

# \* The hijab and the Left

*This text was presented in 2004 at the AWL summer school in London.*

Dear comrades,

I would like first to thank the AWL for having invited me to this week-end of debate. I have been asked to present the recent discussion about the hijab and the law prohibiting what French lawmakers call “conspicuous religious signs” in State schools. (Another law will soon be discussed in order to ban the hijab and any sexual segregation in public hospitals.)

Why is the debate about the hijab taking so much place in France ? When I started looking for documents to make this speech, I realized I was in front of what I would characterize as a collection of conspiracy theories:

- **the Islamist conspiracy.** As you are certainly all aware of this theory, it does not need any further explanation, but it has a strong echo among the Far Right and part of the medias,
- **the Catholic Church conspiracy.** According to this “theory”, Islamists are playing the game of the Vatican which is manipulating them in order to take over Europe. The definite “proof” being the new European Constitutional Treaty (which was rejected by French voters in 2005) and its mention of Christian values.
- The joint **leftist-islamist conspiracy**,
- The **multiculturalists’ conspiracy** (or rather as we say in France the “communautariste” conspiracy). France was a paradise before and the importation of multiculturalism (mainly from America) is going to destroy French national identity, French Republic, or French secularism. All depends if the person you are talking to is a member of the National Front, of the nationalist Left or of a trotskyst group.
- The **capitalist conspiracy.** The bourgeoisie is using the headscarf issue to prevent the working class from realizing that all its “conquests” are going to be destroyed with the pension, Social Security and regional reforms, etc.

I have probably forgotten some of the conspiracy theories about the headscarf.

Obviously I have caricatured several explanations which all deal with some part of French or international reality. In 20 minutes I won’t be able to explain all the elements of these theories and to tell you what is their part of truth and their part of fantasy. I’ll just tell you the story of the hijab debate in France and how it has affected the Left.

## **The situation until the 1980s**

In the 1960s, when I was a left wing Catholic, all my high school friends were “Jews.” But neither me nor my “Jewish” friends defined ourselves according to our religion or so-called “ethnic” origins. We were basically leftwing adolescents. Our politics determined our friendships and our so-called “identities”.

We would have never imagined that in the 1980’s SOS Racisme, the antiracist organization sponsored by the Socialist Party, would give a left-wing political legitimacy to purely ethnic concepts like “les Blacks, les Blancs et les Beurs” (Blacks, Whites and North Africans) which were totally alien to leftwing culture until the 1960s and even considered as racist in the antiracist movement.

Between 1965 and 1981, I used to sell revolutionary newspapers in working class suburbs. I can’t remember having seen a significant number of headscarves in the tower blocks or on the popular markets.

I worked at Paris airports between 1979 and 1983 for Air France and we did the “check-in” for the 3 North African airlines: Air Algérie, Tunis Air and Royal Air Maroc. The only “veiled” women I saw were the ones coming from the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia. But the tens of thousands of North African women who were going back every year to their native land, or who came to visit their family in France, rarely wore any hijab, not to mention a burka.

This was basically the situation until the beginning of the 1980’s. North African and African women immigrated to France during all the 20th century but they did not import their “conspicuous religious signs” – when they had religious beliefs.

Obviously one can question why and denounce French racism or intolerance towards Muslim religion and North Africans. But this reasoning also implies that all North Africans were Muslims. It is true that the French conception of secularism exerted a strong but invisible pressure on Muslim women and men, as the French model of integration is in fact a model of assimilation through School and other institutions which leaves religion and ethnic origins in the private sphere. But it must be also said that the headscarf was not very popular in North Africa, specially in the predominantly Berber regions. The Berbers still represent today 28 % of the Algerian immigrants and 22 % of the Moroccan immigrants in France.

## **The hijab becomes an important element of the political debate**

Nevertheless, since 1989, the hijab is an important element of the political debate. The discussion has started inside and about the school system. The medias have dramatized it to attract the maximum of readers and viewers.

