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Invisible Discrimination Against Veiled Women in the Public Space

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Abstract

This article attempts to show how the Muslim community is discriminated against in the media space in France and in the USA, then presents a research-action in a museum carried out with a contemporary artist, Pierre David, aiming at shifting the lines between the visible—the veil in the French public space—and the invisible—the discrimination of which veiled women are victims.

According to Habermas, the public space is the place where democratic power is legitimized. It is through the public space that the citizen has the feeling of being as much the author of the law as the recipient of legislation (Habermas, 1997). However, H. Arendt has another vision of the public space. From her own phenomenological perspective, the public space is that of the visibility of political issues. It is also the place where the problems of democratic societies become visible to the very eyes of citizens (Arendt, 1983). However, what is visible or invisible in a public space dominated by the media is not only a question of perception, it is also, and even more importantly, a question of the construction of public problems (Neveu, 2015). As Sousa Santos (2015) reminds us with her notion of the “sociology of absences,” certain social phenomena (poverty, disability, etc.) are deliberately excluded from media representations. In other words, what is visible and invisible at a given time, what can and cannot be seen, but also what can and must not be shown, is linked to a political struggle. A political struggle that J. Rancière (2000) calls the “sharing of the sensible.” The public space is therefore not only a space of mediation where reason should play a central role, it is also a space of a struggle for recognition (Honneth, 2007) where aesthetics play a major role. This is why art, which sometimes changes the aesthetic perception of citizens, can play a key role in making certain problems visible. In any case, this is the hypothesis on which this work is based, which is a focused interdisciplinary work (Chareaudeau 2010) at the crossroads of civilization and communication studies. This work, will show how the Muslim community is discriminated against in the media space in France and in the USA (first part), then present a research—action carried out with a contemporary artist, Pierre David, aiming at shifting the lines between the visible—the veil in the French public space—and the invisible—the discrimination of which veiled women are victims—(second part).

I - Discriminated Muslim Minorities in The United States And France

Within the African-American community, in the aftermath of World War II, through the Nation of Islam and its most charismatic leader Malcolm X, and then in the early twenty-first century through the attacks of September 11, 2001, people of the Muslim faith played, in various ways, an important role in the way “living together” could be defined in the United States. A role that is more or less similar to that of the Muslim community in France.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate this point. In the 1950s, the FLN (the National Liberation Front) initially demanded first-class citizenship for all citizens of French Algeria, which corresponded at the same time to the demands of the Afro-American civil rights movement, at the fringe of which was the Nation of Islam. Then, since the attacks of 2001, the EEOC¹, which records discrimination in employment in the USA, shows that difference is a vector of discrimination similar to that encountered by people of North African origin in France.

¹ The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was created in 1964 by the civil rights act.

The statistics, from the US government, took an unparalleled turn increasing by 250% for the Muslim community in the last quarter of 2001 and then remaining at an unprecedented constant rate. The EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) website is very explicit on this subject (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/events/9-11-11.cfm>).

1.1 Anti-Muslim Discrimination Not Very Visible In the Media

As Sousas-Santos (2015) reminds us, certain social processes are invisible, because they are actively made invisible. The Portuguese author explicitly refers to the role of slavery and colonization in the development of capitalism, but we can take up his analysis again for anti-Muslim discrimination. Indeed, the American media have often hidden traces of anti-Muslim discrimination behind what Juan Gonzalez and Joseph Torres (2011)² call “the instant rewriting of the white discourse,” a rewriting that has marginalized or sanctified the leaders of the civil rights movement, with Malcolm X being placed in the first category for both his religious and political engagement.

This otherness, which was reduced in the middle of the twentieth century, was increased in the aftermath of the 09/11 attacks as Mohamed Abid Amiri (2012) shows in an article on the role of the media after this event. Paradoxically, according to the researcher, it took a year for the way in which the Muslim community was portrayed to be marked by stereotypes. Taking up Maxwell McCombs’ and Donald Shaw’s classic analysis of Agenda Setting Theory (2004), the fact that public opinion was repeatedly exposed to negative images of Muslims convinced a section of the population of the real danger that this religious community could represent. Ten years later, the media storm triggered when there was talk of building a mosque near Ground Zero, the site of the towers destroyed in 2001, is, according to Amiri, a consequence of the communication policy of the mass media.

