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# The Safety of Authenticity: Ali Kebap and the Swiss Political Imaginary of Foreignness

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# The safety of authenticity: Ali Kebab and the Swiss political imaginary of foreignness

**\*\*\* Note that this is a first and incomplete (especially at the empirical level) draft aiming at laying out our argumentS; please do not quote or cite \*\*\***

## I. Introduction

"The keyword is authenticity" (Bursa 2009). This paper is an inquiry into the concept of authenticity (and foreignness): Are there different repertoires of authenticity? How does authenticity (de)limit the ability of social groups to gain authority? To which extent authenticity ensnare social groups that are supposedly providing a counter-point to hegemonic forms of discourse and representation into actually reproducing the codes of this hegemonic framework? And, finally, to which extent authenticity represent a threat to democratic politics by silencing those voices who may actually be able to offer such counter-point? Those are the different question we seek to address in this paper.

Over the summer 2009, a series of intriguing posters surfaced throughout Swiss cities, in all linguistic areas of the country, announcing that "Ali Kebab," referring to a probable new Turkish restaurant selling döner kebab, was "new in town." No address was mentioned on the posters, so the first question that came to the mind of the attentive observer was who is this Ali character? Who

is this hefty looking and smiling chap, wearing his red fez and wielding a very long knife? His sudden appearance in the public and mediatic spaces readily created a buzz in the Swiss media: What was this advertisement about? Who was behind it? It soon turned out that Ali was part of a "teaser" campaign for the Swiss market leader of "out-of-home advertising." This teaser campaign was built around Ali's success in the kebab business and his transformation from the owner of a single fast-food business to the owner of a chain of restaurants, hotels and, even, an airline company. The figure of Ali, for us however, resonates beyond this imagined flourishing entrepreneur, and his link to a successful advertisement campaign. We argue that the Ali Kebab campaign illustrates one dimension of the symbolic repertoire of authenticity that is mobilised to depict and, in fine, ensnare Turks/Muslims<sup>1</sup> into a specific imaginary of foreignness despite the fact that they might formally be members of the Swiss polity.

The study of the symbolic register of authenticity in Switzerland becomes even more relevant when the Ali adverts are compared with the political campaign launched around the same time in support of the referendum to ban minarets. In fact, from July to November 2009 the Swiss public sphere was dominated by two very different figures of the "foreign" in Switzerland. While one negative image symbolised overt-religiousness and a threat to public morality and

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Muslims in Switzerland, as well as in other countries, do not represent a homogenous social group, various survey and analysis have shown that Swiss citizens do not differentiate between Muslims (see Helbling 2010: 68, 70). For this reason we connect forms of representation that are obviously linked to the Turks to more general forms linked to Muslims and Islam.

security, via the figure of veiled women and missile-like minarets, the other represented a positive model of integration, which was circumscribed to a safe image of the Turk as a petit yet successful entrepreneur. Interestingly, both the figures of Ali and the veiled woman represent an articulation of what is understood to be “authentic” about a group. We explore how these contrasting repertoires and images of the foreign lay out the limited field of possibilities for (Muslim) individuals to shape their place in the Swiss public space and by extension polity, and more generally for the Swiss polity to be re-imagined.

The paper starts by contextualising both campaigns in light of the presence and increase visibility of Muslims in Switzerland and how, in recent years, this has led to various debates and questions pertaining to their integration in the country. We also re-situate the Swiss case as expressive of strong trends in other European or "western" polities. We then move to a description of both campaigns and to an analysis of their specific articulation of foreignness and authenticity. Building on this analysis, we offer in the third part a discussion of authenticity in light of the (im)possibility for the “other” to re-cast/ imagine her/himself outside this Swiss political representation of foreignness (the “authentic” foreigner). In fact, we argue that this (im)possibility mirrors the dominant premises from which forms of resistance to this ensnarement are set to take place. We finally provide a form of counter-factual reflection as to how actors that are not counter-players, to use Ashis Nandy's terminology (2009 [1983]), may offer alternative and ambiguous figures of difference and in this process destabilise the dominant determinations of the self and “other”.

## II. Contextualising the advertisement/political campaigns: Muslims, Islam and Switzerland

As of 2005, Muslims represented about 310'000 residents in Switzerland, that is a bit more than 4 percent of the overall population. The vast majority are originally from the former Yugoslavia (essentially from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia) and from Turkey. Out of these 310'000 residents about 12 percent were Swiss citizens, that is a bit more than 36'000 residents (Gianni 2005: 13-17). Even if they represent a very heterogeneous group, with different levels of religiosity and practices, political and moral values, cultural habits and socio-demographic profiles, they have usually been portrayed as a fairly homogeneous group by non-Muslim Swiss citizens (Helbling 2010: 68). Although this essentialisation of Muslims is common in many Western settings today, it is noteworthy that in Switzerland *shared* images of the foreign have been particularly strong and pervasive throughout time. This for Bendix (1993: 4) has contributed to fostering and delimiting a common sense of the "Swiss national Self" in a traditionally very diverse and multicultural country (Bendix, 1993: 24). The visibility of Muslims in the Swiss public and mediatic spaces has increased in recent years. This can be explained in part because Muslim religious associations have been making a growing number of claims linked to "*an adaptation and interpretation of Swiss laws in order to find reasonable*

*accommodations to enable practicing Muslims to 'better' live and practice Islam in Switzerland"* (Gianni 2005: 20).<sup>2</sup>

