

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About the Headscarf?

For Alain Badiou the manifesto is an important genre, one that he makes constant references to, such as in his volume *Polemics and Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999).¹ Following the Gezi events in Istanbul in 2013, Badiou got together with other philosophers to sign a manifesto against police violence,² and in the conference held a few months after the event in Istanbul, he emphasized that there was still room for manifestos in this late day and age. Badiou argues that after the *manifestations*, the protests, ie after negating the things that people are against, the movement has to produce a manifesto, a clear affirmation of the state of things they want. However, many a text that sets out to be, or at least uses the stylistic conventions of a manifesto, fails on this front. I want to look at how Badiou's piece 'The Law on the Islamic Headscarf' fares on this account.

While the piece lists, point by point, the failings of the French intellectuals and politicians in their response to the headscarf, it does not give a prescription of what a progressive response to headscarf might be, other than just let the girls wear it and get on with their lives.³ Maybe this is the only thing that needs to be said in a manifesto about the headscarf ban; provided of course, that it is the headscarf ban that the author is talking about. I argue that in this piece Badiou treats the headscarf ban primarily as a symptom of the reviled capitalist system and its aim to control all aspects of people lives.

Badiou's piece or manifesto on the headscarf was published in February of 2004, in *Le Monde*, following, one may argue, a French tradition of airing your accusations in national newspapers. He was anticipating the law that bans the wearing of headscarves, turbans, skullcaps, or other so called 'ostentatious' signs of religious affiliation, at school, on the pretext that such acts are not in keeping with the secular principles of the French Republic. The piece, in a longer version, first appeared in *Lignes and Manifest* series of Editions Leo Scheer. In his collection entitled *Polemics*, Badiou engages in his favourite exercise of analysing words as names of things, concepts, events. One chapter of *Polemics* is dedicated to 'Uses of the Word Jew'⁴. His polemic-

¹ The relevance of manifest: Badiou's texts are published under manifests, Breivik, Todorov.

² Monokl

³ Can one see any affirmative, emancipatory meaning in the headscarf. It could be argued that Badiou goes there half way.

⁴ *Circonstances 3: Portées du mot 'juif'* Editions Leo Scheer: Ligneset Manifestes 2003

book against Sarkozy is entitled, if we translate literally from the French, ‘Sarkozy, what is it the name of?’. Again and again Badiou asks us to treat events and concepts as symptoms and/or names of things.⁵ What the headscarf is the name of, clearly conditions what the headscarf ban is the name of. Badiou says that French intellectuals use the word headscarf as the name of a ‘time lag’ and oppression, and the headscarf ban is an ersatz battle that the French intellectuals are fighting against barbarism, oppression and exploitation all at the same time.

Perhaps more so than any genre, the manifesto is written with the audience in mind, and its power lies in its successful dissemination. The version that I first encountered Badiou’s piece in was on the *lacan.com* website with the title: ‘Behind the Scarved Law There is Fear’. I make references to the online, abridged version of the piece as well, because this will probably be the English version of the text that more people have encountered. Badiou’s piece’s trajectory has been scholarly tome to newspaper to English version on the internet. The internet title is more explanatory in the sense that ‘scarved’, presumably from the French ‘voile’ makes a reference to something being masked- and this aspect of ‘veiling’ or ‘masking’ of real intent is one of the central accusations in this manifesto. **The intellectuals that Badiou takes to task argue that the headscarf veils allegiances other than to the nation state, Badiou argues that the supposedly emancipatory ban veils the capitalist-secular state’s fear of other life-styles.**

The tradition of the manifesto is rich in France and it would make sense to consider Badiou’s manifesto in conjunction with the *manifestations* and indeed the manifesto of the *Ni Putes Ni Soumis*, a movement that became rather well known also in 2003. This group of French feminists of mostly North African descent were arguing for justice and freedom for girls who were facing violence. While by no means a single issue movement, *Ni Putes Ni Soumis* also addressed the forcing of hijab on young girls, which soon, as is the nature of these things, turned into anti-hijab sentiment, a discourse which then, in turn, was used by the imposers of the hijab ban in France.⁶

⁵ though maybe he does not go so far as his best friend Zizek, to tell us to enjoy them.

