Narrating Liberal Rights and Culture: Muslim Face Veiling, Urban Coexistence and Contention in Spain

Marian Burchardt, Mar Griera and Gloria García-Romeral

Drawing on cultural sociology approaches to the role of narrative and framing in politics, this article explores urban contestations over Muslim face veiling in Spain. We argue that regimes of religious diversity are shaped by the ways that the framing and narrating of rights and culture acquire cultural resonance and political traction in urban society. We find that the meanings attached to the face veil and mobilised in public discourses draw on memories and stocks of knowledge emerging from recent histories of urban society. In order to resonate with broader publics and their sensibilities, actors organise these meanings through storylines and integrate them into narratives. We demonstrate that those in favour of the ban on face veiling were able to construct a coherent and expressive narrative around values of social harmony while simultaneously framing it in the language of rights, which allowed them to influence local media and popular discourse in decisive ways. Arguments against the ban, on the contrary, were mostly based on a much narrower rights-based approach that remained abstract and highly difficult to convert into a narrative.

Keywords: Religious Diversity; Cultural Sociology; Migration; Spain; Urban Conflict

Introduction

How can we explain the emergence of local policies aimed at regulating migration-driven religious diversity, such as restrictions on religious dress in public spaces—in our case, face veils worn by Muslim women—and the shape of the discursive contestations surrounding them? In many European societies with high levels of...
immigration, conflicts over the claims of newcomer religious communities have become endemic over the last two decades. Sociologists interested in religious diversity, Muslim integration and policy change have so far mainly focused on regulations on the national or European level and explored how national integration ideologies or the functional logics of institutional fields shape pathways of incorporation. In this article, by contrast, we explore how regimes of religious diversity are shaped by the ways the framing and narrating of rights and culture acquire cultural resonance and political traction in the public discourses of urban society.

On 8 October 2010, the city council of the Catalan city of Lleida passed a ban that prohibits the use of the Muslim face veil, locally referred to as a burqa, in all municipal spaces such as buildings belonging to the city and public transport, with fines of up to €600 for violations. This political decision occurred amidst heated debates about female Islamic face veiling in a number of Western European countries (Koussens and Roy 2014; Ferrari and Pastorelli 2013; Spohn 2013; Parvez 2011; Moors 2009). By changing the city’s by-law regulating this behaviour in municipal spaces, the city even outpaced Belgium and France, whose attempts to ban the burqa had broad political support but faced considerable legal hurdles. While the timing suggests that the debates in France and Belgium helped local politicians to turn the ban into a part of their policy repertoire, direct influences are difficult to trace. Importantly, however, the ban occurred at a time when there was no national debate on the topic in Spain. In the meantime, a local migrant association appealed the decision to the Supreme Court in Madrid, which declared it unconstitutional while suggesting legally sound ways for regulation on a national level. On 1 July 2014 the European Court of Human Rights upheld France’s ban on wearing the Muslim full-face veil, which is likely to have an impact on future dynamics in Spain.

While we take it as a given that burqa bans are instrumentally linked to mobilising nativist populist politics for likely electoral gains, such gains are only enabled through discourses that attach shared meanings to objects of contention. In this article, we investigate how this particular policy initiative emerged from a local history of conflict with its own chronology, conflict sequences and involvement of local actors with stakes and vested interests rooted in urban society. Instead of analysing how macro-level contexts shape the local, we explore how local ones shape national, and eventually global, conflicts by introducing issues of contention to higher regulatory levels. They do so through political and judicial means but also by grappling with, and discursively engaging ideas about, global confrontations. In other words we explore how they conceptualise the ways global and civilisational conflicts play out in their urban lifeworlds.

While broadly situated within sociological debates on religious diversity in Europe, our research addresses and combines cultural sociology approaches to politics (Gamson 1992) and social movements (Snow and Benford 1992) with an approach that considers policymaking as a complex interplay of knowledge, power, social interests and agency. In line with the ‘argumentative turn’ in the analysis of public policies, we emphasise the ‘ways in which particular concepts or story-lines frame what and who is taken into consideration and excluded from policy deliberation’
In this context, we note that ‘rights talk’ (Glendon 1991) becomes increasingly important to both nationalist discourse and religious citizenship debates. With regards to the Netherlands, Uitermark, Mepschen, and Duyvendak (2014, 235) found that ‘political leaders and public figures have reconfigured what had been values of universal liberal citizenship into national values of cultural distinctiveness: “Dutch values” versus “Islamic values”’, suggesting that liberal rights are increasingly framed in the language of culture. Conversely, we are interested in how, in urban society, debates on cultural values come to be framed in the idiom of rights and how diverse social groups take rights talk on board. Yet similar to scholars concerned with ‘repressive’ or ‘illiberal liberalism’ (Joppke 2007), we ask how civic commitment to a shared culture is conceptualised through liberal legal repertoires.

We analyse the actions and discourses of three sets of actors: local politicians, migrant and religious associations and influential individuals acting as ‘moral entrepreneurs’. We find that the meanings attached to the face veil and mobilised in their discourses draw on memories and stocks of knowledge emerging from recent history of urban society. In order to harmonise with broader public sensibilities, actors need to organise these meanings through storylines and integrate these into narratives. We demonstrate that those in favour of the ban on face veiling were able to construct a coherent narrative around *values of social harmony* while simultaneously claiming to defend women’s and migrants’ rights and that this ability allowed them to influence local media and popular discourse in decisive ways. Arguments against the ban, on the contrary, were mostly based on a much narrower rights-based approach that remained abstract and highly difficult to convert into a narrative.

Methodologically the article is based on qualitative research, in particular interviews with bureaucrats in the local administration, leaders of migrant associations, representatives from political parties and other important participants in public discourse and ethnographic observations carried out in 2013.

In order to contextualise our analysis, we provide a brief overview of sociological debates on migration-driven religious diversity and Islam in Spain and situate our theoretical perspective. We then set the scene by describing the history of contention around Islam in Lleida. The main section of the article examines how the burqa ban as a policy emerged from contested narratives circulating in urban society and shaping interests and alliances.