In fact, one should understand this new phenomenon as part of a wider European trend. Scholars stress that the presence of Islam on European soil became particularly important as of the early 1960s due to a need for unskilled labourers in the post-war period. At that time Islam was: “incarnated [...] by the anonymous and silent mass of unskilled labourers working in industry and tertiary sector. Largely on the fringes of society, living in groups in their own, separate social spaces, their primary goal was to earn as much money as possible and then return home” (Césari 2004: 13). As of 1974, the demographic profile of Muslim migrants started to shift from a male dominated population to one consisting of nuclear and extended families settling in Europe (Césari *ibid* and Triandafyllidou and al. 2006: 9). The 1974 oil crisis marked the end of the need for unskilled labours and the beginning of new family reunification policies. This shift is important as it indicates a change in the relations between Muslims and Europeans: “It was no longer possible to think of oneself as a worker in transit: the signs of permanency were numerous and irreversible” (Césari *ibid*). It is from that point onwards that Muslims started to make demands related to their faith, including requests for prayer rooms, the

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<sup>2</sup> It is relevant to stress that unlike other European countries, such as France or the United Kingdom, where claims have focused on issues of political representation or economic and social discriminations, Swiss Muslim “community leaders” have usually circumscribed their requests to civil liberties in relation to the ability of members of their communities to practice Islam or to claims of public recognition for their associations. It is noteworthy that the “large majority of Muslims” have not felt “directly concerned by these claims”, which might, as Swiss scholars have indicated, reflect the fact that they feel well integrated in Switzerland (Gianni, 2005: 20-1 and Gianni, Michel and Giugni: no date).

constructions of Mosques, and so on. These requests have evolved with time and have led to vivid debates, which are still ongoing, related to the recognition, institutionalisation and representation of Islam in Europe.

Césari underlines (2004: 14) that for Europeans this shift in the status of Muslims and of Islam in Europe, including their demands for greater recognition, has been difficult to accept and has been subject to different levels of resistance. Indeed, although many Muslims are now residents and even second and third generation citizens they often continue to be portrayed as the exotic and essentialised “other.” For Triandafylidou, Modood and Zapata-Barrero although this “othering” has been on going throughout modern European history, it has acquired a new shape and momentum after the end of the Cold war where non-EU immigrants have found themselves at the heart of this process: “Constructing immigrants and ethnic minorities as national Others [...] provides a means of affirming the unity and superiority of the in-group” (2006: 12). As of 9/11 Muslims have become the figure par-excellence of this “other.” They have been subject to intense societal scrutiny, where governments, policy makers, civil society actors, journalists, intellectuals, and others have openly been attempting to define their identity along the lines of a dichotomy between the “good” and the “bad” Muslim (Razack 2008; Mamdani 2002; Mahmood 2008). In fact, images of both figures have exploded on our television screens and in the media – images which are also as we will see reproduced in the two campaigns studied in this paper.

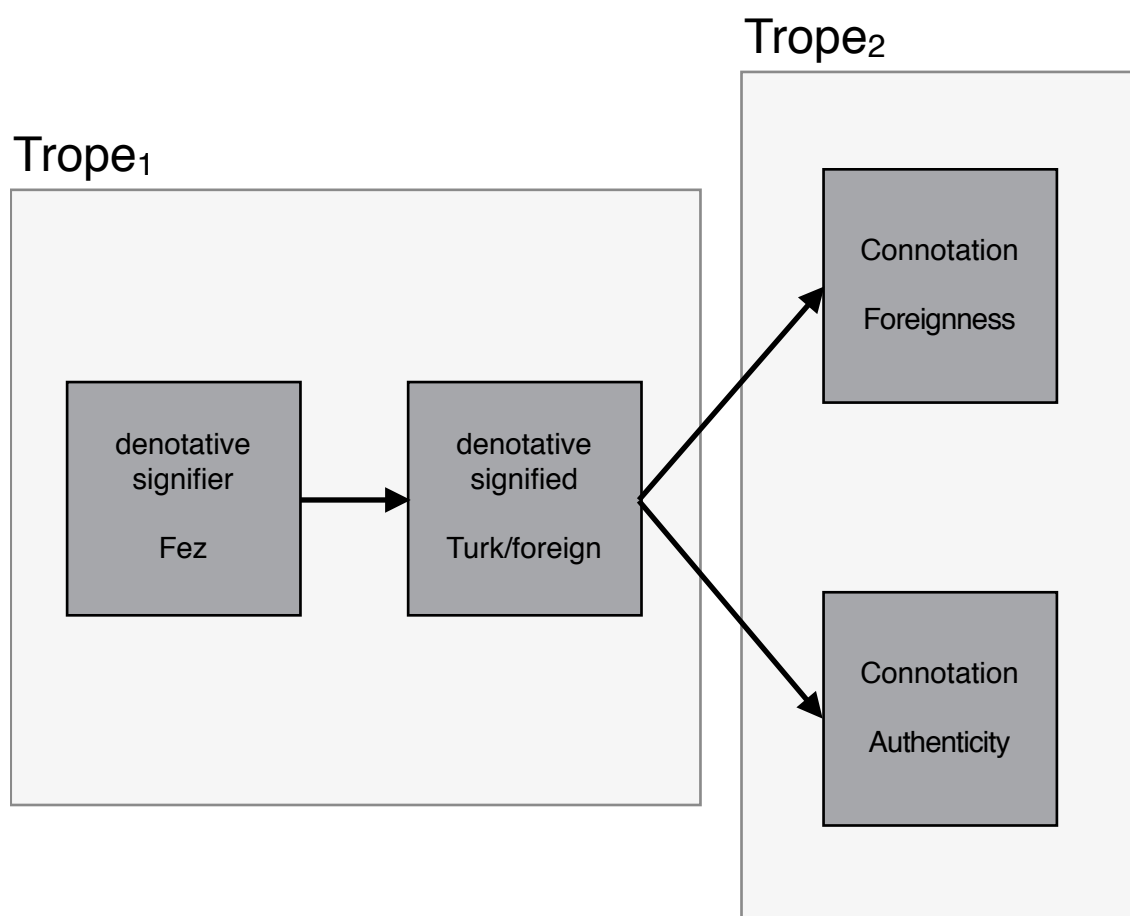
### III. The advertisement and political campaigns: symbols of foreignness and authenticity

