Europe's Muslim Communities

Amiraux, V.

Europe's Muslim Communities

VALÉRIE AMIRAUX

Questions about the impact of 9/11 on Muslim communities in the European Union in terms of social interaction and conceptualizations of Muslim identity led to the comparative project "Europe's Muslim communities: Security and Integration post 9/11" from 2003 to 2007. The project was initiated by Ethnobarometer, the International Research Network on Interethnic Politics and Migration, and directed by Alessandro Silj. It involved national research teams in six EU countries (Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands).[1] ISIM was the Dutch partner of the project.

The initial frame of the project highlighted the causal tie between terrorist attacks against the USA and the growing feeling of hostility towards Muslim populations and focused on public discourses and policies. By the time of our first meeting, in 2003, it was obvious, however, that public opinion had already been furnished with plenty of empirical and statistical evidence of these dynamics.[2] In order to better grasp the dynamic of inter-ethnic relations, we therefore reoriented our project towards a new methodological setting.

As matters were dictated by nationality, we wished to nuance our approach by mapping the differences among EU member states trying to come to terms with Muslim populations after 9/11. This meant assessing the level of anti-discriminatory provisions; the legacy of colonial experiences; the strength of extreme right movements and political parties in the national elections; and the kinds of integration policies existing. All such elements influence national political cultures and both public discourses on, and social treatments of, Muslim populations.

The most innovative aspect of our approach was to implement a protocol different from the classical qualitative approach of the religiosity of Muslims through semi-directive interviews. This involved the reproduction, within laboratory settings, of conditions for conflict to occur. This ethnographic innovation grew from a desire to deal with situations and interactions, rather than discourses and institutions. Thus our method aimed at providing us with a way to observe the multiple meanings of "being Muslim" in the course of interaction between individuals, some Muslims, some non-Muslims.

The seven countries involved have all entertained passionate public discussions in relation to resident Muslims. Further, the idea that relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims automatically conflict in secular contexts appeared to be the common denominator. Method should incorporate the conflict dimension as an avenue of analysis. We aspired to a method that would artificially recreate situations involving "ordinary citizens" that had been in touch with arenas where real conflicts have taken place. This would provide a purer ethnographic approach to religious belonging, based on a sociology of culture perspective rather than a neo-Islamic studies or sociology of religion reading. We thus worked with group discussions, implementing situations of debate for invited Muslim and non-Muslim participants. About twenty groups met over a period of two years, each group meeting at least two times.

The settings created space and opportunities for people to express themselves with their own words. Each group focused on a pre-defined non-consensual topic. Such a method keeps people centered on a topic that, in the course of the discussion, creates linkages and forms of intimacy between them. Trust and mistrust appear as central concepts in distinguishing between successful (and socially cohesive) and unsuccessful situations. The group discussions were opportunities to observe where dialogue stops, what is non-negotiable, at what point people feel too injured by a person's position to continue talking with them. In order not to reduce all conflicts to matters of ethnicity or religion, "focus groups" were formed to represent various ethnic groups, age groups, and different degrees of religious attachment. Though balanced in term of age, gender, and ethnicity, these group discussions consisted of people of diverse and contrasting positions.

The precise format of the focus group discussions differed by country. Topics were chosen either on the basis of their local/national visibility in the public space, or on their ability to bind all participants together. In Italy, the impact of immigrants' arrival on Italian society was central in discussing the perception of respective otherness between Italian citizens and immigrant citizens after 9/11 (Rome), the links between security and identity (Padova), or the cultural transformation of Italian society in a migratory context (Milan). In France, the groups were organized on the basis of a community of experience shared by the participants. Cities were selected and associated with one arena for conflict including religious signs in public schools (Creil-Bobigny), the place of religion in French universities (Bordeaux), the access of youngsters with a migration background to political participation (Melun), the daily experience of religious pluralism in public day-care during school holidays (Argenteuil). The German case was entirely based in Berlin and delved into school and media. The British case included Birmingham (the role of religion in the local socialization of youngsters) and London. The Dutch team chose Gouda as their city in which to host five focus groups, all dealing with the victimization of Muslims, the tension within the media, trust and distrust in politics, the impact of the public presence of Islam on non-Muslim's perception of the faith, and Muslim access to Dutch schools.

Despite their variety and scope, our results may be summarized in two observations: there is, on the one hand, a demand for greater recognition between individuals in European communities in which Muslims live, and, on the other, a need for more trust between all parties. Indeed, in plural social contexts where security and Islam have become closely associated in the public domain, the importance of mutual recognition was expressed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This topic emerged both in the discourses of individual participants, and in the course of interactions during group discussions. Participants complained about the "rupture of trust" and growing tensions between Muslims and wider society and expressed the idea of trust as the only avenue through which social cohesion may emerge. From a public policy perspective education is clearly of great general importance. Tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim students in schools have long been underestimated, both in their daily impact on the relationships between pupils, and between pupils, teachers, and parents.

The material accumulated is quantitatively impressive and ethnographically rich. The main challenge of interpretation has been relating these data to a comparative framework. Instead of solely looking at theoretical/methodological questions, comparative approaches are increasingly problem oriented. This makes such approaches more receptive to interdisciplinary analysis. It also makes matters more difficult when it comes to the epistemological roots of our results. Beside the national reports, the final result of the project will be an edited volume available in English next summer. Lastly, it should be emphasized that although the organization of the group discussions required a lot of time and energy, for both researchers and participants the project has been a success, suggesting the need for future work along collaborative and comparative lines.

Notes

1. The names of all coordinators and research assistants can be found on the ISIM website under Projects.
2. For example, see the various reports on Anti-Islamic reactions within the European Union after 9/11 by the EUMC in 2001 (http://eumc.europa.eu/fra/index.php), the EUMAP initiatives (http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/eumuslims), the reports by the International Helsinki Federation, not to mention academic publications.

Valérie Amiraux is Professor of Sociology at the University of Montreal and currently on leave from CNRS/CURAPP.
Email: Valerie.amiraux@umontreal.ca