

With Islamophobia against Homophobia? - On an “elite discourse”

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On December 10th, 2003, the leftist newsweekly *Jungle World* published a pamphlet by the French journalists Caroline Fourest and Fiammetta Venner, which contained a defensive claim which would go on to have a great career: with their assertion that the term “Islamophobia” was coined in the year 1979 by Iranian mullahs in order to denounce women who refused to wear a veil, the two authors attempted to put a stop to the emerging discussion concerning anti-Islamic racism.

Even the correction published a week later in the same newspaper by Bernhard Schmid could not stop the victorious procession of this little propaganda lie. For more than three years, authors “critical of Islam” have repeated this bogus historical reference with such an insistence that it seems as if even the sheer fact that the term “Islamophobia” is constructed according to European rules of word formation and does not exist either in the Persian or the Arabic languages could not shake their confidence.

In fact the term, whose first known usage is in Etienne Dinet’s *L’Orient vu de l’Occident*, acquired its classical definition through a report by the Runnymede Trust titled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997). The anti-racist think tank from Britain presents in that paper a catalog of criteria which remain suitable to this day for distinguishing between serious uses of the term and Islamist propaganda. Of course the term is also used by fundamentalist groups based in Europe, such as the English Hizb ut-Tahrir, in order to elide the challenge of critique. But other concepts are also susceptible to such instrumentalization, as is shown in the case of the regular and sweeping denunciation of critics of Israeli settlements and occupation policies as “anti-Semites.”

So it makes sense to narrow down concepts related to the study of prejudice within the context of real conflicts and debates, so as to set limits to arbitrary and denunciatory usage. According to the definition of the Runnymede Trust, Islamophobia is present, inter alia, if (1) Islam is conceived as a monolithic bloc which is static and resistant to change; (2) it is viewed as separate and “other,” sharing no common values with other cultures, and without being influenced by these or influencing these; (3) it is construed as inferior to the West, barbaric, irrational, and sexist; and (4) it is perceived exclusively as violent, aggressive, threatening, terroristic, and engaged in a cultural conflict.

The Islamophobic Scene

Now, it would be completely mistaken to construct opinion polls based on these criteria, à la

Wilhelm Heitmeyer, in order to determine the quantitative spread of Islamophobia in the German population. What is observable in such polls is still in the majority of cases a populist nationalism and vulgar hatred of foreigners. Islamophobia has, at least in this country, its relevance not as a mass phenomenon, but as an elite discourse, which, shared by considerable numbers of leftist, liberal, and conservative intelligentsia, makes possible the articulation of resentments against immigrants and anti-racists in a form which allows one to appear as a shining champion of the European enlightenment. What Islamophobes accuse people of Turkish and Arabic heritage of would not even be understood as a reproach by the majority of Germans: opposition to Jews and Israel, dislike of gays, and the sexist degradation of women — all established forms of German everyday practice, which in Islamophobic discourse are construed as special qualities of Muslim immigrants which should disqualify them as members of German society.

Characteristic here is the use of conspiracist imagery: for example, the ex-leftist Italian star reporter Oriana Fallaci, one of the leaders of the Islamophobic movement, speaks of Muslim immigrants in Europe as the vanguard of a planned invasion [1]; and the former *Kalashnikov* editor [2] Gudrun Eussner passes off the riots in the French banlieues as an Islamist-led “Suburban Intifada.” [3] In March 2006, Eussner was also a participant in an international symposium hosted by the conservative *FrontPage Magazine*, an Internet newspaper often cited in the German Islamophobic scene, which is published by the former Marxist and prominent American right-winger David Horowitz. The following is found in the introduction to the transcript: “A Muslim rape epidemic is sweeping over Europe — and over many other nations host to immigrants from the Islamic world. The direct connection between the rapes and Islam is irrefutable, as Muslims are significantly overrepresented among convicted rapists and rape suspects.” [4] The logic is impressively stupid, as if a statistical correlation — which for example also exists between shoe size and income — could provide proof for a causal relationship. Social factors such as unemployment, poverty, and patriarchal role models are disregarded from the get-go in favor of a religious interpretation. But as if that isn’t enough, in the course of the symposium Eussner depicts the rapes as part of a concerted Jihadist strategy, by which the expansion of Islam in Europe is to be accomplished. According to this account, non-Muslim women are being punished for not behaving in accordance with the Koran. Supposedly behind all this is the softcore-Islamist Tariq Ramadan, who is alleged to have initiated these rapes with his proposal that Europe should no longer be regarded as a “house of war” (whose laws one must obey, as long as one is in the minority), but rather as the “house of invitation to Islam”.

