To Authenticate Opinion and (Re-)draw the boundaries of the Public Sphere

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To Authenticate Opinions and Redraw the Legitimate Boundaries of the Public Sphere

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Short outline of my project: The dissertation aims to explore the explanatory potential of the concept of authenticity to identify successful introductions of topics previously considered as beyond public deliberation from 2005 and onwards. My main focus is religious claims in the Danish public sphere.

My theoretical and methodological approaches are closely interlinked and my presentation therefore deals with both theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses.

Ethics of Authenticity

The basic concept of my dissertation is the concept of authenticity. The concept has a long history in existentialist philosophy. Among the many prominent interlocutors are the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (Kierkegaard 2006, ch. 1; Sartre 2003). Today, however, one of the most influential conceptualisation of authenticity has been outlined by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, 1992). Charles Taylor defines the concept of authenticity as being true to oneself within so-called horizons of meaning that makes some features of life seem worthwhile in comparison to others. The term horizon of meaning is defined as a background of intelligibility against which things take on importance (Taylor 1992: 33, 37). This definition is based on the assumption that the identity of each individual is dialogically constructed in relation with what G. H. Mead terms 'significant others' and that individuals are embedded in social and cultural communities which sustain specific horizons of meaning. The dialogical relationship between Self and Other is the basis on which Charles Taylor constructs his concept of an ethics of authenticity, and this concept forms the basis of his moral philosophy (Taylor 1992: 17, Taylor 2004: 24). His moral philosophy is grounded in a belief that people ought to engage in dialogue continuously to search for the good life. According to Charles Taylor, individuals are thereby matured to be able to balance conflicting aims and demands and gain competence to form so-called strong evaluations (Taylor 1989). The interconnectedness of identities – perceptions of Self and Other- through the dialogue in the community gives birth to what Charles Taylor terms hermeneutical justice (Taylor 2004).

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In contrast to his own perception of identity as constituted by an ethics of authenticity, Charles Taylor outlines what he sees as the mainstream cultural trend in liberal democracies, i.e., authenticity defined as soft relativism[1]. To Charles Taylor soft relativism is closely associated to self-absorbedness and ignorance of moral demands of citizenship and solidarity (Taylor 1992: 22).

Social Theoretical Basis

A basic theoretical assumption for my study is that the institutional boundaries of the public sphere[2], i.e., formal institutions such as newspapers, radio and public service broadcasting, are not necessarily equivalent to its legitimate boundaries, i.e., individuals who articulate opinions that are perceived as parts of the public sphere. The public sphere is here to be understood in a relatively broad sense as a sphere in opposition to the private sphere of citizens. I perceive the institutional boundaries of the public sphere as the sedimention of doxa in the Danish community (Laclau 1990: 34), while I perceive the legitimate boundaries as the limit between what at a given time is perceived as with a preliminary definition legitimate objects of public deliberation and illegitimate or only partly legitimate objects of public deliberation, E.g. Muslim religious claims. Since the printing of 12 Mohammad cartoons in September 30th 2005 religious claims have caused increased tensions between liberal rights on the one hand and cultural rights of minority groups on the other, and consequently attracted attention to the question of what cultural rights ought to be perceived as private and what cultural rights ought to be perceived as public (Kock 2007: 192, Lægaard 2007). Subsequently, in recent Danish history I consider the boundaries of the public sphere to be especially open to change (for a theoretical account see also Snow 2004).

Theoretically, I draw on a rhetorical assumption of the individual as a purposeful actor. This rhetorical assumption has been connected to discourse studies through Jonathan Potter & Margaret Wetherell's famous application of discourse theory to studies of social psychology (1987). As a result, it has become clear that the structuralist assumptions of discourse theory may fruitfully be connected to the voluntaristic assumptions of rhetoric through the concept of discursive repertoires. A discursive repertoire is defined as "*recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions events and other phenomena*" (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 149, Wetherell 1998)[3].

