

# **Alienation in Modernity: The Case of European Muslims**

*Justin Gest, Harvard University*

*Even while popular perceptions portray Islam and its European followers to be a thoroughly anti-modern community reluctant to conform to the ultramodern, secular, liberal individualism of the West, a variety of scholars have quite astutely cut through the discourse to recognize a religious community that is very much embedded in and actively participating in European modernity. It is therefore perplexing that explorations of European Muslims' "alienation" from their local democratic system focus on explanations that fail to take proper account of this modernity. Over the past 20 years, a plethora of studies incorporating diverse methods in different disciplines have examined the same general dependent variable—alienation and disengagement among European Muslims. In this chapter, I will critically review these four streams of argumentation, each of which points to certain structural circumstances. In the end, I find each of them to be insufficient in determining why, among young Muslims facing largely the same circumstances, some engage or accept the political system and others reject it. In response, I hypothesize that different behavioral reactions to the same set of sociopolitical conditions is dependent on individual perceptions, which tint interpretations and expectations about shared disadvantages. This conclusion opens the door to a reconsideration of the institutionalist-structuralist account of alienation, toward the development of a more reflective and normative depiction that engages the political beliefs of the individual. This hypothesis embraces the plurality, reflexivity, and individual autonomy embodied by the competitive cultural programs of European modernity.*

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Even while popular perceptions portray Islam and its European followers to be a thoroughly anti-modern community reluctant to conform to the ultramodern, secular, liberal individualism of the West, a variety of scholars have quite astutely cut through the discourse to recognize a religious community that is very much embedded in and actively participating in European modernity.

Highlighting a series of perceptive works, Bhikhu Parekh writes that early generations of Muslim migrants had little difficulty adapting to liberal society and its obligations (2008: 117-120).<sup>1</sup> He argues that their children and grandchildren grow up “imbibing the ethos and values of liberal society and are at ease with it.” While some Muslims may not organize their personal lives in the same manner as their countrymen, Parekh notes that their customs and preferences do not necessarily prevent their performance of civic duties and responsibilities. Tariq Modood adds that Western Muslim sensibilities draw on extra-European heritages, but reinterpret them in a context of democratic citizenship and thereby pluralize it and make it their own (2007: 144). Olivier Roy (2004) has depicted Islam as a religion that works hand-in-hand with globalization to strengthen the connections of a de-territorialized community of Muslims—the ummah. In this manner, Roy contends, one of Islam’s most ancient (yet unattainable) concepts comes a step closer to realization in modernity. Iftikhar Malik writes that, like hybrids, even the most literalist followers of Islam utilize the speed, access and creativity of global communications to re-imagine the past and identify more strongly with the ummah. In reconsidering their roots, they rectify stratification and underdevelopment by espousing the pristine successes of earlier times as an attainable alternative (1999: 1).

Prominently, radical groups—who dominate public representations of Muslim communities in Europe—are not merely adept at exploiting the instruments of modernity for their political purposes. Indeed, such groups combine their ideologies with the opportunities of globalization via the internet, satellite television, air travel (Kaldor and Muro, 2003: 175), which have proven to be cheap and effective means to maintain an intimate connection with homeland forms of identity. Using e-mail, web-cameras, chat rooms, social networks and interactive webpages, information can be posted and links to a greater network can be listed. Kaldor and Muro write that fundamentalists use the instruments of modernity to ironically urge a return to the traditionalism of the pre-global age to people marginalized by their immersion in globalization’s increasingly universal, anonymous, capitalist rationalism (2003: 154-160). In this way, the tools of liberal modernity enable Muslims to—in most individualist fashion—confront the modernity that characterizes their quotidian existence.

It is therefore perplexing that explorations of European Muslims’ “alienation” from their local democratic system focus on explanations that fail to take proper account of this modernity. Over the past 20 years, a plethora of studies incorporating diverse methods in different disciplines have examined the same general dependent variable—political alienation among European Muslims. This entails both political rebellion and withdrawal from the political system. These examinations have yielded four primary streams of thought about causal factors:

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<sup>1</sup> Also see Parekh, 2000.

- a) Politico-theological factors
- b) Socioeconomic status
- c) Public discourse
- d) Identity constructions

In this chapter, I will critically review these four streams of argumentation, each of which points to certain structural circumstances. In the end, I find each of them to be insufficient in determining why, among young Muslims facing largely the same circumstances, some engage or accept the political system and others reject it. In response, I hypothesize that different behavioral reactions to the same set of sociopolitical conditions is dependent on individual perceptions, which tint interpretations and expectations about shared disadvantages. This conclusion opens the door to a reconsideration of institutionalist-structuralist accounts of alienation, toward the development of a more reflective and normative depiction that engages the political beliefs of the individual. This hypothesis embraces the plurality, reflexivity, and individual autonomy embodied by the competitive cultural programs of European modernity.

