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John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006. 290 pp. \$27.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0-691-12506-6.

Review by Alec G. Hargreaves, Florida State University.

French intellectuals were first publicly recognized and categorized as such during the Dreyfus affair, when those associated with the newly created *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (League of Human Rights) sprang courageously to the defense of an innocent minority ethnic citizen against whom the awesome powers of the state had been unjustly mobilized on false but grave charges of military espionage. A century later, in a striking inversion, leading French intellectuals joined forces with the most senior officers of the state in stigmatizing members of a religious minority who, they claimed, were guilty of undermining the foundations of the Republic through the newly invented and allegedly heinous offence of covering their heads with scarves. Viewed against the backdrop of a nation that has long prided itself on enlightening the world not only with the Rights of Man but also with the rigor of Cartesian logic and the triumph of scientific investigation over religious superstition, the Islamic headscarf affairs of 1989, 1994 and 2003-04 rank as one of the most dismal chapters in the recent history of France. The illogicalities and blind spots which suffused the "affair"—which might at times have been more accurately described as a modern day witch-hunt—are masterfully exposed by John Bowen in an exemplary work of scholarship resting on the powers of reason and respect for evidence which all too often have been signally lacking among those who successfully clamored for the Islamic headscarf to be banned from French state schools[1]. Calmly, methodically and with just the right dose of gentle humor, Bowen brings into focus the complex historical context and the tangled web of political, professional and personal preoccupations which combined to produce the law of 2004.

In chapter after chapter, the book lays bare multiple layers of illogicality, distortion and double standards. Most fundamentally, Bowen shows that the decision to ban the headscarf through the law of March 2004 was taken in response to a much wider array of issues and concerns which in many cases were only tenuously connected (if at all) with the disputed garment, the banning of which would do little if anything to resolve those concerns:

French public figures seemed to blame the headscarves for a surprising range of France's problems, including anti-Semitism, Islamic fundamentalism, growing ghettoization in the poor suburbs, and the breakdown of order in the classroom. A vote against the headscarves would, we heard, support women battling for freedom in Afghanistan, schoolteachers trying to teach history in Lyon, and all those who wished to reinforce the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity (p. 1).

Most, if not all, of these problems were real but only through a tortuously illogical mindset could it be imagined that they would be appropriately addressed by outlawing headscarves in French state schools. More specifically, it was far from clear that headscarf-wearing schoolgirls constituted a threat to the core values of the Republic. On the contrary, as freedom of religious expression was guaranteed by a whole panoply of republican rights dating back not only to the 1905 law on *laïcité* but also to the very foundation of the Republic in 1789, the denial of those rights to girls wishing to wear the headscarf was itself questionable. Two main arguments were deployed in support of the ban. According to the first of these, the wearing of the headscarf inherently constituted an act of proselytism and/or some other type of threat to public order and thereby contravened republican principles.

This was a very shaky argument, not least because the *Conseil d'État*, France's highest administrative court, had repeatedly ruled that the wearing of an Islamic headscarf did not in itself constitute an act of proselytism or any other kind of threat to public order. Proponents of a ban therefore focused increasingly on a second argument, according to which the headscarf had to be outlawed because girls were being forced to wear it, thus denying them the freedom of conscience and religious expression guaranteed by the Republic. This too was a shaky argument. Whilst it was entirely possible that some girls were being coerced into wearing the headscarf, there was plenty of evidence to suggest that others were wearing it as an act of personal choice. It followed from this that while a law banning the headscarf might protect girls from being forced to wear the garment, the same law would deny freedom of religious expression to those genuinely wishing to wear it.

In such circumstances, there was a duty of proportionality: the number of girls needing to be protected had to be weighed against the number whose freedom of expression would be denied by a ban on headscarves. In considering the case for and against a ban, the collection and analysis of evidence was therefore of critical importance. How many girls were being forced to wear the headscarf and how many were freely choosing to do so? Instead of endeavoring to answer this question in a dispassionate and fair-minded fashion, proponents of a ban did everything in their power to slant the evidence in a pre-determined direction.