The politicians have also heated this debate with maybe the idea of diverting the population's attention towards a phenomenon which presently has a very limited size (a few hundred cases in whole France before the 2005 ban was passed).

But obviously the problem of the hijab is slowly but surely starting to become omnipresent:

- in some state hospitals where Muslim husbands now demand to have a female surgeon or gynecologist for their wife;

- in private companies or public administrations who want to fire female employees or executives who decide to wear the hijab;

- in banks where some security guards have refused the entrance to “veiled” clients, etc.;

- in schools where sometimes veiled mothers can't penetrate inside the building unless they take off their hijab, or can't accompany a class to the swimming pool or any outdoor activity for which the parents are often mobilized before their children reach the age of the “college” (11 years old);

- and, simply, in the streets, where anyone can witness the progression of the number of “veiled” women.

*[Since this text was written more incidents were reported, the most famous one being the dissolution in 2008 of a marriage between 2 Muslims, officially because the bride had lied to her husband, in reality because Mr Machoman discovered that Madam was not virgin; there were also some strong discussions when the city of Lyon, after months of discussion, decided to adopt a two-meal system in State schools ; or when a mayor authorized – and then banned – a women's basketball match where men were forbidden to attend. Each time the media used this kind of local events to play their favorite sport – Muslim or Arab bashing – rejoined by some elements of the Republican Left whose motives are unclear.]*

### **The political and religious organization of the North-Africans**

In France, traditionally North Africans did not have any centralized organization which could represent their “community” and deal with the French state.

The only form of organization which existed was a purely political one. During the war in Algeria, the National Liberation Front was clandestinely organized in France but it mainly collected money. It was not interested at all in organizing immigrant workers or only as a way of pressuring the French state or eliminating the MNA — the competing Algerian left nationalist organization. And when Algeria became an independent state in 1962, the very official Association of the Algerians in France (as well as the other official groups linked to the Moroccan or Tunisian governments) never seriously organized workers. Their only aim was (and still is today) to spot all the political opponents in order to spy them and/or to arrest them, when they come back home. These official migrant organizations are also interested in identifying those who participate to strikes or other struggles in France and who discover the basics of working class politics.

There was and there is still one big mosque in Paris and its director was from time to time considered as a sort of Muslims' representant but this mosque never built any strong, powerful religious organization.

The lack of Muslim representation was partly linked to the peculiarities of Islam itself but was also the consequence of a pressure from the French State. The State obliged Muslims living in France to adopt a low profile, to have, in many cases, an almost clandestine religious practice. Obviously that was not an official policy. But that's why, for a long time, there were so few mosques in France : not because their construction is officially illegal, but because most mayors always found a so-called technical reason to refuse a building license for it. Most Muslims were obliged to pray in fitted basements, former garages or factories and all sorts of inadequate places – a very humiliating situation for them. *[Since this text was written, there has been some significant progresses in terms of “tolerance” towards Muslim buildings, but a total equality of rights is not yet realized.]*

### **The Left and the Right make a U-turn**

In the 1990s, the governmental parties decided that things should change. The Socialist party leader Jean-Pierre Chevènement and after him a conservative politician Nicolas Sarkozy, both successively Interior ministers played a decisive role. The Interior minister in France is at the head of police forces and public administration. But, since Napoleon, he is also in charge of the relationships between the State and the various religious cults.

