The Interior Frontiers of Germany

On Recursive History and Ritual Male Circumcision

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Abstract

In 2012, the regional court of the city of Cologne ruled that ritual male circumcision constituted unjustified bodily harm. This prompted a nationwide debate culminating in the enactment of legislation guaranteeing male circumcision without medical justification under certain preconditions. This article proposes to approach the ‘circumcision debate’ as a discursive strand of the systematic problematisation of Muslims as ‘Muslims’, which I analyse through the analytic of the ‘Muslim Question’. In addition, I refer to the concepts of recursive history and of the interior frontier to contextualise the 2012 circumcision debate and the political purpose it has served, namely, to establish racial distinctions and interior frontiers between Germans, Jews and Muslims.

Keywords

ritual male circumcision debate – ‘Muslim Question’ – ‘Jewish Question’ – interior frontier – recursive history – racism

1 Introduction

In her illuminating historical analysis of the German debates on ritual slaughter and ritual male circumcision during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Robin Judd (2007) narrates an episode in Baden that triggered waves of discussion and polemic, and mobilised various actors around the issue of ritual male circumcision. In 1881, a Jewish mother took her son to the local
physician after complications emerged from a circumcision performed on her little boy. The physician referred the case to the state medical examiner, who subsequently launched a wider investigation on complications related to ritual male circumcision. After concluding his investigation, the state medical examiner insisted that the government should take charge of the ritual practice by regulating the procedure. This regulation of the rite should be based, first, on gathering knowledge about the practice, and second, on ensuring its compliance with the latest developments in medical knowledge (Judd, 2007: 1–3).

This emerging debate, moreover, occurred within the unfolding of the ‘Jewish Question’, the multi-layered political debates based on the construction and solidification of German nationhood, centring on Jewish emancipation and assimilation. According to Wolfgang Benz (2008: 84), the unfolding of the ‘Jewish Question’ in German territory stretched out over a long period of time and, in contrast to older forms of resentment of Jews that posited their ‘moral betterment’ through conversion to Christianity, within discussion of the later ‘Jewish Question’, the emancipation and enfranchisement of Jews was regarded as a process that would result in the ‘civic betterment’ of Jews through assimilation (Benz, 2008: 84–86). The European ‘Jewish Question’ then focused on the entwining of emancipation through assimilation or assimilation as a means of emancipation (Farris, 2014), the construction of Jews as a nation within the European nations, and an overall, racially-inspired problematisation of Jewish lives and selves. In retrospect, the European ‘Jewish Question’ can be seen as a discourse that racially problematised the figure of the Jew in the context of the construction of national identities.¹

A discursive strand or subtheme of the ‘Jewish Question’ was the question of circumcision. Along with ritual slaughter, ritual male circumcision became a focal point of debate and interventions spanning from the eighteenth up to the first part of the twentieth century (Judd, 2007). During this period, ritual male circumcision was appraised as reinforcing the construction of Jewish political distinction and isolation from the German national body, since the ritual was thought to erect ‘social, cultural and political barriers between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbours’ (Judd, 2007: 6). In other words, ritual male circumcision was discursively crafted as a sign of and therefore entangled with

¹ The European Jewish Question of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been approached through different angles and concepts, including, inter alia, as a project for the emancipation of Jews aligned with the ideas of the Enlightenment (Roudinesco, 2013), as an attempt to consolidate state sovereignty (Brown, 2008: 48–77), and as a crisis of modern secularism concerned with the question of minority existence (Mufti, 2007).
the trope of Jews being a nation within the German nation. As incitement to
discourse, debating and questioning, ritual male circumcision was also related
to calls for the regulation of the religious ritual.

Fast forward to 2010, when a Muslim physician in Cologne performed ritual
male circumcision on a four-year-old Muslim boy at his parents’ request. The
procedure was completed satisfactorily, and the physician visited the fam-
ily later that afternoon. Complications began to arise later, after the mother
took off the bandages prematurely, causing bleeding. She took the boy to
the clinic of the University of Cologne, where the bleeding was controlled.
However, language-related communication problems between the staff of
the clinic and the mother led to the police being called, and a legal charge of
bodily harm was brought (Çetin and Wolter, 2012: 16). The case reached the
Cologne Regional Court and in May of 2012 the District Court of Cologne and
the Cologne Regional Court decided that circumcisions for purely religious
reasons performed on boys unable to give their consent constitute a criminal
offence. Although the initial ‘case dealt with a Muslim child and a Muslim rite,
the parameters of the debate quickly expanded to include the views of Jewish
groups, and engaged a larger discourse related to the legacy of the Holocaust’
(Oppenheim, 2014: 91) and the ‘debate’ therefore involved not only Muslim but
also Jewish communities in Germany as the ‘practice [is] mainly associated
with Jewish and Muslim religious traditions’ (Yurdakul, 2016: 78). As Sultan
Doughan and Hanna Tzuberi (2018: 270) have pointed out, Jewish communi-
ties were caught up in the debate surrounding Muslims because they practised
similar rites, and this association revealed the differential treatment of reli-
gious minorities in the country in relation to which vulnerabilities are recog-
nised or denied.

