The Debate about the Veiling Issue in 21st Century Italy

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Abstract:

The issues related to the veil and other kinds of ‘Islamic’ female clothing have triggered fierce debates both in the West and in the Muslim World, particularly after 9/11 and the subsequent events. On the one hand, there is disagreement about the right of some Middle Eastern governments to impose such clothing to women by law. On the other, the increasing presence of wide Muslim communities in several Western countries has given rise to discussions about the acceptability of the veil (especially when it hides the face of a woman) because of concerns related to state secularism, but also to women’s rights and public security.

This paper will analyse the debate about the veiling issue in the Italian context, to show the frames proposed by the different political actors (including not only political parties, but also other relevant actors, such as churches, intellectuals, etc.) and their evolution, from 2001 to 2013. The paper will show that many actors, both in the left and in the right, have significantly changed their way of framing the veiling issue as a consequence of a shift of the focus of the public discussion from concerns about women’s rights in Muslim-majority countries, to concerns about the legitimacy of Islamic clothing in Western schools and other public institutions.

Keywords: Veil, Islam, burqa, debate, Italy
Introduction: The Veiling Issue in the European Context

In the latest years, the veiling of Muslim women in schools and other public places has been the subject of fierce debates – and some controversial laws – in many European countries, because of both secularism-related and security reasons. The first countries to debate the issue were those marked by a long tradition of immigration, usually also as an heritage of colonialism: for example in France since the late 1990s are reported cases of students suspended from school for wearing scarves. Turkey, another European country with a strong tradition of state secularism – but also, interestingly, a Muslim majority country – enacted in 1989 for the first time a ban on Islamic wearing in public schools. In other countries the issue came to the fore much later, sometimes because of a slower rate of immigration, some other as a consequence of a multi-cultural and tolerant tradition, rejecting French-style state secularism and assimilationist overtones.

It was only at the beginning of the 21st century that new political opportunity structures related to the wave of al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, and the subsequent debate on the alleged failures of previous multicultural and accommodationist policies in countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom, created the conditions for the development of a full-fledged debate on the veil with connections to several crucial features of contemporary societies:

• State secularism and the role that religious values and symbols must be allowed to play in the public sphere and, particularly, in public institutions
• National (and sometimes, more broadly, western) identity, in relation to the waves of Muslim immigration
• Women’s rights, both in relation to the right not to obey societal and familiar pressures to wear the veil, and to the right not to be prevented by the public authorities from freely wear it.
• Concerns of public security, engendered according to some by integral Islamic wearing (such as the burqa and the niqab) because of the possibility that they can hide a terrorist in disguise.
• Concerns of social cohesion, connected to the debate about which kind of policy can lead to a more effective integration of immigrants.

Such debates developed throughout Europe – sometimes engendered by the presence of massive communities of immigrants, some other as a consequence of the political exploitation of immigrants-related issues by right-wing political parties and groups – have led to fierce disputes between those willing to put limitations on the veil (or at least on integral Islamic clothing hiding
women’s faces) and those claiming the right of Muslim women to freely wear them. The milestones of such debates at the national level have been some major pieces of legislations, sometimes banning the veil from public schools and/or other institutions to enforce state secularism (such as the well-known 2004 French ban, and the bans on teachers wearing hijabs enacted in several German lander), some other banning some specific kinds of Islamic clothing hiding the face (as in the Netherlands and, again, in France).

Some scholars today divide European countries in three groups in relation to their policies toward the veil (but also, more broadly, to other issues related to the accommodation of migrants within national cultures and legal frameworks):

1. A prohibitive approach, banning all forms of Muslim body covering in public institutions: a policy often associated to a strong state secularism and to an assimilationist view in terms of migration policies: this is the case of France, Turkey and some German lander.
2. A soft or selective approach banning only specific forms of clothing, covering women’s faces and or the whole of their body: this is for example the case of Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands.
3. A non-restrictive or tolerant approach, allowing all forms of Islamic clothing, even when they hide women’s faces: this is the case of Austria and Denmark (Kılıç, Saharso, and Sauer 2008; Sauer 2009).

As for the differences in the approaches adopted in the above-mentioned European countries, the literature adopts different points of view. The traditional approach to the issue, adopted by many scholars, connects the different stances on the veil by the countries to their traditions of citizenship: according to this point of view

The French civic-assimilationist model is open to include migrants as citizens, grants relatively easy access to citizenship (ius soli), but does not foster cultural and religious differences. The German and Austrian ethno-cultural model is based on descent (ius sanguinis) rather than on consent to common values and principles and imposes strict requirements to immigrants. Finally, the multi-cultural model promotes cultural and religious diversity by providing relatively easy access to citizenship and fosters recognition of cultural differences (as in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) (Sauer 2009, 79; Saharso 2007).

