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## The Muhammad cartoons controversy in comparative perspective

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When the culture editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, Flemming Rose, commissioned the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which were printed on 30 September 2005, he did not imagine in his ‘wildest dreams’, as he wrote later, that the publication would eventually lead to the worst foreign policy crisis in Denmark since the Second World War (Rose 2006: 17). The images were presented in the paper within a frame of concern for free speech, misguided respect for religious feelings, a rising tendency towards self-censorship – and accompanied with the later infamous expression about secular democracy involving citizens being able to stand ‘scorn, mockery and contempt’. The full quote runs like this:

The modern secular society is dismissed by some Muslims. They demand special treatment when they insist on special consideration of their religious feelings.

This is incompatible with secular democracy and freedom of speech, where one should be ready to stand scorn, mockery and ridicule. This is certainly not always very sympathetic or nice to look at, but this is irrelevant in the context. (*Jyllands-Posten*, 2005)

While a great deal of ink was spilled, in Denmark and elsewhere, in disputes about motives and rationale (see Meer and Mouritsen, this issue), none of this could possibly have anticipated the consequences. The publication of the 12 Muhammad cartoons triggered a minor global crisis,

including hundreds of deaths, burning embassies, a massive boycott of Danish and Norwegian products in the Muslim world, and severe repercussions against media staff across the world, where newspapers chose to republish the cartoons in whole or part. In Denmark, there were several death threats against the illustrators and Flemming Rose himself. Muslim protests against the publications were massive, though very different in nature, in Denmark, other European countries and the rest of the world. Likewise, the cartoons caused intense, but diversified, public debates in many countries, including, as the controversy was prolonged, actors from more and more segments and levels of society. Even though the global crisis over the cartoons subsided relatively quickly, conflicts ebbing away eventually in March 2006, it has had continued repercussions. It is now a staple of radical Muslim symbolic inventories of western sacrilege, along with Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and American wars in the Middle East; a constant reminder across the Islamic world of western hostility towards Muslims generally. In February 2008, three people were arrested in Denmark for planning to kill the illustrator, Kurt Westergaard, who in 2005 drew the caricature that has become iconic of the controversy; the Prophet Muhammad with a fizzing bomb in his turban. The elderly man remains in hiding. The arrest led to the republication of one or more of the original 12 Muhammad cartoons in several Danish newspapers and renewed Muslim protests in Denmark and abroad. On 2 June 2008, a massive car bomb went off outside the Danish embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, killing eight and injuring four times as many people. Al-Qaeda, who took responsibility for the attack, called it 'retaliation for the publication of the Muhammad cartoons'.

The initial idea for this special issue arose from discussions in the EU-sponsored EMILIE research group<sup>1</sup> in Athens in April 2007, where case studies of national receptions of the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in Denmark were presented. These studies were inserted in a comparative investigation of the specific nature of 'multicultural crises' – i.e. national controversies over religious diversity and its contested accommodation. The cartoons issue constituted a common challenge, perhaps a specifically European one, to countries with a sizeable Muslim immigrant population, while it also illuminated distinct national factors. EMILIE has been characterized by a bottom-up, inductive approach to discussions of normative dilemmas of existing multiculturalism in European countries, which recognizes how specific conflicts of Muslim incorporation have to be approached, at least initially, with methodological assumptions about the continuing structuring capacity of national public spaces (Favell, 1998; Modood et al., 2006), even though these national environments increasingly negotiate their interdependent paths through European-wide or internationally structured predicaments.

Since the cartoons controversy erupted, a burgeoning academic debate has sought to make sense of what happened from a variety of scholarly

perspectives. Many commentators have seen the events as indicative of a 'new' global – international and transnational – predicament, characterized by specific forms of conflict, diffusion of information, mechanisms of mobilization, types of actors and corresponding normative dilemmas, which in turn require modified theoretical and conceptual tools. The studies in this special issue, in different ways outlined below, address these new developments.

The guiding idea of the special issue is, first, to provide comparative studies – typically facilitated by co-authorship – (1) of different national cartoons controversies (Larsson and Lindekilde's discussion of the different *trajectories* of the Danish and Swedish affairs), (2) of national *receptions* and the insertions into specific frameworks of local controversy, i.e. in France and Germany (the contribution by Miera and Sala Pala), and (3) of more sector-specific receptions and disputes, e.g. Mouritsen and Meer's analysis of news media self-perceptions in Denmark and Britain. This genuinely comparative element has been largely missing in previous treatments of the controversy, as arguably still in many fields of migration studies generally.

Second, the issue aims to use the affair as a prism for the consideration of broader issues of a more general and theoretical interest, ranging from questions of national identity, political culture, citizenship and integration – prominent in all the articles above – to issues in normative political theory (Læggaard, and Levey and Modood), immigrant claims-making (Larsson and Lindekilde), media and journalism studies (Mouritsen and Meer), and studies of social movements and media-driven transnational activism (Olesen).

Below, we outline a periodization of the Muhammad cartoons controversy, which divides it into four distinct phases, noting for each phase some of the issues and research themes that were particularly pertinent. This may be useful also to those (many) readers who are relatively familiar with both the events and the subsequent academic discussion of the cartoons. After this follows a discussion of what type of event or 'crisis' the controversy was, and related to this classification, in what way it was exemplary of something significantly new. In a following section, we briefly outline and discuss main disciplinary receptions and anticipate how contributions to this issue seek to fill in gaps in the existing research on the cartoons controversy, while employing it to open new avenues in migration studies and social science more broadly.