### Migration, Religious Diversity and Islam in Spain

Within the last five years, the Islamic face veil—variously referred to as burqa or niqab—has become the focus of popular debate, cultural critique, political contestation and judicial politics. Spearheaded by a commission to issue recommendations against the burqa under the Sarkozy presidency in France in 2009, full-face veil debates emerged not only in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, Quebec, Italy and Spain but also in multicultural Canada. Burqa debates have been seen as both media-driven reloads of earlier controversies around Muslim
headscarves and as a new arena of contestations over religious pluralism, minority rights and multicultural citizenship.

Such contestations are related to increases in the foreign-born population, which between 1998 and 2013 more than quadrupled in Spain, rising from 2.95% to 13.8% in 2013,1 peaking at 18.1% in Catalonia and introducing new forms of religious diversity (Martínez-Arínó et al. 2011). Illustrative of this is the number of Islamic places of worship, which now number more than 1,274 (4.4%).2 This substantial growth of Islam in Spain has sparked the emergence of local and national controversies over the incorporation of Muslim newcomers. Interestingly, Muslims have faced more barriers to incorporation at the local than national level as multiple conflicts over mosque constructions reveal (Astor 2012). On the national level, the 2004 terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda in Madrid strengthened views amongst policymakers that there is a need to reinforce Muslims’ loyalty to their host country. Subsequently, national political and legal actors worked to accommodate Muslim claims for recognition more proactively in Spain than in other countries. Burqa controversies in Spain arose within this context and thus led to local conflicts over the incorporation of Muslim newcomers into Spanish society.

Spain differs from other European countries in that attitudes towards Muslim immigrants have been generally less hostile. Especially in Catalonia, public authorities have actively promoted religious diversity and there is a long and powerful tradition of rights-based social mobilisations in favour of minorities. This raises intriguing questions as to why rights-based discourse failed to mobilise mass support in conflicts over mosques and the burqa.

Broadly speaking, recent studies conceptualise burqa controversies as part of the ‘way in which societies create opportunities for the development of Islam, or oppose them’ (Buijs and Rath 2003, 9), which entails regulations running in parallel to those on the building of mosques, veiling or the provision of halal food. The forms and degrees of the accommodation of Muslim religious needs (Fetzer and Soper 2005) in terms of cross-country and cross-institutional comparisons have become the main foci for research on Islam in Europe (Maussen 2012; Bowen 2007). Similarly, most research on burqa controversies have so far been limited to the macro-level and legal considerations3 and are centred on understanding ‘why some countries chose to ban while others did not’ (Ferrari and Pastorelli 2013, 1), associating this with national regimes of religious diversity and citizenship.

However, while these institutional approaches are well suited to explaining cross-country variations, they are less adequate in accounting for the origins of these controversies. Focusing on differences and similarities between country-level approaches to Islam in the legal and political domains (Koussens and Roy 2014; Ferrari and Pastorelli 2013), they rarely explore the contingent bottom-up framing dynamics in the specific settings from which they emerge. Recently, this comparative approach has been complemented by legal research on public reasoning around the burqa (Amiraux 2013; Spohn 2013; Fournier 2013) offering a nuanced view of the complex legal and political negotiations of the Muslim presence in Western societies.
However, placing the debate on abstract levels, these studies do not always show how legal discourse impinges on local politics.

To overcome these limitations, and similarly to Galembert (2005), we focus on the situated politics that frame controversies as sites for understanding Muslim incorporation and Islam’s visibility. Citizenship regimes and state–church models matter in explaining public controversies but need to be complemented by a ‘process-oriented analysis’ (Koenig 2009) that traces interactions and framing strategies on the ground. The complexity of burqa controversies lies in the ways in which the local and the global intersect in strategic political action (in city councils), civic activism (by ‘moral entrepreneurs’ and social movements) and judicial politics (in courts) and, as we suggest, the framing of such intersections in discourse and narrative.

Framing Meanings in Discourse and Narrative

Much of the sociological literature views emergent forms of religious diversity in relation to changes in church–state regimes, human rights–oriented legal reform and citizenship while bottom-up processes of local framing and meaning-making remain under-studied. From a socio-constructionist perspective, public controversies are intersubjectively constructed within complex power relations as well as historical, social and cultural configurations. In these configurations, discourses articulate political and media-based processes of ‘problematisation’ of issues—such as the burqa—while also becoming sites of struggle.

With our emphasis on the discursive dimension of political processes, agenda-setting and policy change, our approach draws on the ‘argumentative turn’ in the social sciences (Fisher and Forester 1993), the theory of knowledge production by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and the analysis of framing processes in social movements by Snow and Benford (1992). The common starting points of these approaches are the Thomas theorem on the ‘definition of situation’ and the recognition that collective interpretations and their articulation in coherent and meaningful discourses are elements that profoundly shape the logics of political fields.

This implies that social problems are discursively constructed and located in a frame which ‘signifies and condenses the world ‘out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment’ (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). However, frames and narratives are not only cognitive tools in a world of ‘meaning seekers’ but also operate by ‘structuring relations, in determining whether groups turn into opponents rather than collaborators, whether a confrontation leads to joint governance or conflict’ (Hajer and Laws 2006, 261), and enable ‘discursive coalitions’ whose members gather around common storylines and policy narratives.

Whether discursive coalitions drawing on common ‘storylines’ are eventually successful in public discourse and the political field has much to do with their abilities to provide the symbolic resources that help people to negotiate meaning. In his book *Talking politics*, Gamson (1992, 117) suggests that for negotiations of meaning *media*
discourse, experiential knowledge and popular wisdom are fundamental resources to draw on. We suggest that the success of participants in public discourse depends on their capacities to offer such resources or harmonise with them. Recognising the fundamentally ‘storied nature of much political discourse’ (Steinberg 1998, 846), we now turn to describing the conflict around burqa-wearing in Lleida and the way it entered local collective memories and stocks of knowledge.

