

The modulus of elasticity

Islam, art and populism in postcolonial, securitized Europe

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Current public and political interactions are becoming increasingly populist, illustrating the great success of an approach that creates the belief that majority populations in Europe and USA are in fact beleaguered, *as if* they are a minority threatened by those considered allochthonous. People's democratic agency is thereby silenced and weakened. The Institut des Cultures d'Islam (ICI) deflates populism's boast by bringing individuals, ideas, and artefacts together in a local setting to deconstruct these generalities by being together. The methodology of this paper is to use philosophy, literary analysis, social theory, and physics to analyse the ICI as the same breathed space in which many interpersonal ruptures can be made possible, recognized as such, and then averted. There are ambiguities of difference and of the positive tensions that can be created by bringing *culte* (worship) and *culture* (art) together. This article proposes that the *modulus*, the measure of (human) rigidity (and flexibility), can be used to analyse what happens at the ICI and to consider how outsider 'experts' can both approach this space and also accept that their grasp of what is at stake within it will remain partial.

Keywords: Populism, interpersonal rupture, racism, positive tension, worship, art

Cet article aborde l'influence du populisme dans le discours politique et souligne l'affaiblissement de la volonté générale qui en résulte. Il propose ensuite de considérer le travail de l'Institut des cultures d'Islam (ICI) sous l'angle des difficultés d'interaction qu'il provoque, notamment dans le rapport entre 'culte' et 'culture', afin de souligner la nécessité de ces difficultés pour transformer des situations de rupture potentielle en négociation des possibles. On passe ainsi d'un *modulus* de rupture, concept clé de l'analyse, à un *modulus* d'élasticité.

Mots clefs: populisme, rupture interpersonnelle, racisme, tension positive, culte, art

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Introduction

Laïcité is a key concept in the life of the ICI and is impossible to translate properly into English, but ‘secularism’ will do as a rough working model for discussion. This article explores some of the postcolonial tensions that face the secular society of France with significant numbers of minority populations of faith: the Institut des Cultures d’Islam (ICI) is a case study of how to resolve such tensions. One major locus of interest that *laïcité* finds difficult is what I call the ‘modulus of rupture’, the pressure point that can cause us to refuse to communicate properly with another person. When we come together with those whom we deem to be significantly different from us, how do we deal with the stress in our material understanding of the world, just before we either agree to accept another viewpoint (while we fail to understand but suspend our disbelief) or refuse to bend and risk rupture? Muslim prayer is a potent practice that exemplifies this stress point: at the ICI, Muslims pray and others consume art. This is a daring juxtaposition of two poles of human practice that are often seen as antithetical: in the currently fevered European ‘cultural imagination’, as Ricœur calls it,¹ Muslim prayer can conjure up fears of proselytizing towards radicalization and terrorism, and endorses the *laique* idea that religion obscures reality, whereas art, for the secularist, conjures up the faith in civilization that transcends such savagery. Yet precisely in such an ambivalent place as the ICI there is always also the risk that majoritarian secularist constructs attack their own principles. In this way, a backward somersault of sophistry can convince the white majority that the spineless, overeducated, arty elite are pandering to these ‘Islamists’. Ricœur’s hermeneutics of suspicion reminds us that we believe we know more than ‘these people’ know about themselves and that we should also doubt ourselves. The stress that occurs just before we make a decision to be in a place where our imagination can tell us that tolerance, intolerance, suspicion, and betrayal are immanent, can challenge religious and secular lifestyles. At the same time, this makes it just possible – if we grasp the opportunity – to celebrate our similarities together. At the ICI we see constant efforts to coexist at this point of maximum tension, with many examples of how to face up to and also avoid rupture. In order to contextualize the climate in which the ICI functions, it is necessary to consider a particular aspect of current popular discourse that contains

1 Paul Ricœur, ‘Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination’, *Philosophical Exchange*, 7.1 (1976), 17–28.

within it the endlessly repeated evidence of rupture in societal communications: the prevalence of populism.