A Council representing French Muslims has been formed under the pressure of the Left and then of the Right-wing governments. After three years of heated discussions between the different rival Muslim tendencies, elections have been organized on a very controversial basis. It was decided to use the number of square meters in the mosques or in the prayer halls controlled by each Muslim current to determine the number of voters: such a decision obviously favored the currents who were financially and politically linked to the Muslim States, mainly Algeria and Morocco. It's the organization which is closest to the Muslim Brothers (the UOIF) which won these first elections. A compromise had been made before the elections so the leadership of the Muslim Council has temporarily been given to a more “moderate” Muslim, i.e. close to the Algerian government, but only for 3 years. *[The fight between the various tendencies still goes on and the Council of French Muslims is generally considered as a failure. At the last election in 2008, it's the Moroccan wing of Islam which won the election.]*

So governmental parties have chosen to artificially create a religious representation for the so-called “Muslim” community. In other terms, the Right and the Left assume that most North-Africans are Muslim, and should be

treated as Muslims and not as citizens. *[And this attitude has only worsened with the election in 2007 of Nicolas Sarkozy, a devoted Catholic, who gives a major importance to religious values as shown his books and public speeches, something radically new in French politics.]*

### **Why have the Left and the Right changed their mind after having negated during years the existence of any problem ?**

The immigrants and their descendants live in working class suburbs which have been more and more abandoned by the State, by private companies, etc. That may not be a conscious decision of the bourgeoisie and it is probably the consequence of the total lack of interest of the exploiting classes for these districts, but the final result is the same.

In front of the total disaggregation of these areas, of the growth of local mafias and gangs, the main governmental parties have decided to recognize to the local Muslim religious leaders the right to ideologically control the working class suburbs. In these districts, the Communist Party and its satellite organizations have almost disappeared; the Far Left (apart from the trotskyst Lutte ouvrière and some tiny Maoist groups) has never made any systematic political work; and to top it all, the percentage of unemployment, bad housing, rape and domestic violence, drug trafficking, and all sorts of illegal “businesses” is quite high.

To confront this situation, the Left and Right parties are trying to promote the most moderate Muslim religious forces, the ones which are able to respect the demands of the State and approve its law-and-order policy.

I just told you that the French State was apparently abandoning part of its functions of social control to imams, local religious leaders or even some Muslim sects, in order to organize each so-called “community” along religious lines. But obviously the process is much more complex and contradictory because the Republican-Secular ideology still remains officially at the core of French politics, at least in theory.

To illustrate the present contradictory attitudes of French right and left governments one can look at the recent school textbooks and programs of the IUFM, the universities where the future teachers are trained.

On one side, there is a new tendency to rehabilitate the study of religions at school. The IUFM invites imams, ministers, priests and rabbis to explain religion to the future teachers.

And on the other side, Islam is portrayed in most texts as the most backward religion, the only religion unable to reform itself and to become a modern, respectable religion like the other ones are supposed to be.

Such a political turn in government policy has obviously provoked many reactions among the reformist Left and revolutionary groups.

### **The reactions of the Left and Far Left**

The Socialist Party is the main party of the French Left in terms of votes but certainly not in terms of working class militants – it has almost lost any influence among workers. The Socialist Party defends what it calls an “open secularism” which is a step in the direction of some form of multiculturalism. In other words, secularism is transformed into the modern and variable notion of “tolerance”, instead of being a clear defense of the freedom of consciousness for all individuals, whether they believe in God or not. The Socialists have supported the new law banning the hijab in 2005 without much internal discussion. Their attitude is quite understandable as they have decided, in the 1990s, to denounce what the National Front and all the bourgeois politicians call the “insecurity” in working class suburbs. In most French people’s mind (and unfortunately in most foreigners’ mind), “insecurity” rhymes with immigration, Arabs and Muslims.

It is the same Socialist minister (Jean-Pierre Chevènement) who strongly supported the cops when he was in office. It’s the same man who violently denounced the juvenile delinquents and working class youth, calling them “sauvageons”, wild mavericks. And it’s the same man who obliged the Muslim religious groups to unite and organize in one single Muslim Council.

Among the main groups of the Far Left, 2 supported the new law: Lutte Ouvrière and the Parti des Travailleurs.

