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Assist. Prof. Dr., Sümeyye Sakarya
Ankara University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Politics and Public Administration, Ankara-Türkiye
e-posta: sakaryasumeyye@gmail.com.
(Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author)

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De-Essentializing the Public Space: Religion and Political Ontology

Abstract

Research on religion and public space in socio-political theory primarily focuses on the regulation and inclusion-exclusion of religion "in" public space. However, these approaches fail to recognize the substantial role of religion as a creative force in the construction of socio-political identities. For, they treat religion as a residual category by presuming a necessary ontological separation between religion and "public" so that they could argue for religion's exclusion or inclusion under particular conditions. I maintain that this treatment of religion relies on two key assumptions. First, public space is seen as a fixed, neutral domain for structured exchange among citizens with predetermined identities. Second, the secular is considered ontologically and epistemologically superior to the religious in shaping the public sphere, due to the presumed residual nature of religion and the alleged neutrality of the non-religious (secular). These assumptions essentializing "public", religion, and citizenship, cannot recognize their dynamic and constructive relationships as identities formed through political processes. To address this issue and demonstrate how religion actively contributes to the construction of identities and public space, I propose an anti-essentialist, political reading, drawing on Ernesto Laclau's political ontology and using sociologist Nilüfer Göle's work on Islam in Europe as a case study.

Keywords: Religion, Public Space, Essentialism, Ernesto Laclau, Nilüfer Göle.

Kamusal Alanın Özselleştirilmesine Karşı: Din ve Siyasal Ontoloji

Öz

Sosyopolitik teoride din ve kamusal alan üzerine yapılan araştırmalar, temel olarak kamusal alanda dinin düzenlenmesi ve dahil edilmesi-dışlanması üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Ancak bu bakış açıları, sosyopolitik kimliklerin inşasında yaratıcı bir güç olarak dinin önemli rolünü göz ardı etmektedir. Zira bu yaklaşımlar, din ile "kamusal" arasında ontolojik bir ayrım olduğunu varsayarak dini bir artık kategori olarak ele almakta ve böylece belirli koşullar altında dinin dışlanması veya dahil edilmesi gerektiğini savunabilmektedirler. Bu çalışmada, dinin bu şekilde ele alınmasının iki temel varsayıma dayandığı savunulmaktadır. Birincisi, kamusal alan, önceden belirlenmiş kimliklere sahip vatandaşlar arasında yapılandırılmış bir alışveriş için sabit, tarafsız bir alan olarak görülmektedir. İkincisi, dinin varsayılan artık niteliği ve din dışı (seküler) olanın iddia edilen tarafsızlığı nedeniyle, seküler olanın kamusal alanı şekillendirmede ontolojik ve epistemolojik olarak dinden üstün olduğu düşünülmektedir. "Kamusal", din ve vatandaşlığı özselleştiren bu varsayımlar, bunların siyasi süreçler yoluyla oluşan kimlikler olarak dinamik ve yapıcı ilişkilerini anlayamaz. Bu sorunu ele almak ve dinin kimliklerin ve kamusal alanın inşasına nasıl aktif olarak katkıda bulunduğunu göstermek için, bu metinde, Ernesto Laclau'nun politik ontolojisinden yararlanarak ve sosyolog Nilüfer Göle'nin Avrupa'da İslam üzerine çalışmalarını bir vaka olarak kullanarak, anti-özcü siyasal bir okuma önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din, Kamusal Alan, Özcülük, Ernesto Laclau, Nilüfer Göle.

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1. Introduction

Scholarship on religion and public space in socio-political theory mainly focuses on the regulation and the inclusion-exclusion of religion "in" public space. However, this focus cannot construe the substantial role of religion as a creative force in the construction of social identities. Religion is treated as a residual category through the assumption that there is a necessary ontological separation between religion and "public", which justifies religion's exclusion or inclusion under particular conditions. In this paper, I argue that this treatment of religion is based on two interdependent assumptions. Firstly, it is assumed that public space is a fixed and neutral realm for structured exchange and decision-making among citizens who also hold pre-established fixed identities. Secondly, the "non-religious" (secular) is assumed to be ontologically and epistemologically superior to the "religious" in the construction of "public" due to the alleged residual nature of religion and alleged neutrality of the non-religious (secular). In the first part of the paper, I demonstrate the existence of those assumptions through a critical analysis of the relevant literature. Instead of providing a broad review, I will focus on the Doctrine of Religious Restraint (DRR) and its critics for two reasons. Firstly, although the "exact" meaning of the DRR, if there is any, would vary according to the divergent definitions of its components, its main idea can still be used to summarize the mainstream public reason literature on the topic. The DRR argues that "citizens and public officials have a moral duty to restrain themselves from endorsing state coercion that requires a religious rationale" (Eberle, 2011, p. 285). In other words, people should avoid relying on religion as the sole justification in matters of coercion. While this argument can be used to exclude religion from the public space totally, it can also be employed to advocate its (conditional) inclusion. For, depending on what is counted as coercion and, more significantly, why people should "restrain", the inclusion of religion can be allowed or promoted.