## 1.1 Politico-Theological Explanations

### 1.1.1 Islam's Irreconcilability

Unlike other minority groups of earlier eras, Islam has an institutionalised supranational object of loyalty—the ummah—allegiance to which, at least rhetorically, is meant to supersede ties to the local communities of the nation-state. Such an outlook is only further enabled by the revolutionary new forms of communication technology that connect people globally. Some commentators have argued that if this reinvigorated and re-connected Muslim identity leads to the subordination of civic obligations and disengagement from the democratic polity, then the social cohesion and efficacy of responsive, accountable, democratic governance is placed at severe risk. For these commentators, the question is simple: How can a democracy accommodate certain political or religious movements, the main tenets of which undermine the foundational freedoms of democracy and the individualism it seeks to protect?<sup>2</sup>

The strongest case put forth to challenge claims of irreconcilability has been from Muslim scholars who directly engage the Quran and Islamic tradition, and point to a capacity for Islam and its current minority status in Western democracies to coexist, if not thrive. Tariq Modood writes that most Muslims have no theological or conscientious problems with multi-faith citizenship, because after all, “the Prophet Mohammad founded such a polity. The first organised, settled Muslim community was the city of Medina which was shared with Jews and others and was based on an inter-communally agreed constitution” (Modood, 2007: 142). Other scholars have also interpreted Islam to be a religion of tolerance and pluralism that accepts the beliefs of non-Muslims (*kafir*) and their practice within a shared society (Asani, 2003; Khan, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> See Caldwell, 2009. And indeed, there have been a plethora of isolated (but very well-publicized) cases when Muslims have resisted certain obligations of citizenship, citing the violation of personal conviction. More prominently, as of 2005, there were only 305 Muslims serving in the 184,000-strong, British armed forces. (BBC News, 2005; Also see Hussain, 2002.) Anti-democratic Islamist groups in the UK issued a fatwa that those who join the British army are apostates and those who fight in Iraq or Afghanistan or elsewhere against Muslims are apostates because of their war against Muslims (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Home Office, 2004). In another example, some British Muslim doctors and medical students refused to learn about or treat alcohol-related illnesses and sexually-transmitted diseases because they said that doing so defies their religious beliefs. A small number also refused to examine patients of the opposite sex because they said it is forbidden by the Quran (Martin, 2007). *Al-Muhajiroun*, a now-forbidden, underground group of British Muslims, has encouraged members to reject obligations to British civil society because, they said, all non-Islamic cultural goods are naturally menacing to true Islam.

A complementary strand of argument contends that while Islam has always intermingled the spiritual with the temporal, its political outlook has always been civic in nature. Iftikhar Malik writes that the parameters of a politically organized community were provided early on by the establishment of Muslim polities in city-states with a quintessential emphasis on community-building (1999: 3-4). Following the same logic, Modood maintains that Muslim notions of citizenship are more communitarian than they are state-centered anyway, much like other non-Western traditions. He writes that “Islam has a highly developed sense of social or ethical citizenship in which, in line with contemporary Western communitarian thinking, duties as well as rights are emphasized” (2007, 143). Modood here cites the obligation of *zakat*, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, which requires a portion of one’s income to be contributed charitably.

The theological and political argument for Islam’s compatibility with liberal democracy is supplemented by some scholars’ assertion that Islam is also a malleable religion that adapts to new and modern circumstances. Malik writes that the reconstruction of Muslim communities in the contemporary, non-Muslim world will be successful because Islam’s trans-regionalism, in its religious and cultural sense, does not preclude Islamic receptivity to cultural, ethnic and national diversity (1999: 3). This thread of thinking views purportedly invariant *shari’a* not as a body of unchanging law, but as a set of ethical principles with legal conclusions that apply to specific places and times only and are continually reinterpreted—thus placing the ethical over the legal and the political (Modood, 2007: 143-4). Proponents of this view argue that Islam makes adequate space for re-interpretation depending on historical and cultural environments via the practice of *ijtihad*—the exercise of independent human reason. In this spirit, Islam does not inhibit but enables Muslims’ engagement with modernity and their political systems.