#### **Between denotation and connotation: foreignness and authenticity in the campaigns**

Beyond the immediate messages of the Ali advertisement campaign: "Ali, a fictive character, symbolises companies which become successful on the long run because of poster advertisement" and such (small) companies can become "rapidly prosperous" via this media of advertisement (SWR 2009) – or of the political campaign – "The minarets are only instruments in a struggle to eliminate other religions. It is a struggle for power. The minaret is the expression of a will of political and religious power. It has nothing to do with faith" ([www.minaret.ch](http://www.minaret.ch) 2009) –, these different visual campaigns both articulate, via different tropes, the tropes of authenticity and foreignness. The distinction between the two sets of tropes is that the first are the signifiers of the second. Analysing those tropes enable us to concentrate on: "*how* things are represented rather than to *what* is represented" (Chandler 2007: 124). In other words, through different visual signifiers – the "how" represented by such items as the fez or the niqab to name but the most obvious – we can determine the different signified – foreignness and authenticity – that are available to us in order to understand how authenticity and foreignness as tropes are articulated (see figure 1). We take these two different sets of tropes to represent first the

tropes within the poster (Trope<sub>1</sub>) and then the tropes that represent a more general social discourse (Trope<sub>2</sub>). It is difficult to take any textual or visual production independently from a larger context of signification as: "once we employ a trope, our utterance becomes part of a much larger system of associations which is beyond our control" (Chandler 2007: 124). By delineating such system of associations we hope to show how foreignness and authenticity contribute to (de)limiting the representational boundaries of the Muslims in Switzerland.

Figure 1 – Saint Tropes



In order to analyse the two campaigns we will mobilise basic categories of semiotics that have been used to analyse visual materials (Van Leeuwen 2001). We first attempt to show what are the denotations and connotations in the visual campaigns in the light of Barthian semiotics; by combining denotations and connotations one can aim at providing the meaning of a visual material. Denotation refers to "what, or who, is being depicted here?" while connotation refers to "what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?" (van Leeuwen 2001: 94). While there is a formal distinction between denotation and connotation, both are significantly linked since denotation can be divided in two analytic categories: denotative signifiers and denotative signified. The latter can be associated with something akin to connotations as denotative signified also refer to ideas or values (see van Leeuwen 2001: 99). We also take denotations to generally limit themselves to the posters per se and connotations to be more reflective on societal discourses; this is the reason why we concentrate on the former for our trope<sub>1</sub> and on the latter for our trope<sub>2</sub>. It is important to note a limitation of Barthian semiotics. It does not really take into account intertextuality or the *longue durée* (see van Leeuwen 2001). This is however important for exploring how Trope<sub>2</sub> is articulated. Indeed, on the one hand it will allow us to analyse the intertext between Ali's adverts and the Y'a bon Banania advert (see figure 4), and on the other to inscribe the anti-minaret campaign within a series of other anti-foreign UDC adverts (see figure 5). Now that we have set the basic analytical parameters through which we analyse the visual semiotics of the campaign, let's turn to the analysis of the campaigns.

[note to the kind reader, we did not had the time to establish a list of denotative signifiers, their signified and the connotations that are linked to them]

### Trope 1: Presentation of the campaigns

#### *The Ali Campaign*

Figure 2 – The Campaign Posters <sup>3</sup>



Poster 1



Poster 2



Poster 3



Poster 4

The Ali Kebab campaign was launched during the summer 2009. The above poster 1 was widely showcased throughout Switzerland. The jolly face of Ali,

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<sup>3</sup> The four Ali's ads are available at: <http://holding.live.affichage.divio.ch/en/responsibility/out-of-home/highlights-affichage/apg-ali-kebab/#> (last accessed on 14/11/10).

his red fez, his long knife, and his kebab became familiar even in remote Swiss villages. This campaign immediately created a mediatic buzz, as until August 17 no one knew who was behind it (though some guessed fairly quickly that it probably was a teaser campaign). On that day, a second poster (poster 2) appeared where Ali posed next to two of his employees and where one could read the slogan: “25 x in Town” – his business had expanded. At the bottom of the poster one could at last see who was behind the campaign: the Swiss out-of-home advertisement company – APG –, and read the following slogan: “APG posters make you successful.” This second poster was followed by two others, where Ali had become even more successful as he was now the proud owner of a hotel and subsequently of an airline company.