The deterministic connection between model of citizenship and attitude towards cultural and religious differences has however been put into question by cases involving an ethno-cultural idea of citizenship, and notwithstanding fostering differences, such as for example Austria (Gresch et al. 2008). Further studies have therefore proposed other factors that can explain such discrepancies, such as the models of church-state relations, that can be based on separation (as in France and Turkey), cooperation between the state and different churches (as in Germany and Austria) and on a
special relation between the state and an officially-recognized state church (as in England and Denmark) (Kılıç, Saharso, and Sauer 2008). Moreover, a tradition of anti-discrimination policies can make a country less inclined towards banning the headscarf. Finally, recent studies have focused on the frames adopted by the different actors in the domestic as well as in the international debates, in order to understand the differences in policies among countries, and to cast light on the coalitions supporting and opposing the ban on the veil.

This paper will try to test such hypotheses by analysing the case of Italy: which is particularly interesting both because of the influence of the Catholic Church in a traditionally Christian – but increasingly secularizing – society, and by the presence of new political entrepreneurs willing to exploit religious issues – such as the LN – since the demise of the Christian Democracy (DC) party in the early 1990s. This case is however understudied by the international literature dealing with the veiling issue. The paper will try to contribute to a better understanding of the subject by outlining in the first section the main features of the veiling issue in Italy, and the debates related to it. In the second section, it will analyse the frames proposed by the different social and political actors and the coalitions supporting specific solutions to it.

The Veiling Issue in Italy: History and Norms

The discussion about Islamic clothing in Italy’s public places started much later than in other European countries, such as France. On the one hand, this was due to a different idea of secularism: although Italy is officially a secular state, the wide majority of its population declares itself Catholic, and Catholicism still plays a relevant role in the Country’s public sphere (Garelli 2011; Garelli, Guizzardi, and Pace 2003; Pace 2003). For example, some laws enacted during the Fascist regime and never formally repealed (although not always applied) still make compulsory the presence of the crucifix in public schools and other public offices (Ozzano and Giorgi 2012). On the other hand, the slower rate of immigration from Muslim countries, and the restrictive laws on citizenship (based in Italy on the ius sanguinis) contributed not to make the veil an issue until the late 1990s and 2000s, when many 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants started to attend public schools, and to be part of the workforce. The emergence of the veil – and other topics related to religious values – was also engendered both by the result of wider processes of secularization that has transformed Italian society since the 1960s, and by the rise of xenophobic feelings as a consequence of the rise of the Lega Nord (hereinafter LN) party and the wave of al-Qaeda’s terrorist attacks in the 2000s.
Under a legal point of view, in Italy there is no law forbidding the use of religious symbols in public places or in public offices. As mentioned above, the crucifix is traditionally part of the furniture of many classrooms; moreover, nuns – usually veiled – are traditionally part of the workforce in public schools and, especially, in public hospitals. Therefore, as explicitly declared by some actors during the debates analysed in this paper, the veil could not be put into question without also putting into question the role of Catholicism. This connection was also engendered by the development, throughout the 2000s, of a parallel debate regarding the presence of the crucifix in public schools and other public offices. Therefore, even political parties hostile towards immigrants did not rely on the principle of secularism, not to endanger the role of Catholicism, too. They relied, instead, on another piece of legislation, related to a ban on body – and especially face – covering for reasons of public security. Specifically, article 85.1 of the Royal Decree No. 773/1931 forbade to appear disguised in public places, except in specific occasions (for example during Carnival masquerades). Article 5 of the law No. 152/1975 ¹ (approved in a period marked by frequent terrorist attacks by both Communist and right-wing groups) forbade “the use of safety helmets, or any other device apt to making the identification of a person more difficult, in a public place or a place opened to the public, without a reasonable ground”. On this ground, municipalities led by the LN started, since July 2004, to enact decrees banning garments hiding women’s faces – such as burqas and niqabs – from public offices or, even, from all public places. ² Controversies arose also from the presence of veiled women in public offices such as tribunals. Most of the regulations were however repealed by courts or other authorities, and in 2008 the decision No. 3076 of the Council of State ³ declared that Azzano Decimo’s major had wrongly interpreted the law, since “the burqa is not a mask, but a traditional garment used by some populations, also for reasons of religious practice”. The application of the above mentioned laws about disguising was therefore not justified, except in specific situations, and provided the veiled person did not object to temporarily remove the veil in order to be identified. As showed in the following paragraph, this decision marked the beginning of a new phase of the debate, centred on the attempt by the LN and some other centre-right political actors to make the parliament approve a new law specifically banning face-covering veils. To date, no law has however been approved.

