

Raymond Taras. *Xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. 192 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-5072-9.

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## Defining and Understanding Islamophobia in Europe

Recently, Belgian senators Fauzaya Talhaoui and Bert Anciaux submitted a proposal for a more compelling struggle to be made against Islamophobia, which they regard as “unfounded enmity against Islam.”[1] This triggered a small but lively debate on Dutch Internet sites: was Islamophobia something “real”? Could a touch of Islamophobia be considered smart or even desirable?

Islamophobia as a concept, and as a social phenomenon, is difficult to grasp. Although the concept itself seems old, it has in fact only become popular after Britain’s Runnymede Trust published a report in 1997 describing the phenomenon as “unfounded hostility” towards Islam, the consequence of which was “unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.”[2] This normative definition can be, and is, used by people to denounce others who are concerned about particular developments among Muslims. It is also used by some to claim that a fear of Islam is actually justified and that they are, therefore, “proud to be Islamophobic.”

In writing *Xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe*, Raymond Taras joins a growing number of writers who are making interesting contributions to this topic. In the introduction to his book he sets out his case about “the spread of hostile public attitudes towards Muslims” (p. 4). According to him, these attitudes are based “in part” upon the perceived threat of Islam caused by immigration and the ensuing culture wars. Taras examines Is-

lamophobia against the background of a broader xenophobic and anti-immigrant movement. After discussing the topic of prejudice, he scrutinizes European norms and models of migrant rights, analyzing the way in which a general, wide-spread fear of migrants has been transformed into a specific, targeted prejudice against Muslims. He elegantly demonstrates how deep the historic roots of Islamophobia go but also cautions against equating these past fears with current anxieties and policies. Taras analyzes the differences and special characteristics that individual European countries have. The case studies on France and Germany, for example, are particularly interesting and well-argued sections of his book. It is here that Taras suggests how different nation-state ideas, historical experiences of immigration, and models of church-state relations correspond to different manifestations of Islamophobia. He concludes his book by drawing up a list of propositions, distilled from his previous chapters, which can be used to explain how more general anti-immigrant attitudes develop into specific anti-Muslim attitudes and how this development runs parallel to the rise in Muslim assertiveness. Taras stresses the impossibility of determining a causal link between the two but suggests that there may be an action-reaction relationship between them. He closes by providing us with a framework for analyzing anti-Muslim prejudice, the role of structural features and the contingent factors—a framework that is vital if we are to “undo” Islamophobia.

Taras’s book makes a useful contribution to the expanding body of literature on Islamophobia. For several

reasons, however, I think his definition of Islamophobia is highly problematic. According to Taras, Islamophobia is a composite of religious, ethnic/racial, and cultural prejudices. Offering a definition, he says: “Because a defining stricture of Islam is precisely the inseparability of religious life from politics and identity, any sentiment or action targeting a Muslim is necessarily anti-Islamic, even when the ‘infidel’ responsible for it may be unaware of this nuanced logic.... Muslims themselves can be Islamophobic.... It may be enough that they reject the cultural practices or political orientations that characterise Muslim communities” (p. 18).

Let me highlight the most important and problematic issues of this definition: 1) Islamophobia is defined by reference to a definition of Islam, and 2) this definition is then broadened to such an extent that the concept loses much of its analytical value.

First of all, conceptualizing Islamophobia, based upon a definition of what Islam is, as Taras clearly does, has little analytical value. Taras reduces the Islamic tradition to the doctrine of Islam as “a way of life” and to particular practices and orientations that “characterise Muslim communities” (p. 18). This is a very generalized and essentialist definition of Islam that disregards the many different revitalization movements, the local syncretic cultural practices, and the personal experiences of individual people. This is where Taras falls into one of the pitfalls described by Mahmood Mamdani: he assumes that every culture or religion has a defining core or essence and that particular forms of politics can be recognized as logical products of that essence.[3] But what makes Islamophobia Islamophobia is, I would argue, not a critique of what some Muslims (or non-Muslims) might believe are the central tenets of Islam or people’s core religious practices. Islamophobia manifests itself—and I reinterpret Pierre-André Taguieff’s three levels of racism here (Taras explains these too, on p. 14)—through, first of all, a common-sense response to, and reaction against, strangers and against an essentialized idea of Islam as a religion; second, through reframing particular reactions as a form of rationalized fear; and third, by using the first two levels as the basis for formulating a more advanced argument for exclusion.[4] We can also assume here that if level three gains acceptance, it will influence the first-level “common-sense” perceptions. In these three levels, it is not the supposed essence of Islam that matters but the particular common stereotypes of Islam that are reworked into definitions that people *claim* capture the essence of Islam and that legitimate the exclusion of Muslims. In this process, relationships between people and

particular developments are “Islamized” by making them signs of Islamization.

