

# #MUSLIMRAGE

## When Western Fears Meet Political Humor

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In September 2012, *Newsweek* magazine used the headline “Muslim Rage” accompanied by an image of angry bearded men as its front cover page. After harsh critique, it invited its readers to discuss the front cover via Twitter under the hashtag #MuslimRage. Unexpectedly for *Newsweek*, this request triggered an ironic subversion of the notion of “Muslim rage”: social media became tools in a subversive discourse where users did not only play with the notion itself, but ridiculed Western fears of “raging” Muslims. Drawing upon the reactions on Twitter and other social media the article scrutinizes how humor and irony as political and networked social practices provide a means for marginalized groups to establish a counter-discourse.

*Keywords:* political humor, irony, emotions, social media, Muslims

What May Satire Do?

Everything.

(Ignaz Wrobel [Kurt Tucholsky] 1919)

In 1919 Kurt Tucholsky, writing as Ignaz Wrobel, in an article for the daily *Berliner Tageblatt* fervently argued that satire may do “everything”! Almost a hundred years later, in the aftermath of the attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, a fierce discussion has ensued debating exactly those limits of satire that Tucholsky had in mind. Yet, in a globalized, post-colonial and digitalized world with a multiplicity of stakeholders, asymmetries and hierarchies it has become increasingly complicated to draw a line between the fundamental right of free speech on the one hand and discriminatory hate speech on the other hand.

The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* proved to be yet another – and tragic – example that satire and religious

fanaticism of any kind stand in strict opposition.<sup>1</sup> But since the terrorists were radical Islamists, many voices in Western countries quickly resorted to well-known patterns and explanations, framing Muslims in general as “fearsome Others” and potential terrorists, particularly if insulted. The Cologne carnival even went so far as to cancel a float with a *Charlie Hebdo* motive, out of fear that Muslims might feel provoked.<sup>2</sup> Such reactions fit neatly into a pattern where a dominant-hegemonic Western discourse tends to confuse Islamist religious fanaticism with Islamic religion, or with ethnicity, nationality or descent more generally. In a classical Orientalist fashion, such discourses more often than not target specific social groups and populations that are thereby rendered passive and denied a voice. The case that will be discussed in this article at a first view looks like yet another example of Western self-referential discourse about Muslims as the “threatening Oth-

er.” Yet, as will be shown, this time the muted Oriental talks back.

On September 16, 2012, the US-American magazine *Newsweek* featured a front cover that led to a wave of protest. *Newsweek* used the headline “Muslim Rage” followed by an image of angry bearded young men wearing traditional Arabic clothing. The young men’s rage is directed at the anti-Islamic video “The Innocence of Muslims,” often referred to as the “Muhammad video” in the media, which caused violent outbreaks and protests in some Arab, Islamic, and Western countries, but also debates about the limits of free speech. Beneath the image a reference is made to the cover story by the prominent Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, quoting: “How I survived it. How we can end it.” In her article, Hirsi Ali (2012) contends that the protesters represent Islamic mainstream. However, it was not the article, but the front cover headline and image that caused quite a stir among *Newsweek* readers. The magazine



Ill. 1: “Muslim Rage” on the cover of *Newsweek*. (<http://www.newsweek.com/ayaan-hirsi-ali-islamists-final-stand-64811>, accessed October 22, 2015)

was criticized for the negative and stereotypical ways in which Muslims are consistently depicted and are either implicitly or explicitly linked to terrorism. After receiving a considerable amount of harsh criticism *Newsweek* invited its readers to discuss the front cover on Twitter under the hashtag #MuslimRage by reflecting on their own experiences with “Muslim rage.” While *Newsweek* had supposedly expected the hashtag to collect negative and stereotypical Western perspectives of Muslims as fearsome others and engender a heated discussion, quite the contrary happened. Media analysts argued that even though *Newsweek* had made it a habit to feature controversial, and sometimes even manufactured, covers to increase sales, it was probably not prepared for how Twitter users reacted to #MuslimRage (Hsu 2012): The discussion was taken over by those who were supposed to be its targets.

This article will employ the front cover of the *Newsweek* magazine (September 16, 2012) and the reactions that occurred online, and particularly on various social media platforms, to elaborate on the discursive construction of difference through emotions and its subversion through political humor. Twitter, blogs and other social media platforms became tools in a subversive discourse where users did not only play with the notion itself but ridiculed Western fears of “raging” Muslims. The article will scrutinize how humor and irony as political and networked social practices provide a means for marginalized groups to establish a counter-discourse. Thereby it aims to shed some light on the challenges of online ethnography.

*Newsweek* may be a US-American magazine, yet the phenomenon that developed around #MuslimRage is by far not confined to the USA. Rather, like the reactions to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks mentioned above, it reflects the respective social positioning and experiences of Muslims in Western countries as threatening “Others” in a post-9/11 world more generally, in the USA and Europe alike.

First, the article will elaborate on the notion of “Muslim rage” and contextualize it with regard to a hegemonic “Western” view on an allegedly peculiar “Muslim” form of rage on the one hand and the

study of emotions on the other hand. Subsequently, the various reactions to the notion of “Muslim rage” will be analyzed. Finally, drawing upon the concepts of “stioob” and “polysemy” the last section will scrutinize how humor and irony can function as tools of subversion and resistance.

### Some Methodological Remarks

The article situates itself within an anthropology of the political as it focuses on power relations, inequalities, social hierarchies and the way actors are constituted as political subjects. Such a perspective conceives of the political as something that is not confined to the state but permeates various realms of society (see, e.g., Wedel et al. 2005; Shore, Wright & Però 2011; Aronoff & Kubik 2013). Political humor, satire and irony are thus understood as highly political practices (cf. Kuipers 2008: 368–373; van Zoonen, Vis & Mihelj 2010; Kessel & Merziger 2012; Yang & Jiang 2015).