The Lleida Burqa Ban

Lleida is a Catalan municipality and provincial capital with more than 139,000 residents and a foreign-born population of 21% (2012). Agriculture, particularly the growing of fruit, is one of the main economic activities in the area. The demand for low-skilled labour in the agricultural sector helped to turn Lleida into a popular destination for foreign workers, especially from the late 1990s onwards. A significant part of the foreign-born population is originally from Morocco and Algeria (22%) and sub-Saharan Africa (15%). While there have also been significant increases in the numbers of migrants originating from Latin America and Eastern Europe during this period, the proportion of North Africans, who are overwhelmingly Muslim, was significantly higher in Catalonia than in the rest of Spain (Astor 2012, 50). As a consequence, public perceptions of migration, religious difference and economic precariousness are more directly mapped onto one another in terms of social otherness in Catalonia than elsewhere in the Iberian Peninsula.

During our interviews, it quickly became clear that the ‘burqa ban’ controversy was deeply entangled in longstanding contentious local politics around migration, integration and religious diversity. The most important issues in this regard were the growth of a mosque community with Salafist leadership, rumours of Saudi funding and conflicts over a Muslim bookshop and other premises rented by this group. All our interviewees at some point talked about these issues or directly associated the burqa conflict with them. Exemplary in this regard was the statement of one pro-ban activist who framed the links as follows:

Alright, look, in the city of Lleida there are two mosques. One is Salafist and the other one is not. The Salafist mosque has a fundamentalist imam with direct connections to Saudi Arabia and since he arrived in the city we find women wearing the face veil. This includes his wife. She is completely covered from head to toe and also wears sunglasses and gloves that cover her hands.

The older mosque, called Omar Islamic Centre and located in a discrete building in front of the city hall, opened in 1990 on the initiative of the Senegalese Tijani. The Salafist-oriented Associació Unió i Cooperació Islàmica de Lleida i Comarca was founded in 1996 and mainly attracts people of Moroccan and Algerian origin. The local definition of face veiling as a problem is thus closely tied to the growing membership of this second community and the idea that it indicates a rise in fundamentalism and the radicalisation of local Muslims.
The longstanding conflict around this mosque began in May 2001 when the
Associació Unió i Cooperació Islàmica de Lleida i Comarca purchased an old
warehouse and converted it into their official place of worship. When it opened
under the name of Ibn Hazn, neighbours complained that the place did not fulfil
the required conditions.\(^4\) Seven months after the opening, the city council closed the
place on the grounds that legal requirements were not met. After addressing the
issues, the mosque received official permission to reopen a few months later, creating
further discontent in the neighbourhood residents association, which collected
signatures for a petition, organised demonstrations and lobbied the local council to
take further action.

In this context, in 2005 the city government created the ‘Municipal Assembly of
Religions’ as a new advisory and consulting body made up of different religious
groups present in the city, in line with various attempts to manage migration-driven
religious diversity through creative policies in Catalonia (Griera 2012; Astor 2014). The
Assemblea Municipal de les Religions was to be a meeting and communication
point between local authorities and representatives of different religions with the aim
of promoting social harmony in the city. However, tensions arose when representa-
tives of the Associació Unió i Cooperació Islàmica de Lleida i Comarca declared that
they would only participate on the condition that Buddhists and Baha’is be excluded.
The organisers of the Assemblea concluded that Muslim participation trumped that of
Buddhists and Baha’is in terms of political significance and decided that the latter
would instead be represented in the city’s network of interfaith dialogue. Shortly
afterward the refusal of Ibn Hazn’s imam to be interviewed by a female journalist
during the month of Ramadan became public. This first controversy with local mass
media defined the imam’s image as a radical Salafist.

The mosque controversy reached a new peak in 2007 when neighbourhood protests
and subsequent media pressure forced local authorities to solve the problem by
suggesting a new site. After lengthy negotiations, the mosque and local authorities
agreed to relocate the mosque to a municipal plot in an industrial park, which was
again highly controversial. Local business owners felt that there should only be
commercial entities in a commercial zone and protested. Simultaneously the Ibn Hazn
mosque proved unable to raise enough funds to complete the project and relationships
between the imam and the mayor became increasingly strained. In addition, various
immigrant organisations accused the imam of mismanagement of community
resources in local media. Meanwhile, the local business association had successfully
appealed to the Catalan Court of Justice against the municipal repurposing of the
plot.\(^5\)

After complaints about noise and traffic congestion, in June 2010 city officials
visited the mosque in order to count the number of participants in Friday prayer and
found that roughly 1,200 persons were present in the building, which had a maximum
approved capacity of 240. As a consequence the place was shut down while the mosque
leadership was pressured to find a permanent solution to avoid permanent closure. In
press interviews, the mosque leader voiced doubts about the technical reasons given by
the city government and stated that his group felt persecuted. During this period, he was also accused (and later acquitted) of polygamy and mistreatment and physical abuse of a converted Spanish woman. Some newspapers also published statements by the imam encouraging Muslims to take advantage of Catalan nationalism for the benefit of Islamic communities. Eventually, city officials definitively closed the mosque in September 2010 for failure to comply with capacity restrictions.

It was in this context that Lleida’s mayor stated in May 2010 that the burqa was ‘denigrating for women and should not be tolerated’. The following day a councillor from the opposition party of Catalan nationalists and Christian Democrats (CiU) announced that he would file a motion to ban the burqa in the entire city, including streets and squares. Given the already heated debates over Muslim radicalism, these statements received widespread coverage in local and national media. A report, prepared by legal advisors on the mayor’s behalf, rejected this proposal on technical grounds and limited the possible ban to the interior of municipal buildings (such as libraries, sports centres and municipal offices). During a council meeting in late May, CiU passed a motion for a ban which only the Green Party (IVC) voted against, with the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) abstaining.

Two months after the mayor’s initial statements, the controversy expanded beyond Lleida. The leader of the Partido Popular, Spain’s largest centre-right party and the one currently in power, which had already tried unsuccessfully to bring the issue up in a debate in Barcelona’s city council in 2007, requested a full-face veil ban during a municipal culture commission. In the Spanish senate too, the Partido Popular presented a motion in favour of a ban. Between June and July 2010, Cóin in Andalusia (a region in Southern Spain) and seven Catalan municipalities followed in the footsteps of Lleida and banned the wearing of face veils in municipal spaces through municipal by-laws. In addition, Reus and Barcelona adopted bans by mayoral decree without debate. Furthermore, face-veil bans were debated in five other Catalan municipalities but proposals were rejected. Rather than being completely exceptional, Lleida thus became a catalyst of developments elsewhere in Spain.