⁶ Todorov in defense of enlightenment. His piece on the headscarf in this volume is more declamatory than the Manifesto on art. Still relevant when we consider the 303 Salauds. Which they say hark back to the 303 for abortion but it references *ni put eni soumis*.

There were naturally reactions to Ni Putes Ni Soumis' methods before Badiou's piece.⁷ Various [French feminists](#) and [left-wing](#) authors such as Sylvie Tissot,^[4] [Étienne Balibar](#),^[6] and Houria Bouteldja,^[7] claimed that it overshadowed the work of other feminist NGOs and that it supported an [Islamophobic](#) instrumentalization of feminism by the French Right, with Bouteldja calling *Ni Putes ni Soumises* an [Ideological State Apparatus](#) (AIE). This instrumentalization, cooption of feminism, indeed, of any kind of emancipatory thinking is what Badiou is concerned with throughout his piece.⁸ There's great emphasis on the *trahison des clercs*, treason of the clerks, the administrators, politicians and sadly, the intellectuals. Badiou shows them to be petty and lethargic when it comes to straight, fruitful thinking- and this, more than anything else harks back to Zola's *J'accuse*, in which it is the clerks that do most of the maligning. The treacherous

⁷ Basically all 'indigène': Comment tolérer qu'au XXIème siècle, Sohane ou Chahrazad soient brûlées vives par un garçon en plein cœur de leur quartier ? Comment pouvons-nous accepter que Ghofrane soit tuée à coups de pierres dans un terrain vague à Marseille ? Que dire encore de toutes ces jeunes mariées de force ou menacées de mariage que nous accueillons dans nos permanences ? Souvenons-nous aussi du courage et de cette formidable leçon d'amour et d'espoir que nous a donné Samira Bellil qui avait témoigné dans un livre poignant des viols collectifs qu'elle avait subi.--- hence Houriya Bouteldja, solidarity with white women

- No more moralising: our condition has worsened. The media and politics have done nothing, or very little, for us.
- No more wretchedness. We are fed up with people speaking for us, with being treated with contempt.
- No more justifications of our oppression in the name of the right to be different and of respect toward those who force us to bow our heads.
- No more silence in public debates about violence, poverty and discrimination

⁸ Badiou, just as the feminists against the ban, argue that sexism, is alive and well in France, without, as well as within immigrant communities. A group of anti-headscarf ban feminist issued a manifesto entitled 'Not in Our Name', however, expectedly, Ni Putes Ni Soumis got more coverage and the headscarf came to be the 'name', in Badiou speak, of the oppression of women and the 'autonomous' headscarf, headscarf freely worn by women became invisible, or even incomprehensible for the French public and French law. And this cooption by the state is

As Badiou reveals, the first argument for the ban is that these girls are being forced by men to wear it and then it is the women who are punished by not being allowed to go to school 'In short: these girls and women are oppressed so they must be punished'- as Badiou says 'The headscarf issue is so important that it deserves a logical system with renewed axioms. Badiou shows how the ban itself is the progenitor of the cause. The argument has to work around the ban not the other way around. The headscarf is a sign of women's oppression and signs of women's oppression need to be eradicated with no consideration for the consequences, no consideration who this ban, at the end of the day, disprivileges. Or maybe, it is only the women with headscarf, the female of the barbarians that is disprivileged, that the ban can be and should be put in place.

clerics⁹, the very naming of intellectuals as clerics paid by the government is the meaning that Badiou aims at. **Indeed, intellectual, what is it the name of?**

(2) The Muslim invasion, diagnosed long ago by Le Pen and confirmed today by some indubitable intellectuals, has met its match. The battle of Poitiers was a cakewalk, Charles Martel only a hired gun. Chirac, the socialists, the feminists and the Enlightenment intellectuals suffering from Islamophobia, will win the battle of the headscarf. From Poitiers to the headscarf: the reasoning is sound, and the progress considerable.