Since the primary sources used in this article are Twitter and blogs, such as Tumblr and Gawker, as well as journalistic comments and articles that appeared online, the article engages in an online ethnography, also termed digital ethnography or netnography, that attempts to analytically and methodologically grasp the specificities of online phenomena (see Dicks et al. 2005; Kozinets 2010; Weller et al. 2014; Phillips 2015). Therefore, it is worth noting that since the forms of humor and irony under scrutiny take place online, they are potentially globally situated and accessible. While traditional anthropological and folkloristic analyses of humor and joking primarily dealt with face-to-face situations (Apte 1985; Dundes 1987; Bausinger 1992; Oring 2003), the potential ubiquity and anonymity of the internet demand alternative methodological and conceptual approaches.

Finally, the tweets and blogs that are the focus of this article have all been written in English. How the front cover and the hashtag have been received and negotiated in Arabic and other languages will not be considered. Yet it is very likely that even though this phenomenon originated from a US-American magazine, it did not remain confined to the US, but

turned global at least among users with English language skills. Due to the limited space in this article, I cannot go into detail, but suffice it to say that access to digital technologies “remains stratified by class, race, and gender of both researchers and respondents” (Murthy 2008: 837).

### “Muslim Rage” as a Political and Emotional Practice

The notion of “Muslim rage” has an exceptional impact because of its extraordinary political dimension within the US-American context. In 1990, Bernard Lewis, a well-known historian of the Middle East, wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (Lewis 1990). He argued that the Muslims’ rage against the West was an irrational answer to a feeling of humiliation by the West. A few years later Samuel Huntington in the same vein developed his thoughts in his much cited book *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1997). According to Huntington, after the end of the Cold War, conflicts do not take place anymore between East and West, but along the separating lines of civilizations, which are primarily defined by religion. The most “bloody” borders, he writes, are those of Islam, and the confrontation between the West and Islam would dominate the twenty-first century.

Both Huntington and Lewis use historical references very selectively; they ignore processes of *longue durée*, particularly times of peace or alliances, and political and economic relations as well as conflicts within these “civilizations” (Vertigans 2010: 27). Notwithstanding widespread critique, both authors have proven to be extraordinarily successful. After the attacks of 9/11, in particular these discourses helped inform the policy of the so-called neo-cons and the “hawks” around George W. Bush. On US television, Lewis argued that Muslims by nature had to hate the West, and nothing could be done to change that. The West could only try to be feared or respected, and by military intervention the West could finally save the Islamic world from itself and from their own barbarism: “To counter their ‘insults’ and ‘bullying,’ he recommended ‘tough’ action and implied that US invaders would

be received in the Middle East as ‘liberators’” (Abrahamian 2003: 541).

In effect, the conflictive relation of the Western and the Islamic world is depicted not as the result of historical and political processes, but it is of an emotional and timeless nature, and so is the Muslims’ alleged rage. Moreover, to add the adjective “Muslim” to “rage”, thereby arguing that there is something distinctively “Muslim” about “Muslim rage,” is necessarily tied to a specific conception of emotions.

### *Emotions and (Muslim) Rage*

The study of emotions has gained considerable attention in the last decades particularly within the field of anthropology (see, e.g., Lutz & White 1986; Milton & Svašek 2005; Wulff 2007; Frevert et al. 2014). For a long time it has been widely assumed that emotions are bodily and sensory reactions and thus universal for all mankind, but that the way in which emotions are expressed and dealt with is culture-specific. This perception has also been prominent within cultural studies and social sciences, but it has been challenged by recent critics. Sara Ahmed argues for an approach that transcends the divide between the body and the social world, emphasizing the sociality of emotion (Ahmed 2004: 8–12). Similarly, but with a Bourdieuan twist, Monique Scheer (2012) puts a particular focus on a praxeological perspective on emotions. She argues

1) that emotions not only follow from things people do, but are themselves a form of practice, because they are an action of a mindful body; 2) that this feeling subject is not prior to but emerges in the doing of emotion; and 3) that a definition of emotion must include the body and its functions, not in the sense of a universal, pristine, biological base, but as a locus for innate and learned capacities deeply shaped by habitual practices. (Scheer 2012: 220)

Like other emotions, anger and rage intersubjectively relate to other social actors and include the mindful body. Being performative practices, rage and anger are profoundly social emotions, as sociolo-

gist Schieman illustrates using the notion of drama: “Anger provides drama; rage enlarges and expands it” (Schieman 2006: 493). Also, like many other emotions, rage has multiple dimensions besides the immediate bodily sensation. Emotions are ascribed certain cultural properties and acquire symbolic meanings. Thus, the way emotions are (or can be) enacted and displayed exerts an influence on the way the social world is ordered and hierarchized.

The way rage is perceived, assessed, displayed, practiced, and experienced, is contingent upon various factors. For example, Schieman (2006: 508) argues that actors, following an emotional outbreak, tend to ask whether their anger was appropriate. They need to socially reassure themselves in order to assess the adequacy of something which they actually felt. Such need to blend in and to normalize one’s emotions points towards the sociality and situatedness of emotions as formulated by Ahmed. Furthermore, it illustrates the symbolic importance of emotional display for one’s status in the hierarchies of power and authority. Who can afford to feel and display emotions? Who will be discredited and deemed childish, dominant or even Barbarian? In that sense, rage is a spectacle that carries a specific meaning for different social groups at different points in time and in different contexts (cf. Hall 1997). It is the link between the symbolic meaning of emotions and the sociality of emotional practices that makes rage highly political, as is argued in the example of #MuslimRage.

