kin, are in the final analysis advocates of liberalism whose sacrosanct tenet is the moral autonomy of all human beings. The softer, more sensitive, accommodating approach to cultural diversity is articulated and endorsed precisely because it is believed to generate a richer, more authentic form of autonomy for individuals than the conventional liberal model. Soft liberals insist, therefore, on a “right of exit.” Communities may preach and practice whatever they wish as long as their members are not barred from quitting the collectivity. William Galston [2002: 64] declares the mere absence of quitters and dissenters – that is the appearance of unanimous homogeneity – as sound evidence of compulsory membership. Kukathas [2002: 197], on the other hand, seems to interpret just about everything short of physical bondage as willed consent.

Soft liberal reasoning often surfaces in arguments endorsing the right to wear the *hijab*. Studies have found the scarf to be an enabling ritual that steels pious Muslims to
engage an otherwise alienating secularized European public sector with the reassuring feeling that they are not abandoning their cherished traditions. Veiling furthermore serves notice that independently minded women intend to critically assess rather than slavishly ape the norms and values of the prevailing culture. [Gaspard & Khosrokhavar, 1995; Karakaşoğlu, 2003] To cite one example, the *hijab* conveys to lascivious male teenagers in no uncertain terms (unavailable to harassed European girls) that promiscuity is not a viable option. [Parekh, 1999: 73] Defenders of freedom to veil typically point to Britain as a state which handles religious diversity evenhandedly. In 1990 its courts ruled veiling in public schools permissible. Despite the Anglican Church’s status as the official religion of Her Majesty’s Realm, British schools more often than not give equal weight to Islam (and other salient faiths) in religious studies curricula. The Blair government has formed partnerships with Muslims (as well as Sikhs, Greeks, Hindus and Seventh-Day Adventists) to establish publicly funded religious schools to parallel existing Christian and Jewish ones. Mosque-building has encountered neither the paralyzing red tape nor the public controversy that have stymied it in lands such as Germany or France. None of these Anglophiles suggests that Muslims in the United Kingdom face no discrimination or disadvantage, but they do claim British multiculturalism is on the right course. [Fetzer and Soper, 2005: 25-61] The same holds true for Holland, Belgium and Sweden where similar policies prevail. [Vervoteč and Peach, 1997]

**SOFT NATIONALISM**

Those who would condone *mandatory* veiling in state-subsidized organizations have to look (within the secular Western heritage) beyond liberalism to what I dub soft nationalism for philosophical backing. Many of the conclusions and recommendations of
soft nationalists share so much in common with soft liberals that it is easy to confound the two camps. Both, for instance, want to recognize and fortify cultural communities. But communitarians -- as soft nationalists prefer to be called -- start from metaphysical premises profoundly at odds with liberal universalism. When push comes to shove, these perspectives move their proponents to place the needs of the community before the rights of the individual.

Communitarian ideas are deeply informed by the European tradition of philosophical nationalism. With roots stemming back to Vico, Montesquieu, and Herder, this line of thinking forthrightly rejects the notion of a universal human nature and with it the idea of universally valid principles. Humans are products of their particular contexts, be they historical (Vico), environmental (Montesquieu), or cultural (Herder). It follows that because the contexts are neither identical nor chosen, humans cannot share a universal essence or nature. They are insurmountably particular. In the words of Herder [1877-1913: IV, 472], who coined the term “nationalism,” “not a country, not a people, not a natural history, not a state, are like one another. Hence the True, the Good, the Beautiful in them are not similar either.” In Michael Walzer’s [1992: 171] formulation: “The crucial commonality of the human race is particularism.”