¹ http://www.diritto-penale.it/legge-n-152-del-1975.htm
² The first municipalities to enact such regulations were Drezzo, in Lombardy region, and Azzano Decimo, in Veneto. In the following years they were imitated by many other municipalities, mainly in north-eastern Italy. Some municipalities, such as Varallo Sesia, in Piedmont, also forbade the so-called burkini from public pools. For a comprehensive list, see Pastorelli (2012, 246). On the legislation about the veil, see also Carmignani Caridi (2000).
The following paragraphs will analyse the debate on the use of Islamic garments as developed in Italy from Fall 2002 (when the veil first entered the public debate as a consequence of the western intervention in Afghanistan) to the 2013 electoral campaign. It will show the frames used by the main political and social actors, the solutions they proposed and their strategies, in order to understand the relevant dimensions of the debate.

**Methodology**

The analysis carried out in this paper is based on a database of about 420 articles, published from 2001 to 2013 in the main Italian newspapers: both independent publications, such as *Il Corriere della sera*, *La Stampa*, and *La Repubblica*; and some politically aligned newspapers, such as *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Secolo d’Italia* and *La Padania* for the centre-right, *L’Unità*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Manifesto* and *Liberazione* for the centre-left, and *L’Osservatore Romano* and *L’Avvenire* for the Catholic world. The analysis is focused on the media sphere as a despatialized public sphere representing a meeting point for all other relevant spheres (social, political, legal, scientific, academic, etc.) and playing a crucial role in selecting the relevant voices in the public debates and the most effective frames (Ferree et al. 2002; Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Meyer 1996).

The research selected relevant articles that discuss the veiling issue and used a text-driven coding scheme to understand the specific meanings attributed to the issue and to reconstruct the frames used by the main voices in the debate and the most relevant dimensions of this latter. More specifically, the research analyses:

1) The meaning and frames attributed to the issue.
2) The relations between events and frames activation (in terms of type of events, processes of framing and counter-framing, and the problematization processes related to the issue (Bacchi 2012; Colebatch 2006).
3) The relationship between social and political actors and frames (Cefaï 2007).

The next paragraphs will show the results of the empirical analysis, followed by a short discussion of the outcomes.
The Frames

In the debate about the veiling issue in Italy since 2001 to 2013 at least six different frames emerge as relevant (although, as showed in the next paragraph) often with different interpretations and solutions proposed, even by actors adopting the same frame:

1. The veil as a religious symbol. This frame is related to the discussion about secularism and the role of religion in the public sphere, and, more specifically, to the opportunity to allow the display of religious symbols (or, in some cases, of religious symbols belonging to non-Christian traditions) in public places and public offices.

2. The veil as the symbol of a cultural/political identity. This frame is related to the perception of Muslims as ‘others’ and regards the discussion on the opportunity to tolerate (or to promote) the presence of non-indigenous cultural traditions (both as the expression of traditional culture and as the expression of an organized ‘Islamist’ social and political movement) in the Italian public sphere.

3. The veil as an issue of women’s personal choice and liberty. This frame is related to the issue of women’s freedom against the impositions of the veil by their families and husbands, within a patriarchal culture, but also to their freedom to wear the veil against the regulations enacted by the public authorities.

4. The veil as a problem in terms of public security. This frame is strictly connected to the debate about terrorism and public security developed in the aftermath of the al-Qaeda wave of terrorist attacks and does not take into account the social and moral implications of the veil, but only the problems for public security potentially engendered by the fact that a veil covering the whole body does not allow the identification of the person wearing it and might hide weapons.

5. The veil in legal terms. This frame also do not address into account moral and social concerns, but takes into account the veil only in a strictly legal perspective, by discussing the use of the different kinds of Islamic garments in different circumstances only in relation to the existing laws and what they are supposed to allow or forbid.

6. The veil in terms of social cohesion. This frame is related to the research of the best path to promote the integration of immigrants in Italian society (and more specifically of the question about the opportunity of a restrictive or a permissive policy on the veil) and does not address the moral implications of the issue.
Phases of the Debate and Actors Involved