### *Who Rages?*

In many hegemonic forms of Western self-perception, to feel and display rage is deemed irreconcilable with the self-image of the civilized enlightened citizen who would project himself as a rational and intelligent being. Within such discourses women belong to nature rather than to culture (cf. Ortner 1974); therefore, the “enlightened citizen” is first and foremost male. In the process of civilization and enlightenment he has attained control over his drives and emotions. Rage, on the contrary, is associated with uncontrolled emotion, affect and, last but not least, violence.

Such hierarchies function both diachronically and

synchronically. Through the diachronic perspective, the argument follows Elias ([1939]1997), who argues that progressing civilization and ever longer chains of interdependence lead to a stronger control of affects and an internalization of discipline. Modernity thus appears to be characterized by processes of rationalization and affect control (Weber [1920]1988). In a synchronic way the dichotomy of ratio and affect functions as a tool for social distinctions within societies, differentiating the so-called “civilized” strata and the lower layers of the social strata that are perceived to be less or not at all civilized. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has elaborated extensively on these mechanisms of distinction through the example of France. Since such practices of distinction both rely on and serve to secure social power relations, Sara Ahmed is right to point out that “emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value” (Ahmed 2004: 4 [emphasis in original]).

In the case of “Muslim rage” the dichotomy of ratio and emotion is revealed in the West’s discourse about the Islamic world. The West ascribes a lagging process of civilization which is expressed in a lacking capability to control affects. This perspective reminds of Edward Said’s (1979) concept of “Orientalism”: the Western view of societies in the Middle East, the Arab world and larger parts of Asia from a superior and dominant position shaped by Eurocentrism, imperialism and colonialism with no interest to engage in a dialogue. Likewise, “Muslim rage” appears as a Western construct about an imagined Islamic world that reveals much more about the speaker than about the reference object.

The strategic use of emotions as tools for othering processes assists the dominant-hegemonic discourse in stipulating an incommensurability of cultures, as exemplified in the references to Lewis and Huntington. The idea of culture underlying that discourse refers to a static, essentialist and closed model of culture that does not have much in common with current anthropological concepts and is connected to discourses of Orientalizing cultural racism or neo-racism, shaped by “cultural anxiety” (Grillo 2003;

cf. Balibar 1991; Stolcke 1995). In reducing emotions to cultural specificities, the relation is decontextualized and thus ignores the role of the interaction with the West.

“Muslim rage” thus has a perceptive counterpart: Western discipline and self-control – at least superficially. The use of images, signs, and words relating to “Muslim rage” aims at triggering emotions on “our” – the Western – side; it is the civilized West’s fear of the irrational violence of Barbarians who, in civilizational terms, seem to live in a different time; the Other is denied coevalness (Fabian 2002). Moreover, the reference actors are denied agency and individuality since they appear to be entirely under the impression of their “culture.” As anthropologist Sarah Kendzior (2012) argues, Islam is depicted as a kind of contagion; once “infected,” Muslims are at the mercy of their own affects and hostile impulses. The adjective “Muslim” in “Muslim rage” therefore signifies distance, hierarchy, and superiority: while “we” in the West have learnt to keep our emotions under control in the course of civilization, their “Muslim rage” is out of control, archaic, and is an expression of insurmountable difference to “us.”

It is worth noting that the constant reference to Muslims in general and notions such as “the Muslim world” creates the impression of homogeneity and ignores that Islam is complex and encompasses competing or contradictory groups, like in, for example, Christianity or Judaism. Furthermore, the notion of “Muslims” subsumes many different social groups under one religious label that normally would not describe themselves as “Muslim” in the first place, or maybe not at all. Other markers, such as region of origin, social class, ethnicity, are disregarded or ignored. Muslims do not exist objectively, but they are socially produced (Spielhaus 2011). In addition, social scientists and anthropologists need to be aware of the differentiation of “Muslim” as a category of practice on the one hand and as a category of analysis on the other. Both have their merit and prove useful in different settings, yet they must not be confused since they serve very different functions (Brubaker 2013).

Imaginations of emotions assist in the production

of “Muslims” as the fearsome and threatening other. Not only are they denied coevalness, but by linking this denial with the dichotomy of ratio and emotion, civilization and barbarism, the binary opposition is translated into a hierarchy. In effect a “myth” is created, in the words of Roland Barthes (1972), that functions quasi-naturally and provides a framework to explain the social world and simultaneously performs a “spectacle of the Other” (Hall 1997).

### Reactions towards #MuslimRage

Let us return to the *Newsweek* front cover and the catchword “Muslim rage.” Initially *Newsweek* was confronted with indignant comments that accused the magazine of islamophobia and racism and complained about the clichéd depiction of Islamic religion and its confusion with terrorism. Consequently *Newsweek* took a significant step back by asking its readers to discuss the front cover on Twitter: “Want to discuss our latest cover? Let’s hear it with the hashtag: #MuslimRage” (@Newsweek 2012). Within only a few days, the hashtag gained currency.<sup>3</sup> The reactions can be roughly divided into three categories:

- (1) Comments that concurred with the presumed expectations of *Newsweek*, which were very much on the side of Western experiences with fearsome Muslims. Due to the scope of this article, these comments will not be considered.
- (2) Oppositional comments that follow the track of traditional opposition and either argue from a rational point of view against the cover or simply reject it completely.
- (3) The subversion and “enemy takeover” of the hashtag and of discursive sovereignty. These reactions will be the focus of this article. First, however, “traditional” forms of opposition will be introduced in order to show the effect of subversion and emphasize its dynamics.