Populist discourse as rupture

Populism is commonly understood to be caused by a perceived or actual decline in life prospects and economic security by large areas of the Western world. This can be made credible by a rhetorical device that asserts false causality; *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* (i.e. migrants are in/entering our country and therefore threaten our lives), and is greatly enhanced by the *ad populum* fallacy (i.e. many people find this argument attractive and therefore believe it). Populist discourse has developed powerful techniques for dominating public discussions in TV, newspapers, and on Twitter. One of populism's false causalities is that it speaks transnational, universal truths: 'Islam is dangerous, Muslims will blow us up.' This rigidity leads to ruptures in social relationships and damages the parochial humanity of individual friendships. It has been enhanced in France because the historical suspicion of religion that created *laïcité* has been harnessed by the populist impulse and now contains a racialized component. This can be seen particularly in areas that were reliant on large-scale industrial work that has since declined due to the comparative advantages of other regions of the globe.

In definitional terms, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser describe populism as a 'thin' ideology, often parasitic upon liberal democracy, and based upon a purported dichotomy between the 'honest' population and a 'corrupt' elite, as well as upon a demand to retain popular sovereignty.² This is a clear image, yet challenged by Manuel Anselmi because it is so different in different contexts and may be better defined as a form of discourse, as in Ruth Wodak's work on Austrian extremism.³ The focus upon extremism (never well-defined in modern statecraft) fundamentally alters the discussion that the modern state holds with its populace and renders it one-sided, because we are told that we are in danger and cannot be told exactly how because that would compromise our safety.⁴ Isabell Lorey

2 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3 Manuel Anselmi, *Populism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2017); Ruth Wodak, Majid Khosravini, and Brigitte Mral (eds), *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

4 Alison Scott-Baumann, 'Ideology, Utopia and Islam on Campus: How to Free Speech a Little from its Own Terrors', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 12.2 (2017), 159–76 (p. 164).

identifies this as a trend across Europe: ‘The state increasingly limits itself to discourses and practices of police and military safeguarding, which in turn operate with disciplinary control and surveillance techniques.’⁵ With such a potent and contradictory mixture of definitions of populism and state discourse, there are many who seem to feel powerless to act in the face of populism and therefore allow it to go unchallenged. We may agree that these populist movements are based on reasonable questions about corrupt elites and the voice of the people being ignored, but it is worth considering that they can also then lead to the wrong answers, such as giving the people a referendum vote on a subject they do not understand and that is not the cause of their woes, as with Brexit in Britain.⁶ A remarkable feature of the current European situation is that many people are not asking for explanations or for justice and seem to accept the drift to extreme politics, while often despising it.

Current outbreaks of populism in Europe and elsewhere are providing a largely unchallenged platform for hate speech, racial discrimination, and social division. Of course these difficulties with conducting useful discourse are part of a fundamental crisis with modes of political representation, as Lorey identifies, and are conspicuous in bolstering the increased securitization upon which the neoliberal state relies.⁷ However, the focus at the ICI is upon understanding these ruptured opportunities to communicate with others, and I propose here that the ICI transcends reliance upon the unreliable language of populist discourse by providing different spaces and different forms of communicating the human spirit. Unreliable language is dominant in much media, slipping for example from description to stigmatization in the slide from ‘Islam’ via ‘Islamic’ to ‘Islamist’. The ICI actively resists this sort of slippage.

As Sarah Sorial has shown, there is a key characteristic to populist discourse that may not only reflect but actually *create* this apparent inability of the majority to respond and challenge it.⁸ This characteristic is the one-sidedness, the non-dialogic essence of populist discourse, the exclusion of dialogue and discussion. Such exclusionary power is achieved by a variety of means. For example, extreme statements are made that are not based upon evidence and therefore cannot be verified or falsified. Often the *cum*

5 Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. by A Derieg (London; New York: Verso, 2017), p. 64.

