

Islamophobia: lay ideology of US-led empire

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Abstract

Islamophobia is analyzed as a “lay ideology” that offers an everyday “common sense” explanatory framework for making sense of mediated crisis events (such as terrorist attacks) in ways that disavow those events’ political meanings (rooted in empire, racism, and resistance) and instead explain them as products of a reified “Muslimness.” Thus Islamophobia involves an ideological displacement of political antagonisms onto the plane of culture, where they can be explained in terms of the fixed nature of the “Other.” This maneuver is also an act of projection in the psychoanalytic sense: the racist and imperialist violence upon which US-led capitalism depends cannot be acknowledged in liberal society so it is transferred onto the personality of the Muslim and seen as emanating from “outside” the social order. Imperial violence is then only ever a proportionate response to the inherently aggressive and threatening nature of the fanatical Muslim enemy. In these ways, a Western self-image of innocence and beneficence can be maintained by screening out resistance to the US-led system of global capitalism. On this view, Islamophobia is an instance of a general pattern of racisms serving as imperial ideologies in the modern era. The article contests accounts of Islamophobia that focus only on individual attitudes of prejudice and hatred and instead analyzes Islamophobia as a structural feature of capitalism in the twenty-first century that is intertwined with systems of state surveillance and is able to adapt itself ideologically to a wide variety of local settings.

Street attacks, verbal abuse, desecration of religious sites, media demonization, bans on veiling, religious profiling, restrictions on religious buildings, employment discrimination, criminalization, and pogroms against Muslims in Australia, the Central African Republic, India, Myanmar, Russia, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, often with state complicity – such are the practical manifestations of Islamophobia over the last two decades.¹ Rich empirical accounts of how Islamophobia functions – culturally, politically, and historically – in a number of different contexts have become available in recent years. In 2012, the philosopher Brian Klug correctly described Islamophobia as a concept that has come of age in academia.² Those such as Fred Halliday and Kenan Malik who argued the term was merely a smokescreen to block criticisms of Islam or to protect Islamic political movements from scrutiny are increasingly marginalized.³ However, the concept of Islamophobia remains imprecise and theoretically underdeveloped.⁴

In what follows, the content of current Islamophobic ideology is summarized before arguing that Islamophobia is best understood as a racist ideology that requires structural analysis. I claim that existing accounts need to be developed by attending to how Islamophobia is not only a false belief system that masks real relations but also a “resource” by which the world is made sense of, and by identifying how Islamophobia enables projection, displacement, and disavowal of imperialist violence. A number of challenges in defining Islamophobia as a form of racism are then explored; it is argued that Islamophobia is an “amateur anthropology” in which Islam is made into a reified culture that bears an inherent “nature” predisposing Muslims to certain behaviors. Next, the complex relationship between imperialism and Islamophobia is explored; it is argued Islamophobia cannot be reduced to a form of elite propaganda, that its global circulation needs to be fully addressed, and that its naturalizing and depoliticizing of class

societies with fantasies of cultural homogeneity is significant. Finally, the relationship between Islamophobia and the state is discussed. Islamophobia, it is suggested, is more than a legitimizing shell that provides justification for state practices; it also causes them, as state surveillance agencies conjure into existence the very racial specters they believe are haunting them, in a constant feedback loop of unintended consequences.

Drawing on the now substantial scholarly literature, it is possible to reconstruct the main thematic features of current Islamophobic ideology. The usual caveats about the difficulties of summarizing a rich, complex, and varied literature apply, and the specific processes by which Islamophobic ideology functions in particular settings are necessarily bracketed. But, at a broad level of abstraction, the structure of Islamophobic ideology can be listed as follows:

- Muslims are prone to *terrorism*. This is the dominant theme of Islamophobia, from the canard that Muslim suicide bombers are motivated by the promise of heavenly virgins to the myth that Islam mandates terrorist violence against non-Muslims.
- Muslims are *extremists*. They are full of rage and anger, intolerant of other world-views and suppress freedom of expression. They reject reason or lack the capacity to engage in independent thinking. They engage in separatism and have a desire to close themselves off from others.
- Muslim men engage in *oppression* of women, children, and minorities. Muslim women are subservient and do not act autonomously.

- Muslims engage in *infiltration*. They are subversive, disloyal to the nations where they settle, and infect those societies with the virus of extremism. They seek to conceal this by maintaining hidden networks and engaging in double talk. They lie when challenged and cheat the immigration and welfare systems. They are economically unproductive.
- Muslims are *sexually dysfunctional*. Muslim men are sexually repressed, which makes them sexually predatory. They groom women and children for sexual exploitation or forced conversion. They rape. Muslim women produce too many children, which presents a demographic threat to the countries where they settle.⁵

This list is not exhaustive and the choice of categories is somewhat arbitrary. As with most ideological structures, these themes should not be understood as amounting to a fixed doctrine but a series of linked discourses that are flexible, adaptable, and vary over time. In particular settings, this structure will be mobilized in specific ways. For example, in a context where the discourse connects with politically liberal constituencies, an emphasis on the oppression of women might be especially emphasized. In conservative contexts, the emphasis might be more on notions of infiltration, with “Islam” constructed as an enemy identity.