#### *Traditional Oppositional Discourse*

Numerous tweets criticized *Newsweek* for asking readers to discuss the hashtag as they suspected the magazine of fostering anti-Islamic prejudices. In addition, articles in mainstream online media such as

*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, and *Al Jazeera* joined in and stated the front cover was not appropriate, perverting the truth, and that it was highly insulting. Many authors argued that only a small minority of Muslims worldwide had protested against the video while, for example, simultaneously in Bengasi protests took place against the Jihadist group who had been held accountable for the death of the US ambassador (The Observer Editorial 2012).

Many people had much more profane reasons not to engage in “Muslim rage.” *CNN* reported that in Indonesia only a few hundred people protested against the Muhammad video while a few months earlier 50,000 people had bought tickets for a Lady Gaga concert. What does that tell us about Muslims in Indonesia? *CNN* asked and concluded: “A small number of protesters should not define the entire Muslim population of over a billion. The media should know this and report the truth accordingly” (Obeidallah 2012). Also *The New Yorker* argued that it was short-sighted to perceive of a generalized Muslim rage that could explain violence or politics from Indonesia to Bangladesh, from Iran to Senegal. That would be the same as to argue that authoritarian parts of Christendom could explain apartheid, the Argentinian Junta or Vladimir Putin (Coll 2012).

It is vital for any democratic debate to speak the “truth” and to try to establish an enlightening and educational counter-discourse, either from the position of an alternative culture or as part of critical journalism. Yet, in the case of a dominant-hegemonic discourse such as the framing of Muslims in Orientalizing and threat discourses, alternative voices are hardly heard – even if they come from rather unsuspecting sources such as *CNN*. Examples like the ones above become exceptions that prove the rule, even if the bare figures speak a different language.

Likewise, attempts from parts of the academia to falsify or unmask self-declared “experts” are rarely noticed outside the academic field (see, e.g., Besteman & Gusterson 2005). Why do such contributions change little or nothing within the hegemonic discourse? If the West was that rational, why can experts, politicians and the media not be convinced by research results and bare numbers, but stick to their

version of reality – admittedly in a quite irrational way themselves?

The French sociologist Didier Bigo asks the same question. He is interested in why the quasi-natural link between security and migration proves to be so overly stable and successful, while counter-discourses that challenge this assumption are rarely heard. He states: “The primary problem, therefore, is ideological or discursive in that the securitization of migrants derives from the language itself and the different capacities of various actors to engage in speech acts” (Bigo 2002: 64). Dominant actors who occupy key positions think about migration in a way that is framed by specific myths that determine the hegemonic discourse. Even if these actors themselves do not necessarily believe in these myths, they nevertheless create a truth that exerts an influence which transcends its own field. For Bigo this explains why the security-migration-discourse is hardly impressed by traditional counter-discourses. Security has become a meta-frame “in relation to which other social activity becomes referenced and in accordance to which all other social life becomes organized” (Bajc 2011: 6). The securitization of Muslims, Arabs and “suspicious” Others through bureaucratic measures and public discourse is an integral part of such security meta-framing.

Accordingly, the link between Islam, violence, irrationality, terrorism and barbarism has acquired a quasi-natural mythical quality. Mainstream media tend to follow these myths and reproduce them. Using the example of the protest against the Muhammad cartoons and the media coverage, Mark Allen Peterson contends: “Events taking place at different times in different places, with dissimilar actors and diverse objectives were reified into a single event, a global story about a clash of civilizational values between a rational Western world and an irrational Islamic ‘other’” (Peterson 2007: 248). He argues that the US media do not stick to this pattern because they themselves believe in it, but because these explanatory frames in journalistic practice provide “practical framing devices for rendering the world meaningful to local communities” (Peterson 2007: 248; on the Muhammad cartoons see Lindeskilde, Mouritsen &

Zapata-Barrero 2009; Hansen 2011). Thus, protest against the cover of *Newsweek* did indeed take place. It would, however, have largely stayed unheard if not yet another form of protest had entered the stage.

### Subversion of #MuslimRage

The hashtag #MuslimRage only gained currency when it became subverted from a humorous perspective. This is not to say that all reactions were in fact “funny,” but that the subversion of the hashtag worked by ridiculing *Newsweek’s* invite for discussing “Muslim rage” by taking it seriously. Humor for a long time has been predominantly the domain of psychology, linguistics, or literary studies. Many authors in different disciplines draw upon Freud’s ([1905]2009) conception of the joke and its role in relaxation and releasing control, allowing the unconscious to take over for a little moment (see Davies 2008: 177, for a critique). Anthropologists and folklorists have also increasingly directed their attention at the functioning of humor; however, it has remained a fairly under-researched subject (see, e.g., Douglas 1968; Apte 1985; Dundes 1987; Oring 2003).

Humor depends on an incongruity of features, categories, images that cannot be fully resolved and thus generates surprise. Oring argues that humor works when the parties involved know how to discern an appropriate incongruity: “all humor depends upon the perception of an incongruity that can nevertheless be seen as somehow appropriate” (Oring 2011: 213; cf. Oring 2003, chapter 1). Satire is a literary genre that uses elements such as ridicule and absurd hyperbole while “the comic elements within satire frequently undermine what purports to be its serious import” (Rosen 2012: 2). To some extent, satire always involves social critique. Irony is an important feature of satire. In defining irony, I largely rely on Colletta who conceptualizes irony with regard to the postmodern condition as follows:

Traditionally, irony has been a means to expose the space between what is real and what is appearance, or what is meant and what is said, revealing incoherence and transcending it through

the aesthetic form and meaning of a work of art. The irony of postmodernity denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance and even embraces incoherence and lack of meaning. (Colletta 2009: 856)

A basic feature of irony, and therefore of most satire, is the rupture between a postulated reality and perceptive reality, yet in a potentially globalized and anonymized setting, such as the internet and online social media, reality becomes a fuzzy term. I will return to that point below. The ironic and humorous subversion of *Newsweek*'s hashtag #MuslimRage began on Twitter, within the very arena that *Newsweek* had wished the discussion to take place. Users posted examples of situations where they feel "Muslim rage," and these tweets became so successful that they did not only arouse other users' interest, but also the attention of the mainstream media and other social media, such as blogs. These tweets can be divided into six categories:<sup>4</sup> (1) Western fear and Muslim self-control, (2) link to Islamic terrorism, (3) Westerners ridiculing Islam, (4) religious practices as othering devices, (5) feminist subversion, and (6) everyday banalities.