For Islamophobes, hatred for Muslims is apparently a substitute for anti-Semitism. They make use of similar mechanisms of conspiracy theory which are traditionally operative in antipathy towards Jews, first of all what Horkheimer and Adorno called “pathic projection”: a phenomenon such as rape is picked out, systematically ethnicized, and finally on the basis of Koran citations and the imputation of an Arabic collective psyche interpreted either as a dastardly, methodical procedure for conquering Europe or as an essentialist expression of a “culture” which cannot be reconciled with the West. The demands in consequence are deportation, social exclusion, the denial of fundamental rights, and the tightening of immigration laws — as for example the Islamophobic author Horst Pankow was allowed to demand in the “leftist” journal *Konkret* (3/2006). Sometimes, even open pogrom fantasies are brought into play, such as when Oriana Fallaci speaks in her book *The Rage and the Pride* about her threat to police to set refugee tents of African Muslims on fire because they deliberately pissed in a baptistery in Florence. For this she received the acclaim of the Freudian-Marxist Uli Krug (*Bahamas* No. 39, 2002).

This has fundamentally nothing to do with the critique of religion, even if that’s the initial pretext advanced by representatives of the Islamophobic scene. But by now even the cover of *Bahamas* (No. 51, 2006) is graced with a resplendent photo of the fundamentalist Catholic Joseph Ratzinger, who is

celebrated there as a hero in the struggle against the “Islamic invasion.” And even a newspaper such as *Jungle World* reports on the occasion of Benedict XVI’s observations on Islam by noting the “astounding similarity between Critical Theory and papal philosophy” [5] — which, one could polemically point out, can also be observed on the basis of the homophobia common to both. [6]

The Culturalization of Homophobia

And with that we come to a theme which provides mainly Leftist Islamophobes with a pretext for selling their resentments as politically correct, even emancipatory. While sweeping accusations such as those of anti-Semitism tend to run out of steam when confronted with reality — for instance, the overwhelming majority (71%) of French Muslims, who were again subject to such accusations during the suburban riots at the end of 2005, express a “positive opinion of Jews” [7] despite the conflict in the Middle East — there actually seems to be something to the construct of a specifically Islamic homophobia, if one is to believe a new Gallup study. [8] Whereas for example 66% of Britons by now view homosexual activity as “morally acceptable,” among London’s Muslims the figure is merely 4%. In Berlin too, where Muslims are considerably more liberal — even though religion is no less important to them than to their fellow believers in Britain’s capital — the figure is 26% versus 68%. But if one looks closer, it becomes already apparent that this is only a partial aspect of a larger context: London’s Muslims are also considerably more conservative regarding other issues such as sex outside of marriage, abortion, and pornography. In fact this is the only area in which Gallup is able to ascertain considerable differences of opinion. As far as violence, suicide bombings, honor killings, and the death penalty go, Muslims are either just as skeptical or even surpass their fellow countrymen in their rejection.

But what do these numbers even mean, and what conclusions can be drawn from them? For Islamophobes this is clearly a case of a clash of “cultures.” However, the difference between Berlin and London Muslims alone belies this perception. Similarly large differences also exist between German and French peoples. But that is seen by observers as no more worthy of commentary than, say, the expected difference that would result if a comparable poll were to be conducted among Danes and Poles. What comes into view when it comes to Muslims is namely a tendency towards the essentialization of “otherness”: their attitude, in contrast to that of white Europeans, is deemed static and unchangeable, free of external influences and bound by the fundamental doctrines of their religion.

But do such opinion polls really offer any indication of the spread of homophobia? To answer this question, let’s go back to the year 1991. Even back then, two-thirds of Germans agreed with the following statement: “People’s sexual orientation doesn’t matter to me; why should I be bothered by it.” [9] With that they distanced themselves unequivocally from the third of respondents who expressed the following views: “What homosexuals do is a disgrace; they should be castrated” or “everything should be done to prevent the spread of homosexuality, even among adults. For that we need stronger penal codes.” In 1974, these two blocs of opinion stood in a 50:50 relation to one another. That would appear to be an unambiguous advance.

However, the survey yields a number of further interesting results. Although the majority of respondents claimed not to be disturbed by the sexual orientation of others, 70% of Germans at the same time advocated discrimination against homosexuals in the form of restricting admission to political office or educational careers (in 1974 the figure was around 90%). What’s more, almost two-thirds indicated that they preferred to avoid contact with homosexual men. And around 40% even explained that they became “physically ill” in the presence of such people. And, strikingly, it is in precisely this area, which comes closest to homophobia, that almost nothing has changed between

1974 and 1991.