The Cologne court’s decision, although it was non-binding for other
courts and did not bring about a change in the law, was regarded as setting
up a legal precedent for religious or ritual circumcision for male infants, and
it also inaugurated a brief but intense eight-month period of discussion on
the German socio-political scene that came to be known as the ‘circumcision
debate’. Eventually, the debate found one resolution when in December 2010
the German Parliament passed a new legislative amendment (Article 1631 of
the German Civil Code) ensuring the right to perform male circumcision for
non-medical reasons on conditions that it should take place under medical
supervision and without causing unnecessary pain. The debate did not stop
there, although attention to the issue diminished considerably until 2015,
when, again in Cologne, several civil-society organisations demonstrated
against ritual male circumcision and against the German legislation that
allowed it (Yurdakul, 2016: 77), and more recently the far-right party **Alternative**
for Germany (AfD) revived the issue by proposing to ban it along with ritual slaughter (beb, 2016).

Along with many other debates (including the ‘Muslim test’ for citizenship, arguments about Islam not belonging in Germany, the headscarf and burka, swimming courses, the construction of mosques, ritual slaughter, etc.), the ‘circumcision debate’ drew on imaginaries and discourses that sustained a sense of internal distinctions within the German territory and sought to restrict the definition of who is part of the nation, and who, ultimately, is alien to it and outside a loosely defined but unsurmountable frontier surrounding ‘Germanness’.

Research pertaining to the debate on ritual male circumcision has been conducted and analysed from a plethora of angles and theoretical standpoints: from medical perspectives that inquire into the effects of circumcision on the prevention of infections (L. Kleine-Doepke and Oesterhelweg, 2014; L.V. Kleine-Doepke, 2014; Schöfer, 2015), or that look at its potential relation to a higher incidence of erectile dysfunction (Brookman-May et al., 2014; May et al., 2014); from a legal point of view against the background of international human rights and German history (Swatek-Evenstein, 2013); or in relation to parental authority (Gunzel, 2013; Möller, 2017; see also Pekárek, 2015). Examinations of the debate have also drawn on Jurgen Habermas’s concept of the post-secular political order to inquire about the possibilities of translating religious reason into a secular one (Greve, 2018) or have approached the debate as a way to understand how religious diversity in Germany challenges processes of social inclusion (Yurdakul, 2016). The ritual male circumcision debate has also been understood as coupled with and as an expression of German integration politics and its emphasis of ‘non-Germans’ deficits’ (Çetin and Wolter, 2012), while Amir-Moazami (2016) has poignantly interrogated the debate as a mode of secular governmentality crucial in the production of ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ religious practices in the public sphere. In a similar vein, Doughan and Tzuberi (2018) have looked at the circumcision debate through the lens of critical secular studies, analysing how, in spite of the dominant tendency to discuss Muslim practices and rituals in isolation, both Muslims and Jews have become, through the circumcision debate, intersecting nodal points of differentiated forms of knowledge production.

All of these inquiries have shed light on various aspects of the circumcision debate and its effects, as well as underscored the relevance of knowledge production in the realm of political, medical and legal debates. Building upon these critical interventions, the intention of this article is to contribute to the scholarly discussion on the ‘circumcision debate’ by offering another prism through which the debate can be assessed, namely, as one of the many discursive strands of the contemporary ‘Muslim Question’ and of the ‘Jewish
Question’, part of a discourse that tends to encourage the construction of interior frontiers (Stoler, 1995, 2000, 2017) – discursive borders whose purpose is to imagine, elaborate and solidify ‘the invisible bonds’ of the German nation and, by these means, to exclude from the nation those constructed as alien to it.2

My argument then proposes that the debate on ritual male circumcision raised and drew on sensibilities, ideas and ultimately discourses that postulated a racially-charged ontological difference between Germans on the one hand and Muslims and Jews on the other. This ontological difference operates as an interior frontier, a political concept unravelling those ‘sensibilities [that] get recruited to produce hardening distinctions between who is “us” and who is construed as (irrevocably) “them”’ (Stoler, 2017), a construction that in turn fuels and cements the construction of Muslims as an alien body to the nation. Thus, at the core of the problematisation of ritual male circumcision is the attempt to determine who is a real German and who is not. In other words, through a debate on the figures of the Muslim and the Jew, a line is drawn, a border of sorts, and an interior frontier distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’.