6 Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*.

7 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, p. 61; Scott-Baumann, ‘Ideology, Utopia and Islam’.

8 Sarah Sorial, *Sedition and the Advocacy of Violence: Free Speech and Counter Terrorism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

hoc ergo propter hoc rhetorical device is deployed to adduce false causality between citizens/migrants of colour and the economic woes of the majority. Another phenomenon is the way in which highly emotive assertions are made using the *ad populum* device. They present the privileged majority as the beleaguered minority, which we see in debates about migration patterns.⁹ Here the elite white groups and media may arouse fear in the white working class as a way of securing votes. In the UK context, according to the Refugee Council's submission to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012:

both the Refugee Council and Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum suggest that some parts of the press seek deliberately (or, at least, recklessly) to conflate statistics for asylum and immigration to imply a growing 'wave' of asylum seekers coming to the UK, despite evidence that the number of asylum seekers has fallen significantly since 2002.¹⁰

Such arguments are based upon libertarian positions that insist upon free speech but actually restrict it. Passion is deployed to imbue messages with apparent authenticity and authority; there is constant legitimation of huge volumes of abusive online traffic in the name of free expression.¹¹ None of these forms of utterance can count as communication that invites or even allows responses. In fact they actively discourage conversation. The *modulus of rupture*, the point which can lead to a *modulus of elasticity*, is completely bypassed: many people may feel uneasy when they hear such racist, hate-filled narratives, but they usually decide to let them pass, to not challenge them, and to ignore the intense desire to respond that such discourse can invoke. Whether such populist discourse bullies people into silence or whether we simply take a soft option is not clear. Thus we can see that, whichever theories of populism we adhere to, populist discourse is an immensely powerful feature of populist impulses and very effective at resisting response. The heightened emotion, apparent authenticity, and moral authority of a demagogue's outburst may in themselves suffice to

9 Nina Arif, 'Consenting to Orientalism when Covering Migration: How the British Media Dehumanises Migrants in the Context of the Syrian Civil War', *Critical Hermeneutics, Biannual International Journal of Philosophy*, 2.1 (2018), 27–54.

10 *The Leveson Inquiry: An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press*, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270941/0780_ii.pdf> [accessed 25 July 2018].

11 Maria Ranieri (ed.), *Populism, Media and Education: Challenging Discrimination in Contemporary Digital Societies* (London: Routledge, 2016); Yenn Lee, and Alison Scott-Baumann, 'Digital Ecology of Free Speech: Authenticity, Identity, and Self-Censorship', in *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Technology and Society*, ed. by Simeon Yates and Ronald E. Rice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2019).

dissuade individuals from responding, even if they realize that they are thereby abrogating their right to democratic agency by remaining silent. The common tendency on the part of those who may not agree with such outbursts, is to ignore them – or rather not to react overtly. The worry is that the covert, unintended consequences of being exposed to such extreme assertions is that they will take root in people’s minds. Media education in French schools has shown how difficult it is to try and reduce the negative impact of discriminatory speeches that students read online. Sophie Jehel and Christophe Magis observe that:

As experienced in ESS French classes, the first reaction can be of bitter acceptance. The media structure appears so tightly locked that it seems impassable and this leads to learning how to cope with it [discriminatory speech] – which in the end legitimizes it.¹²

By such means the *modulus of rupture* is aborted; tension is accepted as a burden but never resolved and any chance of dealing with the troubling discourse is lost. Currently there is no widely used digital instrument that can help people to change their approach, and thus it is even more important to seek a different place and a different way in which to create the conditions that will be conducive to the exercise of democratic agency, the understanding that dignity and equality must be sought and protected, and that citizens should have the capacity to express themselves in their endeavours to live a good life. The ICI is one such place which, on a local level, provides an exemplar of creating a space for many different communications, based upon art and Islamic culture, and upon the hybridity of public spaces and the cooperative nature of functioning communities. Ambiguity in life is demonstrated in artwork that (usually) bypasses words and thereby renders redundant the violence and rigidity of populist vocabulary. Nationalist fervour, exclusionary beliefs, and fear of change induce a ‘high’ Young’s modulus (i.e. adhering to beliefs without modification).¹³ The ICI, in contrast, offers a breathing space and different stimuli and in so doing creates a space to develop and reflect a ‘low’ Young’s modulus of rupture (i.e. the ability to be flexible, to respond to contradictory pressures, and even to change the shape of one’s thinking).