## THE EVENTS AND 'NEWNESS' OF THE MUHAMMAD CARTOONS CONTROVERSY

The events and public debates that followed the publication of the Muhammad cartoons – now commonly referred to as the 'Muhammad cartoons controversy' – consist of many different contested issues and sub-debates.<sup>2</sup> As a way of condensing and clarifying the complex trajectory of the controversy, the periodization in Table 1 may be useful.

Table 1 breaks down the Muhammad cartoons controversy into four constituent phases of varying length. The periodization of the controversy builds on two criteria, first the geographical scale of political contention, and second, the intensity of such contention. *Phase 1* of the controversy was characterized by its local or national scope and relatively low intensity of contention. However, this phase saw two events, which are often pointed out as being important for the later escalation of the conflict, namely the decision of the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, not to meet with concerned ambassadors of Muslim countries in Denmark, and the decision of some Danish Muslims to send delegations to countries in the Middle East informing them about the situation in Denmark. Both events helped to internationalize the affair, although the causal significance of each train of events remains disputed. They also remind us that the controversy of the matter, including the potential for competing normative interpretation, feeling of hurt, and attribution of praise and blame by theorists and commentators, was as much created by these reactions from other actors as by the images in and by themselves, or even by their provocative presentation by *Jyllands-Posten*. Indeed, more broadly, the cartoons belong in a category of acts that receive significant meaning through the interpretative choices made by receivers – and, of course, through attempts by authors to anticipate or provoke specific choices.

*Phase 2* was characterized by its international scope and its medium level of intensity. In this phase, the world saw the first demonstrations against the Muhammad cartoons outside of Denmark as well as the first acts of solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten*, which was under increased pressure to resolve the crisis. Important objects of study during this phase were the mechanisms and dynamism of initial transnational mobilization, including the active and reactive role of news media in the West and the Middle East in the spread of the cartoons, the role of transnational Muslim networks, and the internal dialectics in the Muslim states between spontaneous civil society reactions and the orchestrations of autocratic states.

*Phase 3* constituted the climax of the controversy, with the crisis taking on a global scope and a high level of intensity. The controversy peaked in the first week of February 2006 where Danish embassies were attacked by protesters in Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Indonesia. In this phase, the violent

**Table 1** Periodization of the Muhammad cartoons controversy

	<i>Phase 1: Initial responses</i>	<i>Phase 2: Internationalization</i>	<i>Phase 3: Violent escalation</i>	<i>Phase 4: Re-domestication</i>
<i>Time:</i>	30 Sep 2005–25 Dec 2005	26 Dec 2005–03 Feb 2006	04 Feb 2006–25 Feb 2006	26 Feb 2006–20 Mar 2006
Central events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The non-meeting with the Muslim ambassadors in Denmark</li> <li>• The so-called ‘imam-delegations’ go abroad to win external support for their claims</li> <li>• A Pakistani bounty on the heads of the illustrators is issued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boycott of Danish products begins. Demonstrations and flag burnings in the Middle East</li> <li>• Discontinuation of the legal case against <i>Jyllands-Posten</i> by the Danish State Prosecutor</li> <li>• Reprints of the cartoons around Europe out of solidarity with <i>Jyllands-Posten</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attacks on Danish embassies in Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Indonesia</li> <li>• US, NATO and EU supports Denmark</li> <li>• Demonstrations against the cartoons all over the world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Javier Solana travels to the Middle East trying to calm the situation</li> <li>• Reopening of Danish embassies abroad</li> </ul>

nature of some Muslim reactions, but also the directly and indirectly caused number of deaths and degree of visible hurt and anger in the Muslim world, significantly changed and deepened the 'meaning' of the cartoons controversy. It became an issue of international security and diplomacy, the Western world with some exceptions closing rank around a small country, which earlier on had stood more isolated, but also increasingly recognizing the need to de-escalate and manage international conflicts. Ideological and normative stakes were heightened, with interpretations of the affair now revolving around competing strategies towards profound religious and cultural conflict, whether in terms of 'standing firm' on fundamental values in a 'clash of civilizations', or the need to accommodate religious sensitivities at home and internationally.

Finally, *Phase 4* was characterized by the beginning of a de-escalation and re-domestication of the controversy, and, thus, by a more national scope and low-to-medium level of intensity. Table 1 can serve as a heuristic map of the trajectory of the Muhammad cartoons controversy when reading the contributions in this special issue.

Many, including the authors of the articles in this issue, consider the controversy an interesting and even a unique, 'new' case. But what was the Muhammad cartoons controversy a case *of*? What was really special about it? The answer depends a great deal on disciplinary perspectives. Focusing on the specific stakes, actors and political context of the controversy, at a high level of abstraction, a first categorization of the events constituting the Muhammad cartoons controversy could be considered as an episode of 'contentious politics'. In their book *Dynamics of Contention*, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly define this phenomenon as:

Episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants (McAdam et al., 2001: 5).