Persons do not experience the world as the generic, rational individuals postulated by liberalism. Rather, they approach life as passionate members of specific nations, religions, families and other collectivities. They encounter life, for example, through the framework of a particular language steeped in a given culture. [MacIntyre, 1984] They identify themselves much more as a “We” than an “I.” [Taylor, 1995: 192] They are situated or embedded. Michael Sandel [2005: 258] speaks of “thickly constituted selves”
who share a “common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings within which the opacity of the participants is reduced if never finally dissolved.” [Sandel, 1982: 172-73]

Charles Taylor [1994] discerns a new “politics of difference” born of group loyalties which is emerging alongside the more familiar “politics of universal dignity.” In the latter citizens understand nondiscrimination to mean equal treatment of all despite their differences. In the former, nondiscrimination is reinterpreted to mean recognition and respect for critical differences – differences that stem from group affiliations. Thus Walzer [2004: 39-40] argues that is not enough to offer persons an escape from underprivileged, stigmatized groups, say, through assimilation. Opportunity has to be provided qua members of the group. You do not, in other words, eliminate disadvantage by eliminating the disadvantaged group itself. Rather, in what Walzer [2004: 40 & 38] dubs “egalitarian” or “meat-and-potatoes multiculturalism,” the community, replete with all its idiosyncrasies, should be afforded the security not to languish and the opportunity to thrive.

Investing in communities furthermore makes practical sense because they do much good work. For instance, in the example just cited Walzer [2004: 57] claims that a prospering community will likely see to it better than other bodies that its struggling members share in the group’s good fortune. Communitarians tend to place greater stock in smaller as opposed to larger associations. The latter are likely to be characterized by distant, purely instrumental relations, whereas the former are usually bound by ties of familiarity and solidarity. This difference tends to put close-knit organizations in superior stead to take more prudent, appropriate and efficient decisions. For example, members of
local groups with “shared understandings” [Walzer, 1983: 314] exhibit a greater propensity to empathize with, even sacrifice for fellow members. Thus Amitai Etzioni, [1996: 97] in his argument for “responsive communitarianism,” contends that “a shared set of core values is necessary for a community to be able to build consensus on specific norms and policies – in short, to function as a community.”

For tight communities to be able to work their magic, however, they must be permitted to operate according to their trusted, time-tested and contextually honed wisdoms. They must not be expected to live up to alien standards of judgment, in particular, to those of the bogus universal variety. “Since there is no way to rank and order these worlds with respect to their understanding of social goods, we do justice to men and women by respecting their particular creations…Justice is rooted in the distinct understandings of places, honors, jobs, things of all sorts that constitute a shared way of life. To override those understandings is (always) to act unjustly.” [Walzer, 1983: 314] The “politics of recognition” must start from “the presumption of equal worth.” [Taylor, 1995: 256] For can we safely conclude that a lifestyle of personal autonomy is superior to one characterized by compulsory collective obligations? Have we not apt evidence from, say, Asian nations and diasporas of worthwhile, meaningful lives carved out in accordance with demanding obligations? [See Gray, 1995: 91]

It does not take a rocket scientist to understand how such an outlook can be marshaled to justify mandatory veiling. Devout Muslims as well as the religious organizations they join must be presumed to possess sound, internally derived reasons for compelling female members to cover themselves. After all, they profess a faith adhered to by millions for centuries which antedated secular liberalism and may well outlive it.
Furthermore, if liberals are genuinely committed to Mill’s market place of ideas and the presumption of human fallibility that undergirds it, they cannot reasonably foreclose the possibility that their own beloved creed will one day (perhaps through the contribution of empowered, veiled women) come forth as folly. “Truth in one age, error in another” wrote Montesquieu [1913: no. 75] in *Lettres persanes*.

**HARD NATIONALISM**

Hard nationalists fear just such erosion of national confidence and cohesion whether it emanates from liberal universalism or communitarian localism. Tolerating, let alone fostering, deep-seated cultural diversity imperils the nation by recklessly diluting its core substance. Hard nationalists, who would surely prefer the label “patriots,” invoke the same philosophical heritage as do communitarians but limit its compelling findings to the nation-state. On this view, history has demonstrated that despite the efforts of democratic and totalitarian ideologies and regimes committed to cosmopolitanism people insist (often with their lives) upon living in self-governing nation-states. The nation-state is *ipso facto* the most desirable political form of political organization and identity and as such deserves to be preferred and protected.