### 1.1.2 Political Disorientation

In most Muslim-majority countries, Islam is either the established religion or under the authority of state oversight—continuing a long history of Islam’s influence on political and civic affairs. Faith thus transcends the public and private realms in a relationship through which “the invisible faith sincerely held will lead to correct ethical and ritual behavior and thus public visibility of the underlying faith and, *vice versa*, adherence to the visible rules of ethnics and ritual will lead to and strengthen faith” (Nielsen, 1999: 70). Under such circumstances, Cesari writes that the Muslim state is then almost always the primary agent responsible for the authoritative interpretation of tradition, and Islam thus loses a certain vitality with regard to questions of government, culture, and social life. Thus, she explains, “it’s not that ‘the Muslim mind’ is naturally resistant to critical thinking, but rather that analysis and judgment have too often been the exclusive privilege of political authority” (Cesari, 2004: 44).

Some researchers argue that this legacy of intermingling has disoriented Muslims living in the West, leaving them less able to navigate new social and political systems and negotiate a place in civil society. Jorgen Nielsen, for one, contends that it is not therefore the secular context of Western democracies that is the basic challenge to the transmission of faith in the public sphere. He believes that it is more the changes in the social, economic and cultural environment and the effects of these changes which present the challenge (1999: 70). This challenge is total. Nielsen argues that Muslims were a small minority trying to find their way through a foreign set of structures and institutions, in a context developed from a Christian background founded upon the specialization of labor and a rationalism that pervaded the set of sociopolitical norms, ideals, and identities (1999: 74). This new system threatened the Muslim hierarchies of authority, introducing the ideal that each individual should seek his or her own authority, effectively making the individual the ultimate authority (Ibid).

What many in the West might refer to as freedom is thus portrayed as a sort of anarchy—a social and political system turned upside down. In such an environment, one can hardly expect the newcomers to learn how to manipulate the structures of democratic governance in order to make

claims and participate effectively. However, with each succeeding generation of Muslims born in the West, this explanation for Muslims' alienation from the state becomes less relevant. The newest generation of Muslims whom this study examines knows no other political system. And while their parents may be less aware and subsequently less shrewd in their civic life, young Muslims are educated in the West and socialised in its civic life. Like many young people in democracies, they are keenly aware of their rights, routinely push the limits of their freedom, and are sensitised to conceptions of justice. So while the politico-theological explanation of Muslims' unfamiliarity with the nature of Western democratic civic life is a useful stream of thought when we consider some Muslims' lack of participation and commitment to the national government and society, it holds less relevance today than it did decades ago. Indeed, if such unfamiliarity was that which has held Muslims back from higher levels of democratic engagement, then there would be little in their way today. It is therefore worth considering other explanations.

## 1.2 Socioeconomic Explanations

Many social scientists point to the entrenchment of minority Muslim communities in a socioeconomic underclass as a main reason for alienation (Akhtar, 2005: 165; Munoz, 1999; Abbas, 2007: 10; Kepel, 1997). The idea is that workplace discrimination and the marginalization of European Muslims from the mainstream labour force renders them disinterested in the public sphere of a state in which they remain un-invested. And at a more basic level, the argument suggests that the better educated, the wealthier, and the more financially stable people are, the more likely they are to engage (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995a; Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992). Verba et al., in particular, expand the conventional conceptualization of resources to include resources of time along with economic and educational resources. Some people are simply too busy to engage in political activism. Other scholars point to the coincidence between the cutback of social programs and the mass population influx of Muslim immigrants and their children. This has fostered further resentment from poor nationals, and enhanced polarisation between ethno-religious groups with a common social cause. Castles adds that as membership of unions and working-class parties has declined, the ideological and organizational basis for an effective response to the attack on living standards has been lost too (Castles, 2000: 88, 191). Specifically with regard to Muslims, Modood and Berthoud (1997) write that British Indians are more likely to identify with the national majority because of their economic success, as compared to their poorer counterparts of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent.

Despite the wide appeal of socioeconomic explanations for political disengagement, there have been strong counterexamples. Several studies have found that poor Turkish migrants in Western Europe have occasionally voted at a higher rate than native nationals (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Togeby, 1999). And in his analysis of the 2003 British Home Office Citizenship Survey, Hassan Maxwell (2006) found that, contrary to Modood and Berthoud, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are more likely to feel British than Indians in the United Kingdom. He says that his finding does not necessarily suggest that Indians are especially alienated but rather place them in line with white Britons, for whom higher education is correlated with lower British identification. Maxwell writes, "The fact that Muslims and South Asians are more likely to identify as British than the more culturally integrated Caribbeans suggests that national identification is a flexible concept not necessarily at odds with non-Christian and non-English cultural practices, and, that Muslims and South Asians feel more integrated than many observers claim" (2006: 743).