In chapters five and six in particular, Bowen demonstrates with calm but devastating clarity how the evidence presented to the Stasi commission—set up by President Chirac in 2003 to review and make recommendations on the possible need for changes in the laws on *laïcité*—was systematically framed to suit the cause of the anti-headscarf camp. Firstly, pride of place was given to witnesses who testified to the commission that girls were being forced to wear the headscarf. There is no public record of the commission hearing first-hand evidence from any girls declaring themselves to be the victims of such coercion; all the publicly documented evidence of this nature was second- or third-hand testimony by teachers and others who claimed to know of significant but never clearly quantified numbers of girls being forced to wear the headscarf. The commission does not appear to have been concerned about the hearsay nature of this evidence, which seems to have been accepted at face value. Secondly, the substantial body of methodologically rigorous research which had produced documented first-hand accounts of young women freely choosing to wear the headscarf was completely ignored. Not one of the respected sociologists who had conducted such research was called before the commission. Thirdly, the commission chose to hear evidence in public from only two young women actually wearing headscarves, and that on the very last day of its public hearings, by which time the drafting of its report (favoring a ban on the headscarf) was almost complete. Fourthly, well before the commission had finished collecting evidence, its chair, Bernard Stasi had publicly stated: “the voile [literally, veil; a generic term here encompassing the headscarf] is objectively a sign of women's alienation” (*Quest France*, October 31, 2003, quoted in Bowen, p. 208), a view clearly implying that women apparently choosing to wear the headscarf were non-existent and/or deluded.

This was, of course, an ideal solution to the challenge of proportionality: if women saying they wore the headscarf as an act of personal choice could be dismissed as deluded and by the same token victims of alien forces, there was nothing to be proportional about, since all women wearing the headscarf were by definition victims of coercion. QED. The dismissal of any idea of proportionality was evident in a remark made to Bowen by an unnamed member of the commission, according to whom “if even one girl were protected from pressure to wear the voile, the law would be worth it” (p. 208). In this optic, the rights of girls wishing to wear the headscarf by personal choice counted quite literally for nothing.

Bowen deftly traces similar forms of disproportionality in media coverage of the headscarf affair and in the hysterical pronouncements of high profile intellectuals, according to some of whom allowing the garment to be worn in the Republic's schools was directly comparable to Munich, a byword for the feckless appeasement of fascism. While taking themselves deadly seriously, intellectuals engaged in

bombast of this kind have in many ways been making fools of themselves. Bowen neatly restores a sense of proportion when, in noting the lurid Islamist-baiting rhetoric of resident media intellectual Bernard-Henry Lévy, he describes Lévy as “the literary Salvador Dali of 1990s France” (p. 90). The surrealistic nature of the headscarf affair was also apparent in another form of disproportionality: the tiny number of girls wearing headscarves (fewer than two hundred on the eve of the creation of the Stasi commission in 2003), compared with the huge number of Muslim schoolgirls who were not wearing the garment (several hundred thousand in all).

The final proof of the irrelevance of the law to the real issues facing France came with its application in the fall of 2004, when the already small number of girls wearing the headscarf quickly dwindled virtually to zero. If the headscarf had been a beachhead for Islamic fundamentalism against the Republic (as proponents of the ban commonly claimed), one might have expected a campaign of civil disobedience in defiance of the new law. There was no such campaign. Instead, the headscarf drifted off the agenda of *la classe politique*, which soon found itself unable to dodge the much more real and pressing problems which it had too long neglected: the widespread socio-economic inequalities and racial and ethnic discrimination laid bare by the riots of 2005.

Except for some minor errors on points of detail relating to the “pre-headscarf” period, this is a finely documented and lucidly argued book. While there is room for discussion on precisely which of many contextual forces were the most important in leading to the tipping point of Chirac setting up the Stasi commission, thereby paving the way for a ban on the headscarf, this is in all essential respects a superb guide to the intricacies of French headscarf hysteria. It should be read by all those wishing to understand the true proportions of contemporary France and the treatment of its Muslim minority.

NOTES

[1] Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le Foulard et la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), Nancy Venel, *Musulmanes françaises: des pratiquantes voilées à l'université* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), Nacira Guénif Souilamas, *Des "beurettes" aux descendantes d'immigrants nord-africains* (Paris: Grasset, 2000) and Nadine B. Weibel, *Par-delà le voile: Femmes d'Islam en Europe* (Brussels: Complexe, 2000).

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