Each nation has an essence, a cultural core -- what Herder called its “soul” and Montesquieu its “spirit.” “A Nation is a soul, a spiritual principle,” Ernest Renan [1996: 52] once averred. “Two things…constitute this soul…One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” Conservative at heart, hard nationalists resist abrupt and rudimentary changes to the national character. They heed Montesquieu’s [1989: 310] advice to be “careful not to
change the general spirit of the nation.” “If the character is generally good, what difference do a few faults make?” Burke was franker yet: “instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and…we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them.” [Quoted in Dupré, 2004, 181] More recently, Samuel Huntington [2004: xvi] has bemoaned the “Hispanization” of America’s Anglo-Protestant core culture. David Jacobsen [1997] urges nations to restrict or reverse the flow of immigration to avert permanent alteration of the national character. Ole Waever [1993: 23] has advanced the idea of “societal security” to accompany national and social security as an equally justifiable right that citizens should enjoy and states guarantee. Societal security constitutes “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats.” It is about “the sustainability…of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom.”

What good do such theorists discern in national homogeneity? Inversely, what do they fear in diversity? Between the World Wars Carl Schmitt [1932] penned a stinging and influential critique of the pluralist version of democracy espoused by liberals in which competing, self-interested parties rationally bargain with one another. The German philosopher started from the premise that humans interpret the world through passionate, simplistic, comforting bipolarities such as good vs. evil and beautiful rather than ugly. This dependency may be deplorable but it is a fact we must confront. In politics the reigning dichotomy is that of “friend/foe.” The German nationalist averred that democracies, because they depend on compromise and cooperation, could not function
effectively if comprised of foes. The demos, if it was to govern itself, had to be made up of friends with organic ties of loyalty born of a common sense of history, destiny, language and culture. The only role for the foe dimension of the friend-foe equation to play was as a designation of outsiders whose presumed hostility to insiders functioned to fortify national solidarity. Pluralist democracy, he concluded, amounted to a contradiction in terms, an insurmountable paradox, fated to fail in meeting the formidable challenges of the troubled era.

Hard nationalists have ever since taken a page from Schmitt’s treatise, more often than not without citing the German thinker because his ideas became associated with and exploited by the Nazis. Thus Huntington [2004: 19] writes: liberalism “assumes…that a nation can be based on only a political contract among individuals lacking any other commonality. This is the classic Enlightenment-based, civic concept of a nation. History and psychology, however, suggest that it is unlikely to be enough to sustain a nation for long.” Such reasoning he employs to argue that his beloved America cannot expect to thrive if it continues to tolerate large bodies of unassimilated immigrants from Latin America and Asia. In an argument that appears to resonate well beyond American shores in the aftermath of September 11, Stanley Renshon [2005] accuses his country of imperiling its national security by taking on hordes of “50% Americans” whose loyalty to the nation’s well-being is questionable. From a left-wing perspective -- demonstrating that hard nationalism inspires not only conservatives -- David Miller [1995: 189-90] sees among immigrants too many free-riders unwilling to do their part in financing the social democratic welfare state. In words full of Schmittian undertones, he posits that “political communities should as far as possible be organized in such a way that their members
share a common national identity.” Peter Spiro [2004] soft peddles nationalism by claiming that citizens who lose confidence in the nation-state as the protector of their national identity will turn to more unruly, wayward organizations to soothe their anxieties. He seems to have in mind the xenophobic political parties throughout Europe winning the hearts of increasing numbers of voters.

We err, though, if we associate hard nationalism solely with these rabid zealots. In the first place, their campaigns of hate sell well with voters, to be sure, as a result of base fear-mongering – something Schmitt already theorized – but also because their core message of protecting the nation enjoys a degree of legitimacy in the European philosophical tradition. More importantly, mainstream parties and policies often reflect hard nationalist reasoning. Germany is a case in point, though hardly the only one. Until 1999 – in other words during a period in which at the federal level centrist coalitions governed -- Germany’s law regulating citizenship adhered to the principle of *jus sanguinis* by which membership in *das Volk* was determined by (blood) ancestry regardless of one’s place of birth or residence. Perhaps understandable in a Germany involuntarily divided into two states by the Cold War -- though the policy persisted beyond Unification -- the law nevertheless had the effect that millions of “immigrants” born in Germany (not to mention the foreign born settled there permanently) were denied naturalization, while millions of ethnic Germans born and raised in the Soviet Bloc (*Aussiedler*) were awarded practically immediate citizenship upon reaching the Federal Republic. [See Brubaker, 1992] In defense of *jus sanguinis*, the conservative candidate for chancellor in 2003, Edmund Stoiber, asserted: “we want our Christian-occidental
culture to remain the dominant culture, and not to be subsumed in a cultural mishmash.” [Süddeutsche Zeitung, 18 February 1999].