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[1] Soft relativism is a term proposed by Charles Taylor and is synonymous to what has been critically described by Scott Lash (1996) and more neutrally observed by Gilles Lipovetsky (2002).

[2] I am aware that the conception of the national public sphere as one single public sphere is widely considered as inadequate (Calhoun 1992, Crossley & Roberts 2004, Bang & Esmark 2007), but I choose to term the multileveled and highly fluid public spheres of late modernity as *one* to keep the terminology of the paper simple and univocal.

[3] The concept of discursive repertoire is in many ways similar to van Dijks term common sense knowledge (van Dijk 2005). Discursive repertoire is however a more narrow concept since it is linked to individuals and not necessarily to communities as van Dijk proposes. This narrow conception makes a highly differentiated analysis of reception possible.

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The Power of Authenticity

Following the British sociologist Anthony Giddens individualization is perceived as a characteristic feature of late modernity (Giddens 1994: 106). The great myths of modernity, e.g., ideologies and religions, have failed to show their function as comprehensive guidelines for individuals, and the individual is expected to take a reflexive stand and carefully select what overall aims to pursue and what means to apply for that. As has been shown by many durkheimean and postdurkheimean sociologist, this does not mean, however, that religion ought to be denied its function as an identity-constituting factor. Quite on the contrary, several sociologists point out that in these times we are witnessing an increased desecularization that may selectively make religion constitute the identity of individuals (Casanova 1994, se also Højsgaard Thomsen 2005). As Anthony Giddens points out, today identification with the public is obtained through reflexive articulations of self-identity -contrary to modernity, when identification was obtained through articulations of specific class conditions and social class adherence (Giddens 1996, cf. Taylor 1992: 33). Subsequently, I suppose that articulations of authenticity have a special strong power of persuasion.

A Conceptualisation of Opinion

I will study how individuals deliberate, and when succesful, persuade one another. Opinions are perceived as arguments put forward by single individuals or groups in the public sphere. The study draws on rhetorical theory as well as poststructuralist theory to identify the dual persuasive effect of communication. The first effect is established by means of the classical rhetorical appeals: logos, ethos and pathos, and the second is obtained by contingency of meaning established through continuous struggles of discourses in a heuristic field of discourses (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 111). This dual focus helps illuminate voluntaristic forces in public deliberation as well as more diffuse changes in our perception of different concepts and symbols, and it thereby helps to adequately describe changes in the perception of legitimacy in the contemporary Danish public sphere.

Drawing on Stephen Toulmin, I define the concept of argument as an utterance that, as a minimum, includes a claim, data and a warrant (Toulmin 1958). The concept of argument is closely linked to the concept of discourse. Following Chantal Mouffe & Ernesto Laclau's outline of a theory of discourse, I define a discourse as *"an **articulatory practice** which constitutes and organizes social relations"* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 96). On this basis I perceive a discourse as the total amount of meaning established by an argument. Hence, we see that the concept of discourse is to be perceived as broader than the pure argument since it also includes implicit assumptions and pre-established knowledge in the rhetor and the public sphere. For the study of public deliberation in times of controversy a special

category of discourse ought to be highlighted, i. e., the concept of metaphor. Following George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, I define a metaphor broadly as the way of "*understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another*" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). With reference to everyday practices, a metaphor hides and highlights features of an event and helps the audience gain a shared understanding of it.

I identify a discourse as a stretch of text and as far as it draws on meanings from the surrounding text, this text will also be considered as part of the discourse. The outer limit is identified as where the coherence of meaning ends – where inconsistencies emerge.

On this basis, I propose to identify authenticity as a stretch of text that includes an 'I', an affective mental process indicating verb and one or more references to normative frameworks which are considered to be well-known to the audience. The affective mental processing verb indicates the presence of so-called strong evaluations and thereby individual identity (as argued above). Examples of well-known normative frameworks may be ideologies, religious doxa, myths and conceptions of nationalism.

