

GUEST EDITORIAL

Categories of analysis and categories of practice: a note on the study of Muslims in European countries of immigration

Rogers Brubaker

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Abstract

This article reflects critically on the study of Muslims in European countries of immigration. ‘Muslim’ is both a category of analysis and an increasingly salient – and contested – category of social, political and religious practice. The traffic between categories of analysis and categories of practice makes it important for scholars to adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards the categories we use. The article sketches some ways in which the use of ‘Muslim’ as a category of practice – a category of self- and other-identification – has changed in recent decades, and it concludes with some cautionary remarks about the use of ‘Muslim’ as a category of analysis.

Keywords: religion; Muslims; categories; identification; objectification; accountability.

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in religion on the part of students of ethnicity, race and nationalism. The trend is striking in the pages of this journal. Articles addressing religion – about 5% of all articles between 1978 and 1996, and 7% between 1997 and 2009 – represent 14% of articles published since 2010. The first special issue on religion did not appear until the journal’s twentieth year of publication (‘Religion and Ethnicity’, 1997). Since then the journal has published special issues on Hindu nationalism (2000); gender, race and religion (2009); transnational religion and diasporic networks (2011); and methods in the study of non-organized Muslim minorities (2011). In addition, a themed section on Muslim minorities in western Europe appeared in 2010.

Unsurprisingly, the articles on religion have focused increasingly on Muslims in Europe. Of the fifteen articles concerned with religion before 1990, none was primarily concerned with Muslims or Islam. Subsequently, however, about 60 per cent of the eighty-eight articles on religion have been centrally concerned with Muslims; of these, about 75 per cent have addressed Muslims in European countries of immigration.

But what does it mean to study 'Muslims' in European countries of immigration? Who – and what – are we talking about when we talk about 'Muslims'? The answer is by no means self-evident (Grillo 2004). Like many social science categories, the category 'Muslim' is both a category of analysis and a category of social, political and religious practice; and the heavy traffic between the two, in both directions, means that we risk using pre-constructed categories of journalistic, political or religious common sense as our categories of analysis.¹

As a category of practice, 'Muslim' is used to identify oneself and to identify others. (In the important case of collective self-identifications, it is used to identify oneself and others at the same time: to speak not just *of* but *for* others, to subsume others, along with oneself, into a collective 'we'.)

As is the case with all identity categories (Jenkins 1997, pp. 52–73), self-identifications and other-identifications are interdependent: self-identifications are profoundly shaped by the prevailing ways in which people are identified by others; and other-identifications may be shaped – though usually less profoundly, especially where major asymmetries of power are involved – by prevailing idioms of self-identification, especially by publicly proclaimed collective self-identifications.

Prevailing other-identifications of populations of immigrant origin have shifted massively in the last decade or so. Throughout northern and western Europe, populations that had previously been identified and labelled using national-origin, region-of-origin, socio-economic, demographic, legal or racial categories – for example, as Algerians, North Africans, guest workers, immigrants, foreigners or (especially in the UK) blacks – have been increasingly identified and labelled in religious terms as Muslims (Allievi 2005; Yildiz 2009). One sees this shift in politics, administration, media, scholarship and everyday interaction. In part, this shift has responded to a shift in public self-identification. The latter shift was most striking in Britain at the end of the 1980s, when Asian Muslim activists, galvanized by the Rushdie Affair, sought recognition for British Muslims *as Muslims* and challenged the rubric of 'political blackness' and the institutionalized 'race relations' framework under which they had previously been subsumed (Modood 1994, 2006). But the transformation of guest workers into 'Muslims' in the public eye has not been simply, or even primarily, a response to shifts in self-identification. It has its own

sources and dynamics, and has proceeded to a considerable extent independently of the ways in which the populations so categorized identified themselves. This discursive shift started well before 9/11, responding to the increasing public visibility of Islam and increasing claims made for the recognition and accommodation of Islam in the preceding quarter century; but of course 9/11 and subsequent attacks in Europe gave it an enormous boost.

This massive shift in public representations has profoundly altered the discursive and institutional landscape in which populations of immigrant origin formulate their own self-understandings and identifications. Some self-identifications react directly to hegemonic other-identifications. This is most obviously the case where other-identifications are experienced as powerfully stigmatizing. The experience of being stigmatized as Muslims in everyday interaction or public discourse leads some to reactively assert a Muslim identification, to revalorize what has been devalorized.² But self-identifications as ‘Muslim’ respond not only to the experience of stigmatization; they respond more generally to the experience of being cast, categorized, counted, queried and *held accountable* as Muslims in public discourse and private interaction. They respond to the experience of being called upon to account not only for *themselves* as Muslims, but also for what *others* say or do as Muslims (Schiffauer 2004, p. 348). This experience has led some who are not themselves religiously observant to identify – or to identify more strongly – as Muslims, sometimes specifically as ‘secular’ or ‘cultural’ Muslims (Spielhaus 2010).³

