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13. Cultivating a Wholesome Body: Islam in the German Gym Class

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German challenges to the ability of the Muslim schoolgirl to wear a headscarf in a consistent manner have been more indirect than the French ban on the headscarf and reveal distinctively German cultural preoccupations. Exploring moments when the prescriptions of Islam confront the organization of the German gym class points us to aspects of Germanness that I suggest are confounded with the “democratic values” articulated in the German constitution but have quite different roots. Several lawsuits have been filed by Muslim girls for exemption from the requirement that they participate in gym, since it is impossible to maintain proper modesty in gender-mixed classes, where many of the required activities preclude the wearing of the headscarf, and gym clothes typically expose the legs and arms. Concern with the gym class can be seen in one of the questions on the “Muslim Test,” the popular label for a controversial set of guidelines to be used in questioning applicants for German citizenship that was implemented in early 2006 in one of the German states.

In response to a complaint first brought by the father of a twelve-year-old Muslim girl in 1989, the Federal Administrative Court ruled in 1993 that schools are obligated to make all reasonable efforts to offer gender-segregated gym classes for girls (A2.6 C 8.91, 25.08.1993). But public commentary continues around this issue. As these law suits are usually presented in the press as one of the signs that Turks are refusing to integrate, the issue of gym class has touched a nerve in the public imagination.

The specific articulations of German concerns suggest that gym class is felt to be an important part of a child’s enculturation and that by requesting exemption from gym, Muslim girls can never become fully German. The gym class is intended to educate and discipline the body. It is considered so important to the shaping of the young German that it is mandated by law. And it is precisely over the disciplining of not only the female body but also the male body that German and Muslim educational principles diverge sharply.

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German preoccupation with physical fitness has a politically charged history. The significance of gym classes can be traced to the body culture (*Körperkultur*) movement that originated in the nineteenth century, when the first gymnastics club was established. The body culture movement was associated with counterculture, vegetarianism, and nudism, part of a romantic “back to nature” reaction to the demands of industrialization. During the Weimar Republic in the interwar period, body culture and “life reform” (*Lebensreform*) became movements to restore the body to natural health in the wake of the devastation of World War I. But it also spawned youth organizations such as the *Wandervogel* movement, “a mixed gender youth group that would be subsumed in 1933 by the Hitler youth” (Gordon 2002). The idea of a natural yet disciplined and hygienic body thus appealed to a wide spectrum of political movements ranging from anarchists to German nationalists (Mosse 1975).

During the Nazi era, there was a hypertrophied emphasis on disciplining and perfecting the Aryan male body, but women were also subject to physical discipline, with the idea of containing their dangerous sexuality and channeling it into service to the nation.

Similarly, the discipline of gymnastics and other physical training were important for instilling the physical and moral hygiene that would enable the German woman to raise a healthy family and contribute to the maintenance of social order. In contrast to the strong association in Islam between modesty and social order—which makes nakedness a great source of shame for both sexes—the German body culture movement linked nakedness with purity and simplicity, even in the restrictive Nazi era. Though the ideology of Nazism has been firmly repudiated in German public discourse since the end of World War II, there are significant continuities in certain aspects of the cultural logic that were so exaggerated in that era. Exposure of the human body and even full nudity continue to be associated with openness, purity, and a healthy sexuality.

The bifurcation of gender roles in German ideology during the extreme nationalism of the Nazi era is actually rather close to the Islamic vision of the ideal organization of gender roles and the family articulated by founders of the modern Islamist movement. These Islamist reformers saw the family as the foundation of social order, identified women as the mainstay of this order, and emphasized the education of women as essential to the proper socialization of children. Despite this parallel, Muslim strategies for maintaining the purity of women are radically different from the German association of purity with exposure of the body to public gaze.

Within the context of the modern gym class, children may actively be required by law to be fully nude before others, at least in schools where showers are required and no individual shower stalls are provided. Though the showers are single-sex, even this practice violates the prohibition against nudity, even in single-sex settings, for both males and females in the Qur'an. These arguments about the arrangement of locker rooms affect Muslim boys as well as girls and do not focus on the issue of gender segregation (since most locker rooms are gender segregated); these arguments are also not foregrounded in the media.

Physical privacy has a very different significance within German and Muslim discourses and is linked to an array of different bodily practices. Germans and Muslims have a very different sense of what is pure, clean, and healthy. Both Germans and Muslims use analogous evocations of disgust to mark otherness. In contrast, for Germans, the trope of the Muslim woman who is "hidden" behind the headscarf and modest clothing and refuses to participate in the hygienic discipline of the gym class can be readily deployed to evoke feelings of horror and disgust that are associated with hidden, uncontrolled, and polluting sexuality. The hidden women of today are also imagined as a festering secret, subject to arbitrary murder by their male family members. The girl "hidden" under a headscarf, her body a secret to the public gaze, evokes imagery reflecting this horror.

In specific national cultures—the French way of doing sex, the German requirement that the child stand nude before others in the locker room, or the Dutch enactment of the tolerant covert gaze—specific cultural practices are entangled and confounded with abstract, universalized "democratic values." The consequence is that the defense of these democratic values becomes, ironically, a demand for sameness. When the Muslim is positioned as a threat to these values, then cultural and religious practices that are simply different ways of organizing gender or managing the body are interpreted as a violation of democratic values. The gym class is an arena in which the German state regulates the disciplining and exposure of the citizen's body in a way that the child is not free to resist. The Muslim body—either male or female—challenges and exposes this particular contradiction. Public rhetoric obscures the contradiction by foregrounding the oppression of the Muslim girl whose parents do not permit her to expose her body. But the emotional charge of this public rhetoric—what to the rest of the world may appear to be a tempest in a teapot—points to the deeper challenge for German public culture. In all of this, the Muslim man is demonized, and the plight of the Muslim boy, who is also forced to violate the teachings of the Qur'an and expose himself in order to satisfy German notions of national hygiene, is ignored.