Of course, this reasoning is not sound at all and the intellectuals are shown to be the hired guns of the fight against barbarians that have been at the gates for centuries in Europe. Before going fully into exploring what the ban screens, Badiou explains what it is the republicans are fighting when they're fighting the headscarf:

(7) The target is revealed to be not the headscarf; the girl's fault lies in the fact that her father's a brutish worker from the Renault assembly lines. An archaic guy, but stupid. The eldest brother deals hash. A modern guy, but corrupt. Sinister suburbs. Dangerous classes.

So when they republicans look at the headscarved girl, they hardly see the girl, but see the male Muslim who must be imposing this on her.

(8) The Muslim religion adds the following very serious taint to other religions: in France, it is the religion of the poor. (9) Viewed from this angle the headscarf is: the poor oppressing the poor under the eyes of a poor God. 'Disgusting!' says the petit bourgeois.

So the ban becomes a way of dealing with this disgust, to keep the poor, oppressed, abject hijabi body at bay. The headscarf as a symptom, or the stigma of the dangerous classes is disgusting and must be punished as Muslim invasion, a-la-Poitiers, with no regard to emancipatory or dispriveleging consequences thereof. As Badiou reveals, one of the argument for the ban is that these girls are being forced by men to wear it and by some twisted logic it is the women who are being punished by not being allowed to go to school 'In short: these girls and women are

⁹ The "treason" of which Benda writes was the betrayal by the intellectuals of their unique vocation. According to Benda, this situation began to change in the early decades of the twentieth century. More and more, intellectuals abandoned their attachment to the traditional panoply of philosophical and scholarly ideals. One clear indication of the change was the attack on the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity and the concomitant glorification of various particularisms. The implications for intellectual life today are transparent, and this long unavailable classic of European thought should interest all those who teach and who preach the human sciences.

oppressed so they must be punished’ - as Badiou says ‘The headscarf issue is so important that it deserves a logical system with renewed axioms.’ The headscarf is an apriori crime- what sort of crime it is, patriarchal or to do with false allegiances, (as in false gods) can be decided later.¹⁰

The girls’ hijab, when not seen as an imposition of the males in her family, is thoroughly inscribed as a problem of allegiance, and once a girl is marked by it, the stigma will remain, even if she should make concessions towards bare-headedness. In point (12) Badiou suggests a way to measure and police allegiances: ‘a squad of inspectors [...] to inspect whether or not the headscarves, skullcaps and other hats are ‘ostentatious’: That hijab, as big as a postage stamp perched upon a chignon? That kippa the size of a two-Euro coin? All very suspect. The tiny may well be the ostentatious version of the big one.’ This being marked through what you wear or indeed may have worn resonates, or should resonate greatly with the French public with the kippa but Badiou does not take full advantage of the parallel and leaves it to the reader’s imagination. He makes recourse to Mallarme instead, and his dictum on the top-hat, in an effort to engage French readers: ‘Whoever put on such a thing cannot take it off. The world would end, but not the hat’ Once you’ve shown yourself to be a member of a certain class through headgear, there is no going back- and so shrinking the size to a bandana is not going to be enough of a dissociation. Again, it’s not the headscarf per se but the allegiance to a certain class or community that is the problem for the republicans here. **The hijabi girl for Badiou, as for the republicans, is from the working class**- which makes her a cause of hope, a site of resistance for Badiou, and a cause of despair and fear for capitalist republicans.¹¹ There is the sense that the dangerous classes she comes from lag behind and pull France backwards with them as well: the headscarf is (13) ‘That symbol of not keeping pace, of a reminder of the past, a temporal entanglement’

¹⁰ **After thus parodying the positions of the intellectuals and the middle-classes Badiou comes close to naming his reaction to the headscarf and the headscarf ban. In (10) he speaks of a conversation he’s had with a friend about his position on the headscarf.¹⁰ His friend asks: ‘So you want hair to be a sexual symbol that for such ends must be hidden?’. ‘I myself want nothing’, he answers, and then what makes, what for me is an obscure reference to Baudelaire. The last line of the Baudelaire quote is ‘Devil! A fantasmatic Muslim!’, Muslim being a devil by sexualizing women’s hair and putting dirty thoughts in men’s minds.**

¹¹ What- you still are a member of the working classes? Why haven’t you bettered your lot and become bankers already?