In the Italian media sphere, the debate on the Islamic veil starts in Fall 2002, when the country is more broadly discussing the opportunity of the War on terror launched by the Bush administration and particularly the intervention in Taliban’s Afghanistan. Since many left-wing social and political actors were against the war, seen as an act of imperialism by the West, the debate in this early stage was focused on the opportunity to enhance women’s rights by toppling the Taliban’s regime versus the priority to be given according to many to the value of peace, notwithstanding the unfair treatment of women under that regime. In June 2003, the debate shifted towards a discussion about the French case, where both parliament and the media were discussing a law which would ban all ostensible religious symbols from public schools: thus, the debate started to address the issue of women wearing headscarves in western countries. The debate sharpened in the last months of 2003, also as a consequence of other debates that were unfolding at that time, such as that on crucifixes in public schools. It was only in March 2004 – when a headscarved teacher was fired by a kindergarten in Samone, near Turin – that the debate started to focus on specific cases regarding the use of Islamic garments in the Italian public sphere. This shift was mainly a consequence of the LN activism, involving bans on veils covering women’s faces – such as burqas and niqabs – in several small municipalities in Italy’s northern regions. In this phase, the debate was also connected to the debate on Islamic terrorism and public security (also connected to other Islam-related issues, such as the location of mosques), unfolding as a consequence of al-Qaeda terrorist attacks such as those in Madrid. With the exception of the law on terrorism approved in July 2005 (which also included tougher sanctions against people covering their face in public places without a reasonable ground), the debate remained largely theoretical, since on the one hand the existing laws were believed to forbid the use of burqa (despite in the practice this latter was often tolerated) and on the other there was no serious arguing on a French-style ban on religious symbols in public schools. It was only in July 2008, when the Council of State decided that the laws forbidding face covering were not applicable to Islamic veils, that a new phase of the debate started, marked out by the attempt of the LN and other centre-right politicians to get a ban on burqas and niqabs approved: particularly after the approval of such a ban in France, in 2010. A law on the issue proposed by the centre-right majority was under discussion at the Chamber of deputies, when in November 2001 Prime Minister Berlusconi had to resign. With the subsequent creation of the Monti government, not supported by the LN, the debate faded out, with the issue was barely mentioned during the 2013 electoral campaign.

In terms of actors involved, this debate shows several peculiarities, if compared to other discussions involving religious symbols, such as for example the crucifix. First of all, the analysis of the
newspaper articles on the subject reveals that actors not affiliated to political parties, such as journalists, intellectuals and activists, play a much more relevant role that in other debates, particularly in the early stages, when the discussion was largely theoretical and not related to specific law proposals. Another notable feature of this debate is the absence of the Catholic Church, clearly unwilling to be involved in the discussion: therefore, the only religious actors participating in the debate were the Islamic organizations, such as the hardliner UCOII and the moderate COREIS. In terms of both social and political actors, in the early stages the discussion was mainly confined to the centre-left. When the LN started to exploit the issue, the field of actors involved widened, with the notable exception of the Catholic centre (such as the Unione di Centro – UDC); however, with the exception of the LN (deploying many of its leaders) the discussion remained largely gendered, with only a handful of male politicians – such as Giuliano Amato in the centre-left and Gianfranco Fini in the centre-left – really influencing the debate.

Frames and Prognoses

The choice of the frames (and the diagnoses and prognoses associated to them) by the different actors involved in the debate is however the most intriguing feature, since both the centre-right and the centre-left reveal interesting internal debates in addition to the inter-coalitional discussion.

The divisions in the centre-left started earlier, and more or less followed the same lines of the wider international debate developed since the late 1990s in the feminist world, and starting with Susan Moller Okin’s (1999) essay entitled “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”. Okin, and other feminist authors sharing her point of view, were critical about the fact “that feminism was becoming prone to paralysis by cultural difference, with anxieties about cultural imperialism engendering a kind of relativism that made it difficult to represent any belief or practice as oppressive to women or at odds with gender equality” (Phillips 2009, 1). Okin criticized the point of view by theorists of multiculturalism such as Will Kymlica (2003), pointing to the fact that feminism (that is, “the belief that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can”) and multiculturalism (“the claim […] that minority cultures or ways are not sufficiently protected by the practice of ensuring the individual rights of their members, and as a consequence these should also be protected through special group rights and privileges” (Okin 1999, 14–15) are not as easily reconcilable as many thought. As an example, she mentioned the de facto accommodation of polygamy practices even in a secular country as France.
This debate (sharpened in the following decade by the international contingency) was never really settled, despite some attempts to meet the two visions. 4