12 Sophie Jehel and Christophe Magis, ‘Fighting against Discrimination Speeches with Critical Media Education. Lessons from the French Case’, in *Populism, Media and Education: Challenging Discrimination in Contemporary Digital Societies*, ed. Maria Ranieri (London: Routledge, 2016), 147–64 (p. 159).

13 Young’s modulus is a measure of the elastic properties of a solid that undergoes pressure, named after the eighteenth-century English physician Thomas Young.

The Institut des Cultures d'Islam and the *modulus of rupture*

For the outsiders invited to visit the ICI in May 2017, Artistic Director Bérénice Saliou, summarized the vision of the Institute, which is based around seven principles: first, it prioritizes Islamic culture (colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary) and, secondly, presents Islam as a faith with multiple cultures. Third, it engages actively with the cultures of new Islamic countries and, fourth, it aspires to bring Islamic art and culture into the international networks of art. Fifth, the ICI works consensually with the Goutte d'Or and the rest of the surrounding area. Sixth, it includes Parisian artists – Muslim or not – and, finally, it ensures a good representation of women artists. As such, the ICI is setting a trend for harmony between community-based cultural and religious groups, and seeks to collaborate with many cultural sites, including London. The ICI intends to create an appetite so that audiences will return and learn to reimagine Islam as a past, present, and future, with a programme of events ranging from heavy metal from the Maghreb to discussions about Sufi feminism and the changing faces of French people, all in a hybrid, porous setting that also contains a well-used prayer room.

When asked about her understanding of the term *programmation*, Dr Anna-Louise Milne, spearheading this collaboration with the ICI, answered in a way that shows how planning a programme of events becomes a potent way for the ICI to use art exhibitions, performances, films, etc. to transform the way in which people experience their world:

'Programmation' is about how different propositions, or more prosaically activities, might contribute to engendering an awareness or perception of the plurality of Islam. The term belongs to the world of cultural institutions really and will be used quite simply as equivalent to 'what's on' or 'the season' in a more high-brow environment, but what we're interested in getting at is how institutions might be thinking about the relations they can create and/or foreground between propositions – again that word – that might take the form of components in a programme of study, or a film cycle, or a lecture series, or a combination of all of these.¹⁴

The ICI also therefore, by means of its 'programme', asks wider cultural questions about national imaginaries: How much can art get away with and what is usefully provocative? Is it possible to provide art that reflects different realities and goes beyond the fear of difference? In the current

14 Email correspondence with Anna-Louise Milne, 2 March 2017.

atmosphere of populist extremism that fuels ideas of entitlement from those with power, based on concepts like autochthony, by what means can we ask ourselves how to improve our respect of difference and acceptance of ambiguity?

Art, and the space in which it is housed, has the potential to create a place for change and for mutual acceptance. Great importance is thus placed upon freedom of expression, of association, and of affiliation, all of which are enshrined in European law. For many, these three rights may be problematic, raising questions about visible signs of difference, such as forms of dress, within public spaces, which can often today be met with impatience and violence and can create tension between those with more power and influence and those with less.

These debates create the possibility of *rupture* but it is also in these debates that there is the possibility of resolving rupture with *elasticity*, when different identities come into contact and try to break each other's will. Regardless of whether this coming together occurs by accident or design, the conflicting identities have to try and communicate with each other if there is to be any reciprocal understanding. The *modulus of rupture* is a useful heuristic here as it signifies the point of maximum pressure (normally in materials such as clay, concrete, or wood) just before the substance yields to pressure or demonstrates elasticity.