In fact, it has been argued that feelings of inequality among Muslims now tend to have little to do with personal socioeconomic disadvantage at all. As observed by Sloopman and Tillie in an analysis of their Amsterdam case study, "individuals who do not belong to the lowest social groups could still feel deprived if their situation lags behind their efforts and expectations (relative deprivation): 'The more an individual is oriented towards the majority society and wishes to

integrate, the more sensitive they will be to cultural conflicts and expressions of exclusion” (Slotman and Tillie, 2006: 42). According to Wiktorowicz’s study of Britain, feelings of frustration come about when an individual believes that “they face a discriminatory system that prevents them from realizing their potential. They grew up in Britain but are not considered British by many in society” (2005: 91). This is also reflected in Maxwell’s (2006) study, which finds that South Asians and Muslims born in Britain are *less likely* to feel British than those born abroad.<sup>3</sup>

It is likely that this is because the conception of “Britishness,” “fraternité”, Hispanidad, or nationality among first generation immigrants entering a country is significantly different than that of people born into that nationality, knowing no other. Those who migrated from the colonial periphery came for opportunity and egalitarian values of the British governing power. Their children and grandchildren were born with it. This indicates that there has been a change of what Britishness (for example) is, across generations. According to these studies, many Muslim individuals desire the space to form their own identity and they desire the same treatment that any other native of the West would receive. This complicates our understanding of “disadvantage” by directly challenging the socioeconomic or class nature of it. However, it also confronts the above politico-theological contention that Muslims are not sufficiently familiar with the structure and means of democratic civic life in the West to be active, shrewd participants. In fact, it appears they are all *too* familiar.

### 1.3 Public Discourse Explanations

#### 1.3.1 Social Discourse

Discourse-related explanations straightforwardly address young European Muslims’ sensitivity to cultural conflicts and expressions of exclusion. While many young Muslims encounter discrimination, profiling, and racism on an interpersonal basis, their treatment in mainstream Western discourse and news media can feel just as local and direct. As democracies become less direct, discourse and the public sphere become the primary points of access and mediation (Asad, 2003: 5).<sup>4</sup> However, fulfilling news media consumers’ need for quick reference and succinctness makes publications and broadcasts susceptible to gross generalization and un-nuanced explanations. And the need to sell papers and attract audiences makes sensationalist reporting that plays off public paranoia profitable. Tahir Abbas writes that “where the media encompasses Muslims at one level, at another it spreads Islamophobia—not least by focusing on preachers from the wilder fringes of Islam rather than the more recognised authorities” (2007: 10). News media also tend to focus on a range of international political events, many of which involve diplomatic efforts or conflicts pitting Western alliances against the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup> Other observers contend that the media is not only subject to the “nature of the business,” but actually culpable for presenting a one-sided view of Islam that exploits the ambiguities of images and terminology, and promotes stereotypical connections with violence and fanaticism that obscure all other aspects of the Muslim world (Cesair, 2004: 2; Asad, 2003: 159).

Interpretations of Islam that portray it as irreducible, impermeable, undifferentiated, and immune to processes of change, have long obscured the complexities of the historical experience of Muslims across different societies (Ansari, 2004: 8). Today, these perceptions persist, overlooking the complicated process of acculturation and mutual adaptation by Muslims and the institutions of Western Europe. They ignore Islam’s plasticity and diversity, and instead allow exaggerated misimages—stemming from exotica or invented in a narrow historical context and augmented by selective episodic details—to constitute Muslim history and tradition (Malik, 1999: 20). And by

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<sup>3</sup> A more recent study by Gallup and the Coexist Foundation found that while only one in ten Muslims in Britain see themselves as integrated into the rest of society, 77 per cent, said they identified with Britain—a higher figure than the half of the public as a whole who said the same (Doughty, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For a primer on discursive discrimination, see Boreus, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Nielsen, 2004.

considering Islam as an undifferentiated whole, essentialist discourse is able to broad-brush Muslims as a threat to the equally undifferentiated, ‘good’ societies of the West.<sup>6</sup> In turn, Islamic radicals are then able to rotate the same simplistic dichotomy to instill the same monolithic perceptions in their followers—creating a tennis rally of generalizations that only spirals downward.