The apparition that the headscarved girl from the dangerous working classes is fighting is none other than capitalism. Badiou directs the logic of the headscarf ban to brands of the capitalist system, and calls the capitalist system a ‘degrading’ religion, an adjective that is usually hurled at Islam concerning women’s rights:

(14) And are not the ostentatious symbols of this degrading religion to be read on trousers, T-shirts, sneakers, etc., names like Nike (A god! NH), Chevignon, Lacoste? [...] If we’re to strike at the heart of the target, if we’ve got to think big, we know what’s required: a law against brand names. Chirac, get to work. Prohibit the **ostentatious signs of capital** and don’t flinch!

Indeed, if the state is concerned about degradation of the mind and/or honour, of impressionable minds being played with, it is the consumerist calls of capital that it needs to take precautions against. If it is the ostentatious signs of ideologies that are detrimental to young citizens’ minds, then the prescription is surely to ban the most sinister of all: the ideology of capital. Thus, using the republic’s logic, Badiou makes this piece almost an auxiliary to the communist manifesto. The ban on the headscarf gives him an occasion to view his vision of a communist society where brand names would be thought, if not more, as insidious as that of religious signs.¹²

Badiou argues that capitalism needs bodies to be mobile shop windows for its goods and seems to suggest that the headscarf makes women’s bodies less available as exhibition spaces: ‘One cannot sell, it is impossible to sell, cars, caged canaries, concrete mixers or curlers except with a trading sign showing practically naked women (17)¹³

¹² 14- Isn’t it cheaper yet to be a fashion victim at school than God’s faithful servant? (VERY Different in original but this is nicer) Again, the interlocutor is the men (sarkozy’s ‘their women’). Badiou points to the fact that the republic always sees and addresses the man behind the veil. If it is black, it is the wife of a terrorist 16 As secularist, they cannot claim the existence of an authority that tells women what can and cannot be bared. There is however, a modicum of modesty. Where does this sense come from? The manifesto reveals this consensu

¹³ female flesh as golden standard quote Verschleierte Wirklichkeit. (18) **‘We have gone from the feminist slogan ‘my body belongs to me’ to the prostitutional slogan ‘my body belongs to everyone’ This chimes in with the 303 salaud manifesto that was signed by a group of French men protesting about criminalization of prostitution in Oct 2013?, a slogan which requires that female flesh should be marketable without impunity. The availability of prostituted, particularly in the advertisement/economic sense, female bodies is taken up again: ‘All the while, however, the prostituted feminine body is everywhere, the most humiliating pornography universally sold, and advice for the sexual exhibition of bodies crams the pages of magazines for teenagers’**

And continues:

(23) We maintain the following, quite curious thing: that the law on the headscarf is a pure capitalist law. It prescribes that femininity be exhibited. In other words, that the circulation of the feminine body necessarily comply with the market paradigm.

This is one of the most descriptive and manifesto-like statements in the piece. It also tells us why, in the first place, Badiou, a leftist, is interested in the headscarf ban: he sees it as a symptom of the capitalist system that wants to incorporate or embed bodies into itself. Under the capitalist system, as Badiou reiterates 'Enjoyment has become a sinister obligation' - bondage to the capitalist system through the enjoyment principle. **In the headscarf, Badiou –rightly or wrongly- recognizes another economic system**, an economic system of scarcity. They become the un-biddable folk that can challenge capitalist complacency, who lead a simple, non-frills, non-consumerist life style that is not all about instant gratification: 41 'A certain dose voluntary ascetism [...] a headscarf may end up being useful. When patriotism, that hard alcohol of apprenticeship, is altogether lacking, any idealism, even cheap, is welcome',¹⁴

The financial, emotional and phenomenological economy of the headscarf may be different from the capitalist one, but it does not prevent these clad bodies to be co-opted by the capitalist system as advertising space. One need not go into detail here about the Gucci scarfs and Leboutin shoes preferred by rich Muslim women all over the world. The hijabi body that Badiou has in mind is probably the one dressed in simple black or subdued colours, in trainers, protesting for their rights. **In the piece Muslim girls become an ersatz people who challenge capitalist oppression.** One stereotype called in to fight another- that of activist versus the one bruised and battered at home, without a voice.