For the first time in ten years since the 09/11 attacks, several incidents occurred in the United States, which testifies to a rise in tensions towards American Muslims. Americans seemed [already] intolerant of Islam and their Muslim fellow citizens when the controversy over the Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan erupted in the summer of 2010. Hundreds and thousands of people took to the streets of New York City and other major cities across the country to protest the construction of a mosque a few blocks from Ground Zero. The media conglomerate took this story and followed it like never before. They started asking questions such as: “Should Muslims be allowed to build a mosque at Ground Zero? Or “Are Muslims anti-American? “Although every American has the right to build a place of worship anywhere in this country, Muslim Americans were seen as an exception. I was surprised to see the number of people chanting in the streets against the very right of their fellow Muslim Americans³.

According to Halil Ibrahim Yenigun⁴, while the impact of the 09/11 attacks on the perception and treatment of Muslim Americans is undeniable, there is a distinction that must be added that is not a nuance. For the author, the media discourse distinguishes between those whom he considers to be fundamentalists at the heart of a discourse described as colonialists and others—moderates—who are spared criticism.

In France, non-existent in the French media, as Pascal Blanchard clearly demonstrated during a conference held in Clermont-Ferrand in 2012, and then present in a fragmented way with communitarian tendencies, Muslims seem invisible in the public space. François Dubet takes up this analysis again, but with some nuances. According to him, “French media representations are often criticized for not giving a fair place to women and minorities, and the many disparities observed seem to justify the denunciation of a refusal of diversity due to discriminatory practices. If it is true that the discrimination lawsuit addressed to the political system and television was largely founded until the 1990s, things have changed and the argument of discrimination is hardly ever invoked by our interlocutors. Not because it does not exist, but because it is not enough to explain the discrepancies and dissatisfaction... Hence one of our conclusions shows that the feeling most commonly shared by our interlocutors is that neither in the political world, nor in the media, nor even, basically, in the French national community, they really feel ‘represented’.

² News for all The epic story of race and the American Media Verso Books, 2011

³ (<https://abidamiri.wordpress.com/2012/03/>)

⁴ The American Journal of Islamic Social Science 21-3

Indeed, they are condemned either to dissolve into abstract representation or to be locked into the identities imposed on them as women and minorities. The progressive reduction of discrimination does not automatically lead to a transformation of the social representations, categories and identities on which they are based.” (Dubet, 2013)

The April 3, 2013, edition of the newspaper *La Croix*⁵ is an excellent example of Dubet’s point in the way the media evaluates performances and draws consequences from them. In his editorial, Dominique Quinio⁶ raises the question of the redefinition of the concept of secularism in view of the visibility of the Muslim religion and its evolution on the international scene. Fearing identity-based retreats and the increase in the legislative arsenal, she nonetheless calls for greater firmness regarding the principles to which women’s rights and religious freedom call for.

In an article entitled “Les préjugés pris aux mots⁷,” *Libération* of 30 April 2013⁸ shows, through the work carried out under the CoExist program to combat racism and antisemitism, how Aubervilliers schoolchildren found themselves confronted with their own prejudices. A presentation of the associations of words used by the young people is demonstrated. “Black” is associated with racism, inferior; “Arab” with thieves; “Jew” with cheap; “white” with rich, bourgeois or Parisian; “French” with racists, thus showing that the representations are not only hard to live with, but that they are transmitted in a transgenerational spirit marked by alienation. By questioning the idea of prejudices that would be the prerogative of the dominant or majority group, minorities endorse and fuel many discriminatory and sexist representations.

1.2 The Value of Making A Link Between Two Conceptions of Citizenship on Either Side of The Atlantic and The Advertising That Is Made of Them

In order for a relationship of domination as defined by Philippe Corcuff (2012) to begin, thereby allowing discrimination to occur, it is useful that the elements of the equation are brought together: a distinct community must be identified and not postulated before it can be addressed in an analysis. In this case, the Muslim community, through the display of its religious identity, would allegedly come to question the very foundations of republican secularism, as Raphael Logier (2012) explains.