This points to the question of how the object of Islamophobia is constructed. In the list above, the object is presented as “Muslims” but it could equally be named as “Islam.” Moreover, the construction of an object of Islamophobia always goes hand in hand with the construction of a subject of Islamophobia: Islamophobia is characterized by a narcissism that describes Islam/Muslims as simply the polar opposite of whatever an Islamophobic subject values in itself. Thus, for liberals, Islam is intolerance, racism, and oppression of women. For conservatives, Islam is

fanatical, alien, and barbaric. In this mode, Islam is merely the absolute “Other” that enables the construction of a positive image of oneself.⁶

Where does this ideology of Islamophobia come from? Within this field of inquiry, it is possible to divide into two broad categories the various approaches scholars have followed in answering this question. For our purposes, the two tendencies may be called “attitudinal” and “structural.” In the attitudinal approach, Islamophobia is understood largely as a phenomenon of individual attitudes: it is driven by fear and hatred of cultural difference; it has been provoked by events such as 9/11; and it is associated cognitively with stereotyping and prejudice. From this perspective, tackling Islamophobia requires practices such as interfaith work to overcome fear through personal interaction, leading to knowledge of Islam and Muslim “culture.” In the structural approach, Islamophobia is a phenomenon that is: rooted in deep social processes; is connected to, if not generated by, government policies; and is tied to wider questions of political ideology and systems of power. It follows from this account that tackling Islamophobia requires a social movement able to address broader political and social processes. Of course, the distinction between the attitudinal and structural approaches is not absolute and overlaps exist.

The attitudinal approach to Islamophobia overlaps with a wider body of scholarship that seeks to analyze the cultural representation of ethnic identities in general. Describing the ways that Islam is culturally represented as an identity and Muslims are “othered” in the media adds a new element to that scholarship but does not alter its basic theoretical assumptions. A limitation of this paradigm has been a failure to connect the representation of difference to political processes. Stuart Hall, one of the major influences in shaping this paradigm, himself commented in 2006

that the disconnection of this approach “from broader issues of social justice and political action, and from the historical specificities of the present conjuncture, had limited the effectivity, and the meaning, of much of this work.”⁷ Similarly, David Theo Goldberg has written that this approach, while originally bringing with it important and necessary insights, has now grown “weary” and “clichéd” and led to “almost complete theoretical silence concerning the state.”⁸

Within this paradigm, the concept of the political has been lost and replaced by the apparent assumption that to describe someone’s identity tells you all you need to know about their politics or their victimization. Thus cultural or religious difference becomes sufficient explanation for exclusion, and, with the fetishization of marginality, a surrogate for politics,⁹ while there is diminishing attention paid to the enduring systematicity of relationships between race, class, capitalism, and the state. Moreover, in a context in which discussion of structural social and political issues is systematically downplayed in mainstream media and policy discourse in favor of questions of identity, there is a danger that a scholarly discourse also restricting itself to that level is unable to achieve a sufficient degree of critical distance. Ultimately, these accounts tend to inadvertently replicate the binary identity thinking they seek to contest.

In order to avoid such an identitarian cul-de-sac, it is important to understand Islamophobia as integral to political and economic structures. In the US, critical race theorists and historians of whiteness have produced sophisticated accounts of the American racial formation and racial state, arguing that race is integral to the US social order. In these accounts, race emerges as an aspect of modernity’s aspiration to classification or as a mechanism to regulate labor.¹⁰ In Britain, Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars have developed an equally extensive body of research

on “race,” which sees it as a structural feature of British society, rejecting the view that it can best be analyzed through examining individual attitudes.¹¹

Building on these forms of scholarship, I analyze Islamophobia as an imperialist ideology of racism rooted in a capitalist political economy. I propose that Islamophobia is a “lay ideology” that offers an everyday “common sense” explanatory framework for making sense of mediated crisis events (such as terrorist attacks) in ways that disavow those events’ political meanings (rooted in empire, racism, and resistance) and instead explain them as products of a reified alien culture. Thus Islamophobia involves an ideological displacement of political antagonisms onto the plane of culture, where they can be explained in terms of the fixed nature of the “Other.” This maneuver is also an act of projection in the psychoanalytic sense: the racist and imperialist violence upon which US-led capitalism depends cannot be acknowledged in liberal society so it is transferred onto the personality of the Muslim and seen as emanating from “outside” the social order. Imperial violence is then only ever a proportionate *response* to the inherently aggressive and threatening nature of the fanatical Muslim enemy.