Art and shared space can help to manage the tension that either *creates* or *resolves* rupture, and sometimes both in sequence. The ICI is a cultural project through which Islam can be acknowledged as an integral part of the international network of art. By using sensory as well as cognitive responses, the ICI can bypass culturally imprinted norms concerning difference and address perceived 'otherness' as a challenge to be met. This is exemplified at the ICI by being in a common space of a gallery with the other; our shared experience of the work of art and its location enact, evoke, and exemplify commonalities whereby the usual tensions are replaced by interest, puzzlement, delight, or disgust evoked by the art, rather than by the other. The worshipping Muslims who wish to pray are obliged to walk past art installations in order to go to and from the mosque, while secular visitors to the art installations are obliged to accept that, on the same premises, rituals are taking place that they may neither understand nor wish to think about. For each participant there is a *modulus of rupture*, a point at which one may wish to completely reject the pressure created by the other, the alien, and the different and decide to walk away. But if one stays, one must then decide to bend, to accommodate, and not to break, to retain one's ability to accept while not necessarily understanding, a *modulus of elasticity* ... Instead of

rupturing one's contact with others and their ideas by walking away, we are walking around the space, walking with and round the people, the art, the café, and the neighbourhood.

The *modulus* of rupture and of elasticity

Without avoiding tension, the ICI offers a way of engaging with 'the other', one that is free of the rupturing damage inflicted by populist discourse. How can we explore what I am proposing to approach as a *modulus of elasticity*? I will apply the four forms of difficulty that George Steiner identified in relation to poetry in his essay *On Difficulty*, an essay which celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year, in order to structure the discussion of how the ICI creates 'difficulty' and yet manages to sustain the project of making sense together.¹⁵ The *modulus* can then take various shapes, and we will define these as Steiner's four forms – contingent, modal, tactical, or ontological. The contingent form of difficulty refers to the contextual nature of art forms, including culture, history, and religion. The modal approach depends on personal and cultural taste: you may find an artwork unacceptable for many reasons and this may relate to the forms it takes (a rejection of nudity in art, for example). The tactical aspect of Steiner's argument is a way in which the *takt*, the rhythm or shape of an accepted art form can be complicated, interrupted, and made initially less accessible and thus potentially even more delightful once finally understood (seemingly abstract shapes or sounds may resolve themselves into something recognizable upon examination). The ontological form refers to the actual definition of art ('what' is a piece of art?). Difficulty can also result from the *place* in which we experience an art form if it has various conflicting yet complementary purposes and complicates our understanding even further with ambiguities about whether we should be there and, if so, how we should behave.

Initially Steiner can help us to differentiate amongst these different currents that flow at the ICI. It has, broadly speaking, four functions. It is a community centre (*contingent* because close to, and yet separate from, the community it serves), a café (*modal* because several specific and different modes of service are offered (food, culture, and religion), an art gallery (*tactical* because the art is providing a completely different form, and therefore experience, of art from that expected by the community of

15 George Steiner, 'On Difficulty', *The Journal of Aesthetics and art Criticism*, 36.3 (1978), 263–76.

worshippers), and a mosque (*ontological* because the ICI houses religious practice in close proximity to a secular space, which is radically different from most equivalent contexts of worship in France). These four functions are physically bound up together yet they are different from each other and introduce the need to tolerate ambiguity: thus our bodily experience requires that we navigate several differently functioning spaces without causing or taking offence and yet also without sacrificing our requirements, both individual and collective.