The interplay between self-identification and other-identification is not simply an interplay between Muslims and non-Muslims; it is also an interplay among Muslims themselves. Muslims are identified and held accountable as Muslims not only by non-Muslims, but also, and just as importantly, by other Muslims. Being held accountable as a Muslim is not just a matter of being ‘othered’; it is equally, as it were, a matter of being ‘served’ – summoned by other Muslims to an identity one is presumed to hold. The relevant others are not only proximate but distant, part of a ‘transnational Islamic space of reference and debate’ (Bowen 2004, p. 891). They include family members, friends, journalists, intellectuals, local imams, television preachers, prestigious scholars based in the Muslim world, internet-based purveyors of religious instruction and advice, members of transnational religious organizations like the spiritual reform movement Tablighi Jama’at, and so on.

This interplay between self-identification and other-identification changes the quality of self-identification as a Muslim. As a category of self-identification, ‘Muslim’ is increasingly reflexively embraced rather than simply taken for granted. (It may also, of course, be declined or expressly repudiated; but non- or ex-identifiers remain a relatively small – if by some indications growing – minority.)⁴

In Muslim-majority settings, 'Muslim' was long a taken-for-granted self- and other-identification. This taken-for-grantedness is of course massively disrupted by migration to destinations outside the Muslim world. But it has also been disrupted within the Muslim world by globalization, westernization, changes in family structure and educational patterns, new modes of religious communication, challenges to the authority of traditional religious leaders, the erosion of locally embedded modes of social and religious reproduction, and the emergence of a variety of religious movements that seek to reconstruct a purified and universal Islam, freed from cultural encrustations. All of these have contributed to a greater individualization of religiosity, to an increasing self-conscious awareness about modes of religious engagement, and to the 'objectification' of Islam, involving a heightened self-consciousness, reflexivity and explicitness about Islam.⁵

These trends, evident in Muslim-majority settings, are all the more salient and powerful in western countries of immigration. For the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants, in particular, it is difficult to develop and maintain a taken-for-granted identity as 'Muslim' without the support of the entire cultural and institutional milieu that made such an identification self-evident and unproblematic (albeit decreasingly so) in parents' or grandparents' countries of origin. It might be thought that the family would support such a taken-for-granted identification. But immigrant families are in fact sites of chronic struggle over the interpretation of Islam and over what it means to be a good Muslim (Jacobson 1997; Kibria 2008). Such struggles generate self-conscious and reflexive rather than taken-for-granted modes of identification.

Nor are there social or cultural supports for taken-for-granted identification as a Muslim outside the family. Instead, children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants are exposed to a vast web of explicit discourse about Islam and Muslims, produced by both Muslims and non-Muslims. The upshot is that children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants do not grow up in a world in which Islam is a taken-for-granted *medium* of social and cultural as well as religious life; they grow up in a world in which Islam is a chronic *object* of discussion and debate, a world that is thick with self-conscious and explicit discussions *about* Islam. This web of discourse is structured in part around highly self-conscious struggles to represent Islam to Muslims themselves and to national and transnational publics. These are not simply struggles between internal and external, 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' representations of Islam. They are, perhaps even more importantly, struggles among competing internal and among competing external representations. In this context, thick with competing discursive articulations and 'objectifications' of Islam, there is little

space for an unreflective, taken-for-granted identification as a Muslim. 'Muslim' is a category towards which one must take a stance; one cannot simply inhabit it in an unreflective manner.

Having sketched a few ways in which the use of 'Muslim' as a category of practice – a category of self- and other-identification – has changed in recent decades, I want to conclude with a few words about the use of 'Muslim' as a category of analysis.

The distinction between categories of analysis and categories of practice is useful, even indispensable; yet the line between the two is often blurred. Scholars do not stand outside the process through which populations of immigrant origin have been transformed into Muslims. They have not simply registered this shift; they have contributed to producing it, as scholarly literature on Muslims in Europe has proliferated. The making of European Muslims has involved not only a re-labelling of populations previously identified and categorized in other terms *as* Muslims, but also the production of public representations *of* Muslims and the generation of knowledge *about* Muslims. And wittingly or unwittingly, scholars have been party to this ongoing process.