The ability of the DRR to produce restrictive claims against exclusionary ones is my second reason to focus on it. As restrictive arguments already contain a critique of exclusionary ones, presenting the objections to the DRR's restrictive interpretations will suffice to give a comprehensive enough view of the literature to demonstrate the commonality of the mentioned problems to the scholarship. For, not only exclusionary or restrictive but also inclusive alternatives suffer from the first assumption: the fixity of public space and citizen identities. I maintain that these assumptions stem from the failure to recognize the impossibility of society and social identities as objective totalities. Due to their essentialization of public, space, religion, citizen and their compounding proliferations, these scholars cannot understand their dynamic and productive relations as identities instituted through political processes. I argue that the recognition of this failure demonstrates the need for an anti-essentialist, political reading of the relations between religion, space and public. Methodologically, I adopt a qualitative research design, employing document analysis as my primary data collection technique. My analysis draws upon secondary sources, including legal texts, media reports, and the sociological scholarship of Nilüfer Göle. In the second part of the paper, I propose this political reading drawing on Ernesto Laclau's (1990) political ontology. Within this framework, I treat specific incidences investigated by Nilüfer Göle, particularly the one in Toulouse, as critical case studies, selected via purposive sampling, to exemplify the theoretical arguments derived from Laclau's ontology. I further utilize Nilüfer Göle's work to frame Islam as a form of creative dissent and transgression in European public space. In this view, Islam challenges the existing notions of

space, public, religion, and Europeanness and reshapes them through the antagonistic relations it establishes with them.

2. Doctrine of Religious Restraint and Its Critics

The persistent visibility of religion in public space has discredited the secularization model that predicted religion withdrawing from public life in modern societies. The persistence of this normative model, which arguably also desires religion's withdrawal, continues to make the place and role of religion in public life controversial (Asad, 2003; Berger, 1967, 1999; Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2008; Hadden, 1987) and the proper place of religion remains a heated question. The most exclusionary response to this question is epitomized by the bans on putative Islamic attire in various parts of the world. Pursuing an absolute elimination policy, countries like France, India and Spain ban any "thing" that they associate with Islam (from distinct types of headgear to clothes) in an increasing number of public spaces, such as schools, beaches, pools and offices. A less exclusionary approach, that is DRR, limits the elimination of religion to its conditional employment as public reason or justification in public discussions while permitting the symbols in public spaces (Habermas, 1996, p. 458; March, 2013, p. 523; Rawls, 1997). For example, Habermas (2008, p. 130) conditions the inclusion of religion in the formal public to its "translation" into a secular form. He proposes the concept of post-secularism to acknowledge the significant and constitutive place of religion in the public realm and to articulate the ways to include it (Habermas, 2008, pp. 112–119). Yet, his inclusionary attempt also suffers from rigidity and proceduralism, eventually excluding religion. Ağcan (2020) explains this limitation through Habermas's inadequacy to understand "religion" and "the political" and their relations in the relevant network. Firstly, because Habermas confines the place and power of religion to civil society and the socio-cultural arena, he does not properly recognize the total impact of religion. Secondly, because he focuses on consensus and agreement by excluding disagreement, difference and agonism from the political, he prioritizes the secular worldview within which he establishes this understanding of the political at the expense of excluding the non-secular. These preferences imply the maintenance of the hierarchical binary of the secular-religious that Habermas aptly criticizes. In this sense, Habermas enforces the ontological and epistemological duality of the religious and the secular, where the secular has the upper hand. He, then, constructs and fixes the political and identities onto this hierarchical binary. However, this consensual understanding of the political cannot capture the irreconcilable plurality of the worldviews which institute the political and society (Ağcan, 2020, pp. 389–391). Ağcan's objections to Habermas can be applied to all DRR theories and even its critics, since they reduce politics to structured reasoning and advocate the "exclusion" or conditional "inclusion" of religion. This reductionism and advocacy of "exclusion" or "inclusion" presume separate and fixed identities for religion, secular, politics, public and subjects instead of fluid and dynamic ones.