In these ways, a Western self-image of innocence and beneficence can be maintained by screening out resistance to the US-led system of global capitalism, at a time when, as Wendy Brown notes, “rich and poor, colonizer and native, first world and third, live virtually and actually in ever greater proximity” in “a world of extreme and intimately lived inequality, deprived of strong legitimating discourses.”¹² On this view, Islamophobia is an instance of a general pattern of racisms serving as imperial ideologies in the modern era. Frantz Fanon’s classic account of the role of projection in analyzing racism is relevant here:

In the remotest depth of the European unconscious an inordinately black hollow has been made in which the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires lie dormant. And as every man climbs up toward whiteness and light, the European has tried to repudiate this uncivilized self, which has attempted to defend itself. ... In the degree to which I find in myself something unheard-of, something reprehensible, only one solution remains for me: to get rid of it, to ascribe its origin to someone else.¹³

In US history, as Michael Rogin notes, “the fantasy of savage violence defines the imperial imagination.” Crisis events, in which people of color carry out real or imagined acts of violence, are thus “indispensable.” They provide opportunities for the mythic heroes of American expansion to exact racial revenge or rescue. Moreover, the “rescue of the helpless female hostage from peoples of color established sexual as well as racial difference – against the threats of racial uprising, female independence, and the feminization of helpless white men.”¹⁴ Susan Faludi has demonstrated that this ideological structure attained a specific intensity in the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁵

Since today’s US-led global empire, like all empires, inevitably generates violence and chaotic movements of peoples, it is not hard to find the crisis events around which a projection can be organized, from acts of Palestinian resistance to 9/11 to Syrians seeking asylum. Stuart Hall and his colleagues argued in their classic Gramscian study of race and mediated crime panics that such crises never appear in a “pure” form to the public but are made sense of through vocabularies determined by whoever has the power to offer the primary definition of the event.¹⁶

In their original study, they examined the use of the term “mugging” in 1970s England but today’s discourse of “terrorism,” “extremism,” and “radicalization” is equally well suited to this mode of analysis. In the case of events involving political violence, the national security arm of the state and its associated “terrorism experts” have a particular authority to define those events because of their presumed role as defenders of society from unknown threats and their claim to hold classified information unavailable to others.¹⁷ As Hall et al. note, these primary definers set

the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is. This initial framework then provides the criteria by which all subsequent contributions are labelled as “relevant” to the debate or “irrelevant” – beside the point.

Contributions which stray from this framework are exposed to the charge that they are “not addressing the problem.”¹⁸

The ideological process of defining and explaining crises is about giving meaning to disturbing and troubling events and restoring a sense of control over the world. The “lay” explanations that Islamophobia gives are not logical or coherent:

To find an explanation for a troubling event, especially an event which threatens to undermine the very fabric of society, is of course the beginnings of a sort of “control.” If we can only understand the causes of these events, then we are half-way to bringing them under our control. To give shocking and random events “meaning” is to draw them once again into the framework of the rational order of “things understood” – things we can work on, do something about, handle, manage. The explanations we construct are not in the normal sense “logical.”

They are not internally consistent and coherent. They do not obey a strict logical protocol.¹⁹

The explanatory framework itself is constructed out of elements – Antonio Gramsci calls them “traces” – that have been sedimented into the practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific historical society. A new ideological framework – a new “common sense” – takes root in and helps to shape popular life when it takes these elements and incoherently reworks and reorganizes them in order to naturalize a conjuncture through the production of fixed social identities and meanings. In the case of Islamophobia, these traces relate to longer histories of colonialism, racism, and Orientalism.²⁰ Because hegemony is never fully secured, lay ideologies are necessarily and inevitably contradictory.²¹ Moreover, as Karen Fields and Barbara Fields note: “Ideologies do not need to be plausible, let alone persuasive, to outsiders. They do their job when they help insiders make sense of the things they do and see – ritually, repetitively – on a daily basis. ... Ideology is not the same as *propaganda*.”²² When individual crisis events connect with the lay ideology that claims to explain them, Islamophobia becomes a part of the framing of everyday experience and one of the processes by which people give meaning to the social world and act within it. Islamophobia, then, is not primarily an expression of hatred or negativity towards Muslims or Islam but a way of connecting people’s frustrations, fears, and desires to an explanatory framework that has a fixed idea of “the Muslim” at its center.

