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THE POLITICAL TRANSVERSALITY OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

An analysis of historical and ideological foundations

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Islamophobia is a complex process of 'othering' based on the indication of actual or perceived affiliation with Islam. The term 'othering,' or racialisation, refers to the act of seeing the intentions, social conduct and perceptions of those who are (or are assumed to be) Muslim as essentialised religious behaviour. This process overlooks the plurality, divisions and complexities of this group (or at least limits them to a binary contrast between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims) on, for example, a social, economic, theological, ideological and identity-related level.[1] Islamophobic 'othering' results in a representation, which – by amalgamation – groups together individuals, communities and populations that have little in common, linking them to various acts of violence carried out by individuals and groups who claim to be acting in the name of Islam. Islamophobia is therefore a sociopolitical phenomenon which has little to do with the balanced analysis of religions and religious dogmas and institutions – a wholly legitimate process.[2] Nor is the phenomenon of Islamophobia limited solely to actions (such as discrimination and physical or verbal attacks, which, according to many sources, are becoming increasingly frequent) whose legitimisation must also be explored. In France, Islamophobia is one of the consequences springing from the construction of a 'Muslim problem' by a significant number of elites.

It is possible to object that Islamophobia is a product of the rising number of violent acts shrouded by Muslim religious discourse (for example the attacks in Paris in 1995–1996, New York and Washington in 2001, Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015) or of certain changes in the status and forms of Islam in France (more places of worship, the emergence and development of discourse and lines of thought that recommend breaking away from society, etc.). These tangible realities should be considered alongside the different forms of political violence around the world and alongside the changes in Muslim religious practice in Europe. It is also true that for prejudice to work it must first be endorsed by the members of the group that is being targeted. Even if their power is limited, these 'endorsers' are essential when it comes to delegitimising their own group – a role carried out by a certain number of 'representatives' chosen and championed by the same elites that promote the 'Muslim problem.' Furthermore, there are numerous examples of violent behaviour or of non-Muslim religious practices that are, in fact, not deemed to be a public issue (or at least not to the same extent), such as the spread of

Catholic traditionalist demonstrations, the rise in power of the African Pentecost movement in working class areas, the over-representation of 'separatist' movements in comparison with other 'terrorist' acts reported by Europol, even though they cause fewer deaths. The Utøya massacre carried out by Anders Breivik, classed as the deadliest in Europe in recent decades, was not made out to be a 'white' or a 'Christian' problem.

There is nothing organic about the 'Muslim problem' and it has not simply appeared out of the blue. We must remember that social phenomena are not, by default, a public issue, and that for the general public to believe there is a problem three conditions must first be met (Gusfield 2009): the condition of awareness, starting with categorising and interpreting social phenomena; an effort to mobilise different types of actors and supporters, who, without working together but by influencing one another, will come to agree that Islam poses a problem; lastly, a condition concerning norms or, in other words, the series of rules and values that serve to define the problem. That which is presented to us as being a 'problem' hides the unknown, thereby meaning that its scope and its social or health-related impact may be far greater.

Yet, in contemporary France, Islam 'poses a problem.' Today, this idea has become widespread if we are to go by the prolific spread of negative images and discourses regarding the presence of Muslims in France and more widely in Europe. It is even an example of social 'evidence,' in line with the philosopher Fernando Gil's (1993) definition of the word: not an irrefutable argument, but rather a belief that is so deeply engrained that it does not require verification and, as a result, foregoes reason. In fact, in the French context, it is striking to note that the regular and voluntary reinforcement of this 'Muslim problem' is rarely the result of rational exchanges, robust arguments or well-supported explanations. This atmosphere of 'paranoia,' as described by Raphaël Liogier (2012), spans from the far right of the political spectrum to the far left, and across all European countries. The fact that this kind of transversality is possible indicates that modern Islamophobia is based on different foundations. Indeed, how can a social group stir so many negative and transpartisan opinions within French society when rejection of the Other is generally seen as a dividing factor in politics?[3] Here, this chapter is not claiming that 'everyone is Islamophobic' and that Islamophobia shares the same foundations for left- and right-wing sympathisers, both of which would be false and lazy assertions. On the contrary, its aim is to explore the different mechanisms that facilitate the politically transversal nature of hostility towards Islam and Muslims. In this instance, the term 'mechanism' refers to the main ideological and symbolic frameworks around adhesion to Islamophobia.