In July 2010, the Watani Association, a migrant association led by a young Moroccan with no links to the city’s Islamic communities, announced that he would appeal the ban with the help of a Barcelona-based lawyer who had accepted the case pro bono. After suffering defeat in the Catalan Court of Justice in Barcelona, they took the case to the Supreme Court in Madrid, which eventually ruled in their favour in February 2013. The judges stated that only a higher level law (ley orgánica) could affect such a ban and that the city had no jurisdiction to do so. The court also stated that there were no sociological grounds that justified the ban and deemed it to be contrary to the principle of religious freedom.

Since the closure of their mosque, the Islamic community of the Ibn Hazn mosque has been meeting and praying in different public places (parking areas, public squares, empty plots, etc.) and in a public exhibition centre on special occasions (e.g. Ramadan) and has no permanent place of worship. Meanwhile, burqa debates in
Lleida are on standby, even though the mayor announced that he would appeal against the Supreme Court’s decision despite it being legally impossible.

**Political Constellations and Alliances**

Three groups of actors are central to an understanding of the framing of the conflict: local politicians, migrant and religious associations and influential individuals acting as ‘moral entrepreneurs’. The fact that urban dynamics matter becomes readily evident when considering politicians’ positions: the mayor who pushed for the ban was a Social Democrat whose party took a different stance on the issue in the Catalan parliament. Similarly the Republican Left abstained in the local vote while clearly opposing such policies as part of the Catalan government. These divergences only make sense if we place them in the context of local experiences that were increasingly organised according to a storyline revolving around the figure of the Salafist imam as the main villain of the city. Whether in the conflict around the mosque and the Islamic bookshop, interactions in integration and language classes or indeed the burqa affair, the Salafist imam and his circles are consistently pitted against the local administration, politicians, the media and other civic groups.

Interestingly, even though the only women known to wear the burqa are within his circles, it was not the imam who appealed against the ban but an aspiring young man who founded a migrant association with little influence and standing amongst migrant populations. However, the young man used the burqa conflict and his association as a platform to gain a higher profile in local civic society. Other Muslim-dominated migrant associations too emphasised their disagreement with the mosque leadership, oscillating in their stance between moral disapproval of burqa wearing and doubt about the legal ban as an appropriate response. Thus, the president of a migrant association remarked:

> The issue of burqa wearing has to do with someone’s mentality or that of the family. I think this is a personal decision or a family decision. But the burqa has nothing to do with the Muslim religion. The Quran says that women should hide the beautiful parts of their body. But this way where you can only see the eyes and nothing else is really a bit exaggerated. Though as long as there’s no trouble, let everybody wear what they want.

The presence of progressive Muslim-dominated associations made it difficult to project the conflict in terms of a polarised dualism (non-Muslim Catalans vs. Muslims) in public debates. However, even more important in this regard is the role of the second, African-dominated mosque community. While being virtually absent as an actor in the burqa debates, this mosque community came to be celebrated by local authorities and the media as a showcase for an Islam that can be successfully integrated into the urban fabric. Instead of a simple antagonism, we observe the emergence of graduated forms of Muslim incorporation into urban society, which eventually resulted in the construction of two images of Islam: on the one hand, an Islam that is compatible with not only Western values but also local codes of social
harmony, and on the other hand, segregationist Islam that refuses integration. One of the main effects of the burqa debates in Lleida, and probably elsewhere in Europe, is in fact the public profiling of these two images.

This is not to deny that electoral and mass media logic consistently worked to project the conflict about the burqa in dualistic—and obviously starkly misleading—terms, in the sense that if one was against the ban one must have been in favour of the face veil, and by implication in favour of patriarchy, women’s oppression, religious segregation and so on. A city councillor from the Catalan Green Party described to us in detail how difficult it was to present the burqa issue from a liberal rights-based perspective to increasingly polarised audiences and that he was repeatedly accused of promoting Muslim radicalism.

Again, however, the dualism, which appeared to mark the burqa debates from the beginning, rather obscures the complexity of the institutional relationships between the migrant, cultural and religious associations of local civil society and the city government. In the discussions, Muslim-dominated associations had to straddle the divergent path between demonstrating commitment to migrants’ concerns to their communities (while opinions on what that meant in the burqa conflict obviously varied greatly), maintaining good working relations with the city government and simultaneously sending signals of strength and autonomy to the Ibn Hazn leadership. In other words the burqa debates turned into arenas for negotiating claims to authority between different associations aiming to represent Muslims and for sustaining patronage relationships between migrant civil society and local government.

Importantly such patronage and concomitant financial dependency had emerged in Catalonia over the last two decades through diverse proactive policies towards the management of cultural and religious diversity. More than in other parts of Spain, this involved funding for migrant and religious associations and resulting incentives to keep good relationships. In the case of Lleida, several interviewees declared that they saw the Assemblea de les Religions as an instrument for co-opting religious leaders and neutralising criticism. One interviewee said: ‘When the leaders of the community are hired by the local administration and get money from them, they will hardly show opposition to the local government’. This structural ambivalence was reflected in the inability of these migrant associations to construct a coherent narrative, as often evidenced in a ‘Yes, but…’ or ‘No, but…’ rhetoric. Simple assent was especially difficult because of the presence, albeit marginal, of the xenophobic far-right party Plataforma per Catalunya.

Moral Entrepreneurs

Besides migrants’ cultural and religious associations and local government and politicians, there is a third category of important actors in the burqa debates: local women from the ranks of political and civil society who, at some point in their political lives decided to dedicate their efforts to migrants’ causes and came to act as moral entrepreneurs. Associated with political parties and civil society groups, these
women sought contact with Muslim groups just as Muslim groups sought to enlist their support because of the cultural and social capital they possessed. We ground the notion of moral entrepreneurs in social movement theory (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and phenomenological research on moral communication (Luckmann 2002) and wish to capture two aspects through the term: first, these women are entrepreneurs in that they promote and market their ideas about Islam and feminism as particular topics to wide audiences. Second, they are moral entrepreneurs because ideas about good and bad are highly salient in their moral proselytism.