Within this large range of political phenomena, the Muhammad cartoons controversy may then further be subscribed to a subcategory that can be labelled as 'multicultural crises' or 'ethnocultural dilemmas' in western European politics. What is common to these kinds of public debates is that one or more of the claimants in the debate are ethnocultural minorities, and that the issue of the conflict revolves around ethnocultural differences, which are made visible by the development of multicultural societies through processes of immigration (see e.g. Modood, 2007; Morawska, 2003). In this perspective, the Muhammad cartoons controversy is, in some respects, similar to the Rushdie affair, *les affaires du foulard* and the debate following the airing of *Submission part one* and the subsequent killing of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands. Similar cases, but often on a less dramatic scale, are the local/national conflicts over the placement of

purpose-built mosques, Muslim burial grounds, the opening of Muslim private schools, arranged marriages, female circumcision etc. Although not part of the definition, Islam has often been said to be central to most of these ‘multicultural crises’ in western Europe over the last two decades. It is through such cases that the immigrants of Europe ‘became’ Muslims in much public discourse (Allievi, 2006).

Within the ‘multicultural crises’ group of political controversies, the cartoons controversy belongs to a subcategory of instances where specific divisions between public and private, and politics and religion, are somehow challenged by Muslims (Fadil, 2007; Klausen, 2005). Discussions of ‘secularism’ revolve around political culture and conceptions of citizenship, as much as institutional arrangement, and concern the clash between, on the one hand, forms of political Islam, which are defined by public affirmation of the faith, as a matter of identity, recognition and reasonable respect, and, on the other hand, more or less ‘fundamentalist’, deep liberalism.

And by including also the Swedish case of Muhammad cartoons in 2007,<sup>3</sup> and the second round of the Danish controversy in 2008, where the images were republished widely, we could even go a step further and say that the Danish Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005–06 was the first of a new special subcategory of ‘multicultural crises’, namely Muhammad cartoons controversies – in the plural. What are the defining features of these controversies and what makes them unique? Common to them are, first of all, that the protagonists of the caricatures use freedom of speech and the dangers of self-censorship vis-à-vis Islam as justification for publishing the images, while the antagonists highlight discrimination and the need to practise public moderation and accommodation of feelings as the values at stake. The issue to practising Muslims in these controversies – the respectful treatment of the Prophet Muhammad, who is the central and unifying figure in Islam – provides them with an intensity that makes them potential cases of extensive Muslim protests. Also, that freedom of speech is often considered the fundamental value of liberal democracies makes Muhammad cartoons controversies particularly unlikely to find pragmatic compromises.

These last categorizations also relate to further ways in which the cartoons were exemplary of something new, as highlighted by this issue of *Ethnicities*. The deliberate framing of each cartoon ‘act’ as a metaphor of (western) lifestyles of irony, humour and artistic transgression rendered any negative reaction to it evidence of a lack of these modern virtues (Kuipers, 2008: 9). In the terms of international relations theorist Ole Wæver, we may speak of a process of mutual *securitization* of sacred value objects that are perceived as threatened on both sides of a conflict – not between religions, but rather between those who distrust strong religion as a potential for radicalism and terrorism, and those Muslims who abhor the impact on their societies and their youth of western godlessness. The cartoons controversy highlighted a new form of international relations, where religion is as

important as geopolitical factors, i.e. where the increasingly salient ‘soft’ power of ideas is matched by the soft violence of cultural insult (Wæver, 2008).

This deep nature of the controversies to stakeholders also made them particularly ‘contagious’, more likely to cross borders, and to facilitate alliances across them (Olesen, this issue; Larsson and Lindekilde, this issue). Indeed one sense of ‘newness’ concerns the way the affair was created, i.e. its *mediatized* and *transnational* nature, the quickness whereby it ‘spilled through’ otherwise nationally structured but increasingly ‘porous’ publics (Olesen, 2006a; 2006b). The media-driven nature of the controversies fertilized this travelling of issues and conflicts from one context to another, although images – perhaps not so much of the cartoons themselves as of the angry mobs – were as consequential as concepts and ideological representations. Mediatization was part and parcel of its *mobilizing potential*, both inside and outside of Europe – again in a way which was at the same time transnationally effective, and nationally orchestrated, by actors making public claims towards specific states (Lindekilde, 2008).

Indeed, as shown by most of the articles in this issue, the same ideas tend to become expressed and framed slightly differently depending on national context. Here, the insertions of the cartoons into distinct national publics indicate the growing importance of Islamic religion – and liberal secularist ideology – as elements in the construction of national identities, as particularly obvious in countries such as Denmark, Germany and France (Meer and Mouritsen, this issue; Miera and Sala Pala, this issue), but also in less Islam-hostile countries such as Spain and Greece. Finally, from a normative perspective, the controversy has further highlighted a series of, arguably, distinctly European problems of pluralism, centred on the conflict not only between liberal secularism and accommodation of religious sensitivity, but also between different understandings of liberal values, including the meaning of tolerance (Lægaard, this issue). Let us now look at how the articles in this issue focus on these exemplary features to develop understanding of the controversy from each of their disciplinary perspectives.