In the Italian debate – and particularly in its early acts – these two polar visions are quite clear. On the one hand, we have a faction willing to promote women’s individual rights, even when this includes the adoption of military means. It is the case, for example of the MP Carla Rocchi (Margherita) who in Fall 2001 votes in favour of the western military intervention in Afghanistan with a burqa in her hands, to signify her support to Afghan women. The Radical Party, traditionally engaged in favour of women’s choice, also on themes such as abortion, was also very active on the issue, organizing public rallies in favour of Afghan women, and supporting (especially through its main female leader, Emma Bonino) the idea of a law banning integral veils (Iacoboni 2001). On the other hand, other left-wing voices, such as journalist Ida Dominijanni, countered that “what can happen with the use of the burqa and the chador can happen also in our countries, disguised under a nudity as well imposed” (Dominijanni 2002). A point of view interestingly echoed, in a different framework, by an authoritative columnist of the newspaper of the Conference of Italian Bishops (CEI), L’Avvenire, Lucetta Scaraffia (one of the very few ‘Catholic’ voices to be heard in the whole debate), comparing women’s submission in traditionally patriarchal cultures with the nonchalance showed by many western women regarding abortion (as a consequence of “an inner veil, an ideological diaphragm”) (Scaraffia 2002). This division – especially in the left-wing field – was evident also in the following years, with newspapers such as Il Manifesto publishing op-eds supporting both sides of the discussion. A debate complicated by the fact that – on both sides – some took into account the issue purely in terms of rights, while other regarded as more relevant the role played by the veil (rather than by a ban on it) in the integration of Muslim women. As a whole, as already mentioned, there was little involvement of political actors in this discussion, especially from the centre-right (whose newspapers, however, blamed centre-left feminists for “selling away” women’s rights in the name of pacifism and multiculturalism) (Piersanti 2001).

Evidently, most actors engaged in this early phase of the debate, focused their attention on women’s conditions in countries such as Afghanistan, and adopted a frame regarding the issue as a matter of women’s choices and individual rights – although with different diagnoses and prognoses about the West and the Muslim world. This situation was changed – with the inclusion of previously absent considerations about the scope and the boundaries of state secularism in western countries – by the news coming from France, where President Jacques Chirac was promoting a law proposal aiming at

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4 Kymlica himself tried to find a middle way balancing gender and cultural rights, by distinguishing between “internal” and “external” restrictions of ethnocultural groups: while the former are related to restrictions of individual choice and must be rejected, the latter are related to the political representation and the reparation of historical wrongdoings and must be accepted (Kymlicka 1999).
banning from public schools all ostensible religious symbols; the discussion, however, remained largely theoretical, with the exception of the discussion on the opportunity to allow women to wear the veil when making photographs for their documents (which was not a problem in the view of most commentators, as long as the veil did not cover the face, preventing the identification of the woman).

With the shift of focus from the burqa in Afghanistan to the headscarf in western countries, the frame also changed. Those who supported the French law, also in the centre-left (such as journalists Paolo Mieli and Giuliana Sgrena) still relied on arguments related to women’s free choice, but added new considerations, regarding the veil as a cultural, or even explicitly political, symbol, gaining relevance only with the growth of radical Islamism: a “uniform that most Muslim girls living in Europe are forced to wear by the community they belong to” (Mieli 2003). On the other hand, also in the field defending the use of the veil there was a change of frame: some simply framed the issue as a matter of women’s free choice, legitimate as long as they felt at ease with it. Some newspapers also published interviews to Muslim girls declaring that they felt more free with the veil than with a ‘western’ gearing such as a miniskirt (Riva 2003). Other commentators, such as journalist Adriano Sofri, regarded the veil as a symbol of women’s oppression, but nonetheless thought that the state should not frustrate Muslim students who want to wear it by forbidding it by law (Sofri 2003).

The main novelty of this phase of the debate is however the discussion about the veil as a religious symbol, albeit with many different points of view and prognoses associated to this frame. Many, especially in the centre-right, relied on the religious factor to defend the use of the veil in schools, and not rarely drew explicit comparisons between the defence of the right to wear the Islamic veil and the right to hang a crucifix in public schools. It is the case, for example, of the first authoritative voice from the centre-right entering the debate, the Minister of Interior Giuseppe Pisanu, according to whom “different religions are an enrichment for Italy and for Europe” (Galeazzi 2003). This was a position also supported by the only high-ranking member of the Catholic hierarchy to intervene in the debate, cardinal Mario Pompedda. However, some – such as the left-wing newspaper L’Unità – also opposed the use of the veil on a secular ground, supporting the French legislation; while a conservative member of the Muslim community in Italy, Mario Scialoja – a member of the Saudi-related Muslim World League – described the refusal of a Muslim woman to wear the veil as “a sin”: a vision opposed by other commentators, also within the Muslim field (Riva 2003).