Badiou emphasizes how the spectre religious fundamentalism is really the product of a continuous effort to deprive the people of political thought, which results in, as he puts it, 'devastation of minds that they've presided over'. He says that by making a scarecrow of

¹⁴ There is indeed a subversive sacrifice involved in not allowing girls go to school, and missing good students. (40)

Islam/ism, capitalist order has made a handmaiden of secularism: (29) 'Secularism, professing to be at the service of different forms of knowledge, is but a scholarly rule by which to respect competition [...] and be hostile to every conviction. It is the school for consumer cool, soft business, free ownership and disillusioned voters'. When Badiou makes such amorous bedfellows of capitalism and secularism, figures challenging the one will be seen to be challenging the other. And it is those who have resisted the secular republic complex that can show any vitality when it comes to political thinking- however, just as the secularists themselves, Badiou, in his search for an excitable, ersatz people, may be exaggerating the potency of a meter of cloth. Indeed having put so much discursive faith in the hijabis, Badiou feels the need to take a step back and talks about the death of God (30-31) consolidating his leftist credibility¹⁵

As I have stated earlier, Hijabis are seen by the state as having an allegiance problem, claiming to be Muslim first, French second. This dichotomy does not signify for Badiou. If there is to be a liberating allegiance, it will in any case not be towards a state, but to universal suffrage and emancipation of all classes- and who better to feel allegiance to THAT ideal than a headscarved girl from the 'dangerous classes', from immigrant communities:

(33) 'Republic' against 'communitarianisms' - all of that is utter nonsense. Let people live as they wish, or can, [...] let them prostrate themselves whenever they like before worn-out gods [...]. Not having the least universal significance, these kinds of 'differences' neither hinder thought, nor support it^{16, 17}.

Badiou seems to be saying that we are looking for emancipation and liberation in all the wrong places. One of the groups on the false scent are Ni Putes Ni Soumise. Pute and Soumise: what are they the name of? *(28) 'Saying neither mother nor whore is simply pathetic. As is 'neither whore, nor submissive', which is quite absurd: is not a whore generally submissive, and aren't they just? In France in the past, they used to be called les respecteuse?' According to Badiou while we are arguing whether the whore or the submissive, or the hair-showing or the headcovered is more liberated and free thinking there are other forces at work: 'It always comes

¹⁵ - the question in Istanbul!

¹⁶ But you seemed to suggest that they do- giving the hijabis political potency?

¹⁷ 39 education citizen making project

down to this: the enemy of thought today is property. (29) And this is what the ban on the headscarf diverts attention from, with the help of the petty clerks, the intellectuals, who posit the headscarved woman as a scare figure who needs to be chastised and dealt with, displacing other issues of women's liberation in France. particularly how the mark:

(25) Is it that you imagine feminine sexuality is not controlled in our day and age, in our societies?¹⁸ Such naivete would have really made Foucault laugh. [...] Besides, Lacan some time ago established the fact that, between 'enjoy yourselves women!' of gossip rags and the 'do not enjoy' of our great-grandmothers, there is a strict isomorphism. Market control is more constant, surer, more massive and patriarchal control ever was¹⁹

Badiou points to how the capitalist market makes these real issues invisible, and once more to the trahison des clerics, how lazy intellectuals do not even recognize the simplest of revelations conveyed to them by their immediate predecessors, Foucault and Lacan, who would've instantly recognized the way women's liberation is co-opted by capitalism. Feminists, according to Badiou, fall into the same trap as secularists in forwarding the state's aims

(32) One will never go into enough raptures over the trajectory of this singular feminism, which, from its quest to free women, has come to maintain today that this 'freedom' is so obligatory that it requires the expulsion of girls (and not a single boy!) solely due to their clothing accessories. Bewildering!

Fighting the headscarf ban is fighting the ersatz battle against the barbarians, against the patriarchs, from the comfort of one's administrative offices in Paris. Badiou trivializes this heroism by calling those administrators 'hair stylist's. In that sense, the last item of the manifesto, a simple question of 'Feeling better?' may be taken to be addressing these administrators, asking whether they feel happy about fulfilling their part of the effort against the forces of evil. He reminds the reader that emancipation is something further than women being able to show their hair in public- it should be about calling the privileged to account for their ill-

¹⁸ Such naivete would've made Foucault laugh.