As can be predicted from this remark, such blatant bias in favor of das Volk seeped into other laws, most notably, from our perspective, those regulating religion. Germany officially recognizes Christian and Jewish denominations but has denied the privilege to the estimated three million Muslims residing there. Official status bears with it considerable advantages, including an 8-10% cut of registered members’ income tax that flows directly into church and synagogue coffers as well as state-funded religious education in the public schools conceived and taught by representatives of the recognized faiths. [Fetzer and Soper, 2005: 105-19] Though contested politically and legally by Muslims, this policy has in part stimulated some, not all, Bundesländer to proscribe Islamic veiling among public school teachers while permitting them to don habits and yarmulkes. [Der Spiegel, 23 October, 2003] Lest we conclude that (some of) the Germans are the only hard nationalists in Europe, in Italy a Muslim parent’s successful legal battle to bar crucifixes from his child’s classrooms in 2003 ignited a national backlash. [Buonfino, 2005: 87] In Holland in the wake of the van Gogh assassination and in Britain following the London tube bombings, the official policy of multiculturalism has come under severe attack from what appears to be a decidedly nationalistic perspective. [See, e.g., Abbas and Akhtar, 2005: 133-38]

**HARD POSTMODERNISM**

Those I crown hard postmodernists cite such developments as confirmation of the unavoidable and insurmountable cultural conflicts endemic to the “postmodern condition.” [Lyotard, 1984] Nationalists, they contend, ideologically inhabit a winsome
but hopelessly utopian and nostalgic dream world of cultural homogeneity. [Balibar, 1990: 345] Meanwhile, liberals quixotically fail to recognize that the Enlightenment project of rationally deriving universal principles of autonomy, equality and fairness has “in the context of late modernity been abandoned” and “is no longer a living force in contemporary culture.” [Gray, 1995: 95 and 85]

Nietzsche sired postmodernism. It was his seminal insight that all truth claims are historically and contextually contingent. They cannot be universal because they are always views from a particular perspective – why Nietzsche analysts label the idea “perspectivism.” “There are no moral facts,” he famously wrote, “only interpretations.” [Nietzsche, 1997] Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty in differing ways went on to explain just how our particular perspective evolves from and is embedded in the day-to-day practice of our lives. [See Solomon 1987: 178-82] What the Frenchman [1962] termed “prereflective consciousness” colors our understanding of the world, closing our eyes to some dimensions while opening them to others. In this vein, Jacques Derrida [1976] later charged Western thought with a deeply embedded proclivity toward dualism that occludes knowledge and experience that does not fit neatly into black-and-white dichotomies. No one can achieve a holistic perspective which takes account of everything. No person or idea is above bias.

Contemporary postmodernists stress this point in regard to liberalism’s alleged impartiality. Stanley Fish [1999: 56] ridicules liberals as “boutique multiculturalists” who tout tolerance of different cultures but draw the line at cultures who do not tolerate others. That is, they tolerate only those cultures which conform to liberal values – hardly an open-minded, let alone impartial position. Bhikhu Parekh [2000: 13] underscores the
contextual contingency liberalism cannot overcome. “Liberalism is a substantive doctrine advocating a specific view of man, society and the world and embedded in and giving rise to a distinct way of life. As such it represents a particular cultural perspective and cannot provide a broad and impartial enough framework to conceptualise other cultures or their relations with it.”

Though the two concepts share some similarities, postmodernism’s perspectivism differs from nationalism’s “situatedness.” To begin with, nationalists posit a single cultural whole that gives holistic meaning and identity to those who live under its influence. Postmodernists, by contrast, maintain that persons are increasingly confronted with and simultaneously influenced by multiple, intersecting perspectives that undermine coherent experience. “If we feel we have a unified identity,” writes Stuart Hall [1992: 277], “it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves…The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.” Immigration, in particular, compels growing numbers of persons to negotiate multiple cultures and hybrid identities.