The situation changed again in 2004, with the first municipalities enacting decrees banning the use of integral veils in public offices and/or public places, promoted by local administrations affiliated
to the LN. This party shifted the discussion, from the previous concerns about women’s choice and religious rights versus secularism, towards a civilizational ground (also facilitated by the contemporary wave of al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in Europe). The LN politicians – and other personalities in the other parties of the centre-right, such as Daniela Santanché – did not rely on a specific frame: sometimes, they seemed to regard the veil as a religious symbol representing Islam – in terms of a “dangerous virus” threatening Christian Europe (Mario Borghezio) (Berizzi 2006) – some other as a backward cultural symbol related to the traditions of the immigrants’ homelands – while “it is right that extracommunitarian\(^5\) people adapt to our traditions” (Giancarlo Gentilini) – some other still purely in legal and public security terms – since “all the terrorists who have spread death and terror among our people, and the murderers in our towns and cities, and many girl rapers are coward and fundamentalist Muslims”\(^6\) (La Padania 2005) – without enquiring its nature. What’s really relevant, in the LN vision, is the idea of a Muslim invasion of Italy and western Europe: the use of the veil must therefore be rejected since it represents an attempt to impose an alien culture in “our home”. The shift of positions in the centre-right, defending the veil as a religious symbol in the previous phase and now opposing it on civilizational grounds, is also noticed – and bantered – by the centre-right newspapers (Il Riformista 2004).

Also those opposing this point of view showed, however, a wide range of frames and arguments, sometimes on religious, some other on cultural grounds. Moreover, while the LN representatives usually did not usually engage in distinctions between the different types of Islamic garments (although their action was mainly aimed against the integral veil, they also disapproved Islamic garments not covering the face, as well representing for them the Islamic ‘alienness’), this was not true for representatives of other parties. Moreover, even those opposing burqa (from left-wing positions) as a symbol of women’s submission to a patriarchal culture were embarrassed by the LN openly racist stances. Therefore, they not rarely relied on twofold arguments, acknowledging on the one hand “the oppressive connotation and the regressive message that burqa sends, the mortification of woman and her body that it implies”, while rejecting on the other all tones dictated by “Islamophobia and intolerance” (Luigi Manconi, Democrats of the Left) (Manconi and Boraschi 2005). This strain within the progressive field would intensify in the following years, especially

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\(^5\) The adjective extracommunitarian (extracomunitario in Italian) soon ceased to be a technical label to identify those coming from outside the EU to become a pejorative synonymous of ‘illegal alien’, sometimes also wrongly used in relation to people coming from EU countries such as Romania.

\(^6\) Although the positions of the LN politicians were more or less the same throughout this phase of the debate, the most violent displays of anti-Islamic hatred were usually reserved to articles and interviews published in the official LN newspaper, La Padania (not rarely with journalists commenting politicians’ words in even more inflamed terms). When talking to journalists of other newspapers, the party representatives usually chose statements a little more nuanced, sometimes even denying to oppose Islam as a religion, but only specific cultural traditions, such as the burqa or the infibulation.
when the centre-right put on the floor of the parliament a law proposal aiming at utterly banning integral veils. In many cases, those opposing it resorted again on a twofold position, opposing burqa in terms of principle, but rejecting the idea of a legal ban.

This position was adopted also by some within the centre-right, particularly the leader of the post-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale – AN), already known for his liberal views, sometimes contrasting with the main orientation of his coalition: for example on the referendum on assisted procreation. In October 2006 Fini took a very strong stance on the issue, by publishing a letter on the Corriere della Sera in which – although condemning the multicultural ideology – he declared that a law banning integral veils was not necessary. Just like many others supporting a similar point of view – also in the centre-left – he relied on a legal argument, based on the existence of laws already forbidding people from covering their face in public. This point of view was not shared not only by the LN, but also by other representatives of the centre-right field, who engaged very actively in the debate, particularly Magdi Allam and Daniela Santanché. The former was an Egyptian-born journalist, raised as a Muslim, but very critical towards Islamic radicalism, with a civilizational stance not far from that of the LN: during the 2000s, this position of his further radicalized, both in personal terms (with a much publicized conversion to Catholicism) and in his public activity (moving from the vice-direction of the centrist Corriere della sera to become a columnist of the much more conservative Il Giornale). The latter was a right-wing politician (an AN MP until 2008, and later a member of more radical right wing groups, such as La Destra) who started her campaign against the veil in 2006 with the publication of the book La donna negata (The Denied Woman) gathering testimonies from persecuted Muslim women (Santanché 2006). She represented the veil only as a way to submit women and to promote a fundamentalist ideology and not only supported a ban on the integral veil, but also on all kinds of veils in schools, for girls under 16 years of age (Santanché 2007). On this issue, notwithstanding her strong right-wing stance, she also tried to gather a coalition of female MPs, being supported by statements also by some antiburqa centre-left female politicians, such as Barbara Pollastrini (DS). Although she framed her proposals as a way to integrate Muslim girls in Italian society and frequently cited the French example in terms of both secularism and successful integration, it was however aimed exclusively against Islamic symbols, without taking into account Christian symbols such as the crucifix. This was not a coincidence, since – especially in the later stages of the debate – she also displayed civilizational overtones, with points of view not much different from the LN’s.