A study by the Pew Research Center found that the biggest influence on non-Muslims’ impressions of Muslims was what they heard and read in the news media (Pew, 2007).<sup>7</sup> In a recent study by Sadaf Rizvi (2007), she suggests that such news reporting about terrorism is a significant factor in instilling a sense of insecurity and vulnerability among British Muslims. Culpable or not, media misrepresentations throw another log onto the fire of essentialist discourse suggesting that ‘Islam is one, and Islam is dangerous,’ which has led to an equally reductive view of the West: ‘The West is one, and the West is attacking’ (Akhtar, 2005: 172).

While many young Muslims won’t be quite so naïve, the exclusivist sentiment of public discourse in the West can reasonably alienate young Muslims from their societies, as the above sociopolitical explanations suggest. However, if all Muslims are aware of and exposed to the ubiquitous reach of mass media and sociopolitical discourse, why are some young Muslims alienated and others quite engaged? The reach of the sociopolitical argument does not explain individuals’ responses to the broad phenomena discussed. One can only hypothesize that individual responses are greatly dependent on how discourse is interpreted and what individuals believe to be the most effective means of reconciliation.

### 1.3.2 Foreign Policy Discourse

Some studies have argued that European Muslims’ alienation from democratic political systems is the result of dissatisfaction about foreign policy in the Muslim world. British think tank Demos published a 2006 report arguing that foreign policy (and domestic policy) since the 7 July 2005 terrorist attacks in London have “driven a wedge” between Muslims and the wider British community rather than isolate extremists (Briggs, 2006). The report said that government actions were fostering “resentment and alienation” among Muslims and “playing into the hands of the extremists.” It read, “In the meeting rooms of Whitehall, ministers were assuring Muslim leaders of the need for partnership, but in press briefings they were talking of the need for Muslims to ‘get serious’ about terrorism, spy on their children, and put up with inconveniences in the greater good of national security.” But even before the Demos study, according to the British cabinet’s “Draft Report on Young Muslims and Extremism,” the British government was aware that its political action—particularly abroad—has substantiated radicals’ warnings that there is a war against Islam (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2004). Similarly, one 2005 survey found that 83% of British Muslim students are unhappy with British foreign policy—particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine and in Britain’s alliance with the United States government (FOSIS, 2005).

The argument here is that Western democracies’ foreign policy choices that subject the people of Muslim countries to occupation and war alienate Muslims from the governments pursuing those efforts abroad, and perhaps suggest the government’s wider disposition to all Muslims including those within their territory. While it appears clear that foreign policy is a contributing

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<sup>6</sup> The essentialist discourse is manifested in the actions and rhetoric of people who group all Muslims as one. This has been called the Bin Laden Effect, whereby all Muslims are cast in the role of the enemy, transforming them into scapegoats for the entire society. And indeed, in the weeks after 11 September, Muslims were globally targeted during a period of reprisals. (See Cesari, 2004: 35).

<sup>7</sup> With regard to these impressions, Edward Said once wrote: “It is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression” (Said, 1980).

factor to young Muslims' disaffection from the state, for those disenchanted by foreign policy decisions, actions abroad seem only to confirm already-held suspicions or impressions of the government—impressions previously established by other factors. And indeed, many of those Muslims dissatisfied with foreign policy strategies have utilized democratic means of expressing their views and influencing future decision-making. Under such circumstances, their disagreement is actually a galvanizer of political engagement in the form of peaceful dissent. The geopolitical explanation thus complicates our understanding of Muslim perspectives, but not Muslims' political alienation.

## 1.4 Identity Construction Explanations

### 1.4.1 Gender

Recent research suggests that a more Muslim identity frees young women from the constraints of their parents' culture and empowers young men against perceived stereotypes of weakness. In several studies of British Muslim women, respondents often viewed their mothers and grandmothers as limited by their ethnic traditions, and indicated that their Muslim identity qualified them to resist family prohibitions and discourses on appropriate behavior—enabling them greater choice in their decisions about marriage partners, higher education, and fashion (Dwyer, 1999; Glynn, 2002; Ali, 1992; Knott and Khokher, 1993).