Steiner was fluent and self-absorbed in his own exquisite command of written and spoken language, and his ideas on difficulty are helpful, but this is not enough. In fact he represents a dependence upon verbal language that is anchored to a mainly white, historically Western, colonial culture and must be supplemented with an invitation to more plurivocal artistic, cultural, non-gendered, sensory, and intellectual stimuli. Thus, Steiner can only offer a starting point that we need to go beyond in order to encompass the physically phatic, the food, the beat, and the shared breathed air that make the ICI unique. The Institute does not simply embody a decision to be tolerant; it enacts the possibility of accepting a human impulse while disagreeing. There one may thus be able to accept the invitation to generalized reciprocity and to do this while feeling excited, even irritated. This may lead us to the point of being complicit with an impulse with which we may disagree, in order to avoid, metaphorically speaking, one's *modulus of rupture* developing to a breaking point. Thus an observant Muslim male on his way to pray will pass through an exhibition five times a day for the four months of its duration. He may (possibly) feel insulted/amused/aroused by the video installation he must walk past, of scantily clad young women throwing their hair about, even when he knows that this is an Algerian tradition from the Oued Souf region for young unmarried women.¹⁶ Yet the often non-verbal, more-than-Steineresque solution offered by the ICI is about being there and wanting something from the place, and this transforms aspects of it that may seem unacceptable into events that are simply happening and affecting the senses of the physically present person.

This space is 'plurilocal' in the sense that its modes and sites are all local, all different, and yet all connected to each other in novel, possibly disconcerting, and vibrant ways. This makes both for constraint and opportunity, an invitation to elasticity. The Muslim male wants to pass through to pray and then to leave after praying, so he 'deals with it'. He also knows from the strong and articulate leadership of the ICI that this contiguity of moving

16 The work in question here is Angelica Mesiti's 'Nakh Removed' (2015).

flesh and hair and mosque is not intended to insult him. Then there is also the *boho* visitor who comes to discover the art installations. That person may find it embarrassing and even threatening to be brushing shoulders with the prayerful and yet, one hopes, will be able to get a better grasp of the complex, irresolvable layers of meaning in the real world, at least as they manifest themselves just north of the Gare du Nord in the Goutte d'Or. This is very different from the mainstream media debates that have polarized recently around the positions taken by Kamel Daoud, influential francophone Algerian novelist and commentator on the 'Islamic world'. Daoud has recently been at the crux of the sterile debate about whether Islamophobia is a construct produced by apologists of Islam, supposedly located within Western intellectual elites as well as Muslim communities themselves. This questioning of the 'reality' of Islamophobia in European society has led to such defenders of secular republicanism as Professor Laurent Bouvet of Lyon 2 to seek the cancellation of a conference intended to analyse the phenomenon as part of the complex reality of the contemporary social world.¹⁷ Daoud's denunciation of the critical response received by his analysis of 'sexual misery' amongst young Arab men, and the strong endorsement he garnered from key political figures such as the then French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, are examples of the intellectualized populist polarization that creates extreme binaries and thereby precludes discussion between and among such voices. The ICI avoids such polarization (characteristic of the rupturing tendencies of populism) and necessitates acceptance of ambiguity and being present with the other. Steiner's four forms create multiple, multimodal atmospheres that contain the potential for rupture, yet show it to be elastic if one can pay attention to one's surroundings.

It may not be possible for the ICI to reconfigure the colonial history of France. Yet it is a living, breathing response to postcolonial France, situated in the culturally complex area of Barbès-Rochechouart, surrounded by street traders from all over the French colonial world and considerable socio-economic inequalities. The ICI engages with many of these issues directly and indirectly, with an emphasis on enjoyment. When visiting the centre, the outsider will also have access to the streets and the *sapeurs*, extremely well-dressed African men whose impeccable attire is both an aesthetic and a political statement about democratic agency (I can dress as I wish and it will give pleasure), about dignity, and the value of the individual. The ICI is therefore a political response to a political situation and has had to

17 Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, 'Orthodox Heresy', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 August 2018, <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/orthodox-heresy/>> [accessed 15 September 2018].

be consensual with its local community from the start. This consensual approach has to be constantly renegotiated against the background of different needs, such as the Algerian pensioners who live in the Goutte d'Or and long to go home but never will and who epitomize the actuality of the continued dependence of Algeria upon France. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, ICI Vice President and professor at Paris 8 whose childhood home was in Barbès-Rochechouart, clarified on 19 May 2017 that many preconceptions were and still are raised to trouble and disrupt the work of the ICI, such as the assertion that Muslims will block cultural activities and the query about whether Muslims 'deserve' a cultural centre.