It is interesting to note that in all the different posters the figure of Ali remained almost the same – he is smiling widely and wearing a red fez. The only thing that changes is that the different posters showcase symbols of his growing economic comfort: in the second poster he traded his apron and t-shirt for a tie and a shirt, in the third one, one sees that he had a gold tooth put in, and in the last one he is wearing a big shiny watch and ring. Moreover, although the posters market different products, all of them follow the same story line, where Ali remains a petit, even if successful, and, seemingly, foreign entrepreneur.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that for APG, there is no sign of foreignness, or racism, in the campaign as, according to their Head of Marketing and Acquisition Beat Hostenstein, “kebab sellers are now part of our [i.e. Swiss] culture” (see <http://www.lesquotidiennes.com/société/ali-kebab-se-dévoile.html>; last consulted 20 November 2010). Yet, as one can see from the analysis, the kebab seller is still set in a register of foreignness that indicates a certain conception of what is authentic in being a kebab seller, i.e. – an armailli – a typical Swiss shepherd - would not for instance have been considered authentic enough to be a kebab seller.

The trope of foreignness is fairly clearly articulated through the use of denotative signifiers such as the fez, the kebab and other signs of the foreign that come back in all the posters. For instance, Ali's hotel, on poster 3, has the shape of the rotating spit where the kebab meat is cooked on and clothes are hanging out of the hotel windows – something that would be rather uncommon in Swiss hotels. Moreover, the hotel is apparently located in a semi-residential urban area next to a building covered with graffiti. The impression is that Ali's hotel is more of a motel, thus clearly conveying the socio-economic boundaries of Ali's success. Finally, the symbol of the kebab comes back in poster 4, where Ali is on the pilot seat – himself piloting? – holding triumphantly a kebab stick outside his window.

Beyond the visuals of the ads, it is interesting to note that "Ali," Hasan by his real name, is a 46 years old Palestinian, who was cast because of his "typical features" by the Swiss communication agency, Publicis, outsourced by APG to conceive and design the campaign. According to the agency, Hasan was chosen for his "authenticity," (i.e. for his " distinctive characteristics"). In fact, a local newspaper reported that: "Given his lack of profile as an agency model, it is really possible to tell a story of a self-made man." "The fact that Hasan studied machinery engineering and CNC-grinding and does not know a thing about döner kebab is not important" (Brusa 2009). This image of "authenticity" was eventually even re-appropriated by Hasan himself: "They all call him Ali and it is alright with Hasan. Ali has become a little bit of Hasan, and Hasan can

identify himself with Ali. He sees in him a symbol of integration, an example for the cohabitation of cultures in Switzerland" (Brusa 2009). Embracing one's "authenticity," in this discourse, seems therefore to be key to a "successful" integration in Swiss society, or at least to a "peaceful" "cohabitations of cultures." In fact, Hasan represents the example of the "foreigner," who has been able to reproduce and market "his authenticity" to gain economical success (Brusa 2009). In doing so, he reproduces and perpetuates the dichotomy between the "authentic other" and the dominant culture.

### *The Minaret Campaign*

Figure 3 – The UDC campaign<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> These three images are available on the anti-minaret initiative committee website: <http://www.minarette.ch/> (last accessed 20 November 2010). The last two images were not used, to our knowledge, as political posters but are prominent in the website; the last one is actually the letterhead of the online newsletter of the committee.



The anti-minaret posters – showcasing a woman wearing a black niqab<sup>6</sup> and rocket-like minarets piercing the Swiss flag – started to appear in the Swiss public sphere at the end of the summer 2009 in preparation for a nationwide referendum scheduled to take place on November 29 of that year. This political campaign launched by the right-wing Swiss People's Party (UDC) aimed at banning the construction of new minarets in Switzerland (at the time Switzerland counted 4 Mosques with minarets). This initiative divided Switzerland. While the Swiss Federal Council recommended that citizens vote against the initiative, as they considered that it was substantially limiting the right to religious freedom of Swiss Muslims, members of the right-wing party argued that minarets symbolised political-religious claims undermining the Swiss Constitution (Briel 2009). The anti-minaret posters were themselves source of debates. Indeed, some Swiss cities such as Basel, Lausanne, Fribourg, Neuchâtel, and Yverdon decided to prohibit them as they considered that they were discriminatory and could disrupt social peace, however other cities, in the name freedom of expression, allowed them (Wälti 2009). While polls predicted that the population would reject the initiative, it was finally

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<sup>6</sup> A niqab is a veil that covers the entire body of the wearer except for her eyes,

accepted by 57.5% of voters and 19.5 of the cantons (out of 23)<sup>7</sup> – creating surprise in Switzerland and a world-wide mediatic buzz.

[add a § to describe the poster; parallel with previous campaigns where the swiss flag (often shaped like Switzerland) is also used as a metaphor / alternatively cut the extra § from Ali's description and add it to the next section --> this to address a bit of unbalanced treatment (space-wise) in this section]

## Trope 2: Contextualising the tropes of foreignness and authenticity in the campaigns

### *The Ali Campaign*

Figure 4 – The Ali and the Banania Adverts



<sup>7</sup> 53.4% of the population participated to the referendum.

