

OPINION

# Is Europe's Islamophobia following the path of 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Semitism?

On anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Europe

Wednesday 11 June 2014, by [FARRIS Sara](#) (Date first published: 5 June 2014).

In 1844, Karl Marx published a short but dense text entitled "On the Jewish Question". It was a critical review of two essays by the-then famous philosopher Bruno Bauer, who had argued against equal rights for Jews if granted on religious grounds. If Jews wanted to be considered full citizens - Bauer maintained echoing the widespread opinion of the time - Jews would have to abandon their religion and embrace Enlightenment. According to this logic, there was no room for religious demands in a secular society.

As Bauer's position suggests, anti-Jewish racism in Germany and elsewhere in Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was justified mainly on cultural and religious grounds. Jews were discriminated and regarded with suspicion because they were considered an alien "nation within the nation". In fact, it was not until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of "social Darwinism" that "racial anti-Semitism", framed in biological terms, appeared on the political scene and Jews were openly discriminated against on the basis of their alleged genetic inferiority.

The question we might want to ask ourselves today is whether contemporary Europe is confronting a Muslim question similar to the Jewish question 170 years ago. Is European antipathy towards Muslims comparable to that first stage of hatred towards Jews, a hatred that culminated in one of the darkest pages of human history?

In spite of the obvious differences between the two contexts, the success of the far right during the recent elections in several European countries seems to suggest that the answer is a resounding yes. The victory of these parties attests to the incredible gains made by Islamophobic propaganda in the last ten years. In France, the president of the National Front, Marine Le Pen - who obtained one quarter of all votes - has asked school canteens to stop offering Muslim children alternatives to pork [1]. In Britain, the UK Independence Party campaigned against the construction of mosques and became the biggest winner in the elections, with an astonishing 27.5 percent of the vote [2].

Many of these parties, as well as those who voted for them, do not consider themselves racists. After all, the problem with Muslims - according to the likes of Le Pen - is their alleged backwardness, fanaticism and unwillingness to integrate.

In short, it is the Muslims' fault. Just like the Jewish question of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the contemporary Muslim question is premised upon cultural differences and thus presented as legitimate and politically correct.

Though immigrants in general are singled out as a social and economic threat to European societies and workers, it is Muslims in particular who have come to epitomise the "bad other". This has been achieved not only through the xenophobic propaganda of the far right. Actually, conservatives and

even liberal and left-wing parties have contributed to the fanfare.

On the one hand, conservative leaders such as current UK Prime Minister David Cameron [3], France's former President Nicolas Sarkozy and Italy's former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi have repeatedly invoked the Christian roots of European countries, while, on the other, a much broader gamut of political forces, including liberals and leftists, have participated in decrying the headscarf as a symbol of backwardness and oppression. The voices nourishing anti-Muslim sentiment across Europe come from all sides of the political map.

Muslims have thus become, at least in many ways, the new Jews. They have become the scapegoats onto whom Europeans are projecting their anxieties about the future. Conservative and far-right politicians constantly intensify and exploit these anxieties in order to enhance neoliberal and nationalist agendas, while most liberal and left-wing parties have imitated the racist right, perhaps hoping it will bring them more votes.

Marx understood this process all too well. He criticised Bauer for claiming that the lack of political emancipation for the Jews was the result of their culture and religion. Marx maintained that religion had nothing to do with the continued discrimination of the Jews. The prejudice against the Jews and their lack of rights, Marx argued, is to be understood in the broader context of the state's structural inequalities.

The transmutation of the Muslims into the Jews of the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not mean that a new genocide is imminent, or that the tragedy of the Jewish people in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe will be replicated as the tragedy of the Muslim people in the 21<sup>st</sup>. History does not repeat itself in this way. But history can rhyme. It will only be the redoubled work of anti-racist militants and organisations that can potentially prevent that rhyme.

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\* Source: Al Jazeera. Last updated: 05 Jun 2014 13:22:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/anti-semitism-islamophobia-europ-20146414191330623.html>

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\* The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/15/le-pen-pig-whistle-politics>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/04/ukip-mep-gerard-batten-muslims-sign-charte-r-rejecting-violence>

[3] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-16224394>