To achieve the goal of addressing the Islamic headscarf worn by a minority in society, we will make our own a recommendation by François Dubet: “Since individuals are discriminated against because of their identity and their ‘nature,’ the task of criticism and social sciences is to show how these categories are constructed, in order to deconstruct them. Neither gender, race nor cultural identities exist outside their construction as categories of identification and therefore as categories of power.” (Dubet, 2013)

Indeed, the social sciences have a role to play in the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 2007), as many groups (homeless, drug addicts, over-indebted) are more insensitive to this battle than others, as shown by the remarkable collective work on *La France invisible* (Beaud, Confavreux, Lindgaard, 2008).

In order to make these social groups viable, researchers and journalists had joined forces to draw up portraits, deconstruct legal categories, update the unthinkable in statistics, etc. (Beaud, Confavreux, Lindgaard, 2008.) For our part, we chose another path, art. Indeed, art is a communication, full and complete (Dewey, 2010), which allows, through its aesthetic questioning, to question the sensitive evidence of the public space, that is to say, to question what can or cannot be shown in the public space (Rancière, 2000).

2 - Art As A Tool For Making Discriminated People Visible

Following a multidisciplinary work on the color black, a symposium was organized during which a “work created by the visual artist Pierre David, entitled *Le Nuancier*”⁹ was presented. This meeting gave rise to a mutual desire to conduct a work combining art and research. It is on the complementarity of approaches that the work was gradually envisaged.

⁵ *La Croix*, The Cross in English, is a daily French newspaper which adopts the Roman Catholic church positions.

⁶ Journalist and newspaper editor from 2005 until 2015.

⁷ Prejudices taken to words

⁸ *Liberation* is a French daily newspaper founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and Serge July in 1973. Its stance is now center-left.

⁹ <http://www.pierredavid.net/page/fr/nuancier-2>

The discussions launched in 2011 put two areas of convergence into perspective. The first, a shared desire to participate in the debate on public space by working on the dangerous and transgressive black element, the second, a clear link with an earlier episode in African-American history known as the Harlem Renaissance which showed the link between art and the fight against discrimination. We will therefore return to this event before presenting the action research.

2.1. The Renaissance of Harlem: Point of Convergence Between Art and Research

This pivotal period, a concentration of multiple artistic expressions displaying, claiming the place of this community within the American society of the inter-war period, is the period that makes the additional link necessary for the construction of this project. The link to Africa is immediately claimed, the black woman's femininity is scorned and sanctified in African or Egyptian clothing, journalistic writing is claimed, photography comes to bear witness, poetry shows a mastery of language bringing a new rhythmic and melodic impetus. In short, this central episode of the twentieth century will have greatly contributed to a first reconstruction of black identity before its affirmation.

One of the constants of the work undertaken by the artists of this period of the Harlem Renaissance was to put themselves in danger, to transgress the rules established for the sake of social or societal affirmation. Edmonia Lewis, another half-breed, will show the way for Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller who, through her work of art, will in a way be the precursor of the African-American term (Talking skull) by asserting the link between Africa and America despite the language deficiencies mentioned here, but which nevertheless invites us to drape ourselves in African clothing fashions (Ethiopia Awakening). Palmer Hayden asserts, through the John Henry Series, the participation of Blacks in the construction of America, William Johnson asks the question of the color of God, but also, it seems, of the lynching that Langston Hughes, poet of the time, denounced with force and of which Billie Holiday made a world-famous anthem by interpreting Lewis Allan's Strange Fruits. If we add the richness of the writing of the philosopher Alain Locke, we are at the heart of the American counter-narrative which inspired us to launch this work between art and research. A counter-narrative that WEB Dubois will continue to pursue through his journal Crisis. A counter-narrative that strongly opposes the white press's denial of the role played by the black community in the construction of America. The last renowned artist, James Van der Zee, official photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, immortalized many of his contemporaries in the 1920s. It is this capacity to make visible, the invisible, to bear witness to what the general public does or does not want to see that we will want to reproduce in our action research "Veiled" conducted with the artist Pierre David.

2.2. Veils: An Exhibition to Unveil the Invisible

Pierre David very quickly came up with the idea of launching a work on the veil and undertook research on the subject which shows, notably through the work of Mouna Jemal¹⁰, that this concern is at the heart of the French public space since it appeals to several artists in different ways. He thus takes up an idea declined in 2010 by Pierre David and which is entitled "Silver Portraits". For the creation of this work, the artist reversed the usual portrait process by soliciting models at the rate of one per month for a year. The challenge was, it seems, a major one since Pierre David does not break the rule of not knowing those who pose for him. He therefore had to find, photograph and send the works he had created.

