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CRITIQUING ISLAMOPHOBIA AND UNIVERSALITY; HOW TO EXPLAIN THE PREJUDICE AGAINST MUSLIMS IN RUSSIA?

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ABSTRACT

What do we mean when we talk about Islamophobia and why is it important to debate it in different contexts? The following article is a critical debate over the increasing consensus about constructing a universal account of Islamophobia. It will, then, discuss the intense prejudice and systematic discrimination against Muslims in Russia. The authors consider the Russian example and attempt to explain if Islamophobia extensively exists in Russian society and why there is an absence of the language of Islamophobia in the country's academic and media discourse. Using existing research about different expressions of Islamophobia and its political, cultural, racial, and economic attachments, supplemented by a historical debate of the history of the Russian encounter with Islam as the holy other, the authors argue that the existing language of Islamophobia is unable to explain the prejudice against Muslims in Russia and how we can further address this issue by rejecting a universal Western-orientation of the nature of Islamophobia as a phenomenon.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Eurocentrism, Russia, Otherness, Narratives, Orientalism

INTRODUCTION

Different Expressions of Islamophobia

Addressing Islamophobia, the first expression that comes to mind, similar to any other kind of 'phobia', would be an irrational fear about Islam and prejudice against Muslims.

In reality, however, Islamophobia or any other kind of systemic racism needs to be debated beyond the general narrative. For Grosfoguel (2012), any discussion of Islamophobia today departs from a post-renaissance discussion about the cartography of power of the "world-system", meaning "modern/colonial Westernized Christian-centric capitalist/patriarchal world-system." He defines Islamophobia as:

"An epiphenomenon of the political economy of the world-system and, in particular, of the ceaseless accumulation of capital at a world-scale. However, if we shift the geopolitics of knowledge and the body-politics of knowledge from a North-oriented gaze of the World-System towards a South-oriented view, we get a different picture of the global cartography of power. From a Southern perspective, the world-system is organized not only around an international division of labor and a global inter-state system but include, not as additive elements but as constitutive of the capitalist accumulation at a world-scale, a global

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racial/ethnic hierarchy (Western vs. non-Western people), global patriarchal hierarchy (global gender system and global sexual system), global religious hierarchy, a global linguistic hierarchy, a global epistemic hierarchy, etc." (Grosfoguel, 2012).

In this sense, regardless if we are discussing Islamophobia as a form of racism in a world-historical perspective, a form of cultural racism, or Orientalism (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006; Nourbakhsh, 2020), we must not reduce the debate to a certain political understanding of the world-system or purely cultural racism. In other words, formal ideas of acceptance and pluralism alone, which are usually associated with the most common and visible characteristics of Islam observed from a Eurocentric point of view, are unable to offer, as Grosfoguel hopes, a more complex, non-reductive structural-historical analysis.

Islamophobia and Universality

The effort to construct a universal account of Islamophobia and attempt to fit all its different expressions in these different contexts into a single form is not only problematic and unproductive but more importantly impossible. However, finding common dominators in different contexts is possible. In this sense, from a semantic point of view, Islamophobia is about the encounter with Islam, or more correctly, forms – visible forms – that are associated with Islam. Perhaps this is why the body of hijab-wearing Muslim women becomes the battlefield for Islamophobic institutions. Islamophobia as a discourse contributes to the alienation of Islam as a coherent whole, neglecting its cultural, religious, social, political, racial, and economic attributions. In other words, it makes it possible to politicize a cultural form for economic, political, and cultural interests.