Postmodern theory furthermore reads into all truth claims an ineluctable political dimension – what Nietzsche [1968] referred to as the “will to power.” Thus, the self-declared anti-Christ interpreted Pauline Christianity as the disguised attempt of the mediocre to restrain the gifted. Michel Foucault [1979 and 1973] insists that purportedly objective standards distinguishing, say, normal and abnormal, sane and insane, legal and illegal are not merely bodies of knowledge, but simultaneously structures of power
privileging some over others. Edward Said [1981 and 1978] catapulted himself into the limelight in the Seventies and Eighties by maintaining that both purportedly objective Western scholarship and reporting on the Middle East were implicated in the imperialist and neo-imperialist domination of oriental peoples and places. From this perspective decisions to ban the *hijab*, in particular, but also much of the wider discourse about the religious practice, have less to do with the equality of women or freedom of religion than with the demonization and subsequent subordination of Muslim minorities residing in Europe. [El Guindi, 1999: 184; Carens, 2000: 41]

The inseparability of power and knowledge signals the absence of mutually recognized apolitical standards and principles with which to weigh and settle disputes among competing cultural groups. No party, not even the state, can convince all actors that its policies are neutral. [Parekh, 2000: 202] And this is not because the “rational” proponents of such impartiality have yet to enlighten their “benighted” adversaries. Rather, it is because the parties start from incompatible premises and *reason* to opposing conclusions. Fish [1999: 247-50], for instance, points out that to a liberal the motto “seeing is believing” makes perfect sense, while to the religionist “believing is seeing” constitutes sound advice. The former believes an open mind leads to enlightenment, the latter away from it. The former possesses sound reasons for opening dialogue, the latter for shutting it down. Each view, like all others, represents “an orthodoxy to itself, fully equipped with dogma, criteria for evidence, founding texts, exemplary achievements, heroes, villains, goals, agenda, and all the rest.” [Fish, 1999: 218] The head-scarf phenomenon is a case in point. The practice is hardly fading into extinction in European societies where Muslims are supposedly exposed to the irrationality and injustice of
covering. Instead, both the good reasons for and commitment to veiling appear to be growing within certain Muslim circles in Europe. [Goldberg and Sauer, 2003; Modood, 2002: 121-22]

In an atmosphere of plural truths each with committed followers, all positions of consequence, even if once considered unimpeachable, become ethically and politically contestable. Postwar existentialism underscored just this point in the moral vacuum left by the Holocaust. Gurus like Jean-Paul Sartre [1956] and Albert Camus [1956] in different ways urged their readers to find the courage to craft meaningful and rewarding lives in spite of the absence of reassuring transcendental standards. On their view, ethical principles are not given or discoverable; they must be forged and imposed. [See Solomon, 1987: 178-79] Contemporary hard postmodernists have developed this idea to declare the ubiquity and inevitability of political struggle. “Everything is politics.” [Fish, 1999: 9] In order to enjoy influence, moral views must be advanced politically and rhetorically. Supporters must use whatever means necessary to position theirs as the “prestige discourse.” [Fish, 1999: 217] Put frankly, they must seek to “indoctrinate” persons more effectively than do foes. They must be prepared to alter their arguments when they no longer serve their agenda. [8] If this means being hypocritical or inconsistent, so be it. Indeed, duplicity and distortion likely enhance political success. “In general the incoherence of an argument is no bar to, and may even enhance, its political effectiveness.” [Fish, 1999, 273] One naively limits oneself to what is thought to be true and right. For truth and right are nothing more than what skillful rhetoricians and image-manipulators manage to pass off as such at any given moment. [Baudrillard, 1996] Islamists, for instance, have shown themselves adept in some places at manipulating
arguments to transform the image of veiling from an act of oppression to one of freedom. [See Wieviorka, 135 in AlSayyad and Castells 2002].