The Ali campaign unravels an interesting facet of the relationship between Switzerland and foreignness. Indeed, while the Swiss public was intrigued by the campaign in itself, it triggered almost no self-reflection on whether it could create uneasiness among individuals of Turkish decent or of Muslim faith, and be perhaps projecting discriminatory or at least stereotypes on that population. Whereas this type of campaign would probably have triggered debates in North-American societies, where there is a greater tradition of awareness of cultural discriminations,<sup>8</sup> the Swiss public space remained very quiet about it. In fact, the few reflexive comments on this campaign were mainly found on French blogs (Benassi 2009), and a Swiss feminist blog (Martin 2009), where people noticed a strange and almost disturbing similarity between the Ali campaign and the Y'A Bon Banania advertisement.<sup>9</sup> The Y'A Bon advertisement for a cocoa-based drink was very popular in France throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but started to be criticized in the 1970s for its colonial connotations. Indeed, it was argued that the advert reinforced colonial stereotypes of the nice and smiling, but "stupid" and "childlike"

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<sup>8</sup> Bendix (1993) explains that in the United States a majority of the population, because of the civil rights' movement, is aware of the possible negative stereotypes carried by cultural, racial and ethnic designations. This is, however, not the case in many European countries, including Switzerland, that have a weak tradition of social activism on those issues. She also argues that these images of the foreign might even be more entrenched in the Swiss context than in other European settings, due in part to the multicultural character of Switzerland, which needs to find elements to strengthen its sense of national cohesion.

<sup>9</sup> The Y'a Bon Banania and Ali adverts are displayed in figure 2, page 13. Banania is a drink that was created in the early 1900s, and was known for being made of two colonial products (bananas and chocolate). In 1915, the symbol of Banania becomes a Senegalese infantry man at the service of the French colonial army. Although the features of the infantry man will change over time, he will remain the icon of the brand recognizable by his unchangeable red fez and wide smile, For a detail reading of the blog's comments see: [http://www.lepost.fr/article/2009/08/10/1653098\\_y-a-bon-ali-hebap-racisme-canular.html](http://www.lepost.fr/article/2009/08/10/1653098_y-a-bon-ali-hebap-racisme-canular.html) (last access 14/11/2010).

African” (Berliner 2002).<sup>10</sup> Observers stressed that Ali displayed a similar wide smile and jolly face, a red fez and that the same yellow background was used in both ads – recalling colonial tropes.

This lack of Swiss reaction can be better understood in light of a longer tradition of un-reflexiveness over images of the foreign “other” – images that have participated to the strengthening of the rather weak national identity of the multicultural polity (Bendix 1993: 15, 16). Many of these images have existed in Swiss culture long before foreigners were physically present in Switzerland. This is the case for Turks, who have been the object of discursive metaphors in Switzerland as early as the Ottoman Empire (Bendix 1993: 16).<sup>11</sup> It is precisely because these images have been entrenched in Swiss memory and have perpetuated themselves throughout time that they have been considered by many to be harmless: “they have in fact become signifiers no longer invoking the signified image” (Bendix 1993: 23).

Yet, the fact that those images are perpetuated by the dominant culture when the “other” is actually present and living in that country poses a new set of conundrums for the “foreign other”. Indeed, they limit substantially her/his field of possibilities for articulating his/her identity publicly - possibilities that are

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that critics have also argued that the expression “Y’a Bon” made reference to the inability of Africans to correctly speak French (they spoke “the petit nègre” (a pidgin French) – i.e. a simplified version of French).

<sup>11</sup> In fact Bendix highlights that : ““To be jealous like a Turk”, “ smoke like a Turk”, or “be clever like a Turk” are among common proverbial phrases that have established themselves in Swiss dialect since the first reports about the Ottoman conquerors in the twelfth and thirteenth century” (1993: 15).

intrinsically linked to his “success” in integrating the host society. In a way, one could argue that these images of “authenticity” and “exoticism” have influenced how the foreign “other” presents himself to the host society. The case of Döner shop owners in Berlin is a good illustration of this dilemma. Indeed, the image of the “exotic” Turk was used by these entrepreneurs until the early 1990s to market their business: *“In marketing döner, the Imbiss owners' strategy was to promote its Turkishness and exoticness; they exploited its ethnic associations”* (Caglar 1995: 217). This “authenticity” was rendered tangible in those Döner shops through a: *“a highly accentuated oriental and folkloric atmosphere”* (Caglar 1995: 217). In a sense, one could speak of a “strategic orientalism” (see Ketelaar 1991), where the western construction of the “Orient” (Said 1979) was strategically employed to market a specific product as an “authentic” culinary experience. This was done despite the fact that döner kebab, as sold in Western Europe, were not really found in such form in Turkey (Caglar 1995: 210). Yet, Caglar (1995) and Pecoud (2001) identify one key problem with this vision of authenticity and its re-appropriation by Turks in Germany. Indeed, they argue that this “self-ethnicisation” process limited the ideal of integration to ones ability to acquire *economic capital* – creating a fragmented society, where Döner shops owners earned this capital through self-employment. Through this process, Turks were, in fact, deprived

of acquiring *cultural* or *symbolic capital*, as they continued to be depicted as “culturally” different from Germans (Caglar 1995).<sup>12</sup>

In sum, one realises that although the images of “authenticity” as conveyed in the Ali Kebab Campaign can be seen as harmless, and even as a positive sign of integration, it participates to the “othering” of the Turk and by extension of the Muslim. It does so in two ways. First by projecting the image of what is meant by a “successful” economic integration, Turks are invited to re-appropriate this image to be able to quickly acquire economic capital. Yet, in doing so it also limits substantially their possibility for social mobility, or acquiring “symbolic” capital, as they remain enclosed in the category of the authentic “other” – symbolising a series of exotic images that are constructed as “foreign” to, even though they may be part of, the Swiss culture. This “othering” fails to recognize the entire spectrum of differences (whether it is class, political, religious, and so on) in subjectivities, as well as limits the possibilities of imagining ones identity beyond or outside this image of “authenticity.”