The "Global" fight against Islamophobia

Islamophobia as a dehumanizing system is on the rise all across Europe according to the European Islamophobia Report (2019) (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2019; Dulari *et al.*, 2020). Particularly after the European refugee crisis and the right-wing shift in Europe and the United States, Western Islamophobia is fueled and fed by introducing Muslims – especially Muslim immigrants – as the root cause of political and economic crises and the portrayal of Islam as a threat to cultural harmony. To create this threat in a way that can affect large publics, an image of Islam and Muslims had to be constructed. That very constructed image exactly represents a discourse taking a wrong turn giving rise to the account of Islamophobia. This is because, and consequently, academics, media, civil institutions, or even humanitarian organizations feel obliged to engage in constructing a counter – yet universal – image of Islam and Muslims in order to be able to fight Islamophobia at a global level.

It must be considered that Islamophobia does not exist in a vacuum and that its context and history matter. In countries in which Muslims are in the minority (not necessarily in terms of population), the Muslim population as the total *Other* is in constant need to look for an ideal or sentimental constructed image of Islam that is plural, abiding, and perfectly compatible with whatever value it needs to be in tune with when presented in the media, civil society, or among lawmakers and state officials. Returning to the example of hijab as a visible form associated with Islam, one can see how it can get exploited by neoliberalism through hijab fashion brands, the *burqa* catwalk, carefully selecting smiling *hijabi* women for advertising and political campaigns instead of a real representation of Muslim women in the society and advocating for their civil and human rights.



It is at those junctures that Islamophobia as a discourse assimilates and imitates a Eurocentric point of the view based on the historical, intellectual, as well as colonial European encounters with Islam. As Kant (2009) argued, thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.

Exploitation of the Literature of Islamophobia

Here is another way in which the universality of Islamophobia and its Eurocentric origins becomes problematic. Does Islamophobia “shuts down debate,” as some scholars and journalists such as Pascal Bruckner have argued? Does it dismiss criticism of Muslim communities? For Bruckner (2017), the notion and use of Islamophobia “have the ambition of making Islam untouchable by placing it on the same level as anti-Semitism.” Moreover, mainstream media such as the BBC has provided platforms to “debate the very existence of Islamophobia” multiple times (Versi, 2017). The confusion on the debates around differentiating Islamophobia reaches a point that academics feel the need to introduce normative scales to measure “Islamoprejudice” and “Secular Islam Critique” (Imhoff & Recker, 2012).

The semantic obsession around Islamophobia, its universal discourse, and the denial of its existence has firstly become the perfect tool for Islamist movements and Muslim fundamentalist parties, particularly in the MENA region to strengthen their power through national and religious ideologies. Secondly, another question arises as to whether a globalized (Eurocentric) account of Islamophobia assuredly explains the systematic persecution and discrimination against Muslims in China, India, or Russia?

These gaps result in the conflating of issues that are different in principle under a generalized framework that lacks the solidity for the disruptions we confront or is inadequately versatile to fit certain cases with degrees of peculiarity.

Islamophobia in Russia

As argued, there are peculiarities when it comes to different expressions of Islamophobia in a different context. The discourse of Islamophobia is unable to explain the situation of Muslims in Russia and the prejudice against them. Where is Russia in the political economy of the world-system that was debated by Grosfoguel? It is neither North or South, nor West or East.

The image of Russia in the world is rarely associated with Islam. While Orthodox Christianity is the country’s predominant religion, many do not know that Russia is home to as many as 20 million Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds.

The SOVA Centre, a Moscow-based NGO that conducts research work on topics such as nationalism and xenophobia found in a survey that 40 percent of Russians say, they have a negative attitude toward Islam. Many Christian citizens perceive it as “a kind of ideology, as something dangerous that is connected to terrorism” (SOVA, 2016).

The prejudice against Muslims in Russia can be divided into different categories: ethnoreligious hysteria against Tatar Muslims, racial stigma against the disenfranchised, and third-class citizens from the Caucasus, the question of Chechnya that is rooted in the history of wars of oppression, and finally, the new (post-2013) anti-immigrant wave that is given tremendous attention by the media, and politicians from all parts of the political spectrum including the opposition usually using similar narratives to what is being witnessed in European countries that are dealing with migration currents. The latter, therefore, resulting in an increasing number of



hate crimes against them all across Russia. The strategy of the Russian state – in the creation of the new Russian national identity – is normalizing relations in these regions, while at the same time, keeping the Muslim populations isolated and under mass surveillance.