These women have acquired particular competences in Islam and issues concerning women in Islam and majority Muslim societies through academic study, travel and long-term contact with Muslim and women groups in North African countries. They have spent longer periods there, have close contact with, or have friends who are Muslims and who may act as witnesses of their experiences on their behalf. They have also written books on Islam, feminism, patriarchy, veiling and full-face veiling. We found female moral entrepreneurs on both sides, that is, entrepreneurs promoting and others fighting against the face veil ban, which underscores the deep divisions concerning issues of Islam and multiculturalism in feminist scholars found elsewhere (Spohn 2013; Scott 2009; Okin 1999).

We suggest that moral entrepreneurs are important in shaping debates on full-face veiling because they supply arguments for other political actors who lack sophisticated knowledge to sustain their framing efforts. What is more, based on their personal experiences, they offer arguments interwoven with stories, which are validated by their expertise, backed by some, typically ‘liberal’, Muslim constituency and authorised by their standing in Catalan political life. The ‘order of appearance’ (Muslim actors taking a backseat) is important here: neither migrant Muslim women themselves nor Catalan converts can play their role since either qualification (foreign origin, conversion) would probably disqualify them from doing so. While in this context Muslims are chiefly positioned as expert witnesses (regarding the oppressive nature of Salafism or Muslim women’s agency, respectively), non-Muslim moral entrepreneurs have the privilege of being perceived as personally disinterested campaigners for the common good. Mediating between migrant associations and party politics, these women provide coherent storylines that package events and rumours circulating in the city around the Muslim Salafist community and trade them between different constituencies. Assembling storylines permits audiences to form a sense of what is going on, identify the victims, note the culprits and adopt a moral stance towards the situation.

It is within this complex network of institutional relationships that local burqa debates unfolded and came to crystallise around the discursive nodes we explicate in the following.

**Moral Arguments: Liberating Democratic Islam**

Chiefly, there are three arguments in favour of the burqa ban: culturally, it functions as a signal for the promotion of ‘our values’, such as gender equality, individual
freedom and notions of a ‘folksy sociality’; religiously, it erects barriers against Islamic radicalism and helps to promulgate a progressive Islam; and politically, it frees Muslim women from patriarchal pressure to wear it, safeguards human dignity and allows them to engage in and promote Islam as a moderate religion compatible with Western modernity (see Moors 2009, 400). All of these arguments helped to articulate discourses on cultural values with rights talk, i.e. to narrate ideas about shared culture using the language of liberal rights. The stories recounted to underpin these arguments are those of Muslim women who left their countries of origin because they wished to escape the oppression of women wrought by Muslim radicalisation. These are powerful stories because they create strong moral pressure for politicians to respond, especially conservatives with predilections for moralistic vocabulary, and because they allowed the actors to stand, simultaneously, against Muslim radicalism and in favour of Muslim migrants, as well as to seem to do so on Muslims’ behalf.

Thus a pro-ban moral entrepreneur and former CiU city councillor emphasised in an interview that years ago she had written a book on Islam and Catholicism together with a Quran scholar from Mauritania who had told her: ‘They won’t be able to accuse me of racism because I am black. And they also can’t accuse me of being anti-Muslim because I am a Muslim!’ Muslim friends are thus extremely important as expert witnesses because by virtue of their identity as Muslims, which is believed to authenticate whatever claims are made in their name, and invalidating accusations of racism or Islamophobia. In a similar vein, the city councillor behind the burqa ban initiative explained that many Muslim women congratulated him for fighting for their rights, adding that ‘most of the Muslim women in the most advanced Arab countries are in favor of banning the burqa and the niqab’. Thus pro-ban activism relies on the argument that, openly or secretly, Muslim women are also against the full-face veil and grateful to anti-burqa campaigners.

The storyline according to which the ban promotes women’s liberation was not produced in a historical vacuum but inserted in the Spanish historical-cultural matrix of women’s fight for freedom and against Catholic oppression and the Franco dictatorship. In this regard, a city councillor stated:

The imam warns men that if their women do not wear veils, the next day they will not let them enter the mosque…. This is the same type of pressure that Catholic communities also practiced in the past: people who were not going to confession or to the church were marked … during Franco’s time. The Catholic Church wanted to dominate the people.

Ban proponents employed the Spanish narrative of secularisation as a template for Muslim women and their path towards modernity. Anchoring the full-face veil controversy in Spanish history ‘re-evokes cultural memories by assimilating the new within the terrain of the familiar’ (Brock, Cornwall, and Gaventa 2001, 7).

In contrast to the coherence of the pro-ban storyline, we found that those opposing the ban were not able to construct a coherent and expressive narrative that might have served as a master frame, leaving anti-ban activism with a set of disparate strands.
The central arguments were that the ban violated fundamental rights, went against liberal notions of tolerance and was based on false assumptions about women’s agency. To some extent, arguments against the ban are reminiscent of earlier discussions on Islamic veiling, which suggested that banning in the name of women’s freedom cannot but reproduce patriarchy and that burqa women are not victims of male pressure but modern and autonomous. Anti-ban activists emphasised face-veiled women’s free choice, with ‘choice’ morally marking the ban as undemocratic.

Simultaneously, ban opponents invoked education as the royal road to helping them make different choices. As one opponent remarked,

at the heart of all this lies a question of women’s education.... Forbidding the burqa involves excluding these women from society. Educating means giving tools to these women. But if they are not allowed to go to a library, what kind of education are we giving them?

This illustrates that, to some extent, the discourse of women as victims even pervades and colonises ban opponents’ argumentative repertoires.

Moral entrepreneurs link arguments with anecdotes and rumours. They develop a storyline that accounts for the situation, attributes causation, defines the main characters of the story (heroes, villains and victims) and offers solutions or possible story-endings (Snow and Benford 1992). In the pro-ban narrative, the imam of the Ibn Hazn mosque is portrayed as the villain and presented as an authoritarian, poorly educated and even ridiculous person that has the Muslim community under its control. This control is also wielded through groups of followers whom members of the city’s civic rights department described to us as ‘religious police forces’ who patrol the city to enforce Salafist behavioural codes. This corroborates the view that in urban discourse burqa debates epitomise deeper competitions between two versions of Islam. Widely circulated anecdotes about his refusal to shake women’s hands, gossip about his love life and rumours about his connections with rich Saudis contribute to drawing a portrait of the ‘villain’, making the story more expressive and credible. In this narrative, local Muslim women are presented as illiterate, subjugated by men, terrified by the power of the imam and not having agency.