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that, as of the mid-90s, Turkish entrepreneurs responded to this discrepancy, between their economic success, on the one hand, and the absence of social mobility on the other by stopping to exploit this vision of “authenticity” turning rather to a form of “strategic Occidentalism” (Mandel 2008 and Caglar 1995). Indeed, they have attempted to *refresh* the image of döner kebabs, by differentiating between different products, introducing new varieties, and making them less “authentic”, through, for instance, the Anglicisation of their names: “*The most important change taking place in marketing of döner is at the symbolic level, however. Both döner producers and Imbiss owners are trying to give döner Kebab a new image with a different field of connotations*” (Caglar 1995: 219). In other words, this is indicative of attempts by Turks in Germany to detach themselves from this “authentic” label that ended up being a source of social exclusions.

Concurrently, this process allows to locate, define and regulate the foreign “other.” This is why the fact that Ali is portrayed with his “ethnic” characteristics - through symbols such as the fez and the kebab - is not considered problematic, as it makes him safe and distinguishable. It is a way of locating and defining him as different. His success seems to be dependent on his difference and his ability of not blurring categories – of staying identifiable. One could even argue that it is precisely because he has not acquired “cultural” or “symbolic” capital that he is considered to be “harmless.” Indeed, by staying in the economic realm and tapping into his “otherness,” he is not considered to be a threat to Swiss values or identity. His identity remains entirely controlled by the dominant culture, as it is subject to its projection of what the good exotic “other” should be.

### *The Minaret Campaign*

Figure 5 – UDC campaigns





[very very incomplete part, apologies to the reader] Although the posters for the political campaign banning minarets might seem to stand in complete contrast with the figure of Ali. They are similar in many ways. Even if they project this time the image of the “bad” Muslim, it is still a category constructed and defined by the dominant culture. In other words, they project an “authentic” and essential vision of the threatening and dangerous foreign “other”. Interestingly, it does so by highlighting, this time, religious

characteristics and not cultural ones. These are in fact depicted as “dangerous” because they directly threaten the morality of the Swiss nation i.e. its “cultural capital. They fail to remain in the “non-threatening” economic realm. Yet, by showcasing overt religious symbols such as minarets or the niqab (as opposed to the fez and the kebab), this dangerous “other” remains, as well, locatable, identifiable and even subject to regulations (i.e. through bans, etc.). In a sense, therefore, both these campaigns draw and built on the dominant culture imaginary of the authentic foreign “other” – whether it be the dangerous religious “other” or the traditional safe one. Doing so, limits substantially the possibility for the dominant culture to understand that immigrants have multiple and complex subjectivities. In fact, understanding this complexity would be particularly challenging, as it would push the dominant culture to become more reflexive on its perception of the “exotic”, and realise, perhaps, that the “other” is not so different from “one self”.

#### IV. The safety of authenticity

##### **The notion of authenticity**

In a similar fashion as Homi Bhabha (1983), our analysis of the authenticity trope is centred on *modes of representation* constituting and delimiting the power relations (Foucault) between a dominant social group and alterity (a

variety of contextually different social groups),<sup>13</sup> in this case the Muslim “other.” Modes of representation articulate social/cultural/racial hierarchies within a polity. In the present case, again in line with Bhabha, we can draw a link with the colonial discourse which is dependent "on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (Bhabha 1983: 18). Fixity refers here not only to the unchanging character of the “other” – the latter being essentialised and reduced to a certain number of characteristics and properties – but also to the ever-going pattern of the necessity to assign and ascribe difference to the “other” (see also Connolly 2002[1991]). In Bhabha's word, this ambivalence of fixity – both immanent and ever in need of reaffirmation – "ensures [modes of representation] repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the [mode of representation], must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed" (Bhabha 1983: 18).

We argue that the authenticity trope embodies this ambiguity and that this has political consequences for the ability of dominated or oppressed social groups to speak of different voices and as authorised voices in the public sphere. First, authenticity refers to the representational boundaries that are ascribed to a social group by a dominant social group. By representational boundaries we mean that the semiotic interplay between denotation and connotation (Van

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<sup>13</sup> We follow Iris Young's (1990: 186, see also 43) definition of social group as "a collective of people who have affinity with one another because of a set of practices or way of life; they differentiate themselves from or are differentiated by at least one other group according to these cultural forms."

Leeuwen 2001), described in the previous section, constitute the delimitation of key "essential"/"natural" traits that are considered to define, identify, and address a specific social group. In other words, authenticity *becomes* an expectation from the dominant social group in regard to "othered" social groups, as the latter are confined to their "authentic" dispositions by the former. If a member of a dominated social group does not fulfil the expectations of authenticity s/he will not be taken as a genuine representative voice of this social group and thus (mis)placed as a non-legitimate and non-representative voice.<sup>14</sup> We thus argue that authenticity is what constitute, in representational terms, the authoritative voice of the "other" from the perspective of the dominant social group, even if this voice is neither necessarily legitimate (via forms of political participation) nor, as we argue below, representative.