## **DISCIPLINARY RECEPTIONS OF THE CARTOONS CONTROVERSY AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE**

At the beginning, the academic reception of the Muhammad cartoons controversy was rather polemical. Early (Danish) studies, produced during or immediately after the controversy, were often also partisan interventions in it, whether by blaming Muslims (Hansen and Hundevadt, 2006; Jespersen



and Pittelkow, 2006) or presenting Muslims as victims (Engelbrecht Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006; Rothstein and Rothstein, 2006). Many studies asked why exactly Denmark gave birth to the controversy, typically citing the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic political climate in Denmark prior to publication (Blomart, 2006; Favret-Saada, 2007; Linde-Laursen, 2007). In time, reception of the controversy became more balanced, attentive to general and theoretical perspectives, and diverse. Today, the controversy has received attention from within a large range of academic disciplines and approaches spanning from economics to theology and humour research. The articles in this special issue of *Ethnicities* speak to, and create new insights within, at least five such interrelated perspectives: normative theory; migration studies in the context of European nation states and national identity; the literature of collective mobilization and political claims-making; transnational activism and globalization; and media and journalism studies. We discuss each of these in turn.

First, normative political theory has been a particularly fertile ground for the exploration of the cartoons controversy, both in terms of offering the conceptual distinctions and background vocabulary to make more than superficial sense of the variety of claims, counterclaims and competing interpretations of the very stakes of the controversy, and in terms of offering (still competing) adjudications between the most sophisticated philosophical versions of these claims, not all of which have frequently encountered each other on the same turf. Perhaps the most interesting direction for normative theory suggested by the cartoons affair is the (series of) questions it raises about the role of context for normative theory. Over and above the application of specific normative principles and positions to the case at hand, arguably the most interesting theoretical challenge here concerns how to do political theory about specific cases.

There is here an issue of the degree to which theorizing must become more aware of specific national cultural or type-of-group contexts – which is not to say that any one such contextual meaning should be accepted as normatively legitimate. In this regard, academic multiculturalism has had a North American bias, which, when applied to Europe, does not fit former colonial nation states that started as immigrant senders, not receivers, who have predominantly Muslim immigrants, and who struggle with specifically European issues of national identity and secularism; indeed even European theories reflect specific national contexts, already at the level of the meaning of concepts (for instance the concepts of secularism, citizenship and multiculturalism). This predicament, which was also very much in evidence in the cartoons controversy, may suggest the need to combine normative theorizing with more than just the spectacular thought examples and hard cases from analytical philosophy, but also systematic bottom-up studies of the way controversies become conceptualized in different national publics (Favell and Modood, 2003; Modood et al., 2006; Mouritsen, 2008). The

comparative country studies in this issue, in most cases co-written by authors who are also political theorists, reflect this perspective.

However, there is also a second meaning of 'context', which is discussed and demonstrated with specific reference to the cartoons controversy by Lægaard in his contribution to this issue and also elsewhere (Lægaard 2008, 2009; cf. Modood, 2009). This is a question of the understanding of the cases 'themselves', in the sense that the cartoons controversy contains many separate aspects and events of normative significance and different interpretations of these (i.e. answers to questions such as: What were the real motives? What were the effects? Who was hurt, and how? Who were the responsible actors?). In the case of the cartoons, a key issue, discussed at length in the issue's last article by Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood, was the interpretation of the meaning(s) of the cartoons themselves, particularly the controversial bomb-in-turban one, which beyond breaking the taboo found in most Muslim countries of depicting the Prophet, arguably associated Islam as a religion or Muslims with violence and terrorism.

Focusing on one or a few such aspects and interpretations throws into focus specific normative principles (and even meta-ethical theories, i.e. utilitarian versus deontological) and dilemmas, and leaves out others, just as the very act of choosing one's focus may be largely determined by one's theoretical point of departure, for instance a particular breed of liberalism. Moreover, different normative principles may represent competing ontologies of power and social structure. In the first article of the issue, Lægaard argues that whereas context is obviously important to settle questions over specific interpretations (to what extent, if at all, should a normative principle be invoked and applied here?), 'in other cases invocations of context rather presuppose a particular interpretation'. Indeed, our ability to appreciate (let alone negotiate) the profound disagreements in normative theorizing about the cartoons controversy, inside and outside academia, relies on our ability to understand the way that competing normative interpretations, in part, reflect either different selections of 'relevant' context, or different empirical assumptions or social science analyses of such context.

Lægaard's demonstration of different employments of context at the same time provides a succinct theoretical roadmap. This is doubly useful, first, as a prelude to the more empirical tracing of the normative phenomenology of national public disputes, which follows in subsequent articles, and, second, as the to date most systematic discussion, not only of the competing political theory perspectives brought to bear on the cartoons controversy, but also their interrelation. In political theory, the cartoons controversy has been a stepping stone to discussing larger issues of multi-cultural accommodation, tolerance, non-discrimination, freedom of speech, recognition and religious diversity, and not least the proper balancing of

these principles and values (Carens, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Henkel, 2006; Lægaard, 2007; Modood, 2006). Some of the issues have been internal to liberalism; others to the proper interpretation of values conventionally associated with liberalism, particularly toleration. As regards the latter, to the extent the controversy was seen as an issue of toleration, profound disagreement ensues between traditional liberals and others. While traditional liberals see it as a matter of *liberal toleration* (by Muslims) of actions and utterances that they do not like but that do not overstep boundaries of a reasonable pluralism of values and belief (or unbelief), or cause harm, others see the (re)publication of the cartoons as an intolerant act. Either because they hold a wider conception of the intimidation, power or social exclusion that make up intolerance (*social toleration* in Lægaard's terminology), or constitute 'harm', or because they understand tolerance as a broader ethos or practice of empathy and restraint relative to types of difference that are initially seen as unreasonable or offensive (as many in the West certainly regard Islam) (Connolly, 2005).