In this context, the imam of the Ibn Hazn mosque and his Saudi friends keen on expanding ‘traditionalist’ Islam are seen as the cause of the confrontation. The other mosque, frequented mostly by sub-Saharan African Muslims, in contrast is often invoked as an example of the central point: Not Islam itself but Salafism and Ibn Hazn’s imam are the problem. Accordingly, the African mosque is generally viewed as exemplary and its imam as a ‘role model’ of integrated and moderate Islam to be promoted. Taken together these elements formed a narrative that turned into a ‘master frame’ (Snow and Benford 1992) for local media and populations in the process.

Anti-ban moral entrepreneurs, mainly belonging to the multicultural left, also grounded their narrative in anecdotes, rumours and images. Illustrating this they observed that the highest number of face-veiled women in Catalonia is found in
Barcelona’s most expensive shops on the *Passeig de Gràcia*, the main high-end shopping street. In this story the main character is not the poor and illiterate burqa wearer but the rich female tourist from the Emirates. Contrary to that there was also the idea that burqa wearers are mainly Spanish converts who have gone through a long, individual spiritual pathway, an image that projects maximum authenticity and subjectivity, or in other words, values with which the practice of face veiling can be legitimised.

Besides the question of who the burqa women were also lay that of how many existed, which became important in terms of supplying evidence for one’s story. People engaged in a politics of numbers of sorts, and counting burqas was the practice to establish them. Pro-ban activists referred to rising numbers visible in the public space to prove that the problem of radicalisation was ‘real’ while anti-ban activists questioned that there were more than a handful so as to ridicule their opponents’ perception.

**Contesting Epistemic Authority on Islam**

Since public concerns over face veiling were directly associated with urban memories of conflicts around the *Ibn Hazn* mosque and its version of Islam, the question of whether face veiling was in fact an Islamic practice acquired great significance. Ban proponents went to great length to explain that female face covering was neither an obligatory nor Islamic practice by stating, time and again, that there is no mention of face veiling in the Islamic scriptures. One CiU councillor explained:

> This (the full veil) is not written down anywhere in the Quran, you won’t find any surah nor a verse which says that. And that’s why as city councilor I am beginning to write articles and opinion pieces and press declarations and I am absolutely opposed to this person (the imam of the Ibn Hazn mosque).

Unintentionally complying with Islamic textual methods to establish religious truths, ban proponents used this argument to denounce religious claims for the burqa as false. Debating the burqa therefore also raised the question of who is authorised to produce authentic knowledge about Islam. The ban proponents certainly disputed the ability of the Salafist community to produce authoritative knowledge.

Importantly, such disputes over interpretations of Islam drew on examples of burqa wearing and other Muslim-related practices in other countries. People contrasted rules on face veiling in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, traced its origins to Afghanistan and discussed present-day veiling politics in Saudi Arabia and African countries. Concurring that face veiling is evidence of the spread of Saudi Salafist power and mounting pressure on moderate Muslims, disputants saw the burqa as a symbol for power struggles in faraway places and clashes between civilisations. The upshot of this was that in pro-ban activists’ construction, the burqa brought these clashes into their city and their lifeworlds. Thus, Islam’s ‘hypervisibility’ wrought from discursive work on face-veiling also reflects the ways in which images and
emblems of global civilisational conflict insinuate themselves into local society, and conversely, how local experiences are used to make sense of what is going on in the world.

Likewise, we also note that pro-ban actors draw a clear semantic, religious and political boundary between the full-face veil and the headscarf. While others (e.g. Korteweg 2013) see a continuum between headscarf and burqa debates, the analysis of the Lleida controversy suggests the two polemics are noncontiguous. The case of the burqa permits the pro-ban local actors to position themselves as promoters of democratic Islam while emphasising the distinction between the ‘good’ (moderate) and ‘bad’ (radical) Islam, with the headscarf framed as part of the ‘good’ Islam. To frame the prohibition in these terms allows local politicians to pull the burqa affair out from extreme-right discourse and introduce new complexity into the dualism of the ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative. The defence of the legitimacy of the Muslim headscarf by ban proponents affords their storyline further credibility. The material difference between both garments lies of course also in the visibility of the face.

**Lived Social Harmony**

As a ‘universal indicium of civilisation’ (Fournier 2013, 689), showing one’s face marks belonging and renders citizenship a matter of bodily performance. In this sense, our informants articulated the potential disruptiveness of Salafist behaviour in three different body gestures: seeing one’s face, shaking hands and drinking wine. Many of them mentioned several anecdotes and specific episodes associated with these elements, which are identified as symbolic gestures marking the boundary between *us* and *them* and defining the limits of assimilation. These ‘disturbances in social harmony’ dramatised difference by disrupting the routinised flow of local social life. They signal insufficient *deference* as the ceremonial means of showing appreciation of codes of social harmony.

This contrasted with explicit actions of *deference* as was the case when members of the sub-Saharan African Muslim community from the Omar mosque participated with their children in the traditional *Anastasio* festival that honours the city’s patron saint. Significantly and to the great joy of locals, the imam’s daughter and son were dressed up in traditional Catalan costumes, as a local CiU leader vividly recalled. Such moments can be construed as acts of *ceremonial assimilation* in which migrants demonstrate a cultural or folkloric citizenship of sorts. Leaving their religious adherence aside enables them to be recruited into the broader local community and signal to native populations their understanding of the value attached to such seemingly banal folkloric practices. *Ceremonial assimilation* is contrasted discursively to the ‘disruptive’ behaviour of the Salafists and materially to sensations of ‘emotional’ and physical discomfort the burqa often seemed to engender. ‘Nobody likes to see a burqa in the street’ a city councillor stated.
Discourse Coalitions and Discourse Resonance

The highly expressive, vivid and moralistic tone of the pro-ban story enhanced public support and was easily reproduced by the media. Ban opponents, on the contrary, emphasised their difficulties in communicating their viewpoints. A former Green Party city councillor said:

I think this topic caught us all off guard ... and was really difficult to digest. We had a hard time being alone in defending the ‘No position’ and hearing this nonsense like, how can it be that a party that always said it was feminist, ecological and on the Left is suddenly in favor of the burqa ... and that we are promoting Islamic terrorism.