Islamophobia as a form of racism

Of course, it is true that there are Muslim terrorists, extremists, oppressors, subversives, and rapists. But Islamophobia involves reading their actions as expressive of a fixed “nature” that somehow resides in Muslims themselves. The idea of a fixed Muslim “nature” indicates that we are in the realm of race thinking. As Salman Sayyid recounts, the term Islamophobia first began to be used regularly in English following the publication of the Runnymede Trust’s 1997 report,²³ which could be seen as containing “an implicit recognition of the racialization of Muslims.”²⁴ Sayyid argues that the implications of this could not be fully developed within the report’s attitudinal framework, which took racism to be primarily a matter of attitudes of open- or closed-mindedness. Since then, many scholars have increasingly seen Islamophobia as, wholly or partly, a form of racism.²⁵ Moustafa Bayoumi’s formula is typical: “the government has, in effect, turned a religion, namely Islam, into a race.”²⁶

The usual objection to defining Islamophobia as a form of racism is that Muslims are not a “race.” It is true that there is no neat alignment between ethnicity and religion in the social contexts where Islamophobia has a presence. For example, while the majority of Muslims in Britain are of South Asian origin, there is a similar number of South Asians who are not Muslim, and there are large numbers of Muslims who are not South Asian, including white English converts. However, the objection that Islam is not a race is straightforwardly met by the recognition that all racisms are socially and politically constructed, rather than resting on the reality of any such thing as “race.” As Karen Fields and Barbara Fields argue, the practice of racism produces the idea of race, not the other way around. Racism works by presenting its own

aggressive acts as “*race*, something the target *is*, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss.” In other words, racism as a social practice creates the illusion of race as an objective reality outside the social relations that produce it.²⁷ A central concept here is racialization, which refers to the process by which racial meanings are attached to social groups or actions.²⁸

But a question remains of whether Islam or “Muslimness” can be turned into the basis for a process of racialization. Yassir Morsi has pertinently asked:

When we are discussing Islamophobia what do we mean by Muslim? ... is it a mosque-goer? the child of Muslim parents, somebody with a specific ethnic background, or one who shares with another a specific culture? This leads to further questions: Is an Islamophobic attack against a Muslim the result of the target having a set of beliefs that they base on a religious text or because of the culture that is linked to another civilisation? Is it because of an adherence to a set of norms and values inherited through a shared story of one’s origins? ... How should we as scholars therefore define and identify the Muslim as a subject of Islamophobia?²⁹

One possible response is to draw on the work of scholars of racism – such as Martin Barker, Etienne Balibar, and Verena Stolcke – who have emphasized the role played by fixed ideas of culture.³⁰ The concept of “cultural racism” is often understood to mean that the biological racisms prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century have now been replaced by conflicts over cultural difference. But race and culture have always been intertwined.³¹ As Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley have written, anti-Semitism always involved a process in which “cultural

attributes were racialized, seen as encompassing everything for which the Jews stood.” Similarly today, “the constant reduction and amplification of people, regardless of religiosity, nationality, context, attachments, politics and experience, to a homogenized transnational population, to the idea of the Muslim, performs the work of race.”³² They go on to note that: “A language of culture and values has almost completely supplanted one of race, but the effects of such a language, couched though it often is in relativist terms, produces racial dividends: division, hierarchy, exclusion.”³³ In other words, cultural, as much as physical attributes, can be reified and fixed as markers of racial difference. As Etienne Balibar writes: “culture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.”³⁴ This is one of the ways in which Islamophobia is analogous to anti-Semitism.³⁵

From this perspective, Alana Lentin has usefully argued that, with regard to Islamophobia, cultural markers associated with “Muslimness,” such as forms of dress, can be turned into visual signifiers of *racial* difference, even though they are not inherent parts of the body. Muslim headscarf-wearing women, she says, are “reduced to that single aspect of their outward appearance. Even the headscarf, which can be taken off, is no longer seen as dissociable from an individual’s character. It is seen as defining her entirely. Her whole being is reduced to that one aspect of her appearance. Moreover, her wearing of the veil is understood as being inseparable from her very nature. In this sense, she is naturalized.”³⁶ Islamophobic violence against veiled women is thus appropriately described as *racist* violence. Significantly, Islamophobia is the only form of racist violence in which the majority of victims are women.³⁷

What psychological process drives this violence? In Frantz Fanon's account, modern anti-black racism associates the black body with a dangerous sexual potency whereas anti-Semitism fears the Jew as an intellectual danger that is threatening in its power to infiltrate. Thus:

No anti-Semite ... would ever conceive of the idea of castrating the Jew. He is killed or sterilized. But the Negro is castrated.³⁸

Islamophobic attacks on veiled women have a different character again. What is distinctive is the perpetrator's desire to strip the veil from its wearer's face. The aim is to force into visibility what is assumed to be hidden, to return the woman's body to a public (sexual) gaze. "To satisfy the male fantasy, she must be at least metaphorically stripped, unveiled and thus exposed," argues Barbara Perry in her discussion of Islamophobic violence against women.³⁹ The prescription is that "femininity be exhibited."⁴⁰ The Muslim woman is generally constructed in two forms: on the one hand as vulnerable, weak and oppressed – a victim in need of (sexual and political) liberation; on the other hand as a dangerous extremist, concealing a threat to the social order that needs to be revealed.⁴¹ Thus, seduction and revulsion coexist. This ideological structure, which shapes Islamophobic street attacks on veiled women, is also bound up with the War on Terror's military violence: images of Muslim women unveiling as a result of Western military action have repeatedly circulated as metaphors of liberation.⁴² Whether in the war on Afghanistan or street attacks in Western cities, the perpetrator's assumption is that the female victim of Islamophobic violence is paradoxically "liberated" through that very violence.

