

# Veiled threats?

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The reasons given for imposing some kind of restriction on women's choice to wear the burqa can ostensibly be grouped into three clusters of assumptions, assertions and arguments. Firstly, there is a set of assumptions that consider the burqa a security and safety issue. Secondly, there are the assertions that the burqa is a means of the Islamisation of society and finally there are the arguments that see the burqa as a feminist issue. These three clusters are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. In fact, one of the reasons for the sterility of the debate is that too often its practitioners slip from one stream of reasoning to another without missing a beat.

One way to engage with these arguments would be to mount a forensic critique of each of them: refuting point-by-point the central tenets advanced by the advocates of the ban on the burqa. This, however, would be a rather thankless task, not only because the number of ironies and anomalies in the case for banning the burqa interrupt any possibility of coherence, but also because such 'I said, you said' exchange rarely advances the debate, and one of the features of a healthy society is the quality of conversation that the community has about complex and difficult issues.

So how do we need to frame the question of the burqa to generate a debate that would be enlightening? One model that we need to abandon immediately is a juridical one in which the two sides of the question line up their arguments, reinforced by selected facts and presented to

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an a priori neutral judge or jury. Political conversations are not susceptible to legal logic, since the terms of a political conversation are not immune from the conversational process itself. To argue politically is not simply to present a set of statements that can be marked against a pre-existing framework of rules, with the degree of compatibility between the statements and the rules indicating their success or failure. Rather, a political conversation works not only by writing statements but by transforming the 'rules' by which those statements can be judged. In other words, a political conversation changes the terms of the debate.

The attempt to ban the burqa is an attempt to change the terms of the debate. It is a response to the way in which new voices (more precisely voices often marginalised and unheard) have begun to take part in the conversation of the nation. This process of the inclusion of new voices has in recent years been organised in western plutocracies (not unproblematically) under the rubric of multiculturalism. Banning the burqa is not just about banning a piece of clothing; it is about changing the debate around multiculturalism by limiting the voices in the conversation by introducing pre-conditions for participation beyond that required from other groups in society. What is clearly at stake in attempts to ban the burqa is not the burqa in itself but its symbolism. For example, France has the largest Muslim population in the European Union with perhaps five million Muslims in country of sixty million, and the number of women who wear the burqa is estimated by all sides in the recent controversy to be miniscule, perhaps no more than three thousand. There is no credible evidence that this number is growing fast. There are no reliable figures of how many women in South Australia wear the burqa, but there is no reason to assume the percentage of burqa wearing women is larger than that found in France (about 0.00005% of the total population) which would mean about a dozen or so women wearing the burqa in South Australia. On what grounds should legislative effort and state resources be spent in targeting such a small group and imposing on them restrictions that are not generally imposed on other segments of the population?

Reasons for banning the burqa are to do with what it is said to represent. In other words, those who advocate banning the burqa see it not only as a sign of female subordination and

repression but also something alien, for example un-Australian or un-French or un-Belgian. For the people who want to ban the burqa its appearance interrupts the vision of a mythical homogenous society in a bygone age. However, signs do not have only one meaning or, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, denotation is the last connotation. The meaning of a sign is not internal or intrinsic but fixed by its external context; in other words, meaning is ultimately the outcome of a politics, and this is even the case when we have forgotten the politics that gave that sign that meaning.

Talk about banning the burqa cannot be understood fully if we see it as simply an attempt to prevent a looming crime wave of burqa-wearing bank robbers (interesting that the use of stockings by bank robbers did not elicit a similar call for their ban), nor does it have much to do with a forlorn expectation that banning the burqa will ensure face-to-face communications in a world of Facebook (leaving aside the unfairness of asking a few burqa wearing women to bear the burden of bringing back *gemeinschaft* communities), nor does it have much to do with the idea that patriarchy at its most oppressive and dangerous is to be found in the act of donning the burqa (leaving aside *Boy's Own* fantasies of rescuing dusky damsels).

One way of thinking of feminism is to see it as the articulation of women's agency: politically, economically and philosophically. The danger, of course, in attempting to privilege agency is to succumb to the charms of the Cartesian subject. The idea that human beings exist independently of other humans and that individuals are building blocks of a society rather than the products of society is not only problematic on epistemological grounds; it is also difficult to sustain politically. The exercise of agency is not an affirmation of a monadic individual, let alone a neo-liberal consumer, but rather of an embedded subject. We are the way we are because of the relationships, connections and conversations, imagined or real, contemporary or historical, that call us. Like actors who improvise we are still bound by the conventions of the play we are in. Being veiled is not the only way of structuring the female subject. The exercise of female agency means that there is not only one way of being a woman.

The demand to erase the burqa is not an attempt to liberate oppressed women, but more likely an attempt to erase Muslim presence from public life. This erasure is perhaps couched in the language of public safety, combating cultural oppression of women and guaranteeing cultural integrity and civic peace, but what it is saying unambiguously is that Muslims should not be seen let alone heard. The irony of repressing something in the name of combating cultural oppression is too obvious. Banning the burqa, however, has consequences not only for Muslim minorities but also for society in general. All societies have to reject something to be able stand for something. A society that calls itself a liberal democracy has to make good that claim not just every three years whenever there are elections but every day. If liberal democracy is to have more persuasive power than the so-called people's democracy of Eastern Europe, then it should mean something day in and day out. It should mean that the state when called upon to restrict the actions of some of its people, when called upon to impose an extra burden on one section of its population, should act with great prudence and err on the side of caution. Veiling is not a threat but the demand to ban the burqa is a veiled threat to the possibility of a generous and tolerant society.