Transgression, danger, silver portraits, we naturally come to the way the idea takes shape. It is a question of making silver portraits of women wearing a black veil to which we will submit a very simple questioning (why do you agree to pose; why do you wear the veil; what is secularism for you?) by respecting the artist's working method. This questioning we will be able to compare it with the one initiated and presented by Asma Khalid to a dozen women. Her idea is to try to understand why 50% of Muslim women living in the USA wear the veil. In these comparisons, there is an interesting intercultural subject, The objective—another photographic term that we borrow readily—will be to understand why these young women transgress codes in a public space that we would tend to perceive as being mostly hostile to their clothing.

¹⁰ Born in 1973 in Paris, Mouna Jemal Siala lives and works in Tunis, where she has been teaching plastic arts at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts since 1998. A multidisciplinary artist concerned with preserving the memory of her personal experience, Mouna J. Siala places photography at the heart of her work. She draws inspiration from her own history to address the issue of identity, especially that of Tunisian women in the historical and political context of her country.

Finally, it is thanks to the clichés that the innocuous object that at first glance constitutes a scarf will reveal the comparative strength of a piece of clothing to that of the color of the skin. It is therefore a question of exhibiting portraits of veiled women in a museum and then carrying out surveys in the reception of visitors' perception of the exhibition. The aim of this action research is to check whether, by this means, looks change and why.

In the context of this project, the visible is, by definition, the exhibition and everything it conveys. In order to make visible the reasons for the choices made by the models, their values, what drives them and what they claim in a very different posture from the endless opinion polls, interviews of each model were conducted and offered to visitors on digital shelves. In addition, a documentary film was made to ensure that their words were heard.

III- Main Results of This Action Research

The veiled exhibition was held from February 7 to May 20, 2018. It welcomed more than 7,000 visitors, allowed two conference-debates, generated media productions (the short films) and gave rise to a final academic conference whose proceedings will be published shortly. What lessons can be drawn from this action-research? The first one is the difficulty of such an undertaking. Six years separate two main events in the course of this project that is to say between the first formalization of the idea by Pierre David on December 6, 2012, during a meal with the researchers and the actual holding of the exhibition. The public authorities' fear of disturbing public order, the difficulty in finding models willing to be suddenly placed in the spotlight, the hidden intentions lent to the researchers (proselytism, machismo, communitarianism, etc.) partly explain the difficulty of the undertaking in a context where the terrorist attacks have weighed heavily. Beyond this difficulty in taking research out of its comfort zone, two lessons seem essential to us: this action-research effectively brought to light in the local public space a discrimination that was not very visible in the national media space. It also made it possible to reduce miscommunication around the veil.

3.1 Visibility in the Local Public Space

The construction of this project was not without its difficulties. It took a long time for the actors to agree on the communication strategy to be initiated. On an institutional level, combining the skills of the university and the city of Clermont was a difficult exercise given the different assessments of the project within these entities. In the end, however, all the usual partners of the cultural events were notified by email. The online magazine Clermont Auvergne Métropole was distributed via the online magazine Clermont Auvergne Métropole, reaching not only the 290,000 inhabitants, but also the 14,000 businesses located in the conurbation. The 35,000 students at the university received the information through the university culture department, which was very involved in the project, and the institution's communication department. All the media received a press kit, which led to a few publications in the regional and national press, whose reports focused mainly on the artist and the public's perception of this series of portraits, largely ignoring the university approach that led to the development of this project.

Communication on the museum site began with the deployment of a banner on the museum's height representing the first portrait by Pierre David. Flyers, using the layout and colors of the banner, were offered to visitors in the weeks preceding the exhibition and were distributed throughout the Clermont museum network. 7,000 people were thus able to discover the twelve portraits produced by Pierre David in a museum that had prepared its teams in advance for the reception of visitors with potentially antagonistic perceptions of the project. This prior organization was not tested by conflict situations, as no hangings were put up during the four months of the exhibition, either at the entrance of the museum or in the room dedicated to the presentation of the portraits. In other words, there was no disturbance of public order as some elected representatives and administrative officials of the metropolis feared.

3.2 A step in reducing miscommunication

This peaceful visibility can be found in the guest book, which contains three types of remarks.