Moreover, there were internal disagreements revealing tensions between feminist and pro-immigrant rights agendas within the political left, as well the aforementioned tensions within feminism, with a major Catalan grouping (Dones en Xarxa, ‘Networked Women’) and a Lleida-based women’s association with a president of Algerian origin vigorously favouring the ban. This, together with the ambivalent stances of Muslim-dominated migrant associations, made it difficult to present a unified discourse.

However, similarly detrimental to their campaign was the fact that the rights-based approach remained abstract, disembodied and, as a consequence, difficult to convert into a narrative. Promoting abstract rights is, by virtue of the absence of real persons around whom to construct a story, inherently anti-narrative. This was especially so because anti-ban activists had no access to local burqa women and were thus unable to sustain their arguments for Muslim women’s agency. Likewise, it was impossible to create a shared notion of common values around rights-based discourse on tolerance for two reasons: first there was no interaction, let alone conviviality, between anti-ban activists and the Salafist leadership and mosque community; and second they clearly opposed the ban out of different considerations.

Pro-ban activists, on the other side, were champions in depicting, in a dramatic fashion, the case of burqa wearing as the limit of intelligibility and reason, driving home the point of how nearly impossible it was to imagine one would voluntarily cover one’s face fully. This was illustrated in a Socialist city councillor’s desperate comment, ‘I just don’t understand it, really, I cannot make sense of it, I just can’t get my head round it!’ when describing her inability to comprehend burqa wearing as free choice, even after serious effort. Suggesting incomprehensibility was not only a way of making claims to universalism from which burqa women were excluded but also of occupying the ground of common sense, a strategy of intangible means but with coercive effects. Furthermore, depicting the burqa as a prison, as some proponents did, would impart a liberationist tone to their narrative, while anti-ban activists were left to defend abstract rights and practices they did not even endorse. While some of them complained that one should have tried harder to personally talk to the burqa women, others, such as a Green Party councillor, questioned that one has the right to ask for explanations and justifications—‘...or do we have the right to ask girls in miniskirts why they wear them? Clearly, the arguments and storylines
they developed did not draw positively on specific materials from local memories and stocks of knowledge, and therefore could not facilitate alliances.

Conclusions

In this article we drew on cultural sociological approaches to politics to explain disputes over religious diversity, arguing that contentious issues need to be framed through narratives and stories to yield traction and create public resonance. Building on Snow and Benford’s work on framing (1992), we showed that ban proponents created a master frame that expressed values of social harmony and liberation in the language of both rights and culture, and that enabled them to build broad alliances in which discursive bridges between feminism and ‘moderate Islam’, skilfully constructed by individuals we called ‘moral entrepreneurs’, were central. Using material from local stocks of knowledge and memories allowed them to frame the conflict in ways resonant with the sensibilities of both the media and local populations, and to occupy the ground of what is locally considered common sense.

However, successful framing depends not only on which stories and narratives actors develop but also on whether they are able to create narratives at all. In the final analysis, ban opponents were unable to create a coherent narrative that could serve to build discursive alliances. Amiraux (2013, 799) recently suggested that ‘the lived experience of women underneath the full veils is … only being heard when framed as the result of “free choice”’ and that this ‘illustrates the dead end secular societies face when having to rely on liberal language to make sense … of pious citizens’. We suggest that framing ban opposition with the liberal language of rights alone is precisely the problem, as rights discourse remained abstract, impersonal and hence difficult to turn into a narrative. Diverse breaches of the values of social harmony by the Salafist leadership could easily turn into the stuff out of which much pro-ban storytelling activism was eventually made. Ceremonial performance carried paramount value and therefore easily fed into local stocks of knowledge and memories.

The question is, of course, how to explain the fact that some narratives harmonise with broader public sensibilities while others do not. Drawing on Gamson’s work on Talking politics (1992) suggests that pro-ban activism and its narrative could build on close entanglements of media discourse, experiential discourse and popular wisdom as the three forms of symbolic resources people use to make sense of politics. Significantly, while few people had personal experiences with the Salafist imam and no one did with burqa women, city officials’ problems with the imam were seen to potentially represent everybody’s indignation over his lack of deference. Simultaneously, the cross-fertilisations between media discourse, popular wisdom and stories about personal experiences helped to create links between the local burqa affair and global or civilisational conflicts. As a consequence, the local controversy was projected onto understandings of global society while the global was seen as playing out in front of people’s own eyes, which made them feel that their actions mattered. Turning integration issues into a media spectacle, local authorities’ engagement put
the city under the spotlight of international attention and allowed locals to transcend the confines of urban society. The disinterest locals showed in the Supreme Court verdict suggests, however, that the cultural and political contention itself was more important to them than the outcome. Simultaneously, politicians signalled commitment to resuming the burqa debates after the Strasbourg judgement pointing to contradictory relationships between courts and urban politics.

Just as important and deserving more scholarly attention in future research are the ways in which participants in the burqa debate draw on repertoires of justification that link emotions and arguments, that is, the affective and the moral, in ways that unearth the sedimented codes of everyday social harmony. We suggest that exploring interfaces of emotions and justification that emerge on multiple social and spatial scales is one of the major challenges in research on religious diversity today.

Acknowledgements

We presented earlier versions of this article at the conference ‘Religion, democracy, and law’ at London Metropolitan University, 15–16 January 2014, and at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity Göttingen. For insightful comments, we wish to thank Matthias Koenig, Jeremy Walton, Jörg Hütermann, Sam Nelson, Zeynep Yanasmayan, Maria Schiller, Julia Martínez-Ariño and especially Rene Umlauf and Stefan Höhne.