It is likely that young men are also troubled by the constraints of their ethnic traditions. But as Louise Archer documents, for men, Islam is also a way to resist stereotypes of weakness and passivity, by replacing it with an association with strength and power (Archer, 2003 and 2001). Based on interviews with teenaged boys in the north of England, she finds that Muslim boys act out and challenge a range of identities, most of which are intimately connected to issues of masculinity. Talk of religiously inspired violence and martyrdom is a part of this interpretation of masculinity, performed in response to stereotypes of “weak, passive Asians.” The boys position the self and the Others to “assert themselves in relation to white men” and rise above ethnic divisions between Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. According to a study by Marie Macey (1999), a prominent aspect of the Muslim sense of masculinity is the maintenance of appropriate gender roles and familial authority, through which they can control the freedom of young women. But according to Tahir Abbas, young Muslim men of South Asian origin are experiencing a sense of dislocation because of the presence of aspirational and committed women in Western society, as well as women inside the South Asian community. He writes that although their representation in higher education is wanting, women are outperforming men in educational terms (2007: 10).

Such gender-related explanations demonstrate both how Islam serves as a vehicle for young Muslims to appeal to modern social norms without feeling like they have forsaken their embattled cultural traditions, but also how an embrace of Islam's newfound notoriety compensates for Western society's undercutting of minority ethno-cultural norms. This is significantly revealing about the changing social dynamics of Muslim society. However, this stream of thought does little to explain sociopolitical alienation among Muslims from the democratic system and society. According to these studies of gender, young Muslims' relationship with the state is merely contextual. In fact, they suggest that the well-chronicled increase in identification with Islam is not related to an increase in religiosity or to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism against the civic identity of places like Britain, but becomes prominent, paradoxically, as young people become increasingly *British* (Samad, 1996: 17). The Britishness of their lives is not inhibiting a desire to be more Muslim. Instead, their community's ethno-cultural constraints are hindering their desire to be more British. In this light, the rise of Muslim identity among some young people works toward integration—albeit in a hybridized form.



## 1.4.2 The Social Psychological

Essentializing discourse among native communities is often countered with alternative, yet equally essentialist, Islamic identity constructions—some of which pertain to gender, but others to religion. In response to the monolithic images and representations of Muslim people and Islam in the public sphere, some Muslims have created a reactionary self-image that assumes a corresponding moral superiority and monopoly on truth. This promotes the idea that all Muslims have been universally victimised by Western hegemony and are free of any dissent within their own community—itsself a monolithic construction (Sardar, 1995). Any monolithic identity construction is particularly contradictory in modern Western democracies, inside of which the societies demonstrate that being Muslim and being Western are not mutually exclusive components. There is, and has always been, a substantial “middle ground” that creates the space for the vast majority of European Muslims and their plethora of identity preferences (Vertovec and Rogers, 1998: 4-5).

Social boundary theorists suggest that examinations of this middle ground should focus particularly on the margins where one identity meets the next, because such boundaries are the points of distinction (Barth, 1969). However, such lines of dichotomy are questionable because identity formation is not always manipulated at the elite level of communities, but has become increasingly decentralised and therefore less generalisable across individuals. Indeed, we must recognize that individuals tend to identify according to multiple social boundaries simultaneously, and with each boundary, individuals maintain different relationships (Hutnik, 1986).

Principle socio-psychological arguments suggest that alienation is European Muslims’ reaction to the manifold challenges posed by this middle ground. Straddling the line has indeed become more difficult. According to empirical work by Abdullah Sahin, young Pakistanis in Britain commonly experience British values of independence, civil rights, career-choice, liberal attitudes toward relationships. Yet at the same time, they are expected to show loyalty to an extended family, perhaps land in Pakistan, and look to the elders of the community for decisions (Sahin in Lifton, 2007: 28). Many young Muslims in the West see their parents’ or grandparents’ homelands and religious habits as geographically and culturally distant from their lives. The “old country” is viewed as backward and they are often unable to relate to the customs, which appear foreign when juxtaposed to the social habits and ideas to which they have been exposed in the Western educational system and society. Many people of older generations are known to suffer from what Margaret Pickles calls “frozen clock syndrome” to describe those immigrants who live as if the culture clock stopped the moment they departed from their homeland (1995: 107). As a result, according to Wiktorowicz, the older generations’ understanding of Islam is viewed as “archaic, backward and ill-informed” and too “focused on issues of ritual and tradition devoid of political import” (1995: 99). Many researchers have found that a compounding factor is that the younger generation is often unable to communicate in the language of their family’s homeland, and subsequently lose touch with that country’s traditions and culture as an aspect of their identity. The combined effect is a group of young Muslims less inclined to follow their parents’ dismissal of Western culture, styles, and customs, seeking guidance that is more attuned to a modern life outside of the ethnic homeland.