If truth is malleable, it can offer no permanent refuge from political antagonism. Dismissing what I call soft liberalism, Fish [1999: 14] sees “no hope of a procedural republic from which divisive issues have been banished and in which we can all just get along.” John Gray [1995: 90] recommends abandoning idealistic quests for harmony and settling for a postmodern “modus vivendi.” Such a constellation does not even constitute the proverbial “agreeing to disagree.” Rather, disagreeing parties come to the realization that it is more convenient, less disruptive, to permit one another variously constructed and understood zones of discretion in which their particular views predominate. As regards our case study, such a modus vivendi might involve a school, association, neighborhood or set thereof in which the hijab is expressly or tacitly proscribed. Another nearby grouping, however, might leave the decision to cover to the individual, while the next abutting community mandates veiling for all women. [O’Brien, 2005] Such arrangements, however, would be fragile at best and prone to collapse, needing frequently to be renegotiated and fought out. [Parekh, 2000: 238 or Fish, 1999: 15] In the last analysis, Fish [1999: 7 & 240] underscores, there is only “the political game.” “Play it (the lesson is superfluous; what else could you do?) and play it to win.”

SOFT POSTMODERNISM

Such bald Machiavellianism has prompted some postmodernists to blunt the jagged edges of their tougher-minded philosophical brethren. Those I label soft postmodernists offer no guarantee of harmony, neutrality, certainty or stability but they refuse to jettison the possibility that vying parties adhering to fundamentally different Weltanschauungen can
learn to interact with one another via mutually beneficial, respectful, though ultimately precarious practices. Richard Rorty [1989], for example, proscribes cruelty toward others, but not because we can metaphysically demonstrate its universal immorality, but rather because certain gifted “poets,” writers like Nabokov and Orwell of our particular time and place, have crafted emotional stories – not rational treatises – that move us to eschew meanness. This is simply the way we – he means the liberal West – have grown accustomed to living, a mere habit whose moral superiority we can neither prove nor count on. Julia Kristeva [1991: 75-76] adds oppression to the list of unacceptable practices, Alan Keenan [2003: 171] demonization. Chantal Mouffe [2000: 9] dubs her preferred manner of co-existence “agonistic pluralism” in which differing parties come to see themselves not as Schmitt’s foes, but as “adversaries, adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as ‘friendly enemies’, that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.” Martin Marty [2005: 121] endorses “risky hospitality,” inviting “strangers” to one’s table without the guarantee that the encounter will turn out agreeable or disagreeable. All we can hope for is a “thickening of the discourse. It will not produce anything so near as a straight-arrow secular rational approach. It will eventuate in a thicket, a bramble, of entangled and sometimes not completely unentangleable strands, mixed with branches or other growths. But is it likely to reflect not only the messiness of a pluralist society but also repositories of options that would not have been contemplated in the world of the Rawlsians.”

Soft postmodernists seek to transform strangeness into something to welcome rather than fear. Kristeva [1991] argues that deep down we are each of us strangers to

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ourselves – an unavoidable condition of the human existence which can be tapped to ease and encourage openness vis-à-vis foreigners. Bonnie Honig [2001: 4] devotes her book to the question: “What problems does foreignness solve for us?” “Democratic cosmopolitanism” challenges us “to rethink democracy in non-kinship terms as a politics among strangers,” [7] because the goal of democracy should be to forge a “sense of a commitment to local and popular empowerment, effective representation, accountability, and the generation of actions in concert across lines of difference.” [13] Encounters with strangers can hone our ability to discern cloaked contempt and exploitation among those we naively trust as “one of us.” [72] Strangers often violate conveniently accepted ways of doing things, reminding us that democracy itself originated in challenges to convention. [99] “Aliens” can help us reinterpret democracy from complacent assurance of illusory harmony to what democracy should be, namely, “a regime founded upon the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate – a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end.” [LeFort, 1988: 39] But at least the “confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final.” [Mouffe, 2000: 15]