Lutte ouvrière (Workers Struggle) is a Trotskyist group which has officially around 6 700 members (probably not more than 1 500 real members and the rest having the status of sympathizers, given the strict criteria applied by this organization). LO has had a separate history from all the other splinter groups of the various Fourth Internationals. Although it has built organizations in the West Indian, Turkish and African immigration as well in the West Indies and Haïti, it never succeeded (or never tried) to build groups among North African migrants.

The other so-called “revolutionary” group which supported the new law is the Parti des travailleurs (Workers Party). The PT is a former close associate of the British SLL-WRP. The PT claims to be a federation of 4 different political tendencies (a trotskyst, a communist (i.e. Stalinist), a socialist and an anarcho-syndicalist tendency) but in fact it is the trotskyst current (the former OCI) which has all the power in the Party; the other currents are empty shells. The PT claims 7,000 members but for many years it pretends to be always growing... and regularly announces the same figures. The PT is very hostile to religion; it controls one association of “libres penseurs” (Free thinkers) and has traditional close ties with the Free Masons, an old custom – or better an old disease – in the French workers movement as Trotsky bitterly remarked already 80 years ago.

*[In 2008, the PT changed of name and became the POI, Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste, It claims 10,000 members, as it did in the 1970s... and has known a severe split in 2015.]*

The most pro-Republican feminists, like *Ni putes ni soumises* (Neither whores nor servants) also supported the new law. *Ni putes ni soumises* is a small but highly mediatized movement created in working class suburbs to denounce sexual harassment, collective rapes as imams' and Muslim men's pressures on girls and women. It has unfortunately strong ties with the Socialist Party. The main leader, Fadela Amara, is creating a fashion line with the help of the well-known women's journal *Elle*. [And later, between 2007 and 2010, she became a member of Sarkozy's government as a secretary of State for Housing and Suburbs planning !] French capitalism has fascinating capacities to use former radicals or NGO militants. Although the young women and men involved in this group are certainly sincere, they are clearly helping the Socialist Party to gain some popularity.

The Socialist party is trying to repeat today with the revolt of these young women the same political operation performed in the 1980s. At that time a radical movement called *La Marche pour l'Egalité* (March for Equity) but which became famous as *La Marche des Beurs* (The March of the Arabs) arose among young immigrants or French people living in working class suburbs. Thanks to the Socialist Party, this radical movement was killed by the creation of SOS Racisme in the 1980's.

### **The Far Left opponents to the new law**

- Among the "soft" opponents to the law, who adopted a position close to the AWL, one can mention the majority of the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League). The LCR is a trotskyist group of officially 3000 members (actually they doubled their membership, from 1500 to 3000 members after the Chirac election in 2001; the LCR dissolved itself into a new party, the NPA, Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste which was initially successful, reaching 10,000 members, but collapsed later). The majority position of the LCR was "No to the law, no to the veil", quite a sensible position for revolutionaries.

But the strongest opposition to the law came basically from what I would call the multiculturalist Left, although probably few people would agree with my definition. The multiculturalist Left can be schematically divided into 3 groups:

1) currents inside the LCR itself (currents which have been strengthened by the adhesion to the LCR of 100 militants of Socialisme par en bas, the French section of the British SWP)

2) currents inside feminist circles who tried to understand the complex individual reasons which pushed young girls to decide by themselves to wear the hijab. These feminists think that the main enemy should be racism and not Muslim religion and its clothing practices. Among these circles the myth of a possible "Muslim feminism" has also gained some influence.

3) And the third major opponent to the law is the majority of ATTAC, the antiglobalization movement which includes a good proportion of leftwing Christians, a fact which may explain why ATTAC is so soft with secularism.

### **The crucial role of Tariq Ramadan**

The fight of these opponents coincided with the struggle led by Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss philosophy teacher. Ramadan has tried to build a political career in France, with little success, this is probably why he then became Tony Blair's adviser for inter-religious relations in Britain ! His books and conferences influence the most cultivated young Muslims of the suburbs who are attracted by Islam. They see Islam as a way to affirm their dignity and to protest against racism and social exclusion. Tariq Ramadan presents to these young men and women a project which proposes a fusion between Islam and French Republican-Secular values, the possibility of being, at last, a proud French nationalist citizen and at the same time a proud Muslim.