DRR (Audi, 1997; Habermas, 1996; Larmore, 1990; Macedo, 2010; Solum, 1990) requires the members of the public to restrain themselves from supporting the laws for which they do not have a public justification (Eberle, 2002, p. 68). Then, as religious reasons are not public, according to the majority of the public reason theorists (Audi, 1997; Habermas, 2008; Macedo, 2010; Rawls, 1997), people should avoid endorsing the laws for which they have only religious justification (DRR). There are two main arguments behind the DRR: the ideal of respect and the epistemic inferiority of religious reasons. For the first one, scholars argue that respecting each

other requires public justifications. Because religious ones are not public, respect for fellow members of the public requires avoiding relying on them as sole justification. A standard version of this argument is Larmore's (1990) claim that disagreements are inevitable, and to resolve them, we should retreat to a "common", "neutral ground". He considers this resolution as a requirement of rational dialogue and equal respect, which he endorses as two fundamental norms from the perspective of political liberalism. The norm of equal respect implies that individuals have unique capacities to reasonably consider and shape an understanding of a good life for themselves. Respect for this capacity necessitates that the coercive principles that they will abide by should be justified to them through a rational dialogue on a neutral, therefore common ground. Religion must be excluded from rational dialogue because it does not provide a neutral ground. The first problem with this concerns the contingency of the neutral ground. Since disagreements are inevitable, as stated by Larmore, the presence of such a common neutral ground cannot be guaranteed. Although contingency (from an anti-essentialist view) is a feature of any identity, Larmore's argument is based on necessity and fixity and denies contingency and flexibility. This denial becomes more evident in the second problem with the argument: the definition of religion. Larmore (1990, p. 350) argues that when commitments are in conflict, citizens must prioritize "the norms of rational dialogue and equal respect" over "their other commitments". He requires people "to abandon 'the cult of wholeness' and embrace a certain differentiation between" their "role as citizens, free of status and ascription" and their "other roles" (Larmore, 1990, p. 351). This reading of "the cult of wholeness" and "other roles", which is mobilized for the restriction of religion from public reason, derives from an essentialist understanding of religion and other commitments. Accordingly, "other roles", including religious identity, can be differentiated from, and subordinated to citizenship. This definition of religion is not only residual but also necessary and fixed.

Such an approach to religion contains at least three fundamental drawbacks in construing the place of religion in public space. Firstly, the fixity and necessity of religion aggravate the discussed contingency problem. For, even where a secondary component (here, religion) of the process is required to be necessary in a fixed form, the contingency of the presence and the form of the common ground that is the central component of the theory poses more of a problem than a solution. Secondly, recalling Ağcan's objection to Habermas's post-secularism, Larmore maintains the hierarchical binary of secular-religious, which precludes understanding the dynamic nature of the political identities and society and their relations. Thirdly, the differentiation of roles is not a feasible option, particularly in the context of religion, for identities are not constructed in isolation. They are neither total nor final but always in process. "Wholeness", as the opposite of differentiated-ness, is not a "cult" but an inventible part of the institution process of any role, because human actions, which comprise this role or identity, fall into an already dwelling world, making isolation impossible. In the case of religion and religious identity, this wholeness becomes more ostensible since religious convictions are totalizing and overriding for many religious people (Eberle, 2002, p. 145); they will base their decisions on their religious beliefs. "They do not view it as an option whether or not to do so. It is their conviction that they ought to strive for wholeness, integrity, integration". Religion is "also about their social and political existence" (Wolterstorff, 1997, p. 105) and, therefore, many religious citizens will not abandon "the cult of wholeness". In situations where they have to abandon and rank different roles and norms due to the overriding and totalizing nature of religion, they will be prone to rank religion over secular citizenship. The response of Larmore and other DRR

proponents to such situations is to exclude religious citizens from the process of public reasoning.

The second argument behind the DRR maintains that secular reasons are epistemologically superior to religious reasons. As the DRR requires "a public justification" and religious reasons are not counted as "public" epistemically, they must be restrained. The scholarship has three main epistemic criteria for "publicness": shareability, accessibility, and intelligibility. Shareability is the most rigid one and requires both shared reasons and evaluative standards. Intelligibility is the weakest and has no requirement except for being "intelligible" in the broadest sense. In that sense, it is also mobilized against the DRR by some scholars (Bird, 1996). Accessibility is the most common criterion in the literature and demands only shared standards, not reasons (Vallier & D'Agostino, 2014). As the objections and alternatives to the intelligibility version can be applied to accessibility and shareability criteria and I aim to provide a general picture of the literature, I will suffice to discuss intelligibility criteria, mainly through Habermas and Waldron, on behalf of epistemic arguments. In his "institutional translation proviso", Habermas presumes that religion is not intelligible in its own way; it should be translated into a (secular) language that is publicly communicable and can be used as a public justification. He permits conditional (translated) inclusion of religion in the process. One alternative to this argument is Waldron's conceptualization of human capacity. He argues that such concerns underestimate the human ability to understand each other and communicate. It assumes "a Babel of mutually incomprehensible assertions" (Waldron, 2012, p. 857). Although even people from different backgrounds with different beliefs can communicate, most people who need to communicate already live and deliberate from within the same culture and are familiar with each other. For his particular case, Waldron mentions America, where most people are religious, and secular people have ample resources to understand religion (Waldron, 2012, p. 860). Following this assumption, Waldron proposes a "two-way translation", where both secular and religious citizens are expected to learn each other's language. Although Habermas also seems to offer a translation proviso, Waldron's version is more inclusive, fair and realistic because, in Habermas's version, the burden of translation is on the religious citizens, while secular citizens must only "open their minds":

