ON DEFINING MUSLIMS

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A yearbook deals with data. This publication is of course no exception, but as already touched upon in the introduction to the country reports section, we are concerned not to give any quick answers to questions on the complex empirical situation in the 37 countries covered by the country reports. I will discuss how we have attempted to deal with the presentation of the data in the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, whilst suggesting some caveats about how the data accumulated in this publication can be used.

Data are often thought of as ‘hard facts’ that inform us about something on the basis of numbers and which we use to provide descriptive details about the world. Even though numbers and data may seem ‘objective’, statistics can be seen as a reality-producing process related to question of how we produce, reproduce and navigate in the social worlds that we inhabit. Basic statistics are arrived at by counting and this is by no means a neutral activity, because it involves identification, which is a power-related act of categorisation. In other words, acts of identification are simultaneously acts of naming, separating, and distilling some concepts from others by virtue of certain characteristics which are defined by the people doing the identifying. The process of counting and identifying is therefore neither objective nor neutral, because it is always dependant on contextual and relational circumstances. When we count things or people, we do so on the basis of certain premises, and we need to ask the relevant questions: Who is counting? Who is being counted? How is the counting taking place? Why is the counting taking place? And most importantly: is counting a sufficient description of the counted object? In most cases the answer to the last questions will

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be no, and we therefore need to complement the descriptive counting with other perspectives, or at least make it clear that there are other aspects which could possibly tell us other things about the individuals being counted.

When it comes to counting people, it becomes highly relevant to explain the statistics have been generated in a transparent manner—i.e. how the data have become data. This Yearbook deals with Muslim minorities—a very heterogeneous group that we nonetheless choose to describe under a single category—‘Muslims’. The Yearbook therefore seeks to acknowledge the diversity of Muslims as a complex empirical reality, while at the same time wishing to describe Muslims in Europe by the use of data, because we find that this information provides a useful tool for a variety of possible uses. This apparent gap (between the apparent simplicity of the data and the complexity of the situations they describe) does not mean that we have to fudge completely the complicated realities we are facing. Rather than regarding this gap as an obstacle for the Yearbook, it is possible to see the issues it raises as generating a critical platform from which to conduct our research and perhaps develop policy.

One way of creating a transparent critical platform is to distinguish between a ‘category’ and a ‘group’, such that a ‘category’ refers to the collection of data about Muslims. From this perspective, ‘Muslims’ can be viewed as a category with reference to the interest of our respective fields of research. It is thus an analytical construction which we use as an instrument that enables us to say something about the empirical reality of Muslim minorities. The term ‘group’, as an analytical category, takes into consideration the heterogeneous nature of Muslim minority groups in Europe. This concept points to the fact that Muslims might self-identify as Muslims but not necessarily in the same way that the very general categorization does, and that they do not see themselves as belonging to the same group. Nor does it mean that being Muslim is equally important or relevant for them at all times or in all situations. This means that we are attempting to describe a category, which is an analytical construction, to enable a platform for empirical studies of the complex realities of Muslim minorities groups in Europe.

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