Second, authenticity is not only an ascribed category from the "outside" of the social group but also might become a self-ascribed category from "within" the non-dominant social group. Some specific voices within a social group might take on the lead to socially and politically define how authentic is one member of this group in order to (de)legitimize this member's voice not only within the social group but also outside of it. To offer an example in line with our case and which we develop in the next section, contemporary hegemonic Islamist discourses have delimited what an authentic Islamist discourse is supposed to

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<sup>14</sup> We are deliberately avoiding Nandy's mobilisation of a psychological framework for epistemic reasons. We believe that such mobilisation risks, despite all care by the author, to reify collectives into stereotypical psychological dispositions and expectations.

be by rejecting forms of critical approaches to Islam by identifying them with "western" thoughts; whereas "true" Islam is constructed as non- or even anti-western (Mandaville 2001: 180):

"It seems the slightest hint of Western thought in a Muslim discourse immediately corrupts and invalidates any ideas which might emerge from it. The hybridity is not tolerated. In other words, the hegemonic discourse is basing itself on a claim to "purity" and "authenticity," what in Islam is sometimes referred to by the term *aṣāla*." (Mandaville *ibid*)

The trope of authenticity, whether it is directed at or within a social group, has for representational effect to (de)limit whose voice is authorised to speak on behalf of the group and to silence, by denying their "authenticity," alternative voices that might alter the comfort of our representations, and by extension the safety and security of our identities as such safety and security is linked to the delineation of an "other" (Connolly 2002[1991]). Yet, critical democratic scholars argue that these alternative voices are a necessity, as they consider difference to be constitutive of an ethos of democracy which: "balances the desirability of governance through democratic means with a corollary politics of democratic disturbance through which any particular pattern of previous settlements might be tossed up for grabs again" (Connolly 1995: 154). This democratic disturbance is not to be understood solely from the perspective of contestation politics but rather, and we think principally, on an understanding

that the political subject is "positioned on multiple, conflictual axes of identity/difference such that her agency itself is constituted, even enabled—and not simply paralyzed—by daily dilemmatic choices and negotiations" (Honig 1996: 259). In other words, the ethos of democracy is an ethos of pluralization through which any conceptions of the good and the self – and especially dominant ones – have to be confronted to other ones in order to live up to the expectation of politics to be "the multifaceted medium through which the multiple dissonances within it are exposed and negotiated. ... in affirming a multifarious condition always coming into being along one dimension or another, the pluralist temper foments multiple possibilities of micropolitics, collective assemblage, cross-national movements, pluralization, and responsiveness" (Connolly 1995: 198).

For this ideal to be reached, however, it is necessary that social groups benefit of adequate forms of representation. This is important because representation does not only operate a necessary political function in complex democratic societies, where small scale democratic processes – i.e. deliberative processes among individuals – are often impossible or not necessarily just (Fraser 1989), but also because it consists of: "a mediated relationship, both among members of a constituency, between the constituency and the representative, and between representatives in a decision-making body. As a deferring relationship between constituents and their agents, representation moves between moments of authorization and accountability" (Young 2000: 129). These moments of authorisation and accountability are enacted in the public

sphere and determine to a great extent the shape and degree of democracy of a society (Young 2000: 133). This democratic public is both at the source and at the receiving end of representation. Two types of critics can be made to this approach. First, as others have already noted, although a single public sphere is normatively desirable, it is sociologically impossible as dominant groups will end up monopolising the public sphere (Fraser 1990). Moreover, we argue, in light of our discussion on authenticity, that the call for fostering an heterogenous public sphere (Young 1989) by focusing mainly on an endogenous process of authorization does not necessarily take into account how representational boundaries are set by the dominant public and by some of the voices among the subaltern counterpublic.

We argue that while critical democratic scholars (Connolly 1995; Honig; Fraser 1989; or Young 1991; 2000), are normatively correct to call for the pluralization of democracy, most notably via the emergence of subaltern counterpublics, they do not sufficiently take into account the sociological processes that may delimit how far counterpublics may really represent a "discursive contestation" (Fraser 1990: 67). What our analysis of the authenticity trope suggests is that within any dominant discourse there is only a limited possibility for producing representation as "mediated relationship" (Young 2000). Indeed, authorization is not only an endogenous process between a constituency and a representative but also an exogenous process whereby the possibility to be authorized as a constituent is delimited via certain modalities articulating social/cultural/racial hierarchies within a polity. Moreover, our

analysis suggests also that counterpublics do not necessarily preside over the "emancipatory potential" that critical democratic theory sees in them (Fraser 1990: 68). In fact, one might wonder to which extent some counterpublics are offsetting "the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies" (Fraser 1990: 68), if they end up, in their quest for representation, by reproducing the codes of those dominant social groups. It is to this paradox we now turn to.

#### V. Authenticity and resistance: beyond the counter-players? The non-player

The notion of counter-players is developed in Ashis Nandy's deconstruction of the "state of mind" of colonialism (see, for instance, Nandy 2009 [1983]: 3, 11, 24-25). Nandy asserts that a particularity of colonialism is its ability to manage dissent by setting the limits within which this dissent will take place as the persons resisting the colonial mode of domination will actually, more often than not, reproduce the codes (Nandy 2009 [1983]: 2) that have emerged through the interactions between colonisers and colonised. A counter-player is thus a social agent whose repertoires of dissent and contestation, and her ability to seek for recognition or redistribution, are intricately linked to the codes delimiting the legitimacy and adequate *modus operandi* for these repertoires to take place and be expressed. The specific limits of a counter-player's legitimacy and *modus operandi* are not the result of an imposition upon the former by the colonisers but of a negotiation. The acceptance of the "rules of

the game" by the counter-player is reflected in the reproduction by the counter-player of the categories and codes of the coloniser that have resulted from this negotiation. Even while resisting the colonisers, the mobilisation by the counter-players of repertoires of contestation, categories of mobilisation, cultural dispositions and modes of action that are the result of the aforementioned negotiation is reflective of a form of oppression.

