L'Affair Foulard, or, Did My Culture Make Me Do It?

In his film, Mathias Woo asked whether Hong Kong – a global city of transience, transition, and travel – was a good city. Here we turn to another question raised by globalization and mobility: How do we reconcile strong religious identities and convictions within states that profess religious tolerance as long as religious practices are kept out of public life? What role does culture play in the ways that minority groups seek to integrate themselves (or not) into dominant societies? How do the cultural geographies of multiculturalism and globalization help us understand some of the seemingly intractable issues of cultural diversity being faced by states around the world today? Certainly there are many examples from around the world that we could draw upon to discuss these issues. Here, we turn to a brief account of the so-called *affair foulard*, or the headscarf issue in contemporary France, to provide a sense of how cultural geographers might understand such questions.

On October 19 1989, Ernest Chenier, the headmaster of the College Gabriel-Havez of Creil, France, expelled three Muslim girls – Fatima, Leila, and Samira – for refusing to remove their headscarves, or *foulards*, while attending school. Although the scarf is an expression of a particular religious identity that is protected by France's commitment to religious freedom, for Chenier it was also a symbol of beliefs that directly challenged the very idea upon which France's principle of religious freedom was based. That idea is *laicité*, a term which, though difficult to translate into English, refers generally to the concept of a secular state in which freedom of religion exists, but exists in a distinctly private realm that does not interfere with the public sphere in which citizenship exists. Indeed, it was perhaps a sincere belief in religious freedom that impelled Chenier to act in the first place, assuming as he might have that the girls were being *required* to wear the scarf in public, presumably against their will. This, however, was not the case. School officials and the parents of the girls had already reached an agreement in which they were to attend class without their heads covered. But Fatima, Leila, and Samira went to class covered anyway. In this way, their act took on a *deliberate* character, a gesture of both identification *and* defiance, which was thus explicitly political. Two weeks later, the Minister of Education, Lionel Jospin, took the matter to the Conseil d'Etat, France's high court, which delivered an ambiguous interpretation of how *laicité* applied to the *foulard*. The Conseil ruled that the wearing of religious signs by students was not incompatible with *laicité*, but the wearing of such signs as an act of "pressure, provocation, proselytizing, or propaganda" or in a way that would disturb the normal function of public education, violated the basic principles of French law. The Conseil left it to school officials to interpret this distinction between the scarf as a sign of religious devotion or identification and the scarf as an act of political provocation or public disturbance. In 1994 the Ministry of Education clarified the ruling by declaring explicitly that whereas students were free to wear religious symbols discreetly, the *foulard* could not be worn with any discretion and was thus forbidden in French state schools.

Cultural geography is central to understanding why Chenier responded to the actions of Fatima, Leila, and Samira with expulsion, and why the issue was taken all the way to the French high court for resolution. There are at least two ways in which we can view the issue through the analytic lens of cultural geography. First, *laicité* depends upon a clear boundary between two distinct spaces: the private (where religion is said to belong) and the public sphere (where all citizens are equal under the law). The girls' actions clearly challenged this boundary by projecting into the public sphere an article of clothing that the state regarded as private. But from the perspective of cultural geography – that is, by paying closer attention to how people actually interact with their environment, and how they make that interaction meaningful – the abstract spaces of private and public don't always represent the ways people actually live

their lives. While the boundary perhaps makes sense at the scale of the nation, an *imagined community* where citizenship is defined, actual cultural practices are carried out at much more local scales.[2] Indeed, the extremely local scale of *the body* is perhaps the most important scale of all in cultural geography. Our bodies travel between private and public spaces all the time. Often, how we dress and act with our bodies depends upon whether we are in private or public space, and there are social norms that govern such dress and actions, norms that vary according to gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, place, time of day, and so forth. But some bodies may fail to abide by these norms. As the selection by Peter Jackson (see p. 413) makes clear, the cultural politics of how we dress our bodies is an important field within cultural geography. Paying attention to culture at the scale of the body makes clear that the division between private and public is not a natural fact but a socially constituted, and quite unstable, norm. As different bodily practices begin to change society, those norms are also challenged.

Second, the meaning of *identity* has shifted from an emphasis on sameness (this being the general sense of identity assumed under the concept of citizenship) to one of recognition, in which one claims difference from others based on recognizable, or identifying, traits. These are not of course mutually exclusive approaches to identity, but they do reflect a shift in which markers and practices of cultural difference are now central to claims of inclusion, exclusion, entitlement, and disenfranchisement. This shift has come about partly as a result of the increased scale of mobility around the world since the mid-twentieth century, bringing previously distant groups into daily contact with each other to an unprecedented degree. *Culture* has become a general term for the practices, symbols, and meanings that different groups refer to in claiming rights of recognition. Such claims of cultural citizenship – the rights and entitlements afforded to groups in recognition of their cultural identity – differ significantly from the abstract notions of citizenship in the public sphere upon which *laicité* is based. For one thing, claims of cultural recognition derive from *practices* that are often very local in scale, embodied, and have historical and geographical origins beyond the national space in which abstract citizenship is defined. To paraphrase an observation by the anthropologist Talal Asad: the spatialities of many tradition-rooted practices cannot be translated into the abstract space of the nation.[3]

Did culture make Fatima, Leila, and Samira wear the *foulard* in deliberate provocation of *laicité*? While many people in France might believe so, culture is not a thing with causal powers, but a way of understanding how we experience the world and what that experience means to us. What we can learn here from cultural geography is that culture does not, by itself, explain behavior without an understanding of the different scales and contexts within which people do things. And our objective here is not to present the truth behind the girls' actions, but to convey what a cultural geography of *l'affair foulard* might look like. On one level, a cultural geography of *l'affair foulard* might simply point out that covering one's head as a sign of religious devotion is certainly not a practice restricted to Islam. There are people all over the world who cover their heads for religious or spiritual reasons. Indeed, many Christian and Jewish acts of devotion involve head covering of some kind. So the issue here is not simply one of majority societies accommodating the cultural practices of minorities. Thus, on another level, whether we view their actions as deliberate and political or not, we must consider the *embodied* nature of cultural practice, the fact that embodied practices do not necessarily translate into abstract spaces like private and public. We must also consider the socio-cultural norms that define French citizenship and understand how those are challenged by claims of cultural recognition by minority groups. These questions of scale and identity, then, are also important issues that cultural geography brings to bear on our understanding of cultural politics.

The example of *l'affair foulard* highlights several aspects of cultural geography emphasized in some of the later sections of this *Reader*. As already mentioned above, Part Seven focuses on questions of *difference*, while Part Five examines issues of *identity*, and the place-based contexts and scales within which different identities are worked out. Part Six considers *mobility*, and Part Seven looks at some of the ways culture has become a *resource* (for example, in making claims of recognition). All of these themes are at play in the case of Fatima, Leila, and Samira. Taken as a whole, however, all eight parts of the book raise questions about the *politics* of culture, exploring the various ways in which the political

is never far from the cultural. Certainly that is a central message of *l'affair foulard*. Power is thus a consistently fundamental theme in cultural geography. Culture, as numerous contributors to this *Reader* observe, is laden with power. And vice versa: power is almost always encoded, transmitted, negotiated, and contested through – at least in part – cultural practices. The spaces that shape and are shaped by people's experience of their world are not neutral, but are always socially constituted and thus always subject to political practices.

Cultural Geography as an Academic Discipline

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