Evidently, “sexual liberation” has led to an ideological change of attitude in German society with regard to the moral acceptance of “deviant” (“divergent”) sexual practices. But that has had practically no effect upon the homophobic constitution of the bourgeois subject. For homophobia is not the moral assessment of homosexual behavior — it is the fear of same-sex intimacy, which is reflected in the wish not to come in physical contact with homosexuals or to punish them for their “nature.” That this is not so much a case of a conscious attitude as an act of suppression is shown by an experimental psychological study from the year 1993, according to which homophobic men are aroused by gay pornography at an above-average frequency (80%), compared to 34% of non-homophobic men, while at the same time vehemently denying this fact. [10]

Homophobia as a Social Structure

In our society, the experience of same-sex love and desire is tied to the assumption of a homosexual role considered as “abnormal.” Whoever does not wish to slip into this role is advised for better or worse to conceal such wishes from one’s self and from others. That has little to do with reformable ideological attitudes. That’s one reason why the syndrome of homophobia survived, unscathed, the profound changes of attitude that accompanied the “sexual revolution.” What’s more, if one considers the development of homophobia as an objective social form over a longer period and across a larger geographical space, one could very well make the argument that this structure is marked less by an ideological weakening and more by an internal and external expansion: internally by the extension to women and youths [11] — whose romantic friendships were previously hardly discussed — and externally by the increasing inclusion of the non-Western world. For the first instance, a study of sexuality among youths which is repeated every 20 years will perhaps suffice as an example. According to the study, the number of 16 to 18 year old boys who admitted to having same-sex sexual experiences declined from 18% to 2% between 1970 and 1990 — that is to say, right in the middle of the phase of “sexual liberation.” [12] The increasing fear of being seen as “gay” if one comes close to another boy can be deduced in the USA by considering the emergence of a new urban idiom: the “gay seat.” What is meant is the seat left between two boys when they go to the movies together; whoever takes the seat is gay! This clearly demonstrates that homophobia is not a matter of an individual disposition, but rather of a social matrix which creates “gays” as a deviant subject position in the first place. A very nice example for this is — and with this we return once more to our initial point of departure — the so-called “Islamic world.” In classical Arabic there is no word for a “gay,” and nonetheless it is not an exaggeration to state that almost half of all classical Arab love poems were composed by male authors for persons of the same sex. This was not even viewed as objectionable by pietists — although they considered anal sex a grave sin. When the Moroccan scholar Muhammad al-Saffar visited Paris in the 1840s, he noted with wonder: “Flirtation, romance, and courtship for them take place only with women, for they are not inclined to boys or young men. Rather, that is extremely disgraceful to them.” [13]

Viewed from this standpoint, it would seem to be an irony of history that Arab and Turkish Muslims of all people have to be the ones to suffer in order to allow Europeans to represent themselves as tolerant advocates on behalf of the very “homosexuals” whom they have brought about and sorted out as a distinct “minority” through a centuries-long process of normalization in the first place.

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P.S.

* "With Islamophobia against Homophobia?". Mrzine. 12/11/07:

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2007/klauda121107.html>

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Footnotes

[1] "Europe is no longer Europe, it is Eurabia, a colony of Islam, where the Islamic invasion does not proceed only in a physical sense, but also in a mental and cultural sense" (Tunku Varadarajan, "Prophet of Decline: An Interview with Oriana Fallaci," *OpinionJournal*, 23 June 2005).

[2] *Kalaschnikov* is a formerly leftist magazine which has become a journal of "Red-Brown" thought.

[3] Gudrun Eussner, "Vorstadt-Intifada — 'Allah Houakbar!'" 5 November 2005.

[4] Jamie Glazov, "Symposium: To Rape an Unveiled Woman," *FrontPage Magazine*, 7 March 2006.

[5] Rudi Thiessen, "Habemus Papam Habermas," *Jungle World* 38.20, September 2006.

[6] Cf. Randall Hall, "Zwischen Marxismus und Psychoanalyse: Antifaschismus und Antihomosexualität in der Frankfurter Schule," *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung* 9 (1996), pp. 343-357.

[7] Pew Global Attitudes Project, "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," 22 June 2006.

[8] Zsolt Nyiri, "Values Questions Set European Muslims Apart," *Gallop World Poll*, 27 April 2007.

[9] Cf. Michael Bochow, "Einstellungen und Werthaltungen zu homosexuellen Männern in Ost- und Westdeutschland," Günter Dworek (Ed.), *Gefahr von rechts: Gibt es eine antischwule Trendwende?* Köln: SVD-NRW, 1993, p. 48.

[10] Henry E. Adams, et al., "Is Homophobia Associated with Homosexual Arousal?" *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 105.3 (1996), 440-445.

[11] Cf. Ulfried Geuter, *Homosexualität in der deutschen Jugendbewegung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994; Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

[12] Cf. Gunter Schmidt, "Gibt es Heterosexualität?" *taz Magazin* 17.3, No. 6399, 2001; Volkmar Sigusch, "Jugendsexualität — Veränderungen in den letzten Jahrzehnten," *Deutsches Ärzteblatt*

95 (1998).

[13] Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 2.