(1) Tweets that express emotions ranging from anger about self-control and self-discipline up to self-denial as a result of an anticipation of Western fear. Airports and airports in particular are ironically used as symbolic spaces in the aftermath of 9/11.

- "You lose your nephew at the airport but you can't yell his name because it's JIHAD #muslimrage"<sup>5</sup>
- "Cannot say hi to Jack inside a plane. #MuslimRage"
- "On a plane and people mishearing me when I say I am a 'tourist'. #muslimrage"

These tweets point to an actual constraint and limitation due to the securitization of Islam in large parts of the West (see the contributions in Cesari 2010). They relate to the socially demanded low visibility and audibility of Muslims in public Western spaces. In the examples quoted above, "Hi, Jack!" reminds of the verb "to hijack"; spoken on board of a plane by someone identified as Muslim, the "Westerner"

is reminded of the 9/11-hijackers. The third example includes a wordplay that alludes to the similarity in spoken language and to the speaker's suspicion that people on a plane will be inclined to rather hear "terrorist" than "tourist" when uttered by someone suspected to be Muslim. Finally, even the most human urge to call for a lost child needs to be suppressed because in Western hegemonic discourse "Jihad" almost exclusively refers to the violent Holy War of Muslims against non-believers.

Therefore, the tweets simultaneously refer to the experiences of actors who feel discriminated against because of them being conceptualized as Muslims and the processes of subjectification as threatening and fearsome "Others" in Western discourses.

(2) Tweets that express anger of being equated with Islamistic terrorism. The human actor disappears behind the label "Muslim" and ceases to exist as an acting subject outside the ascribed religious category.

- "When everyone in history class turns to you once 9/11 is brought up. #MuslimRage"
- "I told my shrink I was feeling suicidal and he reported me to the FBI #muslimrage"

The first tweet deplores the tendency to hold someone accountable for terrorists' deeds based solely on religious grounds. In the second example, religion also functions as an indicator for terrorism; a Muslim will not commit suicide on his own, but he can't help himself, he will take non-believers with him and therefore needs to be reported to the authorities as a potential threat. In both cases, the dominant representation as Muslim that consequently is framed within the terrorist narrative creates a feeling of being besieged and helpless.

(3) Tweets that deal with Western ignorance that disregards regional and national differences imposing the all-encompassing label "Islamic world," simultaneously ridiculing the reference group's culture.

- "Television 'experts' saying Iran is an 'Arab' country. #MuslimRage"<sup>6</sup>
- "My camel doesn't want to wear a seat belt. #muslimrage"<sup>7</sup>



- “When a white man watches you pray and he says ‘Hey that was a really unique version of Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes’ #MuslimRage”

The last example refers to a popular song where children are taught the different body parts by playfully touching one after the other while singing the song.<sup>8</sup> The tweet therefore refers to a joke that is directed at a practicing Muslim. The joke equates a religious practice with a kindergarten play, thereby illuminating an important feature of so-called “ethnic jokes”: They reduce complexity, mark a clear-cut boundary and let ambiguity appear less fearsome (Davies 1982: 400). Whether such more or less funny utterances are “just jokes,” or whether they are linked to prejudice and even hatred, is contingent upon various contextual and meta-communicative factors. Therefore, the relation and mutual reinforcement of racism and ethnic joking is subject to constant debate (see Billig 2001: 269–270).

(4) An overwhelming amount of tweets plays with various religious practices existing within Islam and how some of them come to be defined as othering devices. They emphasize the way the West perceives of Islam as a “jail,” and of its followers as “entrapped.”

- “A puppy licked me. NOW I HAVE TO MAKE WUDU AGAIN AND BURN MY CLOTHES. #muslimrage”
- “The waiter didn’t tell me the meat i was eating was pork; I was so angry I dropped my glass of wine. #MuslimRage”
- “No halal condoms at the pharmacy? #MuslimRage”
- “The ONLY gloves on sale were made with pigskin... now I gut chilly #MuslimRage hands!!”
- “The 72 virgins turn out to be all males #MuslimRage”
- “There’s no prayer room in this nightclub! #muslimrage”

Similarly to what is generally considered the “traditional Jewish joke” (see, e.g., Abicht 2011; Patka & Stalzer 2013), these tweets playfully deal with ascribed stereotypes about religious regulations – something that is actually fundamentally serious. Humor draws upon this incongruity between

opposing or unrelated categories – in fact, it is the source of humor. In the case of the tweets above, to understand the joke, a certain knowledge of religious rules and practices is indispensable; accordingly, many tweets can only be fully understood by insiders, like in the reference to “Wudu,” the ritual ablution. It includes washing the face and the forearms, and also a wiping of head and feet. Traditionally, dogs have been considered impure in Islam; therefore the tweet plays on a hyperbolic distance to an imagined West when it suggests that Muslims in a hysterical overreaction even reject something as cute as a puppy. The second tweet creates an incongruity: pork is *haram* (i.e. forbidden by Allah), and so is alcohol. The same goes for condoms which suggest adultery or extramarital sex which would be considered *haram*. Martyrs, in a male fantasy, are said to be rewarded with 72, presumably female, virgins in heaven. Finally, nightclubs are considered *haram*, therefore a sacred room within a sinful place creates an incongruity. The tweets thus reflect a play with religious markers that for the West have assumed an entirely different meaning, namely as markers of insecurity and unpredictability.