Example: the veiled Muslim woman and candidate of the Danish Communist Party Enhedslisten Asmaa Abdol-Hamid says (in a reply to a party colleague, Bente Hansen):

> You perceive the veil as a symbol of repression and as a symbol of male domination. This is not what the veil means to me. Wearing a hijab[4] is for me a personal choice that only shows my religious affiliation, and religious symbols change throughout the ages and have different meanings ascribed to them due to changing circumstances. If you wore a Christian cross, it would not mean that you were affiliated Ku Klux clan.
>
> I am aware that in some countries, for instance Iran, the veil is a univocal symbol of the subordination of women in society, and I have disassociated myself clearly from that. Right now, I am witnessing the contrary: people want to force me not to wear a hijab at least if I am to 'be allowed' to call myself a Socialist.
>
> But as I mentioned earlier: I am going to fight for the women's right to decide for themselves of how they want to live their lives and what to do with their bodies. (Dagbladet Information 29th September 2007, p. 16-17)

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[4] In Denmark it is common to use one single term for the burkha as well as hijab, viz. veil. In my translation, I have chosen to distinguish the two terms in order to give the best option of understanding Asmaa Abdol-Hamid's argument.

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In the first paragraph Asmaa Abdol-Hamid paraphrases her opponent's point of view. Then she takes exception to it by stating that to her hijab is a personal choice and not imposed on her by men in order to subordinate her as a Muslim woman. She differentiates belief from certain practices that are broadly perceived as non-acceptable: the subordination of women and the racist rhetoric by members of the Ku Klux clan. In the second paragraph, Asmaa Abdol-Hamid introduces a counterconsideration when she explicitly takes exception to the symbolic meaning of the Muslim veil in Iran. This counterconsideration shows her reflectivity. Further, she makes an articulation of authenticity. In the sentence that starts *"Right now..."* , she compares that repression to Danish political culture in the Spring of 2007 where several Danes of different political orientations have questioned her identity as, on one hand, a Muslim who wears hijab, and, on the other hand, a progressive Socialist. At the same time, she suggests a linkage between tolerance towards Muslim habits and adherence to the common practice of pluralism in Danish political culture. This tacit suggestion is made partly explicit in the third paragraph, where she assures the audience that she is committed to the fight for the freedom of women as it is commonly accepted among Danes.

From the example we see that articulations of authenticity is a subcategory of what Norman Fairchlough terms interdiscoursivity. The individual innovates on the basis of a range of well-known discourses and transforms their meaning by the articulation (Fairclough 2003: 35).

Legitimizing and Delegitimizing Opinions by the Audience
I perceive the concept of legitimacy as context-bound, and therefore I identify it functionally as obtaining in so far as members of the public – the audience as a whole or just parts of it- show acceptance of a discourse by rearticulating it. This conceptualization is closely related to the Aristotelian conception of krisis as a critical, evaluative judgement (Aristotle, se also van Leeuven & Wodak 1999 for empirical analyses).
When such an act occurs throughout the public sphere, I consider the discourse to be part of the public and the boundaries of the public to be temporarily redrawn.
To see whether discourses are accepted, I look for mimicry. Mimicry may be more or less explicit. It may be what Julia Kristeva terms intertextuality, i.e., the explicit drawing on some previously articulated discourse with reference to a specific text (Kristeva 1986). Such explicit references is a well-known feature in vernacular deliberation but – unfortunately for this study- it is less common in public deliberation as it occurs in newspapers. Another way of identifying mimicry is to look for implicit rearticulation, i.e. interdiscoursivity- when part of an argument is repeated and at the same

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time connected to new normative frameworks. If we take the above-mentioned example (p. 4) from Asmaa Abdol-Hamid and look at the third paragraph, she rearticulates an old feminist cue: women should decide for themselves how to live their lives. However, she adds: "*and what to do with their bodies*", and thereby she makes clear that 'what to do with one's body' is not necessarily included in the broad perception of 'how to live one's life'. This distinction is an implicit response to feminists' critique of her identity as a socialist feminist and as a Muslim with hijab. In the third paragraph, however, by linking the two aims with an 'and', Asmaa Abdol-Hamid makes explicit that she perceives the question of what-to-do with one's body (to wear hijab) as a part of choosing for oneself how to live one's life. In this way, she rearticulates a feminist discourse and thereby acknowledges it while at the same time she broadens its scope to cover the right for Muslim women to wear hijab. The close connection between articulations of authenticity and legitimization of it shows the close flux of meaning articulated by self-reflexive individuals in modern society.