A first group went to the site of this exhibition out of artistic interest recording an opinion on the art of portraiture and the qualities of the portraitist. In this context, the considerations on the veil take second place, the remarks being more about the technique used, the size of the portraits, the material used. Here, real amateurs of the portrait technique have come forward. The qualifiers used are: excellent, great mastery of the artist, original support, a beautiful appropriation of the art of portraiture.

A second group discovered the exhibition by first having as a project to visit the other exhibitions on the site, the permanent one presented on the ground floor and the one reporting the discoveries made on the archeological site of Corent¹¹. While everyone recognized the quality of the works presented, they wondered about the meaning to be given to it:

“Why only veiled women? ‘What prompted the artist to ask these women to sit for him? “There is a “cruel lack of explanations as to why this exhibition was held.” It is important to point out that the videos that were supposed to present each portrait were not immediately made available to visitors due to a defect in the organization, an error that was corrected later, i.e. at the beginning of March.

A third group, limited to four comments, attacks the exhibition and the people involved in its implementation. Very clearly, the blames revolve around the religious dimension and the questioning of the concept of secularism. To the members of the third group, the promoters of this project gave pride of place to radical Islam. “Is it the vocation of the Bargoin Museum¹² to propose such an exhibition? “asks a signatory of the guest book.

On the contrary, the women who participated in the project highlighted their willingness to enjoy their freedom in the French public space by relying on the very spirit of secularism which guarantees everyone the right to express their convictions within the limits of respect for public order—this point was at the heart of the debate following Hana Chidiac’s conference¹³—and thus to wear the veil as they see fit. They highlight the fact that this is part of their identity according to an individual construction scheme, thus responding to a personal aspiration. What they liked in their speeches was to bring a nuance to what is often highlighted in the French media, which often considers, in a rather too systematic way, that the wearing of the veil cannot be envisaged without any constraint. An argument which they refute by showing how this fabric—this is how the models often describe it—is not only part of their identity, in the general sense of the term, but also, for some of them, a manifestation of their femininity. Here we are at the heart of the study carried out, namely different interpretations of the founding concepts of our republic, which lead some to worry about the future of the law on secularism, while others want to demonstrate, through their appropriation of the spirit of the law, its vitality. Miscommunication is to be found in the antagonisms arising from the interpretations of the law in a tense societal climate as soon as religious issues are once again exposed in the public space. We are typically in the schema of the sensible as we have defined it, i.e. the distance that exists between the common meaning given to the law and everyone’s interpretation of it.

Conclusion

Invisibility is the cry from the heart of Ralph Ellison, an author known worldwide for his recognition of the black community in the United States in the 1950s. One of the major questions of this work is the relationship of the individual to the group, of his personal identity within the rigid framework of post-war American communitarianism. This invisibility can be found in the social analyses presented in this chapter on the Muslim community. It is the understanding of this invisibility that is central to the artistic enterprise at the center of the survey research project.

Revealing invisibility means working on citizenship in a hollowed-out way if we consider that this concept has a relief. The pictorial comparison follows in the artist’s footsteps; it can just as easily be written in the footsteps of the writer of another time, revealing, through his pen, the full and partial aspects of a society governed by the rule of law.

Salvador Dali is said to have said: “painting is the visible face of the iceberg of my thought.” All things considered and in all humility, it is, to return to the individual experience evoked in the previous paragraph, our intention to seek to use art to recognize the individual singularity of wearing the veil. In this struggle for recognition (Honneth, 2007), art, through its capacity to make visible, makes it possible to modify the sharing of the sensible (Rancière 2000).

¹¹ The city of Corent shelters the remains of an important Gallic oppidum, on a site that was occupied as early as the Neolithic period.

¹² The creation of the museum originated from a bequest by Jean-Baptiste Bargoin to the city of Clermont-Ferrand. Thought in the 19th century to be a museum of fine arts, it also houses, since its inauguration in 1903, many archaeological pieces discovered locally.

¹³ Hana Chidiac is in charge of the heritage unit of the North Africa and Near East collections at the musée du quai Branly.

It also makes it possible to become aware that otherness is not an equation, but an experience. An experience that is sometimes experienced as disturbing (Wolton 2005), but an experience that, through art, becomes a factor in reducing miscommunication.

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