(5) Tweets that can be subsumed under the notion of feminist subversion. They occupy an important position as they aim at liberation from dual victimization (see Willett, Willett & Sherman 2012). The following three tweets use the *hijab* or the veil as a starting point. The *hijab* has assumed an iconographic character for the West’s fantasies about the suppressed Muslim woman. The tweets are funny because they emphasize the *hijab*’s mundane character as an everyday garment, thereby creating an incongruity with its ascribed symbolic importance as a threat icon (see Bracke & Fadil 2012; Amir-Moazami 2013).

- “I’m having such a good hair day. No one even knows. #MuslimRage”
- “When I wear a white *hijab* to a TV interview with a white backdrop. #MuslimRage”
- “My *hijab* doesn’t match my outfit :( #muslimrage”

Generally, “Muslim rage” carries a male connota-

tion, as is obvious on *Newsweek's* cover image of the angry young men. It is in stark contrast with a Western self-perception that is based on male rationality (Borutta & Verheyen 2010). The perceptive dichotomy of nature and culture, and the corresponding analogy of female and male, is exacerbated by the orientalist perspective. Women in turn are co-opted involuntarily by the West that aims at increasing the distance between itself and the male Muslim world. This structure reminds of Gerd Baumann's grammar of encompassment where "the putatively subordinate category is adopted, subsumed or co-opted [...] into the identity defined and, as it were, owned by those who do the encompassing" (Baumann 2004: 26).

Female satire thus constitutes a double disruption of expectations. Therefore, female comedians such as English Shazia Mirza, Arab-American (and disabled) Maysoun Zayid or Indonesian Sakdiyah Ma'ruf are eyed suspiciously from Westerners and conservative traditionalists (Muslim or not) alike (Lockyer & Pickering 2009; Andersen 2012; Marrero 2014).

(6) The last category includes tweets that express rage and anger about banalities that are not worth worrying about.

- "Shawarma with no garlic sauce? #MuslimRage"<sup>10</sup>
- "When my falafel comes out completely uncrispy #muslimrage"
- "Wrestling is fake? #MuslimRage"<sup>11</sup>
- "When my mom got mad at me for putting a pudding cup in the microwave #MuslimRage"<sup>12</sup>

These tweets express anger about everyday issues that could agitate "us" as well, at least theoretically. By adding "Muslim" to the "rage" – which in itself is a much too strong and powerful notion – the tweets reduce the rage to absurdity. "Muslim rage" appears as so overly threatening that it cannot possibly refer to something as profane as mushy falafel. From the Western point of view, "Muslim rage" can only be directed against the West. If it is directed against everyday issues, then not only the "Muslim rage," but first of all the Western fears are rendered absurd.

Here, hyperbole works through a fetishization of

the West's fear of "Muslim rage." Sara Ahmed argues that "'feelings' become 'fetishes,' qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation" (Ahmed 2004: 11). It is exactly because the history of the production of the notion of "Muslim rage" by the West is ignored that it can assume its symbolic meaning as something essential and inherent to Muslim actors.

Twitter does not remain the sole outlet for #MuslimRage. Visual adaptations of the #MuslimRage motive follow, for instance: "Gawker: 13 powerful Images of Muslim Rage" (Read 2012) and the tumblr blog "Rage against the narrative. Do you have #MuslimRage? Tell us why" (Bazeed 2012a), to name but a few. Like the tweets they ridicule the notion by either addressing rage about banalities or by contrasting peaceful everyday lives with Western clichés of a threatening Muslim world. They rely on the tension of incongruity: within the Western imaginary "Muslim rage" is something profoundly serious. Islam is not funny. Muslims are not humorous – after all, they are raging. Ulrich Marzolph, a historian and philologist of Arab literatures, states that

contemporary popular opinion in the West strongly advocates the dominant perception that Muslim tradition in its perceived religious zeal does not allow for such a subtle and tolerant trait of character as humour – in other words: that Muslims do not have a sense of humour. (Marzolph 2011: 171)

Hence, the simple fact that Muslims might make fun of something, that they have a sense of humor, is a fundamental disruption of Western imaginaries about Islam.

### **#MuslimRage as a Political Practice**

The following section will scrutinize more closely how the subversion of #MuslimRage works. Many tweets cannot be strictly categorized as ironic, satirical or humoristic. Some are full of tragic irony while others depend on rather dull humor but are certainly not ironic. What they all have in common is that all of them acquire a highly political dimension as

political practices, and one might even go so far as to argue that this holds even for those tweets and posts that at a first glance appear rather less ingenious.

Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak's concept "stiob" proves to be particularly helpful (Boyer & Yurchak 2010). Stiob is a specific form of political parody that was particularly wide-spread in the late Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia. Boyer and Yurchak contend that stiob meets with ideal conditions also in the current situation of late-capitalist and liberal societies. Stiob is based on an over-identification with a hyperformalized object, a person or an idea which goes so far that fun and seriousness become indistinguishable:

One of the key characteristics of stiob irony was that its identification with its object was unaccompanied by metacommentary on its ironic procedure. In other words, stiob was a "straight," deep caricature that usually did not signal its own ironic purpose. (Boyer & Yurchak 2010: 181)

These forms of political humor are specific in that they oscillate between the two poles of seriousness and satire; they cannot be pinned down. Therefore, their protest and message remain ambiguous – which is exactly why they can be so successful. The general principle of linking ambivalence and ambiguity with resistance and an at least temporal social inversion is not new and has been explored by Bakhtin (1996) in his analytic insights on humor and carnival. Yet, particular ages, state systems, and ideologies seem to invite particular humoristic challenges.