The main historical foundations of contemporary Islamophobia

Several historical movements – which date back to different points in history and which have evolved over time – have facilitated the expression, dissemination and spread of Islamophobia today. This anti-Muslim archive, at times referred to, must not force us to adopt an outdated stance based on an unhistorical view of spoken, written or visual Islamophobia. It would be wrong to think that there is a sort of general Islamophobia that has been around forever and is intrinsic to European identity; one that has supposedly been expressed throughout history with unconscious and recurring hostility that has remained unchanged since the Middle Ages (Dakhlia and Vincent 2011). The long history behind the Muslim problem in Europe is anything but linear, yet in many ways, it remains a contentious topic.

Indeed, France's first encounter with Islam came not with the emergence of the colonial empire or the arrival in the last century of indigenous migrants who had come for military or economic reasons. The long history between the two has created a unique archive of material,

portraying Islam and Muslims as a dangerous and/or inferior 'other' in Western theological and political thought. This anti-Muslim archive was made up of the ideological or iconographical works of a wide variety of actors (theologians, philosophers, erudites, diplomats, in addition to politicians, scientists, journalists, and the like) working in particular social and historical fields (the reaction to the Muslim conquests, the Crusades, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, European and American imperialism, immigration from Muslim countries to Europe, geopolitical and conflict-related reshuffling after the Cold War, etc.).

Since the Middle Ages, religious and political conflicts have given rise to different types of European discourses that have aimed to counter and delegitimise a new opposing and heretical religion, to justify social segregation and to legitimise military conquests. This discourse regarding Islam and Muslims has generated a pool of ideas, representations and images, which has been used by different generations of public actors according to their social standing, their interests and their historical and political contexts.

Shortly after the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, political and religious authorities in Christian Europe drew up various strategies to fight the spread of Islam around the world, including the theological denial of the Crusades, the sending of missionaries, etc. The earliest representations of Islam and Muslims in Europe are to be found in the works of Christian writers (seventh to twelfth centuries) living in Christian and Muslim Europe (Spain, the Balkans) or in territories of the Islamic Orient. The main aim of these works was to fight against a rival Muslim dogma and to avoid conversions in conquered territories, to justify military conquests that made it possible to face a political enemy whose power was growing, and finally, to legitimise the different forms of segregation (legal, spatial) of Muslim subjects under Christian princes. This Muslim enemy has been assigned several names over time and depending on geographical area, including Arabs, Saracens, Moors, Ishmaelites, Agareniens and Turks.

Thus, for Norman Daniel, these writers built up a 'set of beliefs,' an 'arsenal of polemical images' and, according to John Tolan, 'intellectual weapons,' which revealed a feeling of superiority in the West over Muslims and Arabs (see Daniel 1993; Tolan 2003). At the time, this superiority was mainly defined in religious terms, and the arguments lodged against Islam and Muslims were largely theological. Across the board, Christian discourse formed opposing patterns of thought, which became central to popular perception of Islam and Muslims. On the one hand, Islam was dismissed as being tantamount to irrationality, passion, emotion and barbarism, whilst on the other, Christianity was said to represent reason, civilisation and spiritual truth. Some of these patterns were in line with the discourse on the Saracen people, considered to be a 'perfidious race' by one Riccold de Monte Croce (1243–1320). According to the historian John Tolan, the negative representations and beliefs that were deeply rooted in people's minds up until the eighteenth century only underwent 'minor changes' up until the Enlightenment, and even as late as the twentieth century: 'Little truly new was written about Islam between 1300 and the Enlightenment' (1993: 364). Nevertheless, the period between the Reformation and the Enlightenment was marked by a greater diversity in European discourse concerning Islam and Muslims. Traditional prejudices were still rife, but the unanimity of European discourse was interrupted by conflict within Europe itself (protestants and philosophers against the Catholic Church), a shift in relations between international forces with the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, and, lastly, an increasing drive for knowledge that characterised, for example, Orientalism.