> "Whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso, by way of compensation secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments" (Habermas, 2008, p. 132).

While Waldron's proposal of two-way translation, as a criticism of exclusionary accounts, offers an alternative reading of religion and politics, it still does not capture the dynamism and unexpectedness of the political process and identities. It requires a procedure of translation and situates religion in relation to these predetermined processes. Religion is something that can be "translated" and "included". As that is the case also for the non-religious (secular), Waldron's reading does not create an epistemic hierarchy between religious and non-religious. However, religion and secular remain ontologically separate not only from each other but also from the political process. They are pre-established identities that can be included or excluded in politics, which is reduced to deliberation.

The convergence interpretation of intelligibility is a better criticism and alternative to the DRR in this sense. It argues that if the members of the public can agree on the same principles and make sense of each other's reasoning from the reasoner's point of view, the principle is justified. In other words, neither shared reasons nor standards are required (Gaus & Vallier, 2009; Vallier & D'Agostino, 2014). Suppose Ali and Ayşe endorse the same law, and Ali can see that Ayşe's reasoning for her support is in line with her own commitments and evaluative standards, while Ayşe can see that Ali's justification for his endorsement is compatible with his own values and evaluative standards. In that case, the law is publicly justified. As it does not necessitate any translation from any part, this interpretation appreciates the creative and fluid role of religion and other commitments in public life and politics better than Waldron does. It leaves the door open for different types of engagements among the citizens. However, the fundamental issue in those approaches towards religion and public-political life is their focus on agreement, stability and deliberation by ignoring the substantial and productive role of disagreement, unpredictability and agonism in the construction of socio-political life and identities. Consequently, public space as the place of these constructions assumes neutrality. It becomes a neutral space where members of the public deliberate, exchange ideas, persuade each other and decide on the rules to govern their collective life. Power as a factor that can damage this neutrality is not present in these approaches. Its absence permits the processes to proceed as expected and required by the neutrality. For these processes to proceed as expected, members of the public are also expected to communicate themselves in predictable ways. Therefore, these approaches also assign predetermined and fixed identities to the members of the public. Otherwise, actors can act in unpredictable ways by disregarding the procedures. Such a process would mean disagreement and conflict rather than agreement, consensus and stability. As there would be no agreed procedure to contain and regulate those unexpected disagreements and conflicts, they can result in new procedures, identities, and a new public space. In other words, even a small uncalculated action can result in the change and reconstruction of the identities of the involved actors, the rules and procedures, the relevant commitments and grounds, including religion, the measure of rationality and intelligibility and the public space itself.

Therefore, the cogency of these approaches is conditioned on the objective totality, necessity and essentialization of public, space, religion, citizen and their compounding proliferations. This is because if they are not necessary, essential, and totally/fully closed/constructed, their identities would be contingent, and they can change anytime. This scholarship's conditionality reveals its failure to understand religion and its relationship with public space and politics. Furthermore, it also indicates that this failure stems from its inability to recognize the impossibility of society and social identities as objective totalities and their dynamic and productive relations as identities instituted by power in political processes. This failure also demonstrates the need for an anti-essentialist, therefore, a political reading of the relations among religion, space and public. In the next part of the paper, I propose this political reading drawing on Ernesto Laclau's political ontology. To this end, I also utilize Nilüfer Göle's work as a case study, where she considers Islam to be a creative form of dissent and transgression in the European public space. This proposal and case study will also show and explain further how the mentioned scholarship fails and how and why this failure results from their inability to understand the primacy of the political.

3. A Political Reading

Laclau (1990, p. 36) ascribes four features to social relations: contingency, power, the primacy of politics and historicity. Contingency simply means "the impossibility of fixing with any precision – that is, in terms of a necessary ground – either the relations or the identities" (Laclau, 1990, p. 20). In other words, they could always have been otherwise. There are no necessary conditions of existence that require the relation or identity to exist in the way it does now. That is because of the second characteristic: social relations "are always power relations" and "the constitution of a social identity is an act of power", and eradicating power relations is impossible (Laclau, 1990, p. 31). At the moment of the constitution of any identity, there are different alternatives to institute themselves. They are in an antagonistic relationship since the existence of one is contingent on the exclusion of the other alternative.

