Segmental Occlusion:
Political and Social Responses to Full-Face Coverings

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TIME: November 25, 2-4pm
PLACE: Bankstown, Building 1, Room: X-Lounge

ABSTRACT: Over the past decade, substantial numbers of people in Britain and Europe have expressed disquiet about a sight that has become increasingly salient on Western streets: the presence of Muslim women whose faces are almost totally obscured by garments known as the niqab or the burqa (the latter also drapes the whole body). Many commentators, observing this public discomfiture, respond with alarm of their own. The full-face Islamic covering, they say, is simply a sign of growing diversity, a good thing to boot because proof of the capacity of Western societies to absorb difference and to accept foreign customs. Societies are enriched by cultural variation. Moreover, just as the presence of many political interests is a sign of a healthy democracy, so the existence of heterogeneous group customs is a sign of pluralism more generally, and pluralism is one of the hallowed values of Western liberalism. That is one view. My talk presents another: Instead of assuming that people who oppose the niqab and burqa (NB) are ignorant or guilty of "Islamophobia," we might do better to ask whether there is a rational core to their opposition. I believe that there is. On my account, the NB is a mode of visibility and invisibility that is deeply incongruent with aspects of Western citizenship across national traditions, and with social solidarity beyond the domestic/tribal unit. Amounting to segmental occlusion, the NB signals not just difference but opacity, partition, and rejection of the Western idea of “public” (for which visibility, openness, and transparency are key). Moreover, because the face is the central sign-vehicle of the emotions, hiding it is a major impediment to social interaction.

BIO: Peter Baehr is Academic Dean of Social Sciences at Lingnan University. Before coming to Hong Kong in 2000, he worked at universities in Canada and Britain. He teaches and writes mainly in the areas of social and political thought. Aside from his position at Lingnan University, Baehr is Raymond Aron Fellow at Boston University, an Honorary Fellow of the University of Edinburgh, and President of the History of Sociology Research Committee of the International Sociological Association. His most recent books are Caesarism, Charisma and Fate: Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the work of Max Weber (Transaction: 2008) and Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Social Sciences (Stanford University Press: 2010)

The seminar will followed by refreshments in the X-Lounge.

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