Some social scientists argue that the embrace of Muslim identity among younger generations is an act of in-group solidarity in response to the public derision and scrutiny discussed earlier in this chapter (Saeed, Blain and Forbes, 1999; Samad, 1996) and also in response to social rejection by the national majority (Ballard, 1996). Islam has become more significant than ethnic ties, argues Ballard, because it is that part of the younger generation’s identity that is being maligned. In this manner, younger generations of Muslims are reclaiming the stigmatised identity and inverting it into a positive attribute (Cesari, 2004: 25). Gardner and Shuker write that “Islam provides both a positive identity, in which solidarity can be found, together with an escape from the oppressive tedium of being constantly identified in negative terms” (1994: 164). For these individuals, the rediscovery of Islam acts as an authentic medium to “out-Islamise” authorities in the Muslim community and

divorce a Western society that rejected them first. As opposed to swinging more toward a Western alternative to the perceived anachronism of older Muslim customs and lifestyles, exclusivist ideologues use orthodox Islam as a way to handle the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of the West with structure, amid circumstances over which they feel like they have no control (Akhtar, 2005: 167). The collective strength empowers young Muslims despite their feelings of helplessness resisting a perceived discriminatory society.

## **1.5 Human Agency in Modernity**

### **1.5.1 A Critical Review**

Looking back, there are four primary streams of thought that seek to explain micro-level factors that affect Muslims' civic participation and the individual's relationship with the state in modernity. For different reasons, however, each is insufficient to understand modern political alienation.

The Politico-Theological stream explains alienation as a product of Islam's irreconcilability with Western identities or political behaviour. Proponents argue that critical thinking and political judgment have traditionally been the exclusive privilege of political authority in Muslim polities, and that this legacy has disoriented and handicapped modern Muslims. While such explanations of Muslims' unfamiliarity with the nature of European democratic civic life is a useful stream of thought when we consider some Muslims' lack of participation and commitment to the national government and society, it holds less relevance among the growing communities of European-born Muslims who know no other government or society than those of Holland or Switzerland. Indeed, if such unfamiliarity hindered their parents and grandparents from greater democratic engagement, then Muslims political marginalization would no longer be noteworthy today. Instead, religious ideals now inform individuals' moral and political views when they engage or withdraw from European political systems. This sets the stage for modernity's clash of its proverbial "universal-utopian" and "pluralist-pragmatic" poles.

The Socio-Economic stream contends that workplace discrimination, lower wages, and the marginalisation of European Muslims from the mainstream labor force renders them disinterested in the public sphere of a state in which they remain un-invested. However, this explanation is not well-supported empirically as many educated or middle-class Muslims remain withdrawn from the political channels of their local democracies or choose to participate in radical, anti-democratic activities. Furthermore, recent studies show that deprivation is not only conceived economically, but in social and political terms. In a world of multiple modernities, political fault lines thus shift from those of class difference to those of ideology and systems of value.

The Public Discourse and Foreign Policy stream cites essentialist public discourse that constructs monolithic misimages of Muslims and instills a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. Some researchers refer specifically to Muslims' dissatisfaction about foreign policy in the Muslim world. Because of the ubiquitous and intangible nature of discourse, this causal factor is particularly difficult to operationalize. However, arguments that attempt to explain some Muslims' disaffection by pointing to disagreement about foreign policy hold problematic implications. They suggest that Muslims are somehow less able than other groups to express disagreements through democratic channels. They also suggest that political alienation will end with the revocation of the contentious policies. Neither is empirically true. Instead, discourse represents one of the primary sites of modernity—where cultural programs and ideologies compete for space in local social relations.

Finally, the Identity Construction stream argues that alienation is a product of young Muslims' status in what I call the "middle ground" of identity—between the values of the ethnic homeland and the modern liberal democracies, between the discursive constructions of Muslim and non-Muslim identities. Gender theorists contend that although a more Muslim identity can alienate some young people, it also frees young women from the constraints of their parents' culture and

empowers young men against perceived stereotypes of weakness. Such “crises” of gender and identity represent the confrontation of strong ethno-cultural heritages with equally strong local value and lifestyle structures. This not only indicates a significant degree of adaptation, but a living exercise of “multiple modernities,” where social orders are contested in the spirit of pluralism and reflexivity.<sup>8</sup>

From these ideas, we have a significantly better understanding of why there has been a tighter embrace of Islam in recent decades and what structural social challenges and inequities confront European Muslims. However, each explanation is clearly insufficient to understand what causes some individuals to engage democratically and others to withdraw from modern civic life—even though *all* European Muslims face reasonably similar structural challenges. Instead, we see how Muslims occupy the space of competing modernities. This is a space which may feature structural differences derived from religion, class, and identity. But in an environment of equally relevant normative and ideological differences, I hypothesize that such characteristics are subject to significant individual interpretation.