An analysis of Muslim dress as providing a racial marker illuminates one of the ways that "Muslimness" has been racialized. Yet there are other aspects of Islamophobic discourse that

appear to locate Muslim identity not so much in a racialized body but in a set of fixed religious beliefs. Consider the comments of a German politician, Kristina Schröder of the Christian Democratic Union Party, after women were sexually assaulted and attacked by men “of Arab appearance” at the 2016 new year’s celebrations in Cologne: “we must grapple with masculinity norms that legitimise violence in Muslim culture.”⁴³ Or consider the following claim by Ian Tuttle in the conservative *National Review*:

The tens of thousands – possibly hundreds of thousands – of killers sweeping through Iraq and Syria raping and beheading and crucifying are not a convention of murderers who banded together and hit upon “Jihad!” as a handy excuse. Something within Islam is causing this; in fact, there might actually be something called (gulp) “radical Islam.”⁴⁴

Here we have a claim that “something within Islam” is causing “terrorism.” The examples could be multiplied endlessly. A key question is how to understand this “something within Islam” – whether named as beliefs, values, or norms – that Islamophobia assumes Muslims carry within them. It appears that Islamophobic discourse takes that “something within Islam” to be Islamic beliefs and values but these are themselves seen as absolutely determining of Muslim behavior and expressive of an inherent “nature” that spreads in a quasi-biological fashion – hence the prevalence of metaphors like the “virus” of extremism. Thus, Islamophobia assumes that “something within Islam” is endowed with an absolute and immediate causality to produce unruly behavior, that cultural “Muslimness” produces a predisposition to terrorism, extremism, oppression, subversion, and sexual dysfunction. Critiques of Islamic belief are not in themselves

Islamophobic; they become so once they take those beliefs as inherent to, and totalizing of, “Muslim culture.” In order to present Islamic belief as absolutely determining in this way, Islamophobia necessarily embarks on a crude reification of religious texts. The objection to this is that, as Talal Asad has argued, religions are not reducible to a single essence, which can be read off from founding texts. Islamic doctrine has always interacted in complex ways with social practices, rather than laying down a total blueprint for every aspect of life.⁴⁵ Ironically, Islamophobes overlap with fundamentalists in their essentialist approach to religious texts, even as the social and political meanings of their respective essentialisms differ.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant use the phrase “amateur biology” to refer to the way race ideology involves a “common sense” reading of skin color as a “visible clue” to underlying variations in human nature.⁴⁶ Islamophobia is an *amateur anthropology* within which the central idea is Muslim *culture* as a fixed “nature” that generates a predisposition to certain actions. Mahmood Mamdani refers to this as “culture talk” and points out that it is associated with an essentialist dividing line between Western “moderns” who “make culture and are its masters” and non-Western “premoderns” for whom culture is “a rudimentary twitch,” an “instinctive activity with rules that are inscribed in early founding texts.”⁴⁷ Thus, Islamophobia rests on a distinction between two ideas of culture. In the first, culture is the realm of intellectual freedom that transcends nature: Jean-Paul Sartre captures this idea of culture when he defines freedom as “the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order.”⁴⁸ It is this idea of culture that the Islamophobe denies the Muslim. For the Islamophobe, Muslim culture *is* Muslim nature. There is a fundamental difference, then, between the critic of Islam and the Islamophobe. The former recognizes Muslims as autonomous agents who are responsible for their own beliefs and actions;

the latter sees Muslim beliefs and actions simply as expressive of the cultural forces that mechanically and repetitively control them and remove them from modernity. To the Islamophobe, a Muslim is *fated* to behave the way she does – unless she renounces Islam, which would be the only act considered her own.

One of the modes by which Islamophobia reduces and naturalizes Muslim belief is through its deployment of the categories of moderate and extremist. Because Islamophobia displaces and racializes crisis events linked to resistance to empire, from the Palestinian struggle to the Iranian revolution, it forces on every Muslim the question of whether they are “moderates” who detach themselves from their connections to zones of resistance or “extremists” who channel that resistance in the society where they live. But this question is not posed directly; it is always displaced onto the plane of culture: do they accept Western values? This framework imposes itself relentlessly on Muslim public expression, rendering suspicious anyone who refuses to engage in rituals of loyalty to Western culture. In this way, Islamophobia is also a way of containing Muslim knowledge of imperialism: Muslim dissent against empire is never heard as dissent but only as extremism.