We are (not) all *sapeurs*

How do we negotiate our own identities, with our own selves and with each other, against the backdrop of what Lorey has identified as the hegemonic securitization discourse oozing out of European governments? In particular, I have argued here that this is made difficult by populist discourse with its vicious language that becomes self-absorbed in its fabricated, racist, binary splits, uncondusive to dialogue and discussion. In his text *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricœur proposes a very attractive model that has great heuristic value but proves very hard to implement: he suggests that we learn about ourselves by learning about others and by seeing our differences and similarities reflected by the other.¹⁸ Yet there are those who argue that we cannot understand each other when we have different skin colours, and when those different skin colours have grossly affected our respective destinies. Can we really see the world from that other's point of view or respond to them, as either winners or losers, in the ongoing narrative of our colonial past? More precisely, those of colour, who have been diminished for centuries by whites, may understandably see no point in becoming acquainted with the thoughts of the master race. The *sapeur* provides an instructive lesson for the (post)colonial mind. The term *sapeur* derives from *la SAPE*, short for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, or the Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People. On the streets of the Goutte d'Or, while visiting the ICI, the outsider sees elegantly dressed men whose attire and demeanour give them a dignity that should be unassailable. But of course they function in a racialized environment in which even the well-

18 Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

meaning white outsider who comes to visit may be seen as an unreliable, patronizing, and contaminated witness to their suits. Perhaps the ICI also allows for a space for such debate to develop openly by creating permeable membranes between our preconceptions of Islam, our experience of the area Goutte d'Or, and our perception of the art installations. Certainly there is a sense of continuity, actively fostered by the ICI directors, between the multicultural spaces of the Parisian streets and their work.

Paris and London: Why doesn't the UK have anything like the ICI?

How do these modes of breathing, which the ICI has developed and is constantly working on, compare and contrast with institutions in the UK? And how has the ICI's work been informed by the particular features of Islamic cultures as understood in and by the ICI, as contrasted with the British scene? This developing picture of real platforms for the modern Muslim voice is not reflected in the British community as it is at the ICI. There is little in London that is similar to the ICI, except the privately financed non-profit art space the Mosaic Rooms, but that organization lacks local community involvement. France's situation is unique, too, with the very specific mix of state-sponsored regeneration plus edgy postmodernism that feels a hair's breadth away from subversion. This mix contrasts markedly with the welfare and culture-led projects in the UK that focus on literacy, well-being, female empowerment, combatting domestic violence, etc.¹⁹

How do the ICI's relationships within the local community compare with other community-driven initiatives in France and the UK? The ICI is rooted in its local community and is also supported by the City of Paris; this creates a hybrid, mixed-mode organism (community and municipality). In the UK there seems to be a polarization of profiles ranging from the funded or at least officially acknowledged or sponsored organizations to community-led groups which (almost by definition) operate on a shoe-string budget. Central, municipal funding would come from a counter-terrorism fund and is thus often not sought out by community groups. Understandably, the calibre and frequency of community activities are incomparable to state-funded initiatives. User demographics and profiles differ greatly, too. The accommodation in which they are housed (a particularly pertinent point

19 See for example the strongly matriarchal Moroccan Hasaniya or those with more nuanced debates, exhibitions, and performances, such as the Yunus Emre Institute. Also the recently established Sharek Centre which, although nominally about teaching Arabic, branches out into other initiatives too and is truly collaborative.