While stiob during Socialism rested upon an over-identification with a dominant state regime, it now refers to an over-identification with (and a hailing of) a hegemonic stereotypical discourse in politics and the media. Stiob instrumentalizes the hyperformalization of the discourse. Western coverage about Muslims is predominantly "bad news." The "myth," as conceptualized by Barthes, results in a formulistic invocation of the Muslim Other as frame of reference without bothering with details. A parody of the hegemonic discursive power in terms of a reverse discourse explicitly uses the language of

the dominant discourse, thus rendering its one-dimensionality and formulaicity particularly visible: "a parodic genre based on overidentification usually involves such precise mimicry of the object of one's irony that it is often impossible to tell whether this is a form of sincere support or subtle ridicule, or both" (Boyer & Yurchak 2010: 185).

This principle has been successfully applied by various satirists, such as the Yes Men (Reilly 2013) or the so-called "billionaires" in the USA, whose parody overly and loudly supports the dominant capitalist system. Their satire works because they speak a truth that seems too absurd to be true (see Haugerud 2012; cf. Blissett et al. 2012). Similarly, satirists and comedians have been entering politics instead of only commenting on it, such as the former mayor of Reykjavik Jón Gnarr (Boyer 2013) or comedian Beppe Grillo in Italy (Molé 2013). Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) and Stephen Colbert (*Colbert Report*) have repeatedly appeared outside the TV screen, balancing the line between comedy and politics (Jones, Baym & Day 2012). All these performances lead back to the same question: how seriously can these actors be taken? And is a boundary-crossing from satire to serious politics possible at all? Do irony and satire make a difference?

Many #MuslimRage tweets and images use tools similar to stiob. They imitate a hyperformalized hegemonic discourse about raging Muslims and engage in an over-identifying parody, thereby creating ambivalence. But there is an important difference between successful white, male TV satirists or politicians and #MuslimRage.

### Playing with Polysemy

#MuslimRage derives its ironic momentum from the experience of discrimination. Critique and protest are being voiced from a marginal position, yet they explicitly refuse to stay in a state of defense. #MuslimRage as well as similar phenomena such as so-called "ethnic" or "migrant" humor can be understood as a reaction to discrimination (Kotthoff 2013). They turn the stereotypes of the majority against it, they exaggerate and hyperbolize them and thus turn them into a laughing matter. Thereby

the actors liberate themselves from the straitjacket of prejudices and imposed invisibility and appear as autonomous actors.

This takes place through a reversion of the hegemonic discourse, which Simon Weaver (2010) has called the “humor of reverse discourse.” This specific form of humor draws upon the sign systems of biological and cultural racism, but it aims at achieving the opposite effect. Appropriating these signs results in a multiple shifting of meaning in the comical reverse discourse: “humor of reverse discourse” can thus be considered an act of resistance that attempts to change meaning and dissolve social ambivalences.

Weaver argues that the performances of resistant humor are characterized by a “paradoxical seriousness” (Weaver 2010: 44). The parody is based in the performance of a Western stereotype. Racist stereotypes are being used in order to distance oneself from them. Roles are performed – they are not taken over or represented. Both hyper-formalization and reverse discourses show how political humor can function as a weapon of the Orientalized subject, as a “jiu-jitsu of the subaltern” (cf. Gregg 1966; Sharp 1973). Jiu-Jitsu, as a Japanese form of combat sport, uses the opponent’s power and re-directs it to one’s own advantage. The opponent’s power thus does not end up in empty space, but is diverted and turned against the aggressor. Such forms of protest are particularly popular among social groups at the margins or outside the dominant-hegemonic discourse. Twitter, blogs and online platforms as well as other media facilitate participation in political discourse and the formation of discursive networks among members of marginalized groups (see the contributions in Hoffmann & Larsson 2013). They also provide a space for protest, participation, networking and empowerment when used as tools of subversive humor. Mariam Bazeed, the author of the tumblr blog “Rage against the narrative,” describes her motivation for her photo blog as follows:

Every few years something will happen in the world, and Western media will latch onto images of very angry Muslims yelling and screaming their bearded little zeebeba’ed<sup>13</sup> heads off about it, never

mind that there are literally millions of us in the world, and that only a relative handful are out making fools of themselves about it. You know the picture I’m talking about, because you’ve seen it a million times – arms raised, hairy hands fistled, eyebrows in a V, and if they could add a speech bubble in, it would probably say “ALLAHU AK-BAR!!!!” Sick of the narrative? I am too. (Bazeed 2012b)

Mariam Bazeed makes it very explicit that her humorous blog serves a profoundly serious issue: to establish a counter-discourse to fight the dominant narrative about an all-encompassing and essentializing image of Muslims and “Muslim rage.”

However, discourses of reverse humor contain a polysemic element, running the risk of reproducing racist worldviews. Weaver acknowledges this ambivalence. In the example of black comedy in the USA and Great Britain he shows how different recipients decode comedy differently. For some the stereotype is confirmed, for others the performance transports a subversive message. No fixed meaning can be determined, even when the speaker sends a preferred meaning (cf. Hall 1993).

This leads us back to a basic feature of satire and irony: ambivalence. Already Mary Douglas found that challenging the dominant order is an essential requirement for a joke. She argues that jokes are by nature subversive; they “do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue” (Douglas 1968: 369). Yet, they do not negate a dominant narrative; instead, they value something else, albeit within the same social structure. Douglas writes that a joke

represents a temporal suspension of the social structure, or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. But the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition. (Douglas 1968: 372)

Similarly, political humor serves two functions that appear contradictory: “rather than provoking and

inducing social and political change, [...] it conveys criticism against the political status quo and it recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics” (Tsakona & Popa 2011: 2). This double function explains why even the most critical so-called “ethnic comedians” are often accused of perpetuating the very stereotypes they seek to fight in the first place (cf. Spielhaus 2013; see also Rappoport 2005).