What enables and ensures the constitution and presence of the current one is that it was more powerful than other options at those original moments of the institution. For instance, Rabaa Square in Egypt had a different identity until 2013. The protests in 2013 revealed the existence of different options to define the identity of the relevant society and space. That demonstrated that Rabaa's identity is contingent. It is neither necessary nor essential. For that moment, at least two alternatives appeared: a continuation of its "old" identity – whatever Rabaa Square meant till the 2013 protests – and the new potential one the protests would create. Depending on how the conditions change, the latter may have implied more than one alternative and multiplied the number of options. Their power relations determined which option succeeded and constituted (itself as) the new identity of Rabaa Square. The more powerful one denied the other options – i.e. the old one – and Rabaa acquired a new identity: the place of massacre. A simpler example is a neighborhood church converted into a bar. At a moment, various options emerge to institute the identity of the church depending on the context: a library, a charity shop, a bar, a lecture theatre, and remaining as a church. The alternative, which is powerful enough to exclude the other ones, institutes the new identity of the space. What we consider objective, natural, or normal is not only a product of this process but also contingent on its success and the completeness of sedimentation:

> "Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur: the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of mere objective presence" (Laclau, 1990, p. 34).

From this point, Laclau moves to the third feature: the primacy of the political. He initially separates the political from the social. The "social" is the field of this constructed, partial "objectivity". "The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible, constitutes the field of 'political'" (Laclau, 1990, p. 35). Because the social is constructed as a result of antagonistic power relations occurring in the field of political, the political acquires primacy over the social. Laclau indicates two points on this relation between them. Firstly, "social relations are constituted by the very distinction between the social and the political". However, their boundaries are constantly displaced because there is always a "background" of some "sedimented practices" that make both "unmediated political institution" and "a total political institution of the social" (emphasis is in original) impossible. Therefore, reaching a transparent and harmonious society is also impossible (Laclau, 1990, p. 35). These impossibilities demonstrate that social relations

and identities are contingent and can change: "they can be radically transformed through struggle" (Laclau 1990, p. 36). The three features of social relations lead us to their final characteristic: radical historicity. As they are neither essential nor necessary, but their partial objectivity is constructed, social relations and identities are historical. Their contingency demonstrates that they are instituted as a result of historical processes. Therefore, a proper reading of any social relation and identity should study these four characteristics. It should consider that these identities and their relations are the product of historical antagonistic-political processes and can transform through similar antagonistic-political processes. Not consensuses, supposedly neutral regulations, exchange-deliberation procedures or grounds, but antagonistic power relations and conflict shape and define society, social relations and identities. In that sense, we cannot understand the proper place of religion and its relationship with public space and politics through examining its exclusion-inclusion, regulated "rational" processes or consensuses regarding it. Instead, we should examine its power relations, specifically antagonistic ones regarding public space.

Nilüfer Göle's work on Islam and Muslims exemplifies such a political reading of religion. Göle has extensively published on religion and secularism in various contexts. Although some of her early works have exclusively focused on the experience of the religious-secular divide in Türkiye (Göle, 1995, 1996, 1997), her later research extended the focus to also Europe through the case of Islam and Muslims (immigrants) (Göle, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2017). Göle has argued that the increasing visibility of Islam in Europe in recent decades requires a new approach that "privileges and revisits the notion of public space". To make sense of the transforming society, the "vertical perspectives," which have emphasized the relevant state policies, should be abandoned to emphasize "the horizontal dynamics" of encounters between people with different religions, lives and values. With this approach, Göle (2013b) reconceptualizes the public space as "a site for the unfolding of such disruptive encounters and thus an appropriate context for the expression of themes relating to Islam as raised by citizens of migrant origin". She proposes this reconceptualization of public space against a backdrop of democratic pluralism, and multiculturalism approaches in political inquiry.