### **The new law will be ineffective**

The new law about "conspicuous religious signs" has been voted by almost all French deputies. To be precise, 494 deputies voted for it, and 36 against. Among those opposed to the law, half belonged to the Left and half to the Right, including one the most reactionary catholic politician the Viscount Philippe de Villiers.

But this law won't change anything. Exactly like the previous "circular notes" adopted since 1989 by the various Education ministers, it will similarly fail, even if it concerns in fact a very limited number of students.

Until now, every year, only a few hundred girls over 12 million students are trying to wear a hijab and are expelled from the schools.

Most adolescent girls who want to change their clothing habits (to supposedly please God) choose to wear a bandana. According to the new law, a discussion will take place with the student wearing a bandana; if the girl is blond and has "White" French parents she will be allowed to keep it; if one of her parents is Arab, African, Turkish or Berber, her bandana will be suspected of being a "conspicuous religious sign" and the girl will be expelled from school after some time. Even I don't like this word, this new law has all the appearances of an "islamophobic" law.

This law will not solve anything. It may even worsen the situation and encourage other teenagers of other parents to wear the famous forbidden headscarf. Expelling young girls and sending them home is not a solution either. What has to be done is to discuss with the students, to discuss and discuss until they and the teachers arrive to a compromise.

In the schools where the teachers and the administration have had the patience to discuss, there has been often, not always, positive results. But it's difficult to know if the menace of being expelled really convinced Muslim

girls of the positive nature of French form of secularism, or if was just perceived as a threat with terrible consequences.

For the moment there is not even one Muslim elementary school or high school in France [*In 2016, there were 66 Muslim schools ; 300 Jewish schools – including 130 which are supported by the State ; and 12,300 Catholic schools – among which only 300 are not financed by the State – for pupils ranging from from 3 to 18 years old*]. So the danger is not the multiplication of Muslim Schools, the danger is that the girls will stay at home and study by correspondence – which is what is happening today with those who decide to resist to the conspicuous religious signs ban – which Muslims understand as anti-hijab ban.

Such a solution only reinforces their isolation and their possible indoctrination by Muslim sects or political groups. And it puts these girls in a difficult position; studying by correspondence and at home is much more difficult and can be a strong handicap for further studies.

On Oumma.com website a certain Dr Abdallah explains very cynically that, for a child, the period between 10 and 15 years old is crucial. That's why this fundamentalist thinks that Muslim children should go to the French State schools before ten as there is no "danger" until that age; Muslim children should study at home between 10 and 15 (if one of the parents has the necessary time and education), and go to a private school (that is concretely a Catholic school) afterwards. I have not found of a clearer explanation of what is at stake in the discussion about the hijab in France.

Teachers in a Secular State should not teach the pupils their conceptions in favor of atheism or against religion. They should try to help young girls and boys to think by themselves, to acquire a critical mind, to slowly discover that all religions have a history, that religions evolve. So maybe the pupils will slowly realize that religions don't come from Heaven and are a product of human history. But what applies to teachers should not apply to revolutionary groups.

Today, in France nobody has an aggressive attitude towards religion and religious alienation. Nobody criticizes seriously the political weight of the Catholic Church. More and more intellectuals, journalists and politicians affirm that religions have had a civilizing role and should be praised for that.

The government wants to stress the importance of the various religions, because of their supposedly "positive values" which could influence the attitudes of children today, children whose parents are accused of having lost any moral, of ignoring basic Republican or family values.

This is why any criticism against Islam should be always accompanied by criticisms against the other religions (especially the dominant Catholic one in France) and against the so-called civic moral proposed by the bourgeois State.