The argument proceeds in three stages. First, I refer to the idea of recursive history as a framework for understanding the multiple axes of the ‘Muslim Question’: as the production of an alien body; and as the forceful call to integrate and thereby to ‘improve’ this community through ‘acculturation’, ‘assimilation’ or ‘integration’. I do this by also locating the circumcision debate against the background of broader discourses that problematise the presence and existence of Muslims in Germany. Second, moving on from the understanding of ritual male circumcision as a discursive strand of the ‘Muslim Question’, I elaborate how the debate served to erect an interior frontier, and by using a cartoon that criticised the bill allowing ritual male circumcision, I illustrate the workings of recursive history and the making of racial interior frontiers in Germany.3 Here, the concept of recursive history helps to reach an at least par-

2 Following a Foucauldian approach, ‘discourses’ are here understood as systems of thoughts and ideas that constitute social practices, structures and institutions, which also establish and legitimise relations of power (see Foucault, 2010). I want to briefly highlight the limits of the present analysis, the discourse analysis conducted mainly focused on discursive categorisations, within the large field of the never-ending process of building imagined national communities, and their entanglement with racial characterisation. I therefore choose a ‘selective direction’ (Stoler, 2016), emphasising discursive processes and effects, rather than how a variety of different agents and actors positioned themselves in the discursive field of the ‘debate’, including how Jewish and Muslim communities as well as individuals reacted and navigated the turbulent months of the time period called the ‘circumcision debate’.

3 The data analysed here is part of a larger research project on the ‘circumcision debate’ in Germany that explores the various and sometimes competing discourses (medical, legal, political and historical) that have been mobilised to craft the ritual as a problem that German
tial understanding of the genealogies of problematising religious minorities in Germany, and to then interrogate how this problematisation manufactures interior frontiers, and crucial discourses in the construction of racial belonging and citizenship.

2 On Recursive History and the Genealogy of Questions

As in many other European countries, a plethora of debates and polemics centring on the presence of Muslims in Germany has swamped media outlets, political debates and academic inquiries for some time now. Arguments about whether Muslims are integrated into the nation, about gender inequality within their communities, and about the potential violence of young Muslim men waiting to be triggered are today a constant part of news cycles as well as focal points of political campaigns and government policies. There have also been discussions about the self-segregation of Muslims from German society through the construction of ‘parallel societies’, along with the eruption of arguments about whether Islam belongs in Germany (see: Hernández Aguilar, 2019). All of these debates have coincided with renewed attempts to re-imagine Germanness narrowly as White and Christian, and sometimes as Judeo-Christian (see: Topolski, 2016). Debating while problematising Muslims has been part and parcel of processes of defining who really belongs to the nation, and what, in effect, constitutes German identity. In other words, these are discourses that seek to (re)imagine the German nation and its moral and cultural borders in times of crisis and social change. Yasemin Shooman (2012: 17) argues that the increasing participation of Muslims in various arenas of German society may partially explain the exponential increase in debates on Muslims and Islam in recent decades.4

Such debates on the presence of Muslims in Germany, including the circumcision debate, can be analytically approached as a discursive problematisation, namely, ‘the development of a domain of acts, practices and thoughts’ (Foucault, 1984: 384) turning something (a practice or a ritual) or someone (a group or individuals) into a problem that politics must resolve, a problematisation that can be seen as the articulation of the ‘Muslim Question’.

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4 This in addition to the key historical modification in the legal definition of German identity and citizenship, when the German Citizenship Act complemented the jus sanguinis principle with jus solis in 1999.
In recent years, scholars from a wide range of disciplines and theoretical positions have called attention to the formation and appearance of the ‘Muslim Question’ (Meer and Modood, 2009; Norton, 2013; Farris, 2014; Mansouri, Lobo, and Johns, 2015; O’Brien, 2015; Mossiere, 2016), a series of debates and polemics problematising the existence of Muslims as ‘Muslims’ in Europe and in the ‘West’. The ‘Muslim Question’ appears as an analytical lens through which to assess systematic characterisations of Muslims and their faith and practices as problems to be pondered, debated and eventually resolved through a myriad of policies and interventions. As a discourse, one characteristic of the ‘Muslim Question’ is its raising and drawing on debates to predicate the idea of Muslims as an alien community, for Muslims, as the argument goes, are not integrated into the social and cultural fabric of the nation: Muslim women dress differently and do not shake hands, Muslim girls do not attend swimming lessons, and Muslims continue to perform the ‘archaic rite’ of ritual male circumcision, to name just a few of the most dominant narratives (see: Hernández Aguilar, 2019). The ‘Muslim question’ is thus being played out and unfolding through the process of regarding Muslims as an alien body to the nation because they have not yet integrated into Germany, or conversely, because they are not integrated into the nation, they remain a community alien to it.

Approaching the systematic problematisation of Muslims as ‘Muslims’ through the analytic prism of the ‘Muslim Question’ enables us to critically engage with discourses that draw on not only racial characterisations, gendered and sexualized deployments, and discriminatory practices and policies, but also the examination and articulation of historical and historicist discourses aimed at excluding Muslims from the imagined national community. Moreover, another advantage of this prism is in the frame it posits, namely, one that learns from the discursive resemblances and differentiations between the contemporary ‘Muslim Question’ and the ‘European Jewish Question’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Farris, 2014), and particularly through its attentiveness to processes in which a religious ‘minority’ is constructed as an alien body to the nation, and how their ‘exclusionary inclusion’ (Asad, 1993; Partridge, 2012) is predicated upon reforming ‘religion’ at best or completely abandoning it at worst. Whichever of these cases may be followed, the ‘betterment’ of Muslims is expected.