Although such approaches promote the inclusion and recognition of differences and new actors and advocate minority rights, they rely on "the idea of a consensual public space, as based on the principle of a rational understanding between citizens and a public sphere regulated by the state" (Göle, 2013b). In that sense, they exemplify the mentioned alternatives to the DRR. Instead, she offers "an agonistic" or "antagonistic" understanding of the public space where actors argue and dispute over norms, manifest their differences, and create conflict, controversy, dissensus and discord. She proposes "controversy" as a methodological tool to study the conflict that antagonizes and unites people (Göle, 2013a, p. 8; 2013b; 2015, p. 8). Göle differentiates conflict and controversy. She argues that conflict as a notion "refers to modes of collective, group action, while controversies include personal, individual voices and public figures that do not share common interests and opinions". Therefore, this emphasis on controversies permits us to "see the sudden emergence of new actors in unexpected places" while focusing on conflicts leads us to study them in "already-existing spaces" such as the family and workplace. As a result, while conflict relates to "well-defined parties" like woman-man and employer-employee, controversies are about all members of the public (Göle, 2013a, pp. 8–9). Despite this differentiation by Göle, I will use conflict and controversy interchangeably. Firstly, although Göle refers to mainstream sociological approaches, particularly Marxism, to

describe conflict, she does not back this differentiation theoretically: what prevents us from employing conflict to analyze the cases she refers to as controversies? Secondly, the toolkit developed by post-Marxism or post-structuralist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2013) enables us to analyze both through the same framework. Conflict and controversy – as defined by Göle – not only can take the form of each other at any point but also operate as antagonism (or agonism as a milder form proposed by Mouffe) in the given contexts. Therefore, as I mobilize Laclau's political ontology, I will use conflict, controversy, discord, agonism, or dissensus interchangeably as forms of antagonism.

Göle's preference for an agonistic approach and studying controversies instead of consensuses drives from the same objection as Laclau. Both criticize the essentialist conceptualization of society and social identities. Laclau undertakes this task by proposing a general political ontology that can be mobilized as an analytical tool for the study of any social identity and relation. Göle focuses on case studies that demonstrate the limitations of the frozen understandings of public space and religion. She argues that focusing on controversies enables us to comprehend the transformations and emergence of new differences and interactions in the public space. In contrast, a consensual perspective can lead to an emphasis on legislation and common values by disregarding the aforementioned notions (Göle, 2013a, p. 9). However, the arrival and visibility of Islam in the European public space created a discord. It challenged the existing doxa, national boundaries, and sedimented points of reference regarding secularism, modernity and citizenship. In that sense, Islam entered the European public sphere as a form of dissent.

Consensual public space conceptualizations cannot explain this experience. As they stress a rational exchange (reason-based) in a space regulated by the state, they cannot understand the creative and transformative controversies generated by the visibility of Islam (Göle, 2013b). Islam disrupts the very functioning of the secularly defined "reason-based" space and it reveals the prospect of religiously defined "faith-based" public space (Göle, 2013a, p. 10). This account by Göle exemplifies the contingency and radical historicity of social relations and identities as proposed by Laclau. The disruption caused by Islam reveals that a "reason-based" public space is neither essential nor necessary. Its existence is contingent on a historical consensus on the secular doxa of modernity. Islam's disruptive visibility "invites us to question secular doxa and consensual and constituent values of the contemporary European public sphere" (Göle, 2013b). This questioning demonstrates that the current secular public space has been constituted because of a historical process. It is not necessarily natural, neutral and normal – it can be questioned. The current secular public sphere was just one of the alternatives, and as a result of a historical process, it established its hegemony over other antagonistic alternatives. The relationship of these alternatives was antagonistic because the success of one was contingent on the failure of the other.

Göle identifies four main areas where Islam engenders discord in Europe: "the headscarf issue, the construction of mosques, halal food and visual representation of Islam" (Göle, 2017, p. xxii). Islam shapes the European "agenda-setting" and public debate through these areas. It emerges as a critique and alternative to the existing boundaries of European conceptualizations of nation, citizenship, culture, public space and religion (Göle, 2013b). In this sense, it reveals the contingent and historical nature of these identities and relations by antagonizing them. Göle shows the antagonistic nature of this experience through the rise of neo-populism in Europe.

Marine Le Pen's portrayal of herself as "a guarantor of republican values and secularism against visible manifestations of Islam" in France and the fact that this portrayal resonates among a significant portion of the public indicate this antagonism. Similarly, the increase in the numbers of far-right populists who build a career by attacking the public manifestations of Islam, such as the construction of minarets and halal food, reveals the power of Islam as the antagonistic other in shaping the European public debate and space. The politics of these far-right populists, "in seeking to preserve a community of nationhood, leads to the closing down of public space and its containment within a fixed scheme of representation pre-established by the nation" (Göle, 2013b). In that sense, they demonstrate and aim to consolidate the pre-established link between the public space and a "particular community of the nation". Islam's visibility in that space challenges this pre-established identity of the space and demands its reformation. The difference that Islam presents disturbs "the consensual secular order" (Göle, 2013b) and attempts to preserve this order take different forms of power exercise, including legislation. An early example of such legislation in France is the famous 2004 ban on religious symbols in schools. Although the law was limited to schools and targeted the headscarf affair, its scope has been expanded in its application (Göle, 2017, p. 65). Göle mentions two cases from 2009 that indicate how the law and its "inventive" interpretation by local actors have shaped the public space. In the first case, the law was used to expel a research assistant PhD student, Sabrina, from her office at Paul Sabatier University in Toulouse. Her refusal to remove her headscarf was considered to be "threatening her colleagues' freedom of conscience" and "disturbing public order."

