



Introduction: Debating Islamophobia

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Abstract: This essay is an introduction by the co-organizers to the proceedings of the academic conference on “Debating Islamophobia” organized by Casa Árabe-IEAM, Spain, in collaboration with the Program of Comparative Ethnic Studies in the Department of Ethnic Studies, U.C. Berkeley, in May 2009, published in the Fall 2010 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. In sum, the co-organizers, who also served as co-editors of this issue of the journal, expect the publication of this volume to be an academic contribution to the outlined questions regarding Islamophobia, a tool for social researchers and useful to overcome the prejudices and institutional barriers that produce second-class citizens at the heart of Western Europe.

Since the end of the Cold War, a series of “social fears” has spread through Western democracies and, among them, the “Muslim fear” appears to be one of the most prominent. “Western” values, such as freedom of expression, gender equality and national identity, have been used for questioning the Muslim presence and settlement in the large metropolitan cities of the West. For some people these “social fears” or “moral panics” are the expression of a growing Islamophobia. For others these are examples of a real problem in the Islamic communities and that speaking about Islamophobia is, at best, just a distraction or, at worst, a sort of cultural censorship that covers and protects Muslim extremists and their intolerance.

Those of us who understand Islamophobia not as a kind of controversy but as an analytic category need to face the

strengths and weaknesses in our formulation of it. Conceptually, Islamophobia is not defined nor implemented or understood in a coherent and consistent way. The article by José María Rosón in the collection published in the present issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* shows the many ways in which Islamophobia as a concept has been defined and the lack of clarity in the many definitions offered for it. This is what has allowed this term to circulate broadly but to be ineffective and empty of analytic content as a means for social justice: for some people it is a way of complaining, for others an empty rhetoric, and for the public opinion and the political actors it represents a way to turn to ambiguity and clichés. Therefore, the term Islamophobia runs the risk of being transformed into a source of anger rather than a critical source to achieve

equality and social justice.

Aiming to contribute to an in-depth debate about the concept of “Islamophobia,” Casa Árabe-IEAM and the Program of Comparative Ethnic Studies in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Berkeley (California) organized a conference on this issue to explore the analytical and conceptual values of “Islamophobia” from an interdisciplinary perspective. The papers presented in this volume formed part of the international conference entitled “Debating Islamophobia” held at CASA ARABE in Madrid on May 28-29, 2009. The purpose of the conference was to have an academic discussion of this phenomenon in Western democracies with a particular focus on Western Europe. We wanted to explore the uses and abuses of Islamophobia as a concept. Islamophobia is a form of discrimination that is on the rise in Western Europe affecting the social life and opportunities of millions of European citizens. We are concerned about the fact that the concept is contested and our aim is to open a serious and profound academic discussion for conceptual clarification.

The articles included in this volume address the following questions: What defines Islamophobia? Is Islamophobia a form of religious discrimination? Is Islamophobia a form of racism? How can we operationalize the concept as a tool for social research? What are the manifestations of this form of discrimination in Western Europe? How different national identities, cultural traditions and political systems affect the manifestation of Islamophobia in different countries? What are the historical manifestations of the phenomenon? What is the genealogy of the concept?

The increase in votes of political parties with Islamophobic discourses is on the rise in Western Europe. However, as Abu-Zayd argues in his article, since there are millions of European Muslims, to defame Islam is to defame Europe itself. The idea that Islam and Europe are two separate entities fails in

the face of the growth of European Muslims. There is no doubt that 9/11, and its aftermath with the discourse on the War on Terror, has been part of the atmosphere that explains the recent rise of Islamophobia. As Farish Noor analyses in this volume, the world after the discourse on the War on Terror is split along cultural, religious and civilisational lines. However, Islamophobic discourses preceded 9/11 with long-term specificities in different European countries. As José María Perceval shows in his article, Islamophobia is part of the long *durée* of European forms of discrimination. The discrimination of Moors was already there in the 16th and 17th centuries Spain. This discrimination led to the expulsion of “Moriscos” from Spain in 1609.

Vincent Geisser further demonstrates in his essay on France that Islamophobia is rooted in Christian Medieval times. But, in his view, French national particularities have modernized the old Islamophobia into a form of “new racism.” He links French deviation from early Christian Islamophobia to the colonization of West Africa and the Middle East in the 19th century and the enlightenment project in the 18th century. Although in his paper Heiko Henkel does not conceptualize Islamophobia as a form of “new racism,” in his examination of the cartoons affair in Denmark he conceptualizes the concept as representing a form of xenophobia deeply rooted in Danish ethnic nationalism. However, in his view it cannot be reduced to this. It forms part of the struggles for a legitimate place of Muslims in Danish society. According to Henkel, the cartoon crisis was a transitional drama in the struggle for recognition. The new emphasis on “secularity” is a performance of “Danishness as Europeaness.” This identification is politically constructed through expelling Danish Muslims from the nation. This expulsion leads to Islamophobic reactions. In her paper Laura Navarro-García further argues that the Media representation of Muslims, not only

in Denmark but in the West, is a major source of Islamophobic stereotypes.

One thing we need to avoid is what Gema Martín-Muñoz calls cultural explanations of political events. “Culturalism” is common in Islamophobic discourses. “Culturalism” is part of the strategy to glorify and increase a sense of superiority of the West over Islam. It denies the political agency of the social actors belonging to a particular ethnic/religious/national community and turns any particular event into a universalist judgement of the whole community’s belief system (religious or otherwise). Fixing culture leads to essentialism and stereotypes that present obstacles to overcome discrimination. By “culturalizing” what in fact are problems of racial or ethnic discrimination, Islamophobia serves as a mechanism to place the cause of social exclusion of Muslim communities inside the community itself. Problems that are the result of economic, social and political domination become represented as “Islamic exceptions.” But “culturalizing” what in fact are political conflicts denies political agency and subjectivity to Muslims. As Salman Sayyid argues in his paper, Western orientalist denial of political agency to Muslims is at the root of Islamophobia and a major source of misunderstanding and stereotyping. Sayyid challenges representations of Muslim identity as “religious identity” to rescue the denial of the political from Muslim subjects and bring back their humanity from Islamophobic stereotypes. Ramón Grosfoguel further argues that social sciences are in many occasions complicit with Islamophobic stereotypes due to its foundations in epistemic Islamophobia.

In sum, we expect the publication of this volume to be an academic contribution to the outlined questions, a tool for social researchers and useful to overcome the prejudices and institutional barriers that produce second-class citizens at the heart of Western Europe.