Calls to reform Judaism and Jewish subjects during the nineteenth century and those relating to Islam and Muslims in the twenty-first have both included calls to cease the practice of ritual male circumcision. The uncanny similarities in terms of processes and arguments as well as the contextual and historical differences between the ritual circumcision debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that of 2012 pose a series of important conceptual
and methodological questions. Does the history of the ritual male circumcision debate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries matter for our understanding of the most recent German debate? Or should these histories (the old but still alive and the unfolding recent one) be kept analytically separated?

In both cases, the involvement of medical practitioners and state agents sparked wider national debates about not only ritual male circumcision itself but also and, equally importantly, debates about the communities who practise it and their belonging and place within the German nation. These debates, furthermore, led in different ways to an emphasis on how both Jews and Muslims do not fully belong to the German nation but rather were considered separate nations within the nation, or a parallel society, neither assimilated nor integrated. They were a medium through which Jews and Muslims have been turned into problems that must be solved by ‘German politics’. The ritual of circumcision represented precisely one of the practices that did not match or was constructed as opposed to German values, whatever they were in the past or in the present. Moreover, in both cases, ritual male circumcision was also linked to a certain ‘barbarity’, and constructed as an ‘archaic’ practice that does not belong to the present time (then and now).

In this sense, one of the first complications that arises when thinking of the Jewish and Muslim ‘Questions’ together with the circumcision debates in German territory pertains to how we should think about past and present without falling prey to linear and teleological narratives that propose uninterrupted historical development. That is to say, by thinking of the contemporary ‘Muslim Question’ through and together with the ‘Jewish Question’, the intention is not to argue for a continual historical process, a transposition or a violent translation, or for a dialectical repetition, but rather to bear in mind how the history of the ‘Jewish Question’ continues to matter in the world today. To what extent does the circumcision debate that co-constituted the ‘Jewish Question’ matter for our understanding of the 2012 debate? Moreover, how are these discourses relevant to thinking about the questioning and problematisation of Muslims and Jews, either yesterday or today? In order to approach these questions, I draw on Stoler’s (2016) elaboration on recursive history as mode of critical inquiry that seeks to go beyond linear accounts of history.

Recursive history is a mode of genealogical inquiry that reconstructs a ‘sort of history marked by the uneven, unsettled, contingent quality of histories that fold back on themselves and, in that refolding reveal new surfaces and new planes’ (Stoler, 2016: 26). Recursive history gives attention to strange continuities that represent neither abrupt ruptures nor clear-cut stabilities in discourses; rather it takes as a focal point ‘processes of partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations’ (Stoler, 2016: 27).
Recursive history therefore seeks to inquire how discourses are neither constant repetitions, nor ceaseless new beginnings; instead, they operate through a polyvalent mobility in which old archives and discourses are reactivated, re-deployed, re-inscribed and reworked, thereby creating discourses that are not entirely new, but also not a blueprint of the past. Recursive history is thus attentive to the way certain archives are dusted off, activated, utilised and threaded along emerging discourses. As I argue below, certain discursive constructions that emerged during the ‘Jewish Question’ linked to the pairing of emancipation through assimilation – such as that evoked through the ‘archaic’ nature of ritual male circumcision – were recovered and redeployed, during the creation of new discursive constructions during the 2012 debate.

Through recursive history, the Jewish and Muslim ‘Questions’ can both be understood as contingent processes of drawing interior frontiers and of imagining the invisible bonds of the German nation as a set and sorts of sensibilities that distinguished the racially-characterised Jews and Muslims from the idealised figure of the German, and in this context the circumcision debates offer a window through which to interrogate the construction of those ‘invisible bonds’.

3 The ‘Invisible Bonds’ of the German Nation

During the unfolding of the circumcision debate in 2012, a variety of arguments were used to support a call for a nationwide ban on the practice. One dominant theme was developed by discussing the ritual in terms of competing rights, such as the right to bodily integrity versus religious rights, or the rights of children versus the rights of parents. Even though this frame and the medical one became some of the main axes along which the debate unfolded, I want to focus on another recurrent contra argument pertaining to the discussion and construction of the ritual, namely, its description as an archaic rite that stood in opposition to the secular modern German era. For instance, the German Academy for Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine (DAKJ) in its consensus paper on the issue stated: “The question may be asked here whether the leaders of Jewish and Muslim faiths could not reflect on whether a rite, which is even considered archaic by some believing Jews and Muslims, should be reconsidered” (DAKJ, 2012: 997 [my translation]). In a similar but less sensitive commentary, Michael Schmidt-Salomon, the spokesperson of the Giordano Bruno Foundation (one of the many civil associations actively calling for a nationwide ban on ritual male circumcision), expressed his dismay at the resolution
of the Bundestag that allowed the ritual under certain preconditions:5 “Today’s “foreskin” resolution of the German Bundestag is an indefensible prostration to conservative religious lobbyists and an indictment of the secular constitutional state, which is obviously shying away from its legal norms to endorse the propagandists of archaic rites’ (Schmidt-Salomon, 2012 [my translation]).