As already mentioned, the debate related to a prospective ban on integral veils was made hotter by the 2008 decision by the Council of State, declaring that the existing legislation forbidding face-
covering was not relevant in the case of Muslim veils: this made impossible for those opposing a ban on integral veils, both in the centre-right and the centre-left, to dismiss the issue on the ground that face-covering was already forbidden. In the meantime, the centre-left had won the parliamentary elections after the untimely fall of the centre-left Prodi government. In September 2009, a structured campaign in support of a ban on burqa was launched by the centre-right. The campaign started when Santanché staged a demonstration in Milan, where the Muslim community celebrated the end of the Ramadan, and later claimed – with the support of the centre-right media, who widely publicized the issue – that she had been beaten by a Muslim mob.

Unlike the early stages of the debate, now the discussion largely developed within the centre-right coalition, while most representatives of the centre-left field refused to be involved in the debate on the ground that a ban was not necessary, and only some voices (such as the radical Emma Bonino, Giuliana Sgrena and, partly, the rising star of the Democratic Party Debora Serracchiani) supported it. While the Catholic centre (and the Catholic Church itself) still did not play a role in the debate, the centre-right field was apparently divided in at least three different positions. The first, opposing the ban as an obstacle to integration – but also drawing a comparison between the veil and the crucifix – (Lanna 2009) included Fini and his supporters, who were becoming more and more estranged from Berlusconi’s circle: as proved by the creation, in July 2010, of a new group called Future and Freedom (Futuro e Libertà per l’Italia – FLI) which stepped out of Berlusconi’s majority the following year.  

On the other side of the field, a ‘civilizational’ perspective, willing to ban the burqa, included the LN and other centre-right politicians, particularly Santanché. To support their position, they once again framed the issue in several different ways: as a symbol of an ‘Islamization’ of Europe, of a fundamentalist political ideology, of women’s submission, of the impossibility of integration, and so on. What really seems to matter here is the prognosis, not the frame: according to this point of view, the burqa had to be banned, and all arguments apt to support this position were regarded as legitimate. This attitude was apparently part of a wider strategy of the centre-right, aiming at regulating Islam in Italy in a restrictive way, in relation not only to women’s rights, but also to worship places and other issues. For this purpose, the Berlusconi government created in February 2011 a Committee for Italian Islam (Comitato per l’Islam Italiano), replacing the former Council for Italian Islam (Consulta per l’Islam Italiano), in place since 2005. Unlike the predecessor (which

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7 FLI was however not unanimous in supporting this position, since some of its high-ranking members – such as the former radical Benedetto Della Vedova – supported the ban, while others, such as the editor of the former AN official newspaper Il Secolo d’Italia opposed the ban only because the law proposed would directly sanction women wearing a burqa, and not only those forcing them to do it. As a consequence of these divergences, the party decided to abstain when the law came to the floor in parliament.
should have been a kind of ‘parliament’ of Italian Muslims), the new institution, under the control of the Ministry of Interior (then led by Roberto Maroni, an LN representative), included not only representatives of the immigrants’ communities, but also non-Muslim Italian experts, such as journalists and academicians, and aimed at elaborating proposals for the government to regulate Islam-related issues (Fouad Allam 2010). However, the new council was regarded by some as biased, both for the presence among the Italian experts of journalists and scholars known for some anti-Islamic stances, such as Massimo Introvigne and Carlo Panella; and for the exclusion of the authoritative (but more radical, being close to the Muslim Brotherhood) UCOII (El Ayoubi 2010). The recommendations of the Committee, including the ban on integral veils, gave rise to a third strand within the centre-right, also willing to ban burqas and niqabs, but abstaining from any civilizational overtone, as declared explicitly by its most vocal representative, the Moroccan-born PDL MP Souad Sbai. She declared that the veil had nothing to do with Islam and that the ban on integral veils was “a way to tell all Muslim women in Italy that this is a free country, that they must not hide and that the rights of individuals are respected” (Angeli 2010).