¹⁹ It is clear that a coin can think itself the freest thing in the World: it is what circulates the most.

gotten privileges, and the revelation of these privileges is the fear in the title of the piece, as shared on the internet 'Behind the Scarved Law There is Fear'.^{20 21}

Thus, Badiou identifies the ban as a screen, a veil for the intentions of complicit intellectuals. The whole manifesto is an effort to unravel what the law and the veil and hide. The law hides the real enemies Badiou identifies in the manifesto; brand names and property. The law, points to the bear heads of women as means of liberation while crushing other, more fundamental venues of emancipation, such as questioning the capitalist system and allocation of resources and privileges. The law on the headscarf hides, again keeping people busy with the oppressive meanings of the headscarf, a system in which the barbarians, or either sex, are much more easily punished with little regard to their emancipatory or dispriviling consequences. The scarf, in its turn, screens of the terrorist brother and father. It also screens secret alligences to an Idea, other than the ideal of the capitalist-secular state, and this secret alligence that has the power of exposing power structure is what the secularists fear.

²⁰ Badiou does not fear that terrorists that he believes are the real fear factors hiding behind the veil: 'It grieves me to see young men and women blowing their bodies to bits in horrendous massacres under funereal invocation of something that has not existed for some time (45)

Here, the metaphor for resistance against capitalism turns is replaced by the implicit metaphor of veil as terror in the minds of the 'fearers'. In short, the absence organized movement of the workers, ideology will be usurped by terrorists, and it is those who have crushed the workers' movement that are responsible for this usurpation. Badiou does not dwell on this shortcut of a being replaced by b- to him the path is clear, and the form of the manifesto allows him make his argument without too much deliberation.

In point #47 he tells us what the headscarf ban stands for: a way of oppressing the barbarians who are always feared to be at the gates. He then goes more ontological into this fear and declares it to be a fear death. It is a fear of people who do not fear death. Not fearing death, according to Badiou, is possible for who still can cling wholeheartedly to an Idea or Ideal- and this is something that Europeans have excised from their lives. That ideology can still exist somewhere is uncanny, fearful to them. 'For the civilized' 'people dying for an idea', 'is a source of intimate terror'. What he feels for those who can still be attracted to the Idea in question – which he doesn't spell out as Islamism, or jihadism or whatever, an Idea that in any case promises a good life beyond that on the one on earth once one has passed away- is sadness

²¹ n point of truth, the headscarf law expresses only one thing:

Westerners in general, and the French in particular, are no more than a bunch of shivering cowards. What are they afraid of? Barbarians, as usual. Barbarians both at home, the 'suburban youths', and abroad, the 'Islamic terrorists'. Why are they afraid?

Because they are guilty, but claim to be innocent. Guilty from the 1980s onward of having renounced and tried to dismantle every politics of emancipation, every revolutionary form of reason, every true assertion of something other than what is. Guilty of clinging to their miserable privileges.

However, after all this screenings, what the manifesto makes manifest is the complicity of the intellectuals, which has been the driving force of many a manifesto particularly in the history of French political manifesto writing. The manifesto that is concerned with the treason of the intellectuals prioritizes calling to question the culprits, making the machinations of false intellectual positions, without necessarily suggesting a mode of action to right the wrongs that the intellectuals have been instrumentalized for. Badiou's manifesto will also have been read mostly by intellectuals, so it would not be wrong to suggest that it was written with intellectuals in mind, to show them the faults in their emancipatory position when it comes to the headscarf. So as a manifesto, Badiou's piece, rather than deliberate on how Europeans should react to the headscarf, works in a revelatory mode, holding a mirror to French intellectuals and asking them to reflect on their complicity with the capitalist system. After having their position revealed to be untenable and being reduced to mere clerks, can they be happy now? It can also be claimed that more than the headscarf, this is a manifesto about the current state of French philosophy and intellectuals, in keeping with the concerns of the rest of Badiou's oeuvre.