During the ‘debate’, consideration, comment and condemnation regarding ritual male circumcision swiftly spread to the internet, where virtual fora were created (Beschneidungsforum.de, 2012; Beschneidungsdebatte.info, n.d.), and the comment sections of articles proved to be a place where the disparagement of the ritual flourished: ‘On the internet you can find statements and descriptions of the traumatic experiences of circumcised men. Ancient, bloody and archaic knife activities in the genital area have a stone-age character’ (Frederic Voss in: IslamiQ, 2017 [my translation]).

Despite the difference in tone, aims, reach and positions from which they were elaborated, the above statements share a number of common themes and concerns. Ritual male circumcision is constructed as a practice of the past, of ancient times, and so it does not belong in the modern, secular and enlightened German society. It is particularly through the construction of the rite as having a ‘stone-age character’ that Germany and German identity emerge as opposed to the ritual and the communities in which it is part and parcel of their traditions. ‘Germans’ do not circumcise. This is the (not so) subtle message carried by these discourses in which modern ‘Germans’ oppose the ritual citing its archaic and bloody nature.

Racial characterisations and distinctions elaborated to justify exclusions rely on convoluted and uneven processes that thread together a variety of visible and invisible marks. As David T. Goldberg (2002) has documented, racism has also operated through historicist narratives positing dissimilar trajectories of historical maturity and immaturity through which groups and individuals

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5 The Giordano Bruno Foundation (GBF) is a non-profit organisation based in Cologne oriented towards advancing Enlightenment ideals and evolutionary humanism (GBS, n.d.). Based on these principles, the Foundation takes a strong stand against all religions. Ever since its establishment in 2004, the Foundation’s spokespersons and representatives have been involved in public controversies and initiatives involving critique of religion in general and Islam in particular, such as the foundation of the Central Council of ex-Muslims, or the establishment of the Critical Islam Conference (see: Hernández Agular, 2018). In a way, the GBF holds and speaks from the ‘secular-liberal point of view’ (Doughan and Tzuberi, 2018: 272), which purportedly sees itself as emerging from a position of neutrality, but this neutrality conceals the very specific social and political positions from which it originates.
are characterised and ranked in a temporal hierarchy. Racial historicism, as Goldberg (2002) termed this form of racial formation and characterisation, enacts racial difference by conjuring up narratives about groups ‘trapped in time’, lacking development, while constructing others as modern, enlightened and active producers of history. Given that the racial characterisation in the frame of racial historicism posits an underdevelopment of subjects, it also opens up space for their ‘betterment’ if they catch up with progress through learning and interiorising (integrating/assimilating) the ethos of the (non-circumcised) modern subject.

The earlier statements characterising ritual male circumcision as an archaic practice operate within the parameters of racial historicism by discursively and implicitly constructing not only the ritual but also the communities that perform it as unable to catch up with the triumphant march of secular time, a time which, as Judith Butler (2008: 1) reminds us, defines itself ‘over and against a pre-modern temporality that [it has] produced for the purpose of [its] self-legitimation’. By introducing a temporal distinction (archaic versus modern) another division of ontological character emerges: Muslims and Jews have not reached the same level of historical and secular progress as Germans, and so they need to be ‘acculturated’, ‘assimilated’ or ‘integrated’ into the cultural and moral parameters of being modern German subjects with secular sensibilities. In other words, Muslims and Jews do not share the invisible bonds that hold together the German nation because they perform the ritual of circumcision, a sign of their recalcitrant atavism.

Following Étienne Balibar, Stoler (2017) elaborates on the possibilities offered by the concept of ‘interior frontier’ when approaching issues of citizenship and racially-charged processes of inclusion and exclusion. Originally coined by Johan Gottlieb Fichte in his Addresses to the German Nation in 1922 (see Fichte 2013), the concept of ‘interior frontier’ stresses and signals ‘the natural frontiers of the State’ and how national community and identity have rested upon ‘invisible bonds’ (Fichte, 2013: 158) that bind together all of those subjects who share these intangible but fundamental ties (culture, language, values, norms and their embodiment). Given their vital significance, the integrity of invisible bonds must be defended, because such an intangible moral attitude, which holds the nation together, is susceptible to penetration from the exterior, that is, from its external border, but also from the interior, when people from ‘different heritage and language’ (Fichte, 2013: 158) reside and live within the national community. At its core, the concept of interior frontiers highlights all those ideas, sensibilities and moral attitudes (the invisible bonds) conjured up and mobilised to create, establish and predicate an internal ontological distinction between us and them, between, say, a ‘German we’
and ‘alien Others’, between those who practise rituals of a ‘stone-age character’ and those who live modern, secular lives.