This latter position also points to the broader issue of whether such cases as those involving cartoons are amenable at all to discussion in terms of rights and rules (Dworkin, 2006) – let alone legal forms of regulation of legitimate utterances, i.e. limitations on freedom of speech (what Lægaard calls *legal liberalism*) – or whether they should be approached in terms of 'ethical' discussions, including discussions of what Lægaard calls *civility*, which includes virtues of empathy and moderation. In a similar vein, rather different views about the rationale and limits of freedom of speech emerge from a Mill-eian tradition as opposed to more libertarian or deontological tradition, which are less concerned with the content of views expressed. In the former case, there is a debate between consequentialists (utilitarians) on what constitutes harm, both in terms of initial religious insult and the subsequent events, which in this case were unforeseen by *Jyllands-Posten*. Likewise, there is a debate on whether the cartoons may be construed as conducive to a higher quality of public opinion and debate – and about whether self-censorship out of fear might damage such debate.

Some theorists press a further positive point in using freedom of expression to criticize and provoke the religious and devout, e.g. to educate them to become liberal. This fighting creed position, which Lægaard calls *militant liberalism*, can also be seen as a type of *secularism*, which goes beyond institutional and cultural organization of religion into the issue of the type of modernist outlook required in a democracy. This remains prominent in the Danish debate (Mouritsen, 2006; in this issue, see Meer and Mouritsen, criticized by Levey and Modood), where it even became framed as an issue of *recognition* and respect (to be sure, not the multicultural *positive respect* that Lægaard also discusses). In an exchange between *Jyllands-Posten's* Flemming Rose and Tariq Ramadan, Rose said the cartoons:

showed that we want to integrate Muslims into the European tradition of satire. Thereby we told them: You are not a weak minority of victims who require special consideration. We treat you as equals. And we expect neither more or less from you than from any other group in society. This is recognition, not exclusion. (*Weekendavisen*, 2008)<sup>4</sup>

Many normative discussions of the cartoons relied on comparative legal studies where many of the key principles at stake – i.e. freedom of speech, hate speech, blasphemy, discrimination, and the protection of freedom of religion (e.g. Boyle, 2006; Post, 2007; Schauer, 2006) have been analysed, and where some of the initial fuel of controversy is already evident. These principles are markedly differently implemented, circumscribed and balanced in different national contexts, in part reflecting different traditions of accommodating minorities and protecting (majority) religion.

An interesting insight from this literature, when treated from an interdisciplinary perspective, concerns the tension between the public emphases on ‘freedom of speech’ as a fundamental value, on the one hand, and on the other hand the significant set of modifications and exceptions that actually exist in law. Here, interestingly, Europe differs markedly from the USA by having national traditions of legislation against blasphemy (although there is a liberalization trend in progress), but at the same time a much stronger tradition of using freedom of speech in a provocative way against religion – something that is generally frowned upon in the USA, despite the First Amendment.

One controversy here concerns the reasonableness of protecting faith, including particular sacred figures or symbols, in a disenchanted modern world, and also the issue, given the existence of such protection, of consistency between different groups. Here, a case in point has been the lack of protection of Muslims, for instance under British legislation, which only refers to Christianity. By contrast, protection against racism, including laws against specific forms of incitement to hatred, has been seen as more relevant, at European levels and in different countries – e.g. the prolonged British dispute on the issue of extending legislation on incitement to racial hatred to include religion (and whether religion is different from ethnicity, race or gender in this regard) (Meer, 2008). By contrast, in Denmark, abolishment of the blasphemy law was supported, also by parties of the left (before the cartoons crisis), on the grounds that religious people, not religious creeds and symbols should be protected – and such protection was contained in Danish legislation against racism (which also protects against ‘threats, insults or degradation’ of people because of their religion).<sup>5</sup>

Just as the rationale of some of this legislation from quite early on was to prevent the hurting of religious feelings (for the sake of religious peace) (Post, 2007), it is arguable that where a high degree of identification with specific symbols or texts by a minority religious group exists – and where such sensitivity moreover is recognized by the surrounding society in the

form of (perhaps racialized) group stereotypes – blasphemy may come close to hate speech.

Moreover, in as far as the cartoons utilize negative stereotypes in the depiction of Muslims (including the Prophet) there is a case for seeing them as racist. Such a case is offered in this issue by Levey and Modood. Their article is a sustained attempt to tackle the questions of normative interpretation that are raised by the existence of limits to freedom of speech, and the controversy *within* liberal political thought of fixing these boundaries in the case of religiously provocative images. The authors use the ‘Tricolour values of liberty, equality and fraternity’ to ‘explore how liberal-democratic principles variously apply and conflict’ in the affair. The article usefully distinguishes between three aspects of controversy: first, the very depiction of the Prophet, second, the suggestion that Islam is violent and dangerous and, third, that Muslims as a group are.