### Conclusion

Potential polysemy is an inherent feature of #MuslimRage that cannot be resolved. Who laughs with whom about whom and why? The twitter-ego does not have to coincide with an actual person; #MuslimRage is about performance and parody, not about representation. A “netnographic” approach encounters various methodological and analytical challenges such as the complexity of the field, the multitude of relationships and networks, the unclear context and the many ways of content being disseminated. In effect, the validity of data more generally poses a challenge to the ethnographer. The originator cannot be definitively determined when something has been retweeted several thousand times. Interestingly, this is a feature that tweets and re-tweets share with jokes in general: “Jokes are numerous and do not have authors; they are invented by, improved by and circulated among large aggregates and networks of individuals” (Davies 2008: 157). Yet, the question remains: what is the social context of the tweets and the blogs if the field consists of a multitude of actors, motives, intentions and geographical places?

Finally, it is nearly impossible to determine why a tweet is successful: whether over-identification is rooted in identification, whether it is a position of ironic distancing that leads to retweeting the joke for the joke’s sake, or whether the cliché is reproduced and reified.

Should #MuslimRage even be an excellent example of postmodern irony, characterized by “cynical knowingness and self-referentiality” (Colletta 2009: 856)? Is irony, as Christy Wampole criticizes, the ethos of our time, simply expressing “rampant sarcasm and unapologetic cultivation of silliness”

(Wampole 2012)? Or is it, as Cynthia Willett (2008) argues, the appropriate critical mind-set for the “age of empire”? These questions lie beyond the scope of this article. Yet, I suggest that #MuslimRage’s ironic twist adds an important voice to a discourse that otherwise would have remained largely unheard. Irony, not as cynical self-referentiality, but as a political practice becomes a tool of subversion and resistance, at least on a discursive level, and even – or: particularly – when there is a multitude of authors. Such irony, to speak with Tucholsky, may do potentially everything. Therefore, it seems futile to contemplate authenticity – in parody everybody can do everything, and that accounts for the specificity of this particular form of humor. But where does that lead us with regard to #MuslimRage? *The Atlantic* attempted to put some order in the phenomenon #MuslimRage, simultaneously nicely summarizing it:

The hashtag now includes tweets from people who seem to be Muslim. It includes tweets from people who don’t seem to be Muslim. It includes tweets from people who seem to be making fun of Muslims. It includes tweets from people who make fun of the people making fun of Muslims. The hashtag, as hashtags are wont to do, has taken on an organic life of its own, independent of its originator. [...] The whole idea of “Muslim rage” – as an idea as well as a hashtag – is being flipped on its head. [...] But they turned the magazine’s own cynicism into something better – something funny and meaningful and insightful and real. They turned *Newsweek*’s “scripted experience” into something they wrote on their own. (Garber 2012)

#MuslimRage did not bring luck to the US-American edition of *Newsweek*. The printed edition ceased publication in December 2012. A relaunch in 2014 was highly disputed among critics. Independently from *Newsweek*, the wider problem of “Muslim rage” unfortunately remains high on the agenda.

## Notes

I wish to thank Guido Tiemann and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for valuable suggestions and helpful comments on previous drafts of this article.

- 1 The Catholic Church, for example, has a long history of protesting against satire, from the times of the Reformation to Monty Python movies and rather recent events such as the Vatican's preliminary injunction against the German satirical magazine *Titanic* (Sued-deutsche.de 2012).
- 2 The decision was later revised and the original float was slightly reworked; moreover, several topical floats took part in regional carnival parades, also after the Central Council of Muslims criticised the withdrawal (Stern 2015).
- 3 From the immense amount of #MuslimRage tweets I chose 21 tweets for the purpose of this article that I subjected to closer scrutiny. Also, I chose two blogs which have been referred to abundantly on other websites and whose images have been copied over and over again. These are Gawker: 13 Powerful Images of Muslim Rage and Tumblr: Rage against the Narrative. The tweets were posted between September 17 and 19, 2012, and the blogs discussed the cover between September 17 and October 1, 2012, in the immediate aftermath of its publication. It is hardly possible to give a precise number of tweets with the hashtag #MuslimRage, but suffice to say that the hashtag quickly trended on Twitter, i.e., it became one of the most popular notions referred to in tweets.
- 4 The selected tweets and images were subjected to a textual and/or visual analysis and coded from a critical discourse analysis perspective that particularly focused on power relations while retaining the ethnographic viewpoint with regard to an actor-centered praxeological approach that pays attention to contextual situatedness.
- 5 *Jihad* is Arabic for 'struggle.' It is a common name and also a legal concept in Islam.
- 6 Iran (Persia) was not conquered by the Arabs. The tweet refers to the tendency to ignore regional histories.
- 7 Muslims are, supposedly, backward and travel on camels. Jokes about Muslims and camels in various constellations can be found abundantly on the internet.
- 8 "Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes./ Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes./ And eyes and ears and mouth and nose./ Head, shoulders, knees, and toes, knees and toes."
- 9 Pigs are *haram*.
- 10 *Shawarma*, a Middle Eastern meat dish, is typically served with garlic sauce, which is also the case with falafel, chickpea balls, which are best eaten crispy.
- 11 Wrestling is a combat sport that largely relies on the theatrical staging of fights.

- 12 Pudding explodes when put in a microwave. Any mom would be mad.
- 13 A *zebeeba* or *zebiba* is a prayer bump or prayer scar, a mark on the forehead caused by touching the ground during prayer. The *zebiba* is also a sign of devotion and particular piety.

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