Identifying one's object of analysis as 'Muslims', for example, highlights religious affiliation and, at least implicitly, religiosity; it also marks the population of interest as different from the surrounding population in both religion and religiosity. This risks foregrounding religion (and religious difference) as a frame of reference at the expense of alternative and possibly more relevant frames of reference.⁶ The social processes governing the socio-economic status of populations of immigrant origin, for example, have more to do with the social origins of migrant populations and the dynamics of labour markets, schools, neighbourhoods and families than with religion. Muslims in Europe are indeed deeply and multiply disadvantaged; but they are not disadvantaged, in the first instance, *as Muslims*. Of course many Muslims do encounter suspicion, hostility and stigmatization as Muslims. But the dynamics of socio-economic marginality do not turn primarily on religious exclusion (Joppke and Torpey in press); they turn on other forms of social closure and marginalization. Grouping populations of immigrant origin under a religious rubric in studies of urban marginality is therefore potentially distracting and possibly misleading; it risks suggesting a cultural explanation for a primarily socio-economic phenomenon (Thomson and Crul 2007, p. 1026).

For other analytical purposes, to be sure, there are compelling reasons to focus on religion; and one could make the case that the literature on Muslims in European countries of immigration has paid too little attention to matters of faith and religious practice, being focused more on issues of socio-economic integration and political conflict.⁷ Yet here too there is a risk of overemphasizing the centrality

of religion. This is not to deny that religion is very important for many Muslims, no doubt more important than it is for most non-Muslims in highly secular European countries of immigration. But people who identify as Muslims (like those who identify with any other religion) do not identify *only* or *always* as Muslims, and they may not identify *primarily* as Muslims, though some of course do (Schielke 2010; Jeldtoft 2012). To study the religiosity of Muslims by focusing, as many studies do, on conspicuously visible, vocal and devout practitioners is to risk reinforcing 'public understandings of Muslims as particularly (and dangerously) religious' (Schmidt 2011, p. 1217) on the one hand, and reproducing the 'ideological aspiration of Islamist and Islamic revivalist movements' on the other, with their 'privileging of Islam as the supreme guideline of all fields of life' (Schielke 2010, p. 2). It is to risk what might be called 'methodological Islamism'⁸ by focusing too exclusively on the 'Muslimness' of Muslims and treating 'Muslim' as a master status and a continuously salient self-identification.

Social science scholarship on Muslims and Islam is situated in a field already densely occupied by competing public representations of Muslims and Islam. These range from Islamist representations at one pole to expressly anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim representations at the other, with many others in between. In this context – where our analytical categories are at the same time intensely contested categories of practice – it is crucial to reflect critically on the categories we use.

I am not suggesting that scholars should refrain from using 'Muslim' as a category of analysis. The use of a term as a category of practice does not disqualify it as a category of analysis; if it did, our analytic vocabulary would be vastly poorer. One may regret the discursive transformation of populations of immigrant origin into Muslims, but one cannot undo that transformation. And given the prevailing degree of public misinformation, one could argue that it is in fact urgent for scholars to study Muslims, and to communicate to broader public audiences a more differentiated picture than those that prevail in public discourse.

My argument is not about what categories we should use; it is about how we should use them. We may have no good alternative to using analytical categories that are heavily loaded and deeply contested categories of practice; but as scholars we can and should adopt a critical and self-reflexive stance towards our categories. This means, most obviously, emphasizing that 'Muslims' designates not a homogeneous and solidary *group* but a heterogeneous *category*. Beyond this, and more substantively, it means focusing on the changing ways in which the category 'Muslim' works, both as a category of analysis and as a category of self- and other-identification in practice. In this way we can make the category 'Muslim' the *object* of analysis, rather than simply using it as a *tool* of analysis; we can analyse the competing

reifications of Muslims in Islamist and anti-Muslim discourse, rather than unwittingly reinforcing them.

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Notes

1. For the comparable problem in the study of race and racism, see Wacquant (1997).
2. Although Kashyap and Lewis (2012) do not speculate about the mechanisms of identification, the survey data they present – showing that Muslim youth in Britain attribute *greater* salience to Islam for their personal identity than the older generation of Muslims, despite being *less* religiously observant – are consistent with this interpretation.
3. The emergence of such self-identified ‘secular Muslims’ or ‘cultural Muslims’ in the public sphere has added a further wrinkle of complexity to debates about who legitimately speaks for Muslims (Spielhaus 2010) and how Muslims should be represented in state-sponsored consultative forums (Laurence 2012, pp. 163–97).
4. Maliepaard, Lubbers and Gjisberts (2010) found that 12 per cent of second-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands – but only 5 per cent of the earliest migration cohort – do not identify as ‘Muslim’. Since the survey asked if the respondent belonged to a religious group, and then asked those who did which group, it is possible that some of those counted here as non-identifiers nonetheless identified as ‘Muslims’ in a cultural or ethnic sense.
5. Roy (2004); on objectification, see Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, pp. 37–45).
6. For a discussion of the analogous risk of overemphasizing ethnicity, see Brubaker et al. (2006, p. 15).
7. John Bowen, personal communication.
8. By analogy to ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003).

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ROGERS BRUBAKER is Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, UCLA, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551, USA.

Email: brubaker@soc.ucla.edu