Soft postmodernists never cease to reiterate that engaging “the Other” represents a gamble worth taking, not only because our trusted practices no longer work, but because they foreclose yet undiscovered solutions which, of course, once found will prove temporary and fallible. Yasemin Karakaşoğlu [2005: 12] appears to have just such an eventuality in mind when she implores German (and European) officials to permit capable, covered women to advance through the institutions of their chosen land of residence or citizenship. “If they succeed, they might develop and articulate fresh
approaches to Islam as an integral, instead of an alien element of German society.” In this same spirit, Joyce Mushaben [2005: 211] contends that a “wave of protest demonstrations [supporting the right to veil] in January 2004 – attracting 5,000 participants in Paris, 3,500 in Lille, 2,400 in London, and nearly 2,000 in Berlin – should trigger a few fond memories among members of the ‘68 Generation,’ as well as deeper reflection as to how important it is to allow…Muslims themselves to ‘dialogue’ their own way through the issue.”

CONCLUSION

As indicated in the introduction, I have sought through this schematic philosophical reading of the head-scarf debate to demonstrate that a strong case can be made by invoking venerable strands of thought in the Western tradition for a broad range of opinions. Our dilemma is not that we have no compelling solutions, but too many. Just such a condition Nietzsche [1968] perspicuously diagnosed as “nihilism,” the metaphysical home, according to Alasdair MacIntyre [1984: 106-14], in which we find ourselves today. The German philosopher’s forthright conclusion –“God is dead” – has been wrongly read and criticized as the belief in nothing. It is the belief in many things but in none with absolute certainty. Modern science, Nietzsche realized, did not definitively refute theism but it did generate a credible alternative cosmology that undermined absolute religious authority. Nihilism, claims MacIntyre [1984: 43], has not turned us into amoralists but it has left us “almost intolerably conscious of rival moral alternatives.”

So it is with the head-scarf controversy in Europe. Europeans hold strong opinions they feel passionate about. Moreover, they have a general sense, even when
most cannot articulate the finer points with eloquent philosophical argumentation, that
their view is ethically legitimate. At the same time, however, they realize that opposing
views are equally justifiable. The presence of Muslims in Europe may have generated the
debate in the first place. But the “clashing” of fundamentally opposed parties is taking
place just as much among Europeans as it is between Europeans and Muslims. Europe –
or “Western Civilization” more broadly -- is hardly united around a coherent moral
persuasion. Nor is “Islamic Civilization” for that matter, though it would take a separate
essay to address the debate among Muslims. [See Bennett, 2005]

This conclusion may intrigue philosophers, but what meaning does it hold for
practitioners immediately confronted with taking a position in the head-scarf debate?
True, the latter should not presume the undeniable moral superiority of their preferred
course of action. But by the same token, they should keep in mind that their opponents
possess no monopoly on truth either. Practitioners should therefore advance their
preferred policy but with an eye to the political and rhetorical maneuvering that might be
necessary to defend and impose it. That said, if the preferred option falls short of being
morally superior, proponents need not feel ethically wedded to it. This perspective can
unshackle policy makers from rigid, “principled” positions and set them free to probe and
negotiate pragmatic solutions appropriate to a given context. I am reminded of a British
headmaster in Manchester who permitted girls to wear to the hijab to class so long as the
scarves matched the colors of the school uniforms. [Liederman, 2000]

Some will dread postmodern pragmatism as a sure recipe for anarchy. In the first
place, they should not underestimate the difficulty of reestablishing national
homogeneity. Wittgenstein once likened it to sewing back together a broken spider’s
Furthermore, Patrick Geary [2002] doubts whether any European nation has ever enjoyed genuine ethnic homogeneity. As far as reviving the liberal order is concerned, Bernard Williams [1985: 163-64] has conceded that “there is no route back from reflectiveness...past forms of life are not a real option for the present.” In the second place, critics wrongly denounce postmodernism as “anything goes.” Its precise meaning is that “anything goes which can be made to go.” [Fish, 1999: 307] And this is often not much. Established ideas and institutions tend to exhibit surprising staying power even under great strain. Lest we forget, Hitler and Stalin both failed to exterminate liberalism despite all the power they amassed. The Soviet dictator ultimately fared no better in his efforts to extinguish nationalism. It seems unlikely, then, that women and girls wearing scarves will greatly disrupt the larger order of things in Europe.

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