Another example was the former social-liberal politician Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen's happening on April 26th 2007 where she donned a hijab. The gesture was made as a response to members of Danish People's Party who had questioned the right of Danish Muslim women to be veiled in whatever style the veil is worn[5]. Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen then chose to wear hijab and to have her-self photographed in front of a statue of a fishwife wearing headscarf as they commonly did until 1960s. The idea was to show that hiding one's hair has been common practise for female workers in Denmark until recently, and that Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen thought it paradoxical that members of Danish People's Party and others wanted to prohibit Muslim women from hiding their hair in accordance with religious doxa. Lilie Chouliaraki terms the purposeful use of such reflections from past to present as anachronisms (Chouliaraki 2004). By the means of an anachronism Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen recalled an old female practise of hiding one's hair to the audience and thereby helped to legitimize the choice of many veiled Muslim women living in Denmark.

The opposite of legitimization of discourse is delegitimization of discourse. Delegitimization can either be the non-introduction of arguments in the public sphere, or it can be arguments that are only articulated once or arguments whose content of meaning are deliberately dissolved by other arguments or discourses. The first scenario is difficult to identify empirically since the arguments have not been put forward publicly. The second scenario is easier to find since the arguments have been articulated

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[5] See footnote 3.

but have not succeeded in being *re*articulated. The last scenario is the most interesting given that my aim is to identify the flux of legitimization and delegitimization in the public sphere. I will illustrate the last scenario of delegitimization with an example.

Members of the Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, which Danish politicians have attempted for five years to subject to legal constrains, demonstrated during February 2008 against Danish newspapers because of the reprinting of a Mohammad Cartoon. The right of Hizb ut-Tahrir to exist had, until February 2008, been defended by the two major Danish socialist parties that together represent about 20 pct. of the voters. In the wake of the protests against the reprinting of the cartoon, however, the chairman of the larger socialist party, Socialist People's Party, Villy Søvndal advised the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir to go to Saudi-Arabia if they would not respect the right of Danish Newspaper to reprint the Mohammad cartoon. He wrote in his newsletters:

> Not only have Hizt ut-Tahrir got it all wrong, they have purely and simply gone to the wrong place. If they are so foolish that they really want to introduce the Khalifat and set up Sharia law, they have gone to the wrong country. [...]
> With great care, they (members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, skj) have fuelled the controversy and at the same time managed to talk directly to Danes who are fed up with religious fanaticism and to the minority of Muslims who obviously cannot get enough of religious fanaticism. [...]
> And to all Muslims in Denmark: The solution to your problems – which I acknowledge and understand– cannot be reached by religious belief. And certainly not through religious fanaticism as that promoted by Hizb ut-Tahrir.[…]
> Univocal support for democracy is needed. Support for liberal rights. Support for the principle of equal opportunities. This goes for everybody in this country.
> (*Villys vinkel*, February 19th and 20th 2008)

In this quotation we see that Villy Søvndal dissociates attempts to set up the Khalifat from living in Denmark. He further points out that the Islamist movement has polarized Danes: Those who "*are fed up with religious fanaticism*" and a subsection of Muslims "*who cannot get enough*". In the third paragraph, Villy Søvndal further dissociates two concepts, viz. solution and religion. These two concepts have often been connected in apocalyptic speeches that have helped fuel rebellion, and after ethnic youngsters set fire to cars, garbage cans and public schools during February 2008, the concept of rebellion adequately describes the context of the newsletters. By the dissociation Villy Søvndal attempts to differentiate protests and religious fanaticism from the concept of solution and thereby opens up for using integration policies, social policies and educational policies as solutions to the

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problems which many immigrants in Denmark face. He attempts to redirect the effort of young Muslims away from visions of the Khalifat and towards the Danish political system and society at large. In the quotation Villy Søvndal clearly separates a subgroup of Muslim fanatics from the majority of cultural Muslims in Denmark and thereby delegitimizes the claims of the fanatics – members of Hizb ut-Tahrir- without repeating the dichotomization, frequently urged, between the majority of cultural Christian Danes and Muslims. Delegitimization is obtained through an argument in favour of democrats of all religious orientations living on an equal footing in Denmark.