There are different streams of Islam in Russia of which the state adopts different attitudes and strategies towards each of them (Antunez, 2016). The policy of nationalizing and domesticating Islam in post-soviet Russia is rooted in perceiving Muslim regions as ‘foreign’ territories jeopardizing the sovereignty of Russia. According to Aitamurto (2019), the exclusion of Muslim communities in Russia is related to Russia’s complex and historical relationship with Islam. Moreover, she argues that the Russian state is conducting a project of national Islam to protect the country from transnational Islam – a project that emphasizes Muslims’ loyalism towards the Russian state as well as political conservatism among them (2019).

Islamophobia in Russia, however, is rarely discussed or even mentioned. How can this be explained?

The term Islamophobia is incredibly under-reported – if not absent – within the Russian academia as well as the media. When scholars, researchers, and journalists are asked, many argue that Islamophobia does not exist in Russia the way it exists in Europe and for this reason, its coverage is absent. They perceived Islamophobia as a Western concept (Luschmaan *et al.*, 2016). This is in reference to the specific literature of Islamophobia as it is understood at large. Is Islamophobia an overlooked concept in Russia then? Why is the very term Islamophobia rarely discussed and represented in the Russian academic, political, and media discourse?

In most cases, speaking about the situation of Muslims in Western Europe and the United State in the context of Islamophobia is intertwined with the concept of immigration. One might be able to similarly make the case about immigrant workers who go to Russian territories from Central Asian countries. Nevertheless, the peculiarity of the Russian case is not interconnected with immigration; whenever we look in vast regions of the Russian land that are mostly populated by Muslims, such as Tatarstan and the Caucasus, people were inhabitants of these regions and did not come from anywhere else. As a matter of fact, these territories historically have been attacked and invaded by the Russ people; therefore, the Russian mentality in their relationship with Muslim people in Russia is different in principle than Western Europe or America.

Reflections of Russian colonialism are not seen in Tatarstan and the Caucasus. They do not consider their encounter and actions in those regions as a colonial act. When we investigate Russian literature, there is almost no mention of the world colonialism. Whenever Russian scholars and historians write about colonialism, it is considered a Western model belonging to a particular era in history. However, when we study the case of Russian involvement in parts of central Asia and Tatarstan, it demonstrates a very classical form of colonialism. Most histories of colonialism in Russia have not been written by Russian scholars but by British, German, and American scholars. Post-colonialism has had no place in Russian and Soviet studies (van der Oye, 2014).

This is the analogy that we have to bear in mind when we look at the case of Islamophobia in Russia and the lack of literature in the Russian media as well as academia. The question of Islamophobia, similar to the question of colonialism, has not been contemplated in the Russian context. This is a common matter even in the Russian academic mentality. Russians are extremely competent when it comes to historical studies and archaeological studies within the human



sciences. Yet, when it comes to critical reflexive approaches to their own history, there is still a place for critique. It is to argue that the question of Islamophobia seems to express different modalities in the Russian context in comparison to European or American cases.

A history of the Russian Encounter with the Other

It is vital to consider historically, how Russians have reflected on their encounter with the *Other* to understand Islamophobia in Russia.

If we seek to understand whether certain segments of the Russian populace are Islamophobic in a deep sense, we need to bring into our discussion a bit of historical and philosophical backgrounds.

In examining philosophical debates in the period of the 19th century, we identify the views and key ideas of Vladimir Solovyov who is one of the most important philosophers and theologians of 19th century Russia. He has written and reflected deeply on, among others, Russian philosophy, Christian theology, and mysticism. Solovyov discussed Jesus and the importance of Christ in understanding the perfection of the human soul. Solovyov, however, also refers to Islam and significantly conceptualizes Islam as the *Other* (Solovyov, 1950; Sutton, 1988). In his writings, Islam is positioned as a competing narrative to the Orthodox Church. Why did he referred and focused on these debates in his discussions of Christianity?