While a secular principle of freedom from religious law, largely enshrined in legislation in all the West, rules out prohibiting the publication of pictures of the Prophet, the authors takes issue with Rose’s idea, cited above, that the publication was a way of according equal respect to Muslims as citizens. It was certainly not the case that liberal principles as such prescribed publication. From a liberal standpoint of ‘equality’ and ‘fraternity’, if less from that of ‘liberty’, there would have been ample reason – also given the marginalized situation of Muslims in Denmark – to decide against publication. Discussing, second, the issue of whether Islam as a religion should be protected, the authors discuss a range of contemporary examples – from Serrano’s picture *Piss Christ*<sup>6</sup> to the pop singer Madonna – which all suggest that Islam is only suffering now what Christianity has long had to put up with, i.e. forms of modern irreverence that should not, however distasteful and hurtful, be legislated against. However, third, the stereotype of Muslims as violent potential terrorists, plausibly implied (if not intended) by the bomb-in-turban cartoon, is a different matter. Here, as in a number of other cases discussed by Levey and Modood, it makes sense to speak of religious stereotyping of Muslims as a form of racialization that has some new elements as well as a long pedigree in European Christian Islamophobia.

The second disciplinary perspective covered by this issue is the field of migration studies, and more particularly such approaches that are concerned with the development of policies and discourses over migration, integration and multicultural conflicts in European nation states, and their connection with larger issues of political culture and national identity. Now, the normative stakes in the controversy (freedom of speech, secularism, civic integration of Muslims, toleration) appear to connect it with Joppke’s analysis of European convergence – beyond traditional cultural nationalism as well as multiculturalism – towards what he aptly terms ‘repressive liberalism’ (2007a) – i.e. the combined emphasis on a traditional liberalism

of colour blind rights and a much more intrusive, perfectionist ambition to assimilate newcomers into societies and economies, which are 'for liberal people only' (Joppke, 2007b: 271). A common starting point of the EMILIE project's joint analyses of how national publics reacted to the controversy was indeed that, as with the various national headscarf affairs, the cartoons controversy was a European issue, in that all or most countries had one (Joppke, 2009) – indeed, unlike the former, had it simultaneously. Yet, several contributions to this issue suggest that the receptions of the affair, and the (universal or liberal) value ideals accompanying it, not only became implicated in local identity constructions and struggles over national political culture (Mouritsen, 2008; Rostbøl, 2008), but that these constructions and struggles assumed particular national forms. The exchange between Rose and Ramadan may indicate the former's 'repressive liberalism'; but it also testifies to the continuing importance of national context – here a Danish and British context respectively.

This is the theme of the first of three comparative articles, which is Meer and Mouritsen's analysis of news media editorial debates in Denmark and Britain. This piece, which looks at two countries that are conventionally placed at different ends of a continuum of difference friendliness in Europe, in fact finds significant similarities in the debates. In particular, the article shows that, whereas Danish public opinion was split down the middle, *Jyllands-Posten* (in a debate that was of course much more extensive in Denmark than elsewhere) actually stood rather isolated among serious national newspapers, while others registered concerns that were shared by critics of *Jyllands-Posten* elsewhere in Europe, but were almost dominant in Britain. While one main difference between the two countries was in the degree of severity of condemning *Jyllands-Posten* (e.g. as not just insensitive or stupid, but deliberately inciting racial hatred), another concerned the political employment of, and reactions to, the affair by government. There is a stark contrast between the British case of a responsible elite unanimously condemning what neither could nor should ever happen in Britain (and lauding British newspapers' policy not to republish), and on the other hand the Danish government's employment of the affair, at least initially, as an element in an ongoing domestic *Kulturkamp*, which was also the ideological background of *Jyllands-Posten*'s decision to print the cartoons in the first place. The article also notes a more general contrast between a 'multi-culturalist' emphasis on (British) moderation and religious sensitivity and respect, and on the other hand, also among *Jyllands-Posten*'s critics, on a tradition of rough and hearty informality.

Even more than the headscarf issue and other affairs, the cartoons controversy also exemplified a tendency towards reflective national self-consciousness, where perceptions of the affair in other countries – negatively as well as positively – became points of reference in national debates. There was a sense in which southern European countries, as well as eastern

European countries such as Poland, on account of the traditional place of Catholic and orthodox religion in public life, distanced themselves from the immoderate secularism and insensitivity of northern Europe. Somewhat similarly, Meer and Mouritsen's piece highlights how Britain maintained a feeling of superiority for having come a longer way than 'Europe' – although this difference, as the article goes on to show, could also be seen more negatively.

However, this reflectivity and ideological opposition of one's national self with an external Other is perhaps most obvious in the case of Sweden. The third article, by Larsson and Lindekilde, analyses at length the manners in which 'multicultural' Sweden compared itself favourably with Denmark (incidentally vice versa: Swedish commentators knew that neighbouring Denmark's politicians habitually dismiss the irresponsible and naive way that Sweden deals with migration and integration). This was not only in terms of relating the Danish affair to a very real public perception of the difference in the two Scandinavian *brother countries*' public philosophies, where Danish open rejection of multiculturalism and concern with 'national values' was contrasted with (successful) Swedish incorporation of cultural diversity in *Folkehemmat*. It was also visible when Sweden had its own Muhammad cartoons crisis – which started when a local newspaper published the artist Lars Vilks' drawing depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a dog – where national politicians, led by the prime minister Frederik Reinfeldt, demonstrably said and did all the things that the Danish prime minister had failed to say and do.