During February and March, the members of Villy Søvndal's own party and many other socialists have publicly agreed with him, thereby shifting public opinion away from Hizb ut-Tahrir in the Danish public sphere.

Villy Søvndal's newsletters of February 19th and 20th attracted huge attention and they were cited in the major daylies and that is the reason why I have chosen to use newsletters that originally were directed to a subsection of Danish citizens – a maximum of 15.000 partymembers- as an example of delegitimization in the Danish public sphere.

On Normativity and Ethics

From my theoretical outline, it should be apparent that I favour an inclusive view of religion in the public sphere and therefore also recognise a legitimate space for religious claims in politics. In taking this perspective, I make the assumption that believers in general have a high moral standard and therefore only raise religious claims when they sincerely feel urged to do so. By this assumption, I rule out the secularist-libertarian view of religious claims as mere window-dressing for promoting one's own contingent interests vis-a-vis fellow citizens and the state. The argument goes as follows: When believers raise religious claims with obligational modalities (cf. p. 4 above) they perceive something to be of the utmost importance for their existence. In the same move, they bar themselves from a wide range of claims that are not to be considered important (Ferrara 2004; Taylor 1989). This means that believers are aware that only very few claims can be raised on the basis of their religion. By this assumption I also partly distance myself from the guidelines proposed by Jürgen Habermas (2006). Jürgen Habermas proposes that believers ought to translate their religious claims to what he terms rational claims, or at least to be obliging towards secularists aiming to do so. I acknowledge that translation of religious claims into claims that may be evaluated by relatively neutral formal-pragmatic validity conditions may facilitate multi-religious co-existence, yet I fear that Jürgen Habermas' proposal may lead to exclusion of claims that are considered existential but cannot undergo such

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translation. According to this evaluation, I find that the guidelines proposed by Jürgen Habermas are insufficient to meet the challenges of modern multicultural societies.

Another basic assumption in my dissertation is that non-fundamentalist believers of all kinds share a basic moral framework of trust and mutual recognition, and consequently raise religious claims in a respectful and particularist way that makes mutual accommodation possible (Taylor 1989, Govier 1997). Writing on the basis of this assumption, I reject claims raised by contemporary right- wing politicians who argue that Muslims ought to be prohibited from raising religious claims in the public sphere because they do not respect the rights of non-Muslims. As far as I am aware Islamist movements as Hizb ut-Tahrir's perception of non-Muslims may be regarded as an exception to the Muslim perception of non-Muslims.

Strengths

- By the eclectic rhetorical –discourse theoretical approach I avoid the individual-free poststructuralist trap that makes many scholars distance themselves from poststructuralist analyses.
- The approach provides empirically identifiable criteria for legitimization and delegitimization of arguments and discourses. A reliable and transparent way of identifying what is considered as legitimate and what is not.

Weaknesses

- Is the Habermasian ideal of open access to the public sphere realized? Role of editors, formal and informal structural access criteria?
- Do deliberators try to persuade one another or the passive audience that also forms part of the public? If the latter is the case what is the implication for my study?
- Is rearticulation by one single individual enough to regard a claim as legitimized and thus as part of the public sphere? Is number to be accorded significance?
- Are utterances to be regarded as reflections of the mind? If this is not a valid assumption what implication does it have for my approach? How do I deal with it?
- The role of discursive repertoires. Do members of the public understand metaphors, allusions etc. in the way they are intended by the speaker?

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