Islamophobia as imperialist ideology

Generally, the US academy has paid little attention to the connections between racism, settler colonialism, and global empire.⁴⁹ Such analysis is heavily circumscribed by the mechanisms of funding, prestige, and informal censorship. Those who depart from official orthodoxies to critically examine US foreign policy usually do so within the disciplinary boundaries of

international relations or area studies and are therefore badly placed to grasp the racial dimensions of empire and the domestic shadows they cast. Equally, scholars of race are generally tied to law, sociology, and criminology departments, which tend to constrain their fields of study to the borders of the US and fail to reflect upon the colonial histories through which those borders are constituted. There has been a strand of legal analysis of the War on Terror focused on domestic and international law but it rarely thinks about racism as the systematic correlate of global empire. Among the US-based scholars who have nevertheless sought to explore how empire implicates racialized responses domestically are Sohail Daulatzai, Elaine Hagopian, Amy Kaplan, Deepa Kumar, Alfred W. McCoy, Nadine Suleiman Naber, Vijay Prashad, Junaid Rana, Cedric Robinson, Michael Rogin, Edward Said, and Steven Salaita.⁵⁰

Edward Said's analysis of the specific ways in which Islamophobia is linked to US imperialism remains definitive. He demonstrated that Islamophobia in the US is historically specific and originates in political processes; it is not essentially a matter of religious difference or a spontaneous, popular response to incidents of terrorism. Its roots lie in the images of Islam that had solidified under European colonialism into a discourse of European civilization and Muslim backwardness, with notions of gender and sexuality playing a central role. As the US replaced Europe as global hegemon in the mid-twentieth century, Islam was positioned ambiguously: in some contexts a potential threat against US-induced "modernization," in others an ally in the Cold War against communism. The US's relationship with Israel meant that the insurgent Palestinian national liberation movement of the 1970s had to be officially explained through a distorting lens in which the desire for self-determination was no more than an expression of Arab fanaticism. The current form of Islamophobia has its origins in this "crisis" for US power as it

confronted one of the last Third World national liberation movements in a region that had become “a testing ground of imperial design, the centrepiece of Washington’s post-Vietnam strategic architecture.”⁵¹

Then, in the period after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the European colonial legacies of Orientalism were drawn on once again as a repository of myths to construct a new ideological enemy in the final years of the Cold War and its aftermath.⁵² Bernard Lewis’ much-circulated 1990 *Atlantic Monthly* article “The roots of Muslim rage” is the major reference here.⁵³ Muslims and the West, Lewis says, are in a deeply rooted conflict, which is not linked to a set of political issues such as racism, the Israel-Palestine conflict, or Western backing for Middle Eastern autocrats, but must be understood as a product of Islamic culture itself and its unique structural problem with modernity. For Lewis, it is this fixed content of Islamic culture rather than various political contexts that lies at the root of what he calls “Muslim rage.” “It should by now be clear,” writes Lewis, “that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historical reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.”⁵⁴ While Lewis referred to Islamic fundamentalism as the current expression of this deeper problem in Islamic culture, keeping open the possibility of non-fundamentalist Muslims finding their way to a reconciliation with Western modernity, Samuel Huntington went further, popularizing the “clash of civilizations” notion as a general formula for understanding post-Cold War international relations and seeing Islam itself, rather than Islamic fundamentalism, as an underlying problem for the West. “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating

source of conflict will be cultural,” wrote Huntington. “Islam has bloody borders” and a “centuries-old military interaction” with the West that is unlikely to disappear and “could become more virulent.”⁵⁵ In either form, the “clash of civilizations” thesis assumes that Muslim politics can be explained simply as the mechanical and repetitive expression of an underlying cultural abstraction called “Islam,” pre-programmed for fanaticism, that has remained the same over centuries and whose content can be known through a reading of its religious texts. The more literally one reads those texts, the more forcefully their inherent violence captures the reader: terrorism is simply the product of a literalist reading of classical Islam.

Said’s critique of Islamophobia appropriately begins by countering the reductive, identitarian formula of a clash of civilizations, which sees “Islam” and the “West” as deep, stable, ongoing cultural entities rooted in distinctive and separable moral principles. Emphasizing with Said that Islamophobia is historically constructed usefully calls attention to the ways in which it is produced and reproduced at specific moments. After all, US-led empire is obviously not inherently anti-Islamic in any straightforward sense – witness the strength of the relationship to the Saudi ruling elite even as “Islamism” is cast as the greatest threat to the “West.” But, though Said offers a compelling account of the content of Islamophobic discourse at different times, he tells us less about the exact relationship between Islamophobic ideology and the imperial interests it serves.

The most straightforward way of understanding this relationship is through a “propaganda” model of Islamophobia. On this account, neoconservative elements within the foreign policy establishment consciously fostered Islamophobic ideas in order to provide legitimation for their

imperialist foreign policies. Certainly, it is possible to demonstrate that US neoconservatives believe in the need to invent enemies as a way to bind society together, that their alliance with the Israeli Right means Islam is a plausible candidate for this role, and that their ideas about Islam have been propagated by an Islamophobia industry funded with \$40m over ten years.⁵⁶ (It is worth noting that this would be a small sum with which to buy a new form of American racism.) But, as an answer to the question of the relationship of Islamophobia to empire, it is incomplete. First, such an account struggles to explain the forms of Islamophobia that have been developed within liberal discourses. Second, it cannot explain the existence of Islamophobia in contexts where neoconservatives have limited influence, such as India and Russia. Third, it reduces the ideological process to propaganda.