The last comparative article, by Miera and Sala Pala, contrasts the reception of the cartoons controversy in Germany and France, which both had extensive debates on the cartoons and whether to republish them. As detailed by the authors, the two countries are traditionally opposed in terms of citizenship models and national identity; conceptions of secularism (a markedly more positive conception of religion in public space in Germany); diverse colonial experiences; and, of course, Germany's nationalist socialist past. In this comparison, as in the one between Denmark and Britain, one again sees how many arguments and themes resound across national boundaries. This is particularly the case with the discursive frame of Islam as a threat to western Enlightenment values. However, the analysis also indicated a striking variety of different approaches in the print media to the question of publishing or not, in part or only a few, and in the different justifications cited.

Even so, details in the reception also need to be understood here in the context of specific national conceptions of cultural difference, citizenship, and the place of religion in politics. Thus, the comparison brings out the way that France, despite the country's continuing agonizing about the republican model of *integration*, in this case at least stood very firm in its custodianship of a rationalist enlightenment heritage, whereas in Germany there

was some negotiation between a post-Second World War tradition of restraint and a discourse of European *Leitkultur*.

A third body of literature engaged by this issue deals with collective mobilization and political claims-making. Also from this perspective the controversy very much concerned political identity or culture, but not only at the level of nations and states. Adopting a political identity view of culture, one may speak of culture as the politicized interpretations and delineations of membership, of 'us' and 'them', in terms of specific, cherished abstract values (such as freedom of speech), practices (e.g. forms of civility) and identity (conceptions, say, of who could be the bearers of these values and practices). Whereas, above nations, such conflict was seen in the constitution of 'Europe' or 'the West' against 'the Islamic world', beneath state level it was seen between various collective actors, such as parties, media organizations and, of course, Muslim minorities. Larsson and Lindekilde's analysis, already referred to above, combines a nation-level centred 'public philosophy' approach with a political opportunity structure approach, which looks at the way not only institutional, but also discursive-ideological structures shape the space of manoeuvring of collective actors, while also offering possible and feasible political identities (and rendering other identities ineffective and weak).

From this perspective, where the claims, values and self-perceptions of groups cannot be deduced in any direct way from the 'original' (religious, ethnic) cultural baggage of immigrants, the cartoons controversy was particularly interesting because it facilitated the collective mobilization of new groups. Unlike the politically 'progressive' groups traditionally studied in the literature on social movements, these new claims-makers were traditional and religious (see also Olesen, this issue). A few studies have already dealt with the processes of Muslim mobilization, claims-making and action repertoires during the controversy (Högfeltd et al., 2008; Lindekilde, 2008, forthcoming). The way this mobilization took place, in terms of available strategies, channels and feasible rhetoric, was very different in different countries, including the two countries studied by Larsson and Lindekilde, Sweden and Denmark. This was partly because of the reigning discourse, but also very much related to the very different incorporation structures in the two countries – routinized corporative consultation with recognized national organizations in Sweden versus ad hoc attempts at co-opting 'preferred' groups in Denmark. In this vein, Denmark first saw a very significant and unprecedented mobilization by religious Muslims, including some radical segments, but later on, equally significantly, the formation of a group of self-proclaimed secular 'Democratic Muslims', which identified itself against the former group.

A fourth academic perspective, not unrelated to the one above, concerns transnational activism and identity formation and the conditions of such activism created by processes of globalization. Within international



relations studies, and studies of international political economy, the Muhammad cartoons controversy has been highlighted as an exemplary case of global interconnectedness. These studies show how the publication of the cartoons in Denmark led to international reactions such as diplomatic disengagements, boycotts and protests within international organizations such as the UN, which again had important short- and long-term effects on the room for manoeuvre for politicians and corporations in Denmark (Ettenson et al., 2006; Linell, 2006; Pedersen, 2006). Olesen's contribution to this issue pays particular attention, as one of four theoretical challenges to transnational activism raised by the cartoons controversy, to the way that the escalation of the conflict to a transnational level must be understood via analysis of the complex interplay between official actors – the Danish government, other governments and their diplomatic representations – various civil society actors, and the media. While the controversy sparked substantial civil society protest and unrest, this was clearly influenced, and in some cases orchestrated by state actors and international organizations. Another new challenge, analysed by Olesen, concerns the very conceptual meaning of transnational activism. Here, first, and with the background of the cartoons controversy, Olesen insists on the need to see 'activism' as a broad, cross-cultural phenomenon, which may assume new, less orderly, even violent forms. Second, the controversy highlighted a very important element in contemporary transnationalism, which is the contemporaneous development of protests in many different parts of the world, where different groups with connected identity grievances and a shared devotion to the same religious symbol were mobilized through a variety of networks.

These issues of transnationalism, finally, are closely connected to a fifth set of disciplinary perspectives emanating from within media studies. This is unsurprising, because the controversy was not only created in and by news media, but also constituted as a media event, in several senses. First, the controversy was diffused, accelerated and turned into an international and transnational event by news media, not only in terms of the spread of the images in the first place and representation of ensuing reactions in the Muslim world and elsewhere, but also in terms of the mobilizing function, indeed at times the independently acting and politicizing role of news media (Douai, 2007; Hussain, 2007; Olesen, 2006a). Olesen's article in this issue pays particular attention to the role of media in transnational diffusion as 'trans-space communication with an indirect relationship between authors and audiences' where 'media disconnects claims from their authors and make them available to large undefined audiences'. Within cultural and sociological media studies this mobilizing role of the media has been tied to how media work as an institution, in terms of the impact of news criteria (conflict, personification), communicative constraints (simplifications, stereotypes), TV dramaturgy, the role of new media platforms (the internet)

and the increasing differentiation of media – including the role of transnational Arab media in presenting alternative interpretations and viewpoints.