In the second case, a woman was prevented from using public transport. The transportation brand, Tisséo, of Toulouse, did not permit her to renew her monthly pass identity since her hair (not her face) was covered in the ID photo. Although the 2004 law was only intended for public schools, it shaped other public spaces, including public transportation, universities, school grounds, and even the streets in Toulouse. A small controversy around the Islamic veiling at public schools sparked a wider controversy in an expanded public space and actors. While the law was limited to public schools and minor students, it expanded to include other women like university students, parents picking up their children from school, and hijabi women using public buses (Göle, 2017, p. 66). With the growing controversies over time, in 2010 France enacted a law to ban the full-body veil (burka) in all public spaces (Göle, 2017, p. 287). Indeed, the controversy over the headscarf (or/and burqa) continues in France (Fornerod, 2023; Kouachi, 2023) and many other countries like Germany (Roth, 2021), Holland (Aksunger, 2022; Guy, 2019), Sweden (The Local Sweden, 2022), China (Jiang, 2015) and India (Al Jazeera, 2022).

While an analysis of these different countries reveals the contingency and dynamism of the meaning of public, space, religion and their relationships at a global scale, the example of France, and particularly Toulouse, suffices to show this contingency and dynamism in the limited scope of this paper. Toulouse's experience provides a case study for Laclau's political ontology. Firstly, we see that the identities of the actors are not pre-established, fixed, closed or total. Experiences in the political processes (re)construct the identities. The identities of Sabrina and the woman who was rejected for a transportation pass, are not the same before, during and after the series of events they had to endure. Their names, ages, educations, attires, religion, and lifestyle might be the same throughout these processes. However, what they mean to them and the others will be different. If their identities were pre-established, complete and

necessary, they would not have experienced those rejections. That is because completeness or necessity of identity do not permit a change in its meaning. Sabrina has already been doing the "thing", which resulted in the events, for a long time. However, this same "thing" meant something different to the university actors at a point. They have altered their actions towards Sabrina due to this same "thing". Therefore, the identities of this "thing" and Sabrina have transformed through particular antagonistic process. Similarly, the actors acting on behalf of the transportation company had not changed their treatment in one month. It might be argued that a vertical process may require the actors to perform in a given way, so their identities did not necessarily change and they obeyed the law. However, this is not the case here. The law was enacted in 2004, not in 2009, and was limited to the schools. Furthermore, only Toulouse actors interpreted and deployed the law in that manner. Moreover, even if the processes were purely vertical, there would have been a change in their identity, although in a more limited, top-down and forced manner. However, regardless of the extent of verticality, we observe that the identities of the actors are contingent and historical. They change because of antagonistic, political processes.

This experience concerning actors' identities also relates to the second point: the meaning of religion is not fixed. What Islam means in the public space changes over time. While it was not considered a threat or an enemy before, now it is. Göle explains this transformation through the increasing visibility of Islam. The veils of "immigrant women" and "grandmothers" of the earlier generations did not raise such controversy in France. They either worked as unprivileged migrants or stayed at home; their Muslimness was not visible in the same way and their headscarves were associated with nostalgia, innocence, tradition and docility. However, when the veil is linked to "Islamic political action and the public appearance of women", its meaning changes. As Göle (2013b) notes: "Piety loses its innocence". The construction of mosques follows a similar shift in the public discourse. Although mosques have existed in Europe for a long time, they only began to engender discord during the 2000s. Switzerland's 2009 referendum to ban the minaret exemplified this discord. Before, they were mostly hidden, built in old industrial areas and lacking distinctive features. They were invisible. However, their visibility operates as transgression when they carry recognizable Islamic signs like domes and minarets and move to city centers. They become an attempt to (re)define the public sphere, its values and forms and disrupt the sedimented hierarchies in the public realm, such as center and periphery (Göle, 2013b). These examples show that Islam's identity and what religion means evolve according to its power relationship with other elements such as public space, center, periphery, and relevant actors.