Secondly, under Taras’s definition, almost any negative comment made about a particular doctrine or practice of Islam could be defined as Islamophobic. Do we define support for the French law banning the wearing of an Islamic head scarf in a public school, for example, as Islamophobic behavior? Taras seems to think so. He states that the support of Etienne Balibar and other intellectuals of the ban may not have been as explicitly Islamophobic as other critiques, such as nineteenth-century scholar Ernest Renan’s views, were, “but by engaging in Eurocentric critiques of modernity that belittle development in the Islamic world, these intellectuals ... are left open to the charge that they invoke an Islamic/Arab orient reflecting an updated variation of Orientalism” (p. 146). Following Taras’s definition, the ban would be Islamophobic, as it rejects the “cultural practices” that “characterize Muslim communities.” There are many people however, including Muslims, who support the ban for a variety of reasons, such as alleviating the social pressure on girls.[5] Holding such opinions and intentions is not necessarily Islamophobic.

Taras also defines the debate held about Turkey’s European Union bid as a prime example of Germany’s “Turkophobia” and cites examples of anti-Muslim sentiment in countries such as Austria and the Netherlands. While demonstrating how arguments such as these (and their country-specific contexts) have indeed been used in the debates, he neglects to mention the many other arguments, such as Turkey’s poor human rights record, which were not based upon hostile, xenophobic sentiments but which were also put forward. True, such arguments can be, and are, used in Islamophobic discourse, but that does not render them Islamophobic as such. The problem with Taras’s broad definition is that it becomes impossible to determine when we are talking about the hostile views and attitudes to Islam and Muslims, and when there are other issues at stake (as well).

Taras’s book is impressive in its detailed accounts of several themes and in the focus he puts on different European countries, but it lacks the analytical precision which is required to understand the many ways that different issues, events, and phenomena are related, or thought to be related, to Islamophobia.

Let me close this review with two more general remarks. When reading Taras’s account of different events and debates in several European countries, I could not fail to note how frequently reference is made to the role

of sexuality and gender. Many of the debates deal with issues that specifically concern women, such as headscarves, face-veiling, and the alleged oppression of and discrimination against women by Islam; furthermore, several formerly Muslim women play a role in the current debates about Muslims and Islam, such as Necla Kelek in Germany (pp. 173-175). Conversely, many Muslim men are portrayed as the violent oppressors, misogynists, and so on. While it is clear that gender plays a pivotal role in the debate, there is no analysis of the interaction between gender and Islamophobia. A more thorough engagement of scholars of Islamophobia with the position of men and women and with ideas about femininity and masculinity in relation to the triage of secularism, securitization, and Islamophobia would certainly be welcome.

My final remark pertains to the different xenophobic and prejudiced policies that many European countries have. Certainly, in popular speech, Islamophobia is often seen as a characteristic of far-right movements, but this is only part of the story. It was not the far Right which plunged Europe into a “War on Terror,” which devised and implemented the plans for a ban on headscarves and face-veiling, and which is currently blocking Turkey’s EU bid. It is the mainstream politicians, such as those in the Netherlands who, while deeply and sincerely disliking the tone of anti-Islam nativists such as Dutch politician Geert Wilders, also state in the same breath that he has a point and that, at least, he is “telling it like it is.” Several mainstream political leaders have publicly expressed their belief in the superiority of Western or European “civilization” over Islamic “civilization.” The now common Dutch word for Moroccan Dutch youth who are involved in crime or cause trouble in streets, *Kut-marokkanen* (fucking Moroccans), was not invented by the far Right, but by a social democrat. The idea of attacking culture (or religion) instead of “foreigners” was already in place in the 1990s in the Netherlands when both mainstream left- and right-wing parties questioned whether having more ethnic diversity was likely to hin-

der social cohesion and coined “the culture of migrants” as one of the major obstacles to integration.[6] Perhaps the mainstream parties really are taking up these issues so that they can “neutralize” more radical parties such as Wilders’s Freedom Party, but, as Wilders’s anti-Islam view originated after 9/11, these nativist anti-Islam parties are, perhaps, also the product of, and enjoying the fruits of, the xenophobic labor of mainstream parties in the 1990s. Taras’s account aptly shows how European governments and mainstream political parties are implicated in devising and implementing xenophobic policies and draws our attention to different modes of Islamophobia and power, making it a valuable contribution to research on Islamophobia.

#### Notes

[1]. “*Talhaoui wil strengere aanpak van islamofobie* (Talhaoui wants tough approach to Islamophobia),” *GvA Gazet van Antwerpen*, February 28, 2013, available online at <http://www.gva.be/nieuws/binnenland/aid1340905/talhaoui-wil-strengere-aanpak-van-islamofobie.aspx> (accessed April 3, 2013).

[2]. Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997), p. 4.

[3]. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

[4]. Pierre-André Taguieff, *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and Its Doubles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[5]. John Bowen, “Commentary on Bunzl,” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 524–525.

[6]. Verena Stolcke, “Talking Culture: New Boundaries, New Rhetorics of Exclusion in Europe”. *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1–24.

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