Notes

[1] See International Organisation for Migration, ‘Spain’. Retrieved 24 February 2014, from https://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/ europa/european-economic-area/spain.default.html?displayTab=facts-and-figures
[2] See http://www.observatorioreligion.es/upload/78/50/Explotacion_Directorio_junio_2013.pdf (accessed 2 March 2014).
[3] Exceptions are Parvez (2011) and the special issue in Social Identities, 19 (6).
[4] See El País, 26 July 2011.
[5] See El País, 5 March 2013.
[6] See El País, 22 July 2010.
[7] See El País, 16 June 2010.
[8] After this defeat, the ban became effective in the city.
[9] Importantly, this contrasts with the cases of progressive, emancipated or secularised Muslim women (e.g. Necla Kelek in Germany or Ayan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands) who have become icons of media debate and expert witnesses themselves.
[10] Lleida City Council, Minutes of May 2010 meeting. Retrieved 2 March 2014, from http:// www.paeria.es/cat/ajuntament/actes.asp?idtipus=PAO&detail=Trues&IdActe=1070&Dia=-1 &Mes=-1&Any=2010&TextCerca=&Consulta=False&PaginaAnterior=/cat/ajuntament/actes. asp&pagina=1.

References

Amiraux, V. 2013. “The ‘Illegal Covering’ Saga: What’s Next? Sociological Perspectives.” Social Identities 19: 794–806. doi:10.1080/13504630.2013.842678.

Astor, A. 2012. “Memory, Community, and Opposition to Mosques: The Case of Badalona.” Theory and Society 41 (4): 325–349. doi:10.1007/s11186-012-9169-5.
Astor, A. 2014. “Religious Governance and the Accommodation of Islam in Contemporary Spain.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1–20. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/VaX4tUvhkvE.

Berger, P., and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Knowledge: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* New York: Doubleday.

Bowen, J. 2007. “A View from France on the Internal Complexity of National Models.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33: 1003–1016. doi:10.1080/13691830701432905.

Brock, K., A. Cornwall, and J. Gaventa. 2001. *Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy.* Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Buijs, J., and J. Rath. 2003 *Muslims in Europe: The State of Research.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Ferrari, A., and S. Pastorelli. 2013. *The Burqa Affair across Europe: Between Public and Private Space.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Fetzer, J. S., and J. C. Soper. 2005. *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fisher, F., and J. Forester. 1993. *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning.* London: UCL Press.

Fournier, P. 2013. “Headscarf and Burqa Controversies at the Crossroad of Politics, Society and Law.” *Social Identities* 19: 689–703. doi:10.1080/13504630.2013.842669.

Galembert, C. 2005. “The City’s ‘Nod of Approval’ for the Mantes-la-Jolie Mosque Project: Mistaken Traces of Recognition.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31: 1141–1159. doi:10.1080/13691830500282659.

Gamson, W. A. 1992. *Talking Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Glendon, Mary Ann. 1991. *Rights Talk. The Impoverishment of Political Culture.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Griera, M. 2012. “Public Policies, Interfaith Associations and Religious Minorities: A New Policy Paradigm? Evidence from the Case of Barcelona.” *Social Compass* 59: 570–587. doi:10.1177/0037768612460800.

Hajer, M., and D. Laws. 2006. “Ordering through Discourse.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, edited by M. Moran, M. Rein, and R. E. Goodin, 251–268. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joppke, C. 2007. “Beyond National Models: Civic Integration Policies for Immigrants in Western Europe.” *West European Politics* 30 (1): 1–22. doi:10.1080/01402380601019613.

Keck, M. E., and K. Sikkink. 1998. *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Koenig, M. 2009. “How Nation-States Respond to Religious Diversity.” In *International Migration and the Governance of Religious Diversity*, edited by P. Bramadat and M. Koenig, 293–322. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Korteweg, A. C. 2013. “The ‘Headrag Tax’: Impossible Laws and Their Symbolic and Material Consequences.” *Social Identities* 19: 759–774. doi:10.1080/13504630.2013.842674.

Koussens, D., and O. Roy. 2014. *Quand la burqa passe à l’Ouest: enjeux éthiques, politiques et juridiques.* Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.

Luckmann, T. 2002. “Moral Communication in Modern Societies.” *Human Studies* 25 (1): 19–32. doi:10.1023/A:1014838423896.

Martínez-Ariño, J., M. Griera, G. García-Romeral, and M. Forteza. 2011. “Inmigración, diversidad religiosa y centros de culto en la ciudad de Barcelona.” *Migraciones* 30: 101–133.

Maussen, M. 2012. “Pillarization and Islam: Church-state Traditions and Muslim Claims for Recognition in the Netherlands.” *Comparative European Politics* 10 (3): 337–353. doi:10.1057/cep.2012.11.

Moors, A. 2009. “The Dutch and the Face-Veil: The Politics of Discomfort.” *Social Anthropology* 17: 393–408. doi:10.1111/j.1469-8676.2009.00084.x.
Okin, S. M. 1999. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Parvez, Z. F. 2011. "Debating the Burqa in France: The Antipolitics of Islamic Revival." *Qualitative Sociology* 34 (2): 287–312. doi:10.1007/s11133-011-9192-2.
Scott, J. W. 2009. *The Politics of the Veil.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Snow, D. A., and R. D. Benford. 1992. "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest." In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by A. Morris and C. Mueller, 133–155. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Spohn, U. 2013. "Sisters in Disagreement: The Dispute among French Feminists about the ‘Burqa Ban’ and the Causes of Their Disunity." *Journal of Human Rights* 12 (2): 145–164. doi:10.1080/14754835.2013.784661.
Steinberg, M. W. 1998. "Tilting the Frame: Considerations on Collective Action Framing from a Discursive Turn." *Theory and Society* 27: 845–872. doi:10.1023/A:1006975321345.
Uitermark, J., P. Mepschen, and J. W. Duyvendak. 2014. "Populism, Sexual Politics, and the Exclusion of Muslims in the Netherlands." In *European States and Their Muslim Citizens. The Impact of Institutions on Perceptions and Boundaries*, edited by J. Bowen, C. Bertossi, J. W. Duyvendak, and M. L. Krook, 235–255. New York: Cambridge University Press.