### 1.5.2 Globalization and Political Agency

To emphasize interpretation, perceptions, and expectations in this way is not to say that they are asocial. They are shaped by the structural context of agents. As Anthony Giddens argued, agents are knowledgeable—reflexively constituting their respective realities—but ultimately always bounded by structural conditions and unintended consequences.<sup>9</sup> My hypothesis emphasizes the underlying importance of agency and judgment, and individuals’ subjectivity in *how* they reproduce their surrounding social circumstances. Structures are rarely 100% determining. For this reason, it is worth considering the roles of individual perception, interpretation and expectation in studies examining decisions to engage or withdraw from democratic institutions and European society. Ignoring them also ignores the circulation of competing value systems and moral paradigms in an increasingly plural European public sphere.

Globalization has sensitized individuals to the subjective because, in the past 20 to 30 years, we have been increasingly bombarded with vivid, foreign cultural perspectives and opinions through the advent of online profiles, the wider spread of exotic products and commodities, the reach of transnational associationalism and the immediacy of global news media. The introduction to other lifestyles, cultures, religions, personas and habits forces the individual to reconsider and ultimately classify his own. Classification usually is a matter of a trait being ‘similar’ or ‘different’ according to criteria that are less grounded in the national than in the personal. Globalization has the capacity to introduce and then humanize the Other and her ideas. And in portraying characteristics like birthplace and ethnicity as arbitrary, and portraying one’s persona as self-constructed, we are permitted to build our own perspective and political self rather than accept what we are told it is naturally ‘meant’ to be.

Understood in this way, Islam can hardly be construed as un-European. It is but one arbiter of political and ethno-social construction in a free-flowing European sea of competing influences. Such influences are filling the authoritative void left by the state as people’s activities become too disperse to normatively structure or control. Bhikhu Parekh argues that states *require* moral partners (like religious groups) because they are too abstract, distant and bureaucratic to hold society together and deal with such problems as the disintegration of the family, the rise in crime, and selfish disregard of others’ interests (1997: 21). In this way, Islam (and religion in general) compliments the state by reaching the elements of people’s lives that secular government cannot access. From this perspective,

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<sup>8</sup> My understanding of ‘multiple modernities’ is derived from the seminal explanation in Eisenstadt (2000: 2): “The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world – indeed to explain the history of modernity – is to see it as a story of a multiplicity of cultural programs.”

<sup>9</sup> See the theory of structural relations in Giddens, 1993 and 1984.

Islam is not merely reconcilable with European modernity, but sometimes desirable too. Islam and other religious or non-religious communions discipline individuals' daily activities, provide authoritative moral codes, and structure social lives in a manner which the state is less capable of sustaining, given the dilution of its influence on social order and behavior. Problems arise when doctrines like Islam are unable to connect with adherents, and marginalized agents pursue meaning from peripheral, radical or "anti-system" sources—which unfortunately are able to compete with mainstream orders on equal footing in the increasingly egalitarian public sphere.

This egalitarianism undermines the previously established discursive superiority of states, and emboldens those previously resigned to their submission. Because of this, we have witnessed a significant reinvigoration of international cosmopolitanism, but also incidents of extreme and violent particularist backlash. So whereas previous generations of religious minorities could only respond to the domestic hegemony of national political structures by retreating to suppressed particularist communities in the cracks of the nationalist facade, today's minorities have the option of defying the national completely—emerging above the cracks. The evolution of such personal choice has reinvigorated individual agency and changed the nature of political alienation and interpersonal relations.

Contemporary alienation is now expressed through association and activism (as much as it once was characterized by withdrawal)—albeit in exclusivist groups which seek to divide or undermine the democratic political system. Contemporary alienation is often less a matter of 'can't' (capacity), and more a matter of 'don't want to' (choice). Finally, contemporary alienation's deprivation is less economic in nature, and more political. This is partially because modern democracies champion equality of opportunity more than equality of resources. More generally, what separates today's alienated individuals from the characteristics envisioned before is that today's citizens are less subject to and dependent upon the structural constraints of the state. Increasingly, it matters how the individual perceives the state—and how the individual perceives herself.

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