in London) ranges from the Arab British Centre and the Mosaic Rooms to the Pakistani Community Centre (co-located adjacent to Willesden Green Mosque) and Mostafa Ragab's Egyptian House in Shepherd's Bush. However, there are new moves afoot: in the last decade in the UK there has been an organized, focused intention on the part of several Muslim families which have established foundations to provide philanthropically inspired funds for education. This positive, well-financed people power may affect the cultural community climate, especially as government may seek to spend less in communities after Brexit. Moreover the well-worn sketch of identity politics as a fissiparous impulse that leads groups away from the national interest is being challenged and replaced by a new generation of Muslim scholars, such as Khadijah Elshayyal, who offer powerful examples of political and community activism that show how Muslims can and do exert democratic agency even though they have been and still are treated differently and in discriminatory ways from other British citizens and minority groups.²⁰ My three year AHRC funded research project has amassed rich evidence to show that university campuses in Britain bear resemblance to the ICI project, in that discussions take place (although of course they also sometimes fail) amongst young adults (including Muslims) who self-identify as very different from each other, yet somehow manage to deploy some elasticity for accepting, if not understanding, the other. Elshayyal shows us how rich the cultural imagination of Britain really is, *if* we accept identity politics as a fast-evolving phenomenon and *if* we seek to address the economic inequities that damage the country with unaccountable power.

Reflections upon the patronizing rigidity of unaccountable power

We know that language can have a malign influence in the areas which the ICI seeks to influence, as already discussed through analysis of populism's aggressive narrative. Art forms can take us beyond the language that we use in order to assign difference and can invite us to consider difference as a way of engaging with an idea, an object, a sound, a sensation. Indeed, freedom of expression is becoming more difficult, weighed down as it is with political difficulties and in particular the rise of populist impulses that seem irresistible when magnified by social media in an ever more powerful digital world. There are several reasons for this: first and foremost, free

²⁰ Khadijah Elshayyal, *Muslim Identity Politics: Islam, Activism and Equality in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

speech is an impossible idea; the possibility of speaking – with some but never absolute freedom – needs to be discussed and negotiated between interested parties. Another reason is the way in which language has become weaponized by the media, making it more complicated to use certain previously ordinary terms to talk about issues that are deemed to be controversial and therefore dangerous, even if they are perfectly legal (Islam, Islamic, and Islamist come to mind). Most importantly, racism is as unresolved as it ever was in daily life and often takes shape in casual verbal racism, which this article may even inadvertently contain, being written by a white non-Muslim woman.

Subverting language by emphasis upon the plastic arts is a necessary move in this climate. The ICI presents myriad ways of experiencing the humanity of Arabs and Muslims by disseminating their creativity. If this exceptionalizes the Muslim world and risks indulging the patronizing rigidity of unaccountable power, then that is a natural consequence of the ‘othering’ of Islam in which the media and European governments and their populations engage and indulge. The ‘programmation’ at the ICI facilitates a mapping of Muslim thought and cultures which may at times displease even those closest to this brave, distinct project. Milne brings in outsiders to experience and reflect upon this unique experiment. She thereby sets a scholarly and pragmatic framework for considering the value of the ICI’s project. Not least important is that the ICI, with its cultural focus, provides the opportunity for approaching and dealing with (rather than evading) a *modulus of rupture* that many find unbearable when they experience discrimination and racism online – at the ICI we are together in the same breathed space and we are in the community. It offers a localist solution to these populist impulses by reinvigorating the human capacity for personal engagement with difference on a daily basis. This is effected through bringing together into one physical space those who have a powerful voice and those who do not, facilitating a *modulus of elasticity* in order to counteract the ways in which populist rhetoric makes communications between individuals rigid. The ICI demonstrates how the population in the Goutte d’Or and their visitors can, and do, maintain their commitment to serving the common good by making public values work locally with a platform for celebrating translocal ideas, images, identities, and ideals. Now the challenge is for more people to step off the street and into the ICI.



ICI Stephenson, street conversation © Melissa Thackway