Second, as particularly highlighted by Olesen's contribution and his notion of 'porous national publics', the cartoons controversy showed the need to theorize the relationship between the national and the global, but beyond the often hazy or idealistic invocations of a 'global public sphere'. On the one hand, public spheres – and the issues and political claims they channel – continue to be national in content and structure. Yet, with globalization – and transnational activity and networking – such national publics become penetrated by issues, concepts and images from other (national) public spheres; and the original national issues, concepts and images migrate or become lifted out of their context and parachuted into alien contexts – where the 'same' material takes on different meanings, and is often used for different local purposes, by new actors.

Third, media discourse of course remains a key indicator of the dominant frames and arguments of public opinion generally, whether reflective of the views and news frames emanating *from* the media itself in editorials, commentary and regular reporting, or those emanating from political elites and other groups, represented *through* the media (Meer and Mouritsen, this issue; Miera and Sala Pala, this issue). Several studies have focused on how the Muhammad cartoons have been debated within the mediated public sphere in different countries (e.g. Debatin, 2007; Kunelius et al., 2007; Triandafyllidou et al., 2006), and some studies, including Larsson and Lindekilde's contribution to this issue, use media reporting for quantitative analysis of the content and amount of claims-making by different groups.

Finally, within the subfield of journalism studies, a specific set of questions, relatively unnoticed, concern the self-conceived role and responsibility of news media, including their understanding of press freedom and censorship. The analysis of media debate in this special issue by Meer and Mouritsen, and Miera and Sala Pala informs this problematic. Ideally speaking, a traditional set of publicist ideals has been seen as governing the 'republic of the press'. However, these ideals have changed a number of times through history, accumulating the available normative accounts of the function of news media in a democratic and culturally pluralist society. Each ideal can also be interpreted in different ways. For instance, in a libertarian perspective where the controlling power and overall soundness of the market of ideas require extensive freedom of the press, with regulation being a matter for industry itself, it could be argued both that such freedom of the press was never challenged in the first place, or, ironically, that it only was so as a result of the affair. A social responsibility conception of the press was amenable to those who called for restraint for the sake of public peace, and those who saw 'standing firm' on press autonomy as the very essence of defending a democratic society. Finally, conceptions of citizenship

journalism could both be construed to involve respect for all the readers and viewers in a plural society and as a call to provoke a dialogue that engages and moves them.

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### **Notes**

- 1 The EMILIE project – A European Approach to Multicultural Citizenship: Legal, Political and Educational Challenges – is a nine-country comparative project, headed by Dr Anna Triandafyllidou, and financed under the European Commission's 6th Framework programme (see ELIAMEP, 2009).
- 2 An extensive meta-debate developed about how to refer to the images published by *Jyllands-Posten*. On the one hand there were those, including *Jyllands-Posten*, who referred to the images using the neutral term 'drawings' (*tegninger*), and on the other hand those who preferred the more value-laden term 'caricatures' (*karikaturer*). *Jyllands-Posten* argued that it had not asked for caricatures, but only commissioned the illustrators to draw the Prophet Muhammad as they saw him. Many critics of *Jyllands-Posten*, in contrast, argued that by contacting members of the Association of Danish Newspaper Illustrators, *Jyllands-Posten* had indeed asked for caricatures of the Prophet – parodying or mocking images. Throughout this special issue we will use the terms 'Muhammad cartoons' and 'Muhammad cartoons controversy', as this way of labelling the images and the events that followed are the most commonly used in English.
- 3 On 18 August, the local Swedish newspaper *Nerikes Allahanda* published caricatures by the artist Lars Vilks depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a dog. For a detailed discussion of this case see Larsson and Lindekilde, this issue.
- 4 Rose, in a similar vein, mentioned those Danish Muslims who had told him that 'the debate you have started is our struggle. We fight for the right to be critical, to challenge religious authority'. Ramadan of course took issue with Rose's idea of secularism and his will to impose it on all Muslims: 'What you are now telling me is, "I am on the side of the secular Muslims"'. But you do not define who that

- is. What does it mean? Someone is secular who accepts secular society. I am a secular Muslim, but I am also religious, I have feelings for my religion' (*Weekendavisen*, 2008).
- 5 Danish press tradition is very liberal (Jørgensen, 2007) and it is quite difficult to have someone convicted according to the anti-racism legislation. Following the cartoons, the office of the state attorney twice rejected a case for blasphemy brought against the paper. Some commentators, including legal scholars who emphasized the context and editorial text surrounding the cartoons, believed a court case could in fact have been made, and many, including *Politiken* and *Berlingske Tidende*, regretted that there had not at least been a proper legal adjudication of the matter (Engelbrecht Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006). In 2008, editors Juste and Rose were finally acquitted in a private suit brought against them for defamation.
  - 6 For a brief explanation, see Wikipedia (2009).

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