



# Virtual Roundtable: Julie Billaud's response

Julie Billaud  
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## 1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

I started engaging with the notion of political agency in my earlier work on gender politics in 'postwar/reconstruction' Afghanistan. In a context where foreign occupation (under its multiple forms) and nationalist politics considerably



constrained women's capacity to speak, I wanted to understand the conditions of possibility of an autonomous and culturally intelligible feminine political voice. Through fieldwork carried out among various groups of women in 2007, I realised that Afghan women's engagement with the public had to be understood in terms of performances with deep political meanings.



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Because gender policies were locally perceived as a transplant imposed by 'the West', women were conscious of the necessity to manage the impression of their audiences in order to maintain their public legitimacy. The emotional, religious, nationalist and poetic repertoires they mobilised in their everyday interactions were evidence of the extreme resourcefulness they demonstrated when attempting to articulate rights claims without radically disrupting the intricate rules of the honour system. The international community's agenda to « empower women » and promote "women's rights", because of its disconnection from the subjective experiences of Afghan women, mostly served to bolster the myth of a return to normality for the Western public. As a consequence, such discourses intensified moral panics around identity at the local level. The drama that is



currently unfolding in this region of the world, triggered by an indefinite foreign military occupation, flawed development projects and social inequalities, has created a lumpen youth in thrall to radical Islam and violence. Women, far from being the passive victims of these developments, have accumulated over time an intimate knowledge of their place in the moral world they occupy. This knowledge does not merely reside in cerebral machinations: it comes alive in practice, that is, in performance.

*Their agency precisely resides in their (mostly intuitive, but also sometimes strategic) capacity to manoeuvre this extremely precarious and symbolically charged political space.*

These reflections have deeply shaped my understanding of current debates around Islam in Europe and in the UK in particular. Of course, the situation of European Muslim women is not totally similar to the one of the women I met in Afghanistan. However, British Muslim women's political agency has to be placed, like for Afghan women, in a broader context marked by rising Islamophobic sentiments and contradictory attempts by the government to "manage diversity". Among second and third generations of "post-migrants" Muslims in the UK, Islam provides a new framework for leading a moral life, a framework that is both emancipated from Western modernity but that nevertheless remains contemporaneous to it. Indeed, British Muslims testify of subjectivities oriented towards 'moral life'. Their postures are both inward and outward looking: their command of Islamic knowledge is a source of self-empowerment, a form of 'care of the self' (Agrama 2010) that nurtures a sense of distinction. However, in their quest for self-betterment, they do not passively reproduce a traditional lifestyle but they rather project a view of what ethical living ought to be. This personalized form of religiosity goes hand in hand with a desire to improve the world around them. In this sense, religiosity sets the condition of possibility for broader political action. The younger generations of Muslim women, for example, have begun to revisit the sacred sources of the *deen* to rethink the position of women in Islam. A number of them have made their entry in Shari'ah councils or have specialized



in Islamic family law or Islamic finance, an expertise that has become increasingly valued on the British market of identities. The vast majority of British Shariah councils' clients are women seeking a religious divorce. Ironically, these institutions which are perceived as discriminating against women from the outside, are seen as a threat to men's authority from the inside.



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Western liberal tradition tends to associate secularism with the preservation of the principle of gender equality in democratic societies. Indeed, the notion of freedom is conceived as an individual's ability to autonomously assert her/his will and pursue personal interests unfettered by the weight of custom, tradition or transcendental will. Individual autonomy is central to how freedom and personal fulfilment are imagined. To be considered 'free', an individual must act without social constraint. To a large extent, Western feminism has assimilated these liberal presuppositions and has envisioned women's emancipation as necessitating a clear break with traditions and beliefs. The fact that visibly (veiled) Muslim women have emerged in public and that they marry religiously, divorce in the same way and use spiritual guidance to lead their lives in accordance with their faith challenges Western conception of women's emancipation.

*In this sense, British Muslim women's performances could be read as*



*subalterns' unapologetic attempts at asserting a feminine identity distinct from Western's standards of emancipation.*

As Ghassan Hage argues in a recent article published in *American Ethnologist* [\[1\]](#): “What if there was something indeed threatening in a good anti-colonial way in every Muslim man growing a beard and every Muslim woman peacefully but defiantly putting her hijab on”? This is the question I am daring to ask in my current work on British Islam.

## **2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?**

These two examples derived from my fieldworks in Afghanistan and in England demonstrate the somewhat out-dated approach of area studies. In my view, area studies are ill equipped to draw the kinds of comparisons necessary to understand our contemporary globalised world. Because of the increasing speed with which « cultures » interact, political developments in the Middle East can no longer be analysed without making references to political developments happening elsewhere in the world. This has always been the case since the birth of the discipline but because flows of information have intensified exponentially over the past 50 years, the intensity of these exchanges and interactions has been magnified. The expansion of diasporic lifestyles is a good illustration of the limits of area studies for capturing such a cultural phenomenon. How would you place culturally a person born in Lebanon from Palestinian parents, who resides in Australia, regularly returns to Lebanon on holidays, and has never visited Palestine? The analytical framework offered by area studies may well not be the most useful to understand such an experience.

[\[1\]](#) Hage, Ghassan. 2016. « État de Siège: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism? »



*American Ethnologist* 43 (1): 38-49. doi:10.1111/amet.12261.

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