Thereafter, negative representations of Islam and Muslims tended to stay separate from religious or spiritual influences and started to become more diverse. The 'anti-Mohammed' phenomenon gave way to the construction of a negative Muslim 'otherness' originating from the arts, literature and, increasingly, science. The role of orientalist writers would prove to be crucial;

they saw the East as an area shaped by different communities that were to be explored and colonised for economic (raw materials, workforce and other resources) and political reasons (power struggles between Western states). These colonial discoveries brought about a global tripartition: civilised Western Europe, the history- and culture-deprived world of the 'uncivilised' and, between the two, the East, made up of great civilisations in decline. While allowing for a whole host of discoveries relating to Eastern communities, Orientalism led to the scientific legitimisation of colonial conquests and also took an active role in them. The desires for knowledge and for power are often linked.

In particular, orientalists helped to establish the idea that religion had to feature in all analyses of the history of oriental societies. They played down political, technological, economic and social factors because they felt that spirituality and religion took precedence in oriental cultures, in contrast to the West, which was going through a process of secularisation (Said 1980). Even today, this view helps to legitimise the idea that the individual and collective behaviours of Muslims are determined primarily by their religious affiliation, and not by political, economic or social determining factors. This unhistorical perspective on the history of the Muslim world leads on to a second assumption: that of the existence of different races within the human race, each one with inherent biological and psychological characteristics. By picking up on the 'War of the Races' theory and the pseudo-scientific works of racial anthropology, orientalists see the historical trends of the Muslim world as a struggle between religious movements, which is also a race struggle (see Reynaud-Paligot 2006). By connecting religion and race, they thereby help to racialise religious affiliation, which has become an intrinsic characteristic of Muslim populations. From this perspective, colonial domination is based on a racial definition of nationality and citizenship. For example, in 1830, indigenous Muslim populations that were overpowered following the conquest of Algeria were, from a legal point of view, both nationals (subjects of the empire) and non-citizens (without the right to vote or to be elected) who were subject to a unique penal code (the *code de l'indigénat* or Indigenous Statute). This legal discrimination can be explained by the colonists' desire to maintain their grip on political power, but also by the belief in the civilisational and racial inferiority of Algerian Muslims.

From xenophobia to anti-clericalism: main contemporary foundations

Of course, the small number of historical points highlighted here do not give a comprehensive account of the link between the past and present of Islamophobia; they simply allow us to perceive the periods in which more material was added to the anti-Muslim archive. We are reminded to what extent the status of Islam in France can be partly described in view of this past by the hostility towards Islam in certain traditionalist Christian communities; the recurrence of prejudices and the faults attributed to the Muslim "other"; the hegemony in the French media of neo-orientalist interpretations promoted by various experts and public speaking professionals; or the perpetuation – more than half a century after the Évian Accords – of a specific legal and political way of dealing with Islam used by successive governments.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, this belief in the existence of a 'Muslim problem' has brought about numerous public issues and controversies: an 'integration' problem concerning the inter-generational reproduction of a certain form of religiosity judged to be incompatible with overarching concepts of citizenship, assimilation and national identity; a problem of modernity based on Muslims' supposed rejection of democracy, secularism and gender equality; a fear of over-population and even population transfer; a security problem centred around the threat of Islamic terrorism (Bigo et al. 2008). Discourse and imaging has aided the construction

of an 'imaginary Islam,' which was opposed to the French 'Republic,' the 'state,' 'secularism' and the 'nation' (Deltombe 2005). 'Muslims' themselves, although not against the 'French people,' are frequently divided into two broad categories: 'extremists' ('Islamists' or 'fundamentalists') on the one hand and 'moderates' on the other. This logic is binary and essentialist, and it completely overlooks the nuances and complexities uncovered by an increasing number of social science studies on the Muslim phenomenon (Göle 2015). In reality, there are several forms of Islamophobia, which are driven by different forces, and which highlight the transpartisan reach of this phenomenon. Here, we will discuss some of these forms.