We suggest that more than only a theological matter it is related to the emergence of Russia as a state born by an encounter with the *other*, which was Muslim Tatars. In the mentality of Russ people, Tatar people symbolized Muslims. If we consider the history of Russia between the 12th and 15th centuries, they were the dominant force of what we call today the Russian federation from the Japanese sea up to today's Astrakhan on top of the Caspian Sea. They were the dominant force of central Asia. When the Russ people or as we say Moscow principality was transforming into the Russian state, the Russ people defeated Tatar and Muslim people. And for the former, the idea of Christianity and the idea of the Orthodox Church intertwined with their identity. And in order to strengthen this identity, they were forced to defeat and suppress the identity of the *Other*, and who was that *Other*? Among other things, that other was the Tatar, Muslims and religion of Islam. There are a number of colonial policies against the Tatar. Again in the 17th century, the other who threatened the Russian empire was the Turkish or Ottoman Empire that also symbolized Islam. So for them, Islam become a sense of the *Other* they needed to defeat. Therefore, the idea of Islam had been conceived as the other.

But slowly after overcoming the Muslims as enemies, a new and elaborated approach towards Muslims started to take shape. It was influenced by the idea of the enlightenment tradition. This was especially after Catherine the Great who was influenced by ideas of liberty and enlightenment. She gave Muslims more freedom and rights to build mosques and practiced civil rights and good policies toward Muslims. From the 18th century up to the 20th century, we have a different narrative of Muslims in Russian culture. Still, if we discern the cultural and theological discourses, there is a sense of insecurity towards Muslims. At the beginning of the 20th century, the approach became completely different towards all religions with the rise of the Soviet Union as a state.



It seems the prejudice – the ethnoreligious prejudice – against Muslims in today’s Russia, including the increasing hysteria against “brown” immigrants from Central Asia, has the same qualities as what was described before.

If we study the Russian identity, it seems that this identity has been intertwined with Orthodox and Christian influences but this historical identity somehow has been dislocated and today we are unable to not discuss the Russ ethnic group as an Orthodox Christian identity. There is a gap and this historical gap cannot be filled and overcome just by trying to reinforce the Orthodox identity into the masses of Russian society, which is what politicians and even the Orthodox Church are trying to do. There is a huge opening that cannot be ignored. However, having said that, there is also a problem related to the question of Christian identity or the European identity that leaves them with a sense of insecurity, and the revival of Islam – whether ethnic, cultural, and religious attachments towards Islam – poses a threat itself.

In addition, the politics of demography in Russia must be considered. In view of the accumulation of population, it is not anything remotely close to the situation in Western Europe and the US and their interactions with minorities, blending cultures, and integration. However, the population in Muslim territories changes the relationship between land, capital, and labor and the nature of the interplay between each also changes and the political-economic conditions will bring a different panorama before the Russian nation as a whole. These are issues that need to be understood and deconstructed, and we need to identify the different existing narratives in Russia.

CONCLUSION

The Russian case is only one example of the narratives that do not fall within the increasingly accepted universal expression of Islamophobia, even though it shares common dominators closely to the definition that was presented at the beginning of the article. China and India are among other examples, not to mention the particularities in different European cases such as France, Germany, and Serbia.

In this sense, constructing a universal account of Islamophobia is a double-edged sword. At one end, it creates a space for conversation and solidarity. On the other, its Eurocentric origin and simplified discourse neglect significant cases affecting Muslim populations around the world. It additionally overlooks the exploitation of its discourse by populist and nationalist Muslim politics.

The language and literature of Islamophobia need to be deconstructed, criticized, and expanded in order to be able to serve the purpose it is created for.

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