CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MUSLIM TRANSNATIONALISM AND DIASPORA IN EUROPE: MIGRANT EXPERIENCE AND THEORETICAL REFLECTION

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Across academic literature, at least within the social and political sciences, Muslim populations in Europe are increasingly being described as *diasporas* and/or as communities and groupings of “transnational character.” These are concepts which do not occur in traditional Islamic theological or legal debates, yet they are also becoming more common as self-perception *among* Muslims, as well as in politicized discourses *about* Muslims. Against the background of interview samples and field experience among “transnational” Muslim people, this chapter describes discursive tendencies on the topic of “Muslim transnationalism” and diaspora (nowadays used in senses detached from religious relevance) within social science, and examines the contributions of two leading Muslim authors who position the situation of Muslim minorities by means of the language of that discourse.

The observation that this meta-language differs from the self-perception of the subjects concerned may appear trivial at first. It does not

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1 The original train of thought of this chapter had been developed as early as 2004, and thus was able to benefit from scholarly discussion in very diverse academic contexts, among them the panel on Transnational Religions (organized by Ramon Sarró) at the Luso-Afro-Brazilian Social Science Congress (Coimbra, Portugal, 2004), the conference on the Role of Social Sciences Part I at the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation (Berlin 2004), and later in a session of the postgraduate/postdoctoral colloquium on contemporary Critical Theory supervised by Detlev Claussen (University of Hanover). I want to express my deep gratitude to those participants who provided inspiring comments, as well as to the editors of this volume, Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg for their kind invitation and patience. While writing this chapter and trying to respond to the theme of their book, it helped a lot that the main arguments and parts of the text had formed a journal article which was recently published in German (Tiesler 2007a), and had received further comments.

2 On the proliferation of the term “diaspora,” see Baumann (2000): “The semantic broadening of ‘diaspora,’ both in terms of relating it to any dispersed group of people and to conceptualize a certain type of consciousness, have made it one of the most fashionable terms in academic discourse of the late 20th century.” (Baumann 2000: 325).
at all point to a “Muslim particularity,” but rather to the weight that educational middle-classes (here: the educated and educating) in general have in processes of the construction of collective subjectivity (Hroch 1978, Siems 2007). Instead, what makes this dynamic interesting is the fact that here representatives of a new generation of European-Muslim intellectuals³ are analyzing the new social conditions and experiences of a culturally and ethnolinguistical heterogenic religious minority not through conventional Islamic-theological and legal categories, but through a secular discourse language and its conceptual creations of transnationality and diasporicity.⁴

Such reflections spread and echo rapidly in virtual and public discourses, of course including Muslim discourses.⁵ Interestingly, an opposite tendency (from secular to religionized terms) can be observed in “non-Muslim” discourses. Public debate and some contributions in social and political sciences (which up until the early 1980s had explicitly distanced themselves from questions of religion) and which recently are more concerned with topics related to Muslims in Europe, are partly inclining towards a “culturalization,” “religionization” and “Islamicization” of their categories and debates. Socio-economic and political aspects, gender, religion and culture are rarely differentiated when it comes to Islam and Muslims.

Muslims and their cultural attitudes, eventual socio-political engagement and social mobility, are hardly ever discussed in a comparative and non-normative context, i.e. compared in relation to similarities rather than contrasts with non-Muslim minority and majority groups of the same age, gender, class, migratory and/or educational backgrounds. In terms of analysis, this deficiency often leads to a disproportionate “Islamicization” of the subject (Muslims), and strengthening of the

³ Mandaville (2003: 130f) describes developments within Muslim intellectual activity in Europe, with particular regard to those thinkers and activists concerned with the politics of Islamic identity and community in Europe. Through the reconciliation of day-to-day realities of European life with religious principles, their work is appealing to the “second generation” of Muslims who were born and raised in Europe. Many of them are highly educated and seek to fashion a critical and sophisticated idiom of Islam.

⁴ As one characteristic of what he conceptualizes as “new” Muslim transnational networks in Europe, Nielsen (2003) highlights forms of interaction with realities and institutions external to the Islamic world. Academic institutions in Europe surely belong to this category.

⁵ This dynamic of academic discourse languages being transmitted more rapidly to public debates and adopted by the media, certainly increased with new communication technologies, but its roots lie in the aftermath of 1968 (Claussen 2000b), when more academics became journalists, and journalism started requiring a broader academic education.