Above all, Islamophobia subscribes to nationalist, racist and xenophobic traditions. It forms part of the extension of racism, covering other minorities that are judged to be undesirable on national territory. Here, Islam is seen as the extension of the other's religion. We will only briefly discuss this form of Islamophobia (or rather Islamo-xenophobia), which sits at the right end of the political spectrum. The confusion caused by the appropriation of secular and feminist struggles by the far right and the hard right must not obscure these racist foundations. Numerous observers have highlighted the importance of anti-Arab racism – or even the targeted rejection of Algerians following decolonisation – as a way of understanding contemporary Islamophobia. To be convinced of this truth, it is enough to note the overlap in the family histories and political engagements of current Islamophobic figures, such as Eric Zemmour or Robert Ménard. However, this is only part of the picture.

Islamophobia is also boosted by societal dynamics, allowing it to make a wide-reaching impact. In fact, for several centuries, at least since the Revolution, French society has been shaped by a deep secularisation movement, characterised in particular by the loss of influence of religious norms in daily life, the political decline of church authorities, in addition to the decline in religious practice and the vocational crisis. While the nineteenth century was marked by important battles between the different factions of the secularisation movement and the supporters of a return to the *Ancien Régime*, the subsequent century seemed to be one of institutionalisation with the establishment of a peaceful compromise written into the law of 9 December 1905 (Baubérot 2011). This law failed to put a definitive end to the conflict between the 'two faces of France' – anti-clerical and Catholic – but it did establish a definite balance between the factions and, at the time, the French Republic. Even though several events meant that the stability of 1905 was called into question, it was never a matter of restricting the religious freedoms guaranteed by the founding texts of modern secularism, which was vigorously defended by Aristide Briand before the Chamber of Deputies. Up until the Second World War, it was essentially the survival of a Christian form of anti-Judaism that led the theme of religion to be seen as a marker of racism (although this dimension was present in Nazi anti-Semitism). The relevance of this theme was subsequently questioned with the preparation of the law against racism of 1 July 1972 (Calvès 2011). Speaking on this matter, Jean-Pierre Delannoy said that legislators 'feared discrediting the plan by focusing on such a dated hypothesis' (Delannoy 2005). The religious theme was eventually taken into account in 1972, but its 'dated' nature would reveal the general acceptance of reduced religious visibility in public (places of worship and religious institutions, clothing and even special public demonstrations like processions, festivals, etc.). Yet, at the end of the 1980s, the emergence of a new type of religious visibility – regarding clothing in particular – and the widespread, negative media coverage it received, once again brought this topic to the attention of the French people. This turning point – marked by the first 'veil controversy' in Creil in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall and the bicentenary of the Revolution – was to destabilise those who maintained that the secularisation of the twentieth century and the shift in cultural attitudes (in particular with regard to women) had already been achieved in the 1960s. Several individuals, who had based their political careers on opposing the

tradition and norms of the Church, looked very unfavourably upon the public emergence of new forms of religiosity among younger generations.

These dynamics of secularisation and secularism, at the heart of the universalist myths of the Jacobin Republic, can also be linked to virulent anti-clericalism, which draws inspiration from a highly anti-religious interpretation of historical materialism (Tévanian 2013). Certain theoretical approaches that are inspired by this concept often see religiosity as an obstacle to openness, and to being aware of 'true' social relationships and the forms of domination that are fostered between them. Moreover, assuming the importance of class relations and the social question, these heterogeneous approaches are sometimes used to downgrade, rather than analyse, what is revealed by the dynamics of race and religion compared with what is revealed by socio-economic standing. As a result, theoretical, political and moral considerations are blurred, making it difficult to carry out a balanced analysis of Islam's place in society. On the far left, Islam is often accused of impeding the course of social and revolutionary emancipation, and of stopping the unification of the working class. It is therefore hard to see this 'suspect Islam' as a source of victimisation, in contrast to other markers of rejection, such as background or skin colour.