Thirdly, this evolution simultaneously redefines those elements depending on the nature of the power relationship, which can also be considered through Fraser (1990, p. 62) who identifies it as a shift toward a hegemonic mode of domination where the official public sphere serves as a site for constructing consent. The meanings of public and public space change through this power relationship, reflecting a "modernity project" where secular habits are not spontaneous but require the adoption of Western culture, effectively turning the public sphere into a functional tool for social regulation (Uğurlu, 2024, p. 267). Göle lists different notions of space, such as a public stage, counter-publics, a public sphere and a tangible place. These "subaltern counterpublics", as stated by Fraser (1990, p. 67), function as parallel discursive arenas where subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses. These alternative arenas allow for the creation of "halal versions" of secular life practices and provide the motivation and solidarity

for religious selves to persist and reinforce their identities within a secular habitus (Uğurlu, 2024, p. 268). Göle (2013b) argues that the experience of Islam in Europe enables us to envision public space as a public stage, which functions "as a stage for the appearance for Islamic actors and controversial events". Subaltern communities institute their identities in these alternative spaces outside "official" public spaces to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). "Official" public spaces mostly refer to the traditional conceptualizations of the public sphere for regulated exchange among citizens, civil society, state and administrative power (Göle, 2013b). This conception of the public sphere has historically rested on significant exclusions and functioned as a "strategy of distinction" to marginalize certain groups (Fraser, 1990, p. 60) Therefore, a power relationship stemming from the unforeseen visibility of subaltern religious groups modifies the identity of the public space. An antagonistic relationship erupts between their existing identity and the demanded one, between the "reason-based" publicness and the religiously defined "faith-based" one. Religion operates as a creative force in the (re)definition of public space and relations, as religious identity is also actively "shaped and developed through encounter, conflict, and interaction with the secular public sphere" (Uğurlu, 2024, p. 273)

Lastly, these controversies and changing identities create conflicts for the Islamic actors and reform their socio-political identities and relations. These political and historical processes also shape their inner world. As hinted at in the earlier discussion of actors' identities, what their identity means to them changes as well. However, change is not limited to their identity but includes their worldview, religion-Islam, and understandings of public space. Encountering a new problem that they cannot deal with through the familiar Islamic prescriptions requires them to reconsider what they know as Islam and Muslimness. Furthermore, visibility as transgression, particularly "over-visibilization", contradicts some interpretations of Islam which endorse intimacy, modesty, purity and privacy (Göle, 2013b). Göle exemplifies this with the ironic place of the headscarf in Europe. As a means of modesty, the headscarf hides the body of the woman and maintains her privacy and purity by protecting her from unknown gazes. However, paradoxically, the headscarf attracts more attention in Europe and moves the hijabi woman to the very center of the public gaze. This process also integrates the headscarf gradually into the fashion and beauty market as a part of the public life and this integration contradicts its "original intent" and Islamic interpretations regarding modesty (Göle, 2013b). Therefore, Islamic actors in the public space experience a personal conflict that necessitates them to question and perhaps redefine themselves, their religious understandings, and their relationships with the outside world. They recognize the contingency of their worldviews and identities and how their maintenance depends on power relationships. Asserting or losing their power in defining the public space can shake and alter how they constitute and conduct themselves in public life.

4. Conclusion

A reading of the experience of Islam in Europe through Laclau's political ontology demonstrates the limitation of the dominant literature in construing the role of religion as a creative force in the construction of social identities. This literature regards religion as a residual category by assuming a necessary ontological separation between religion and the public arena. As a result, they can argue for its exclusion-inclusion or regulation under particular conditions. I maintained that this treatment of religion is based on two interdependent conventions. Firstly, they view

public space as a fixed and neutral realm for structured exchange and decision-making among the citizens, who also hold pre-established fixed identities. Secondly, they suppose that the "non-religious" (secular) has ontological and epistemological superiority over the "religious" in the construction of the "public" due to the alleged residual nature of religion as opposed to the alleged neutrality of the non-religious (secular). These assumptions stem from the failure to recognize the impossibility of society and social identities as objective totalities. Due to their essentialization of public, space, religion or citizen and their compounding proliferations, those subscribing to this literature cannot understand the dynamic and productive relations shaping identities instituted through political processes. The recognition of this failure shows the need for an anti-essentialist and, therefore, a political reading of the relations between religion, space and public. As Nilüfer Göle states, an antagonist or agonistic understanding of public space is required to appreciate the productive role religion and religious actors play through their transgressions in European public life. The disruptive visibility of Islam in Europe challenges the taken-for-granted notions of space, religion, Europeanness, public sphere, and redefines them over time. This visibility functions as a site of antagonism, exposing the inherent contingency of the secular order and forcing a reconfiguration of the social field. By refusing to remain a "residual" or private category, these religious expressions transform the public square from a site of passive, state-regulated consensus into a vibrant arena of political becoming. Consequently, the presence of Islam is not an "integration problem" to be solved, but a constitutive political opening that invites Europe to move beyond a static, exclusionary heritage. It ultimately compels a transition toward where identity is no longer a fixed essence, but an ongoing, agonistic negotiation of the common good.

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