As already mentioned, the centre-left was also not unanimous on the issue, with some even proposing laws aiming at banning burqas (signed by Paola Binetti, then still a PD member) but also at legalizing them (put forward by Salvatore Vassallo – PD – and signed by several other PD and IDV members) (Morigi 2012; Garibaldi 2010). However, its representatives took a lower profile than those of the centre-right. When the centre-right proposal was put on the parliament floor, only the PD explicitly opposed it, while all the other opposition parties (IDV, UDC and FLI) chose to abstain (A. 2011). While, as already mentioned, the Catholic Church chose not to be an active part in this debate, the proposal stirred fierce discussions in the Italian Muslim organizations: particularly, the COREIS (which was part of the Committee) supported the ban since they regarded the burqa as alien to the Islamic culture; on the other hand, the UCOOI opposed it. This latter organization regarded the issue as irrelevant (declaring that no more than a hundred women in Italy wore an integral veil) and – despite agreeing on the fact that women should not cover their face – was against a ban imposed by law (Giansoldati 2010).

The law proposal was approved in August 2011 by the Commission for Constitutional Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies. However, the untimely end of the Berlusconi Government in November of the same year abruptly ended its path before it could be approved by the parliament. After the worsening of the economic crisis, and the creation of the Monti government (supported also by the centre-left, and without the LN) apparently nobody regarded the law as feasible anymore. The veil also disappeared from the public debate: although a few dozen newspaper articles were published
on the subject in 2012 and throughout the 2013 campaign, the subject was not apparently regarded anymore as relevant by the main political forces.

**Conclusion**

Several features emerge as interesting from the debate analysed in the previous paragraphs.

First, this debate was peculiar – if compared to other discussions related to the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere, such as that on crucifix in schools – by the different role played by some actors. On the other hand, some actors significantly involved in most other ethical and religious debates chose not to intervene about the veil: it is the case, particularly, of the Catholic Church and, consequently, also of catholic groups both in the political system – such as UDC – and in the civil society. Probably, this issue was very embarrassing for the Catholic forces that, in the same years, were defending the right of Italian public schools to hang crucifixes in classrooms; while, on the other hand, were probably reluctant to show too much support for the Muslim side.

The other actors also showed several peculiarities, especially with the engagement of different kinds of actors in the different stages of the debate. This is true in functional terms: in the early phases of the debate a crucial role was played by non-political actors, such as journalists (a category indeed playing a relevant role throughout the debate, unlike in debates on other ethical issues), while the politicians mostly intervened only when the discussion regarded cases related to the Italian case. Moreover, if we take into account the political positions, the left (and the debate straining it) played a dominant role in the early stages of the debate, while the right (and its internal divisions in secularist, pragmatic and civilizational factions) was hegemonic in the latter stages. Another striking feature of the debate is the virtual irrelevance of the Italian Muslim community. It is true that some Muslim-born people – such as Magdi Allam and Souad Sbai – were very active in the discussion. However, the analysis of the debate suggests that they were given the opportunity to put forward their ideas in the media sphere (mainly through the centre-right newspapers) since they had an image of ‘secularized’ Muslims, supporting positions similar to those of the centre-right. This is an hypothesis that might be supported also by the exclusion from institutional dialogue of an organization representative of a wide sector of the Italian Muslim community such as the UCOII, while giving more space to less representative but more moderate organizations, such as COREIS.

In terms of frames, we have seen that the early phase of the debate – focused on the veil in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan – were marked by the hegemony of the frame seeing the veil as a matter of women’s choice (both for those willing to wear it, and for those unwilling). However,
with the emergence of cases related to the Italian context (such as women wearing burqas in public places, and teachers wearing a headscarf in public institutions such as schools) and the intervention in the debate of the LN, civilizational concerns related to an alleged Islamic ‘invasion’ of Europe came to the fore. Interestingly, the LN and its allies chose not to justify their positions with a specific frame, but chose to instrumentally exploit all arguments able to justify them. Sometimes, this even led to contradictions: for example with some actors declaring sometimes that the veil had nothing to do with Islam, and other times that it was the symptom of an ‘Islamic virus’ contaminating Italy. This discrepancy was however only apparent, since that the civilizational stance mainly came to the fore in specific context – such as articles published on La Padania or statements released during LN rallies – while more moderate stances were proposed when talking to non-partisan media and audiences.

The positions of the LN were in any case crucial for this debate, introducing in it new dimension, beyond the discussion between ‘liberal’ and ‘multiculturalist’ feminists that had marked the first phase of the debate. Its aggressive stance on the one had engendered strains within the centre-right field itself, with some representatives aligning with this position, and others rejecting it – or, at least, not sharing its civilizational – and not rarely openly racist – overtones. On the other hand, such positions also contributed to emarginated the from the debate centre-left, who could not find an agreement on a specific position: since on the one hand the progressive forces could not support the xenophobic stances of the LN, while on the other they could not engage in a defence of the burqa (which many progressives felt as an instrument of women’s submission).
References List