The attitude that should be adopted with regard to Islam and Muslims has significantly divided feminist, anti-racist and anti-clerical groups – considered to be progressive – in light of the numerous controversies that have plagued the public sphere for 30 years. Similarly, aside from openly racist and xenophobic movements, political organisations and trends from the far left through to the centre right have all had to endure debates, deep-rooted disagreements, reconfigurations and even outright division, which have given rise to forms of Islamophobia that cannot solely be described as xenophobia. Recognising religion to be a marker of the rejection of others, much like race, gender or social class, is the cause of similar debate. Religious affiliation is considered to be an acquired marker, which is the result of a personal choice deemed to be reversible. It does not have the same status as ascriptive markers, like gender, disability or skin colour, because these are considered to be hereditary and exterior to the individuals in question. Yet, in France, Muslim visibility was constructed as if it had emerged from bottom-up *islamisation*, that is to say, as the symbolic marker of politico-religious movements. Generally speaking, it is also seen as a movement that goes against women's rights. As a result, the various spiritual and moral aims of Muslims – which often correspond to the characteristics outlined in empirical research on Islam and which are accepted by Muslims themselves – stand in stark contrast to the view held by the dominant and hegemonic community, which equates Islam with a questioning of the historical movement of secularisation, with 'failed integration' and with the rising power of Islamism, which is seen as a threat to individual liberty.

Conclusions

In contrast to what might be implied by the change in status of Muslims in Europe as a result of a chain of violent military events here and particularly in those countries of the Middle East and Africa with substantial Muslim populations, the ideological foundations of Islamophobia have been set for a very long time and have been discussed differently since the beginning of the 1980s. Without doubt, the numerous sources of contemporary political and geopolitical upheaval have added to our concerns and our fears, which are manipulated by a number of political and media personalities in hopes of increasing their own popularity and the levels of hostility towards Muslims. However, let us not forget that the first modern version of the 'Muslim problem' was used in the factories of the automotive industry, just as the left-wing government shifted towards ultra-liberal rigour. Faced with North African skilled workers and the General Workers' Confederation (CGT), the Mauroy government decided to move away

from a traditional trade union movement centred around protecting jobs, in particular those of North African workers, by putting a religious slant on strike action. They became 'holy strikes,' 'Shiite strikes,' which resonated with the international press, even though the North African workers were Sunnis. In this regard, this period in social history represents a sort of contrast that simultaneously reveals the issues of legitimacy that link the presence of migrant workers to their economic purpose, demonstrating the effectiveness of using identity as leverage in dividing the working classes, and unveils the impact of exclusion based on Islam. The role of employers, the government and a part of the press in the stigmatisation of strikers and the trade unions that supported them invites us to think about the overlaps between economic and social agendas, and the emergence of public scandals. Yet, in more general terms, what is most striking is this refusal, this incapacity to envisage a shared future and a common imagination that includes the Muslim population of France. This is because, fundamentally, the solutions to the 'Muslim problem' are mainly centred around control (of the cult, the mosques, the training of Imams, etc.) or prohibition (through legal discrimination); they are based on disciplining the minds and bodies of those men and women who are believed to be Muslims. Nevertheless, they imply that these supposed Muslims are not here to stay and can be deported. This is what an increasing number of disinhibited Islamophobic individuals are openly hoping for and what an increasing number of French people defining themselves (or perceived) as being Muslims are fearing.

Translated by Steven Wonnacott

Notes

1 This chapter picks up on the analyses presented in *«Islamophobie». Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le 'problème musulman'* (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013) and on my introduction to the sociology of Islamophobia (Mohammed 2014). The reader can refer to these in order to further explore the analyses outlined in this chapter and to access a more complete bibliography. For the purposes of readability, we have kept bibliographical annotations to a minimum.
2 This is the case even if the content of these analyses is sometimes a way of disguising hate speech.
3 The reader might want to refer to the opinion polls carried out by the *Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme* (CNCDH), the French Advisory Commission on Human Rights.

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