A more detailed account of the connections between US imperialism and Islamophobia from the perspective of the post-9/11 moment is offered in Deepa Kumar's work. Islamophobia, she suggests, is the product of a matrix of agents – think tanks, politicians, academics, the security apparatus – and the various media that circulate their ideas to the general population.⁵⁷ As an ideology, Islamophobia constitutes a dominant frame for understanding issues like national security and sets limits of permissible thinking on such topics.⁵⁸ Her work documents the discourses emanating from the networks of neoconservatives, Likudniks, and “humanitarian interventionists” among the think-tank world of Washington, DC. In turn, these ideas, Kumar suggests, have influenced the public rhetoric of both Republican and Democrat administrations and determined representations of Muslims in journalism and entertainment. More recently, a network of full-time Islamophobic propagandists and the Christian far Right have provided a more folksy version of neoconservative Islamophobia. In this whole process, liberal intellectuals

by and large play an enabling role to the neoconservative propagandists who originated Islamophobia: they either accept this ideology in some form or fail to recognize its racist and imperialist character.⁵⁹ Culturally dominant Islamophobic ideas are also tied to the practices of state bureaucracies according to the following formula: “This is how ideology operates; while ideologues produce and disseminate ideas, most bureaucrats and technocrats, largely oblivious to these narratives, nonetheless reify it through their activities.”⁶⁰ In other words, state bureaucracies “make real” the ideas developed by elite ideologues.

Developing this analysis, it is important to understand Islamophobia not only as an elite discourse but also at the level of everyday “common sense,” where ideologies enable people to make sense of the world. Ideologies are not only falsehoods propagated by elites but also “resources” that people make use of in giving structure to their lives on a daily basis. Moreover, Islamophobia as a lay ideology is adaptive enough to shape social life in a wide range of local settings. In the US, it resonates with histories of settler colonialism, plantation racism, and anti-immigrant nativisms that are deeply enmeshed in the culture, law, and politics of US society. In Britain, it reworks the traces of colonial history (from Egypt and Sudan to Afghanistan and India) and racisms against post-war Asian immigrants. In France, it interacts with a long history of anti-Arab racism connected to colonialism in North Africa. In the Netherlands, it draws on a colonial history in Indonesia and histories of racism against immigrant workers from Turkey and Morocco. In Russia, as Mladina Tlostanova has demonstrated, Islamophobia is rooted in aspirations to Westernization: in the early modern period, as Russia sought to become European, Islam had to be distanced and erased from its self-image.⁶¹ In India, Islamophobia connects communalist histories to the idea that modernization requires a suppression of Muslim

“backwardness” in order to stand alongside the Western powers. Katy Sian has noted that Sikh anti-Muslim sentiment also functions as a marker of Westernization.⁶² Even when Islamophobic ideology circulates outside the West, central to its discourse is a racial binary structure of the West and Islam as separate, fixed, “natural” identities.

The relationship between Islamophobia and empire is further illuminated by setting it in the wider context of racial ideology. In general, “race” in the modern era is a means by which tensions between the social and economic aspects of global capitalism are eased. This occurs in two distinct ways. First, the combined and uneven development of imperialism involves “non-free” labor (slavery, various forms of colonial indenture, and super-exploitation) co-existing with the capitalist ideology of a “free market” of labor. The contradiction is resolved through a spatial organization of global capitalism in which racial codes identify colonial natives, immigrants, refugees, and people of color as “Others” for whom liberal principles do not apply. Second, racial ideology works to frame capitalism’s social problems as resulting from the presence of an alien “Other” defined by its racial identity rather than by its class belonging. The illusion of unity in a class-divided society can thus be produced through the cultural construction of, for example, Jews as an external intrusion into the body politic, or through what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “psychological wage” that draws non-elite whites in the US into an identification with their own ruling class exploiters.⁶³ In both cases, class antagonism is racialized and turned into a pillar of stability for the system.

Modern anti-Semitism is distinctive here as an ideology that displaces the social fallout of capitalism onto the terrain of race, through a conspiratorial conception of power. Anti-Semites

view Jews as dangerous sub-humans threatening the purity of the social body from below but also as a secret, cosmopolitan super-class able to direct world history through its control of the media and high finance. Anti-Semitism thus connects to real frustrations and desires that a class society produces but redirects those away from actual class relations onto a Jewish enemy that has to be fantastically inflated through conspiracy theory in order to play its allotted role.