Furthermore, as Stoler (2017) points out, one of the analytical advantages of the concept lies in its questioning of the malleability and situatedness of racially-constructed distinctions and the effects of that questioning on the construction of inclusive and exclusive notions of citizenship. The concept of interior frontiers allows us, for instance, to inquire about the implicit sensibilities, moral attitudes and values that are used in order to both set out what ‘Germanness’ is, i.e. what invisible bonds hold Germans together, and to clarify how these distinct traits exclude those who are deemed and constructed as not sharing such bonds. Thus, ‘interior frontiers will provide a succession of vantage points to identify the making of the “stranger” in the matrix of citizen and subject formation’ (Stoler, 2017).

Previously, I elaborated upon the ‘Muslim Question’ as the systematic problematisation of Muslims, and how that problematisation operates through two premises: first, that Muslims are a community alien to the nation, and second, that they should therefore integrate, meaning they should acquire, learn, interiorise and give allegiance to the invisible bonds of the German nation. The interior frontier hinges on these two axes of the ‘Muslim Question’: the invisible bonds signal those who belong and those who are ‘alien’ to the national community, while also stressing the lack of integration, given that Muslims do not share those intangible ties. In this vein, one of the many invisible bonds is that Germans do not circumcise their male infants, and thus, if they (Muslims and Jews) were integrated/assimilated, and if they shared this (secular and modern) value/norm/ideal, they would not circumcise their boys either.

4 Bloody Knives and Recursive Scissors

The circumcision debate in 2012 was an instance through which Jewish and Muslims communities and individuals were problematised and regarded as not fully belonging to the nation. However, the swift intervention of the Bundestag to provide these communities with legal and political security in relation to ritual male circumcision also became the target of criticism and further problematisation.6 This section will analyse a cartoon that satirises both ritual male

6 Doughan and Tzuberi (2018: 283) make a compelling argument that Germany’s historical guilt and responsibility toward the Jewish community underpinned the prompt response of the government to guarantee the performance of the ritual. However, this framework of protection is based primarily not on the protection of Jews as a religious minority in the
circumcision and the German government. In doing so, it recursively draws on the antisemitic archives of the ‘Jewish Question’ (world domination, blood libel) while tracing those discourses through more recent discourses such as the ‘Islamisation’ of Germany and of Europe at large. In this process, it depicts Muslims and Jews as communities that break the invisible bonds and thus the interior frontier of the German nation through infiltration.

After the German Parliament passed the legal amendment permitting ritual male circumcision without medical justification and with certain preconditions, a cartoon appeared on the website of the above-mentioned Giordano Bruno Foundation (Schmidt-Salomon, 2012). Cartoonist, Jacques Tilly, drew his satirical impression of the ‘precise’ moment at which the amendment was passed by the Bundestag.

The cartoon depicts a scene in what is supposed to be the Parliament. The central figures in the caricature are a rabbi and an imam flanking a priest. The three of them cheerfully hold up a yellow banner with the inscription, ‘For the Right to Circumcise Little Boys’, while the rabbi and the imam hold up in the air an open pair of scissors. From left to right, the imam wears a full-length grey tunic, glasses and a black hat. He has a white beard and his wide smile seems to reveal that he has only one tooth. In the middle, the figure representing the priest is wearing a white and purple tunic, gold chains and a mitre. He also is drawn with an elongated and rounded nose touching his upper lip. The rabbi has a less open smile than the other; he is dressed all in black, with glasses, a black hat, and sidelocks. These three figures are also flanked by the German and the European Union flags, representing, as it were, that they are inside Germany and the Union.

Prostrating in front of these figures, the cartoon depicts four groups of people wearing shirts of four different colours and with the acronyms of the political parties they represent. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) in blue, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) in black, the Greens (Grüne) in green, and finally the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in red. The only figure with shirt with a different tag stands within the CDU group and in front of the others. The shirt on her back says Merkel, with her buttocks slipping out of her trousers. All of these figures representing the political parties

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7 German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly intervened in the debate by criticising and calling for the Cologne Court’s 2012 decision to be reversed. She said: ‘I do not want Germany to be the only country in the world where Jews cannot practice their rituals. Otherwise we will become a laughingstock’ (Jones 2012).
in the Bundestag seem to have their eyes closed, while giving the impression of being in total submission to the three representatives of ‘religion’.