In terms of politics of representation, this conceptualisation has a two-fold implication. On the one hand, the ways by which resistance and accommodation are articulated and enacted by the oppressed will only reproduce/reinforce the structure of domination that has resulted from the interactions between colonisers and colonised; i.e. between dominant social groups and other social groups. On the other hand, if the oppressed takes on repertoires of contestation and actions that are not defined by this original, colonial, negotiation both the oppressors and the oppressed are taken aback, literally thrown off balance. **[expand on Nandy's paradigmatic example is Gandhi and more specifically his gendered ambiguity]**

Nandy considers individuals or social groups who do not play by the book of the dominant social group to be "non-players". These non-players are playing by their own rulebook without necessarily taking into account the rulebook of the dominant social group. In line with a quotidian reading of resistance (Scott 1984, de Certeau 1981), Nandy considers that non-players at times are resisting a system of domination and specific codes of representation by

employing tactics. Tactics enable us to consider resistance not as something motivated, organised, collective, altruist and strategic but as something that can be “unorganized, unsystematic, and individual, ... opportunistic and self-indulgent, ... and/or ... imply, in their intention or meaning, an accommodation with the system of domination” (Scott, 1985: 292). Through their accommodation of the system of domination, the non-players are actually re-appropriating codes, cultural norms, etc. without necessarily abiding to the dominant understanding of the later but by simply making it their own in their own way, in a way that is not necessarily forethought by the dominant group or in adequation with the dominant group's understanding. It is important to note that the forms this appropriation may take cannot be defined a priori: “the occasion continues to trump definitions, because it cannot be isolated from a conjuncture or an operation” (de Certeau, 1990 [1980]: 60-1, 63, 124, 127). It is only within a larger structure of meaning and through the reaction the dominant social group has to these tactics that one is able to locate and understand them as forms of resistance.

The example of Muslim women who define themselves as being pious, feminists, and active citizens are a case in point. Through their actions and discourse they detach themselves from the figure of the counter-player. They break from the image of the pious women with no voice object of her culture and patriarchal norms. By asking for the right to participate fully to the activities of the polis by for instance studying in higher education facilities, working as lawyers or doctors, having access to social and cultural mobility, or

being involved in politics, they are stressing that they are not overwhelmed by their faith – secluded to the private realm where the enchanted is allowed to flourish – but that their identity is complex and multiple. They challenge therefore a religious stereotype that correlates the wearing of the veil with the inability to speak for oneself in public. Finally, by positioning themselves as feminists, they destabilise the dichotomy often stressed by feminists themselves between the autonomous, “secular” and rational feminist subject opposed to the overt-religious, dependent and irrational one in need of saving. The positioning of these women leaves the dominant society in quite an uncomfortable and unambiguous position, as it destabilises the dominant categories of “authenticity.”

The case of Ilhem Moussaid is a case in point. Ilhem, a member of the new anti-capitalist French party (NPA) and who identified herself as being a “secularist, feminist and anti-capitalist” (Ilhem, cited in Alemagna 2010), decided to present herself in the 2010 regional election with her headscarf. Her decision created the headlines in February 2010, and became the prime subject of conversations, debates and criticisms among journalists, intellectuals, politicians and members of her own party. Interestingly, Martine Aubry, leader of the French socialist party, argued that a candidate wearing a headscarf would not have been accepted on the list of her party. For her, religion had to be separated from politics – it had to remain in the private domain and not disturb what she understood as the neutral realm of the Republic. Members of the French Right, put forth another type of argument,

stressing that the young girl was instrumentalised and manipulated by her own political party, lacking the rationality and the autonomy to be an independent agent of her actions (Zappi, 2010). In such a cacophony, Ilhem's voice and political opinions were barely audible, and when they were they were quickly disregarded as being a nonsense, a proof of her illogical subjectivity and even for some of her deceptiveness hiding another agenda. In fact, her headscarf was sufficient, from the outset, to delimit her identity and to push her back in a well delimited and safe category of "authenticity". After a few days, Ilhem finally reacted in an email to the turmoil she created:

"I am very sad to see 8 years of my life reduced to my headscarf. I am very sad to hear that my personal belief is a danger for others, when I am promoting friendship, respect, tolerance and equality between all human beings [...] I am a citizen like all others" (Ilhem, cited in Gurrey 2010).

The discourse and subjective position of Ilhem, as well as the reactions of the dominant society are quite noteworthy. Indeed, they directly lead us to reflect on the "safety" of dominant readings of "authenticity," which do not only allow the dominant society to locate and define the "foreign" but also comforts it in its own identity and values. This leaves us with a series of questions that will need to be further investigated: What are the conditions that allows to develop a subject position that breaks away with dominant categories of authenticity?

Can these be successful - i.e. can those actors not only have a voice in the public realm, but be heard and taken seriously? Or is this too “dangerous”, as doing so would render the “other” harder to locate, and consequently reveal the fluid and rather unstructured character of the dominant society’s identity?

## VI. Concluding remarks

**[Watch this space!]**

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