

Khan, N. (2010) *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 10:2.

“Are Europe’s migrants not a potential resource? Response to Bassam Tibi”

Tibi addresses the problematic issue of integration facing Muslim ‘migrants’ in Western Europe. In his diagnosis, Europe and its Muslim migrant population, the “Islam diaspora” constitute two entities which have come to interact with each other in a fragmenting process of “ethnicisation”. Instead of perceiving Muslims as caught between two exclusivist options - ‘Europeanising Islam or the Islamization of Europe’- Tibi argues that Europe’s Muslims should abandon their recalcitrant approach to the Islamic ‘umma’ and adopt Western political values, especially “pluralism”. European countries should, in turn, live up to the secular ideals of an enlightened civic nationalism. An avoidance of the perils of an ethnicised Islam in Europe will be guaranteed by the assimilation of Muslims in Europe, and by structural arrangements that ensure their social and economic integration.

Pluralism, popular sovereignty and human rights are undoubtedly important cornerstones of European democratic progress. In the context of the rise of right wing nationalisms in Europe, Tibi’s diagnosis (ethnicisation) and therapy (reformed Islam + European pluralism) might present a tempting combination. Both ‘multiculturalism’ and assimilation have demonstrated their limits as integration policies. A new approach *is* needed. It is also hard to deny the risks of ethnicisation and conflicts of the type we witnessed in French banlieues in 2005 and 2007.

However, there seem to be several problems with his argument. First, Europe has never fully endorsed such principles. Their status as the bedrock of a ‘European’ tradition/history is contestable. Further, isn’t Europe essentialised here, as ‘progressive’? Second, in his idea of ‘Euro-Islam’ – in which Muslim identity supersedes all other identity categories, Tibi proposes a rather essentialising category, despite his protestations. In doing so, he ‘ethnicises’ rather than politicises disintegration and locates the Muslim ‘problem’ in culture, not in the political and economic forces producing marginalisation and fragmentation. Who are the Muslims he refers to? There is little differentiation of their ethnic, religious, social class differences or generational histories of immigration. Tibi’s logic would imply the ethnicisation of Islam is an indiscriminate process that, if unchecked, would lead to the mobilisation of second-generation Pakistani physicians in England, Moroccan street-vendors in Italy, Kabyle footballers in France, and Antalya shopkeepers in Germany to Islamist organisations. The third problem is the paradox of a pluralistic nationalism. By responding to a problem that frames Self-Other relations in terms of intractable differences and immutable characteristics, civic nationalism (Europeanisation) seems likely to reproduce the ethnicisation that Tibi finds, and experiences, as so troubling, (including by Muslims of new Muslim arrivals). Is his solution not cast in the same terms he seeks to deconstruct?

The current crisis of the encounter between Self and Other, ‘the Europeans’ and ‘the Muslims’ has long intellectual and historical roots, as Tibi acknowledges. For centuries Europe has viewed Islam as anti-European and anti-Christian. European myth-making of the Orient has been expressed by a plethora of epithets (e.g. violence, sensualism, fanaticism, Arabian Nights, barbarism, primitivism) that has entrenched an integral hostility towards Muslims and served as the pretext for European self-dramatisation and difference. This mythmaking was reflected in the accounts of a nascent anthropology. After the mid-eighteenth century, European attitudes towards the status of the Other as an unpredictable savage changed. In the spirit of enlightened humanitarianism, his differences were accepted as valuable and human. However, the kind of reasoned understanding advocated, for example, by later anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard was still problematic. Whilst they sought to level the fictions of racial superiority that had served the ideology of empire and conquest, they still constructed non-European cultures as ultimately *different*. By acknowledging the Other as one who could no longer be enslaved and exploited, he became an ‘ethnic’ problem for European culture. Ironically, this mechanism is operating in Tibi’s argument which reproduces the contemporary populist terms of a dangerous essentialism that sees the ‘Muslim’ as inherently Other and a ‘problem’ for Europe that needs to be addressed.

Whilst Tibi condemns the contemporary Europe that “ethnicises” and marginalises Muslims, he argues that Muslims are to blame for their own predicament, for not embracing the right kind of cultural values. By ignoring the forms of state and institutional power that marginalise immigrants, Tibi gives credence to the reductionist argument that poses a solution to a problem deemed to originate not in politics, economy or an obstinate colonial legacy but in ethnicity and culture. In doing so, he reproduces the problem of ‘ethnicisation’ and an East-West discourse that perpetuates damaging fictions of Muslims and Islam.

The solution Tibi proposes in the form of state/religion separation, democracy, human rights, tolerance and civil society is certainly eurocentric. Should Tibi not be harsher on Europe? This crisis of relations between European Self and immigrant Other that so troubles Tibi has, after all, persisted throughout the heyday of the nation-state, the demise of empires, the Cold War, into the age of globalisation and the large-scale movement of ‘Third World’ people across European borders. Rather than keep apace with the growing significant subjectivity of her new citizens, Europe has responded with unpreparedness and retrenchment.

Tibi’s view seems too one-sided: Europe teaches and Islam listens. Whilst Tibi recognises the existence of many Islams, Islam is treated as a kind of monolith, and subservient to ‘European’ modernity. Instead of an encounter between Europe and Islam, Tibi proposes a one-sided movement from Islam to Europe. Why not the other way round and propose a solution based on the democratic elements inherent in Islam (e.g. consultation, critical thought, egalitarianism)? Hybridity is important and Europe has much to learn from the experiences of its Muslim and non-Muslim migrants. Tibi’s error is to ignore the potential of the multiplicities, diversity and hybridities that emerge out of intercultural contact to break down the divides created by too much nationalism. Habermas says that centuries ago the Jews were the ‘most German’, because all other ‘German’ citizens mostly felt ‘Bavarian’, ‘Prussian’ and so on. In coming years, Muslim migrants might be more ‘European’ than ‘nation-state’ oriented ‘ethnic’ British, French or Italians. This would be unsurprising. Migrants move across countries and develop different views on identity, less clear-cut than those of ‘ethnic’ Europeans who are tied to their obsolete (and dangerous) nation-states. Paradoxically, migrants could become the ‘vanguard’ of a new Europe, more hybrid, more open, more ‘Other’ to herself.

Europe’s real challenge is not to manage its many new citizens, including Muslim ones, but to manage its new encounter with a culturally and racialised Other, in a very different world. This new Other is the product of globalisation and cultural transformation but also, difference and dissimilarity. Homogenisation (civic nationalism) may not solve the conflicts that accompany the emergence of new European realities, and citizens, so much as Europe’s enlisting of its new citizens into the vanguard of a new hybridised language of dialogue and communication. Rather than rely on its tired tropes of the Other - so firmly rooted in histories of hostility - Europe should listen to its migrants and embark on a new voyage of discovery - one that seeks to adjust inequalities and is based on solidarity and humility, not fear.