The submission of the German political elite to the religious figures in the cartoon is of fundamental significance for the understanding of the workings of recursive history and the erecting of racially-charged interior frontiers. From the drawing, it is possible to infer that Jacques Tilly assessed the passing of the bill by the Bundestag as a moment when the representatives of the German nation yielded to ‘religion’; they capitulated to the desires of, as Schmidt-Salomon (2012) put it in the article where the cartoon appears, the ‘propagandist of archaic rites’. The cartoon stands for a moment of surrender: it depicts a waning Germany, in which secular values are being overturned from ‘within’ by these ‘propagandist’ religious figures. The histories of both antisemitism and Islamophobia have provided numerous examples of Jews and Muslims being accused of tearing apart the unity of the nation but, in the cartoon, Christianity is also depicted as posing a threat to the German nation. This inclusion can be seen as emerging from the entrenched ‘secular-enlightened-humanist’ position of the Giordano Bruno Foundation, which asserts as its *leitmotif* that its goal is to

develop a viable humanistic, rational and evidence-based alternative to the traditional religions and to help it become established in society. This objective is based on the insight that we cannot face the complex challenges of the 21st century using the religious paradigms of the past.

GBS, n.d.
Again, a temporal distinction that becomes ontological is created between those religious figures of the past and the German secular present. But the position of the GBS is only one among many competing to define what German identity really stands for, and the circumcision debate represented an important arena in which to advance those ideals. The prostrations that nurture such representations, moreover, activate old and more recent tropes of racially-inspired conspiracy theories, such as domination by infiltration – an infiltration from within so powerful and insidious that it has even reached the highest legislative body of the German nation.

At a glance then, two conspiracy theories merge into a discourse positing the weakening or dissolution of the invisible bonds of the German nation. On the one hand, the cartoon conjures up and exploits the antisemitic conspiracy theory of Jewish world domination epitomised in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and the alleged plan to dominate the word by controlling strategic sites of influence (media, economy, politics), which also contains the implication that such a plan involves a scheme to subvert the morality, values and ideas of ‘gentiles’ too (for a critical overview of the *Protocols*, see De Michelis, 2004). On the other hand, the prostrating political parties – the moment of German surrender – recall the *sujud*, one of the positions of prayer in Islam. By means of this intertextual allusion, the cartoon activates another conspiracy, that of the ‘Islamisation of Europe/Germany’ – a deliberate and aggressive plan by Muslims, in complicity with some European elites, to turn European values, ideas, norms and populations into Islamic ones, resulting in the feared ‘Great Replacement’ and the full establishment of Eurabia (on this issue, see Carr, 2006; Bangstad, 2013; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar, 2020; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2018). The cartoon threads together these two conspiracies. The prostration represents a re-inscription and amplified recuperation of the conspiracy theory of Jewish world domination and of Muslim infiltration and replacement, while portraying a self-imputed loss: losing control of the nation, the dissolution of German identity, values and ideals, both common in discussions of the ‘Jewish Question’ and in the current problematisation of Muslims. But the cartoon adds another particular layer: Christianity takes part in the erosion of German identity.

The cartoon depicted above is in fact an amended version. The original is exactly the same but with one exception. Instead of scissors, the imam and the rabbi gleefully hold in the air knives dripping blood.8

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8 This version of the cartoon was removed from the article.
Tilly’s first cartoon was criticised as antisemitic: the bloody knife in the rabbi’s hand recursively alluded to, recuperated, and re-inscribed the Blood Libel, one of the oldest and most recurrent tropes of antisemitism, into the circumcision debate and the figure of the Jew. Commenting on the amendment, Tilly acknowledged that the knife in the rabbi’s hand could be seen as antisemitic, although he insisted there was no antisemitism in the cartoon whatsoever, and in order to avoid misinterpretations he decided to change the artefacts, not because he believed they were antisemitic but only because he did not want the cartoon to be read that way:

The cartoon was intended to criticise the German parliament’s submissive attitude on religious issues, of which last Friday’s resolution is just one of many examples. In the rush, unfortunately, as I later discovered, I gave the wrong tools to the representatives of Judaism and Islam. Ignoring the overall context of the picture, the image of the Orthodox rabbi with knife in hand could indeed be interpreted as antisemitic, although of course that was at no point my intention. Antisemitism is a serious mental illness, which must be countered with complete determination. The new version avoids the risk of misinterpretation and I think it brings out the real message of the cartoon more clearly and more charming.

Tilly, quoted in Schmidt-Salomon, 2012 [my translation]

Although Tilly exchanged the knives for scissors in the hands of both the rabbi and the imam, his comments on the original drawing refer only to Jewish sensibilities and hurt, and not to those that might be felt by Muslims, for the depiction of a laughing imam holding a bloody knife in front of the Bundestag did not meet with any criticism. As Sabine Schiffer and Constantin Wagner (2011) argue, one important difference between present-day antisemitism and Islamophobia in Germany lies in the degree to which public expressions of the former are quickly and vigorously denounced, while expressions of the latter are, by and large, publicly accepted (see also Shooman, 2012). Moreover, this differentiated treatment of religious minorities in Germany corresponds with a secular-liberal view that presents the critique of the Muslim community as a much-needed critique of religion within the framework of freedom of speech, whereas the same critique when directed at the Jewish community is carefully framed so as to avoid any accusation of antisemitism (Doughan and Tzuberi, 2018: 289). Tilly’s disavowal of the sensibilities that may be hurt or injured by the depiction of a bloodthirsty imam reflect to some extent the dominant attitudes to the circumcision debate. The debate began by problematising ritual
male circumcision practised by Muslims, but as the debate swiftly came to focus on Jewish sensibilities and Germany’s historical responsibility for Jewish communities, no one denounced the racist portrayal of the imam.