Islamophobia has inherited from modern anti-Semitism this conspiratorial mode. For today's Islamophobes, President Obama – the most powerful man in the most powerful government – is secretly a Muslim, the Muslim Brotherhood is covertly controlling the US government, and the European Union is no more than a front organization to enable the Arab colonization of Europe.⁶⁴ At the same time, Islamophobes see Muslims as a dangerous immigrant under-class locked in a medieval belief system that threatens to disrupt Western society if they are not “integrated” (i.e. “civilized” into adopting “Western” cultural values) or expelled. A class-divided society is naturalized and depoliticized with this fantasy of a culturally homogenous “us” at the very moment when global capitalism “threatens to loosen the hold of the nation-state over its subjects.”⁶⁵

Islamophobia and the state

While Islamophobia is more than elite propaganda, it is also impossible to separate from state practices, both domestically and internationally. Islamophobia is more than a legitimizing shell that provides justification for state practices; it also causes them. As Michael Rogin argues, US

imperialism cannot be fully explained in terms of the economics of resource wars; it requires also an understanding of race as constitutive of the American state.⁶⁶

The state surveillance gaze that tries to sift the moderate from the extremist among Muslim populations is where the racialization of Islam is perhaps most clearly evident. Law enforcement, national security, and military agencies in Europe and the US read Muslim bodies for the signs of what has come to be called “radicalization” – such supposed indicators as growing a beard, starting to wear “Islamic” clothing, or speech expressing forms of religio-political ideology.⁶⁷ These signifiers of “Muslimness” – facial hair, dress, and expressive activity – are taken to be markers of suspicion for a surveillance gaze that is also a racial gaze; it is through such routine bureaucratic mechanisms that counterterrorism practices involve the social construction of a racial “Other.” As Remi Brulin has written, “in the early decades of the Cold War, American presidents barely ever used the concept of ‘terrorism’ and, when using it, referred to a very broad type of acts and actors. The term was essentially absent from the discourse, and undefined.” Yet by the 1990s a specific, selective understanding of “terrorism” had come to dominate US discourse, which routinely associated it with Muslims.⁶⁸

The infrastructure of this surveillance gaze is deeply entangled with the global project of empire. It integrates military and commercial networks, from the visual and Wi-Fi surveillance conducted by military drones to the databases of US tech corporations, from homeland security profiling at airports to the interrogation of detainees at CIA black sites. It blurs the boundaries between state and industry, between military and civilian policing, and between internal and external security. It is tied to the global racialized wars on terror, on drugs and on unauthorized

immigration. The production of Muslims as objects of mass surveillance is thus analogous to and overlaps with other systems of security surveillance that feed the mass deportation of immigrants and the mass incarceration of the prison-industrial complex.⁶⁹ The US state and its allies are able to gather vast banks of information on these insurgent populations but, because they do not confront the political nature of resistance openly and directly, they never truly know the nature of the resistance they confront; wherever there is resistance, they only see race. Their actions are therefore caught in a constant feedback loop of unintended consequences, as they conjure into existence the very racial specters they believe are haunting them.

Paddy Hillyard's concept of "suspect communities" provides a useful way to conceptualize the intertwining of surveillance and race that is at work here.⁷⁰ Hillyard studied the experience of the Irish population in Britain under the anti-terrorist legislation introduced in the early 1970s, which was part of the state's attempt to maintain control in the North of Ireland in the context of an armed insurgency by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). What Hillyard documents is the police practice of arresting those suspected of involvement with the PIRA and interrogating them to identify their friends and family. The police then worked their way through the friends and family and interrogated them in turn, and so on. Eventually, this method of investigation produced in the minds of the police a picture of the "community" as a network of suspicious persons linked together by various social relationships. Through being subjected to this kind of policing, those targeted also came to understand themselves as a community with a shared experience of suspicion at the hands of the police. Hillyard's point is that the Irish "community" in England does not pre-exist police surveillance but is itself constituted through the interrogation process, both in the minds of the police and of their targets. The community is

forged in the police cells. The surveillance practices of the police are thus integral to the construction and reproduction of the Irish as a racial group.

In the War on Terror, we can trace similar processes in which “Muslimness” is constructed as a racial object in the very act of collecting information about populations deemed “threats” by the state. Indeed, such processes should be placed in the much longer history of racialized surveillance in the United States, from the settler-colonial period, the establishment of the plantation system, and the colonization of territories in Asia, to the emergence of the national security state in the Cold War.⁷¹ In each case, before managing a heterogeneous population, the state first set about defining it; in doing so, it not only acknowledged difference but also shaped it and, sometimes even, created it – a process Mahmood Mamdani refers to as “define and rule.”⁷² Coding populations racially to organize the spatial distribution of rights, naturalize an unequal social order, and depoliticize resistance is central to capitalism’s combined and uneven development, not a hangover from a pre-modern past; today, Islamophobia is one of the foremost ways of carrying out such racial coding.

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