Furthermore, according to Tilly’s argument, changing the tool in the rabbi’s hand make the charge of antisemitism disappear. But the scissors do not necessarily make things better or more ‘charming’; rather, they mobilise the recursive history of the circumcision debates within the context of the ‘Jewish Question’, while partially re-inscribing those archives into the present.

Below is a cartoon from the antisemitic Austrian magazine Kikeriki (1912) with the caption, ‘Circumcision: It Makes a Profit, That Is Why the Jews Practise it’ (reproduced in: Judd, 2007: 100; ANNO, 2011). This cartoon depicts a mohel with a broken-toothed smile, long beard and an aquiline nose touching his upper lip, wearing a skullcap, sidelocks and a coat, and holding in one hand an open pair of scissors, and in the other a ducat. Beside him at waist level there is also a barrel full of ducats. As Judd (2007: 99) argues, the financial aspect of rituals (including circumcision and slaughter) became more dominant against...
the background of the Great Depression (1873–1896), and these concerns were also intertwined with the ‘traditional images of the “Jewish usurer”’ (Judd, 2007: 99), linking both ritual male circumcision and ritual slaughter with ‘Jewish greediness’ and ‘Jewish bloodlust’. Although the tools that are depicted in these cartoons do matter, what is important to underscore is the wider, recursive historical context in which the cartoons are situated. What do they tell us about how Jews and Muslims are racially imagined and ontologically fixed as alien? Moreover, what do they tell us about the subject position that keeps posing Questions, that is, the German subject and the purportedly invisible sensibilities, values and moral attitudes that ‘craft’ that position. In short, what makes a German truly German, and how does this process necessarily rely on imagining the invisible bonds of Germans as different from those of other communities, say Jews or Muslims?

5 Conclusion

The concept of interior frontier, as discussed by Stoler (2000: 324), offers another analytical advantage for it hinges on a fundamental tension of nation-building, namely, the coexistence of discourses and practices of inclusion alongside exclusionary and discriminatory practices and ideas. Understanding the crafting of the interior frontiers in a particular context thus can offer ‘a succession of vantage points to identify the making of the “stranger” in the matrix of citizen and subject formation’ (Stoler, 2017). In this contribution, I made case for understanding the discursive problematisation dubbed the ‘circumcision debate’ as a prism through which to recognise the crafting of interior frontiers in contemporary Germany. However, the discourses that problematised the Jewish and Islamic ritual of circumcision coexisted with inclusionary discourses and ultimately with legislation that secured the right to perform it, albeit with some preconditions. I conclude this contribution by presenting the latest attempt to problematise ritual male circumcision in Germany (the exclusionary drive) and discuss it through an inclusionary reaction to this new attempt to ban it.

On 24 January 2020, the far-right organisation Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) planned to hold a demonstration against the ‘circumcision of little boys’ in the vicinity of the Ohel Jakob-Synagogue in Munich (dpa 2020). The city of Munich prohibited the demonstration out of public order and security concerns, but PEGIDA’s attempt to revive the problematisation of ritual male circumcision while attempting to create a politics of fear and intimidation close to the synagogue speaks of
how the ritual can and continues to be conjured up and mobilised in order to create the ‘stranger’, the communities alien to the German nation. PEGIDA’s attempt to problematise the ritual was met by a demonstration organised by the association calling itself ‘Munich is colourful’ (München ist bunt), which attracted approximately 1,500 persons who opposed PEGIDA’s politics of fear and intimidation.

PEGIDA’s original raison d’être was to stop the alleged ongoing Islamisation of the Occident, but it also seeks to problematise Jewish life through its attempt to ban ritual male circumcision. This shows the mobility and fluidity of racial discourses, the linking once again of race and religion, as Gil Anidjar (2003) has documented, and the fundamental role of conspiracy theories in the racial characterisation of Jews and Muslims as communities ‘alien’ to the German nation. Nevertheless, the opposition to PEGIDA’s attempt to oppose the ritual also sheds light on the existence of different elaborations on the imaginaries surrounding German identity, and on one that includes the protection of religious minorities.

I return now to one of my opening questions about why the history of the ‘Jewish Question’ continues to matter, modestly realising not only that there is no single answer to that question, understanding that posing such a question was too ambitious from the outset, and yet also being aware that it is a question that needs to be asked again in so far as Questions keep being asked – Questions that are problematisations of religious minorities writ large, and Questions that seek to delimit the boundaries of citizenship and belonging by marking subjects as not ready yet to be included in the imagined national community.

Biographical Note

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