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Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobia in France: The Construction of the 'Muslim Problem'*. Translated by Steve Garner. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2023. 306 pp. Notes. \$114.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-082036324-0; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0820363257.

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Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed's engaging sociological study on Islamophobia in France explores the context of the term in relation to the sociopolitical climate of the 2000s. Originally published as *Islamophobie: Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le 'problème musulman'* (Éditions La Découverte, 2016), the authors explore the term Islamophobia in this millennium as it has been shaped in debate and in denial with respect to social, cultural, and political arenas in contemporary French society. The authors underscore that "the denial of Islamophobia as a new form of racism has been added to the denial of Muslims' right to be in France" (p. 18). In recent years, Islamophobia, construed through debate (or not) in France, has been shaped by what is viewed as "the Muslim problem" and "the immigration problem" (p. 18). The authors' study proposes analyzing these facets of Islamophobia by "understanding the logics underpinning how the media works, the politics operates and the space of social movements function" (p. 18). The principal goal of the book is to legitimize the concept, thus "making it visible" (p. 194).

Much of the denial of Islamophobia centers on how the term is viewed in the body politic of France. Outspoken activist Houria Bouteldja claims that "Islamophobia is primarily a form of State racism...whose only goal is to keep a population in subaltern status" (p. 212). The authors stress that multiple groups, associations, and political entities on the right and the left of the political spectrum struggle to define the term. Often, because of persistent denial of Islamophobia, many racist acts go unnamed as Muslims face "religious-based discrimination" on a daily basis (p. 48). While the authors focus much of their study on France, they also bring in important European debates about racism and immigration that engender discussion of Islamophobia. The authors also compare European debates with those in the UK and US to illustrate how racism is documented differently in anglophone contexts.

In France, *La Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme* (CNCDH), has emphasized the importance of the term "Islamophobia" as having "a number of advantages from the perspective of fighting discrimination." Further, "the power of the word makes a serious phenomenon visible" (p. 216). This official body stressed in its 2013 report that "refusing to speak of Islamophobia may be perceived as a willingness to deny the reality and the scope of a

phenomenon which has been particularly sensitive for several years, and which turns people of Muslim faith into a homogenous and socially problematic group” (p. 116).

Comparing antisemitism with Islamophobia, the authors stress that while antisemitic racism shares some contours with Islamophobia, it is not quite the same since for Muslim populations much of the hate and backlash are linked to “religious rituals” practiced by the devout. Quoting Bruno Etienne, the authors point out an irony: “only 5 percent of Muslims practice all the religion’s required rituals” (p. 88). In the chapter “Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia”, explaining the difference between the two, the authors remark that “the construction of a threat is the main feature shared by anti-Semitism and Islamophobia” (p. 150). It is based on “two essentialist discourses on Judaism—and the Jews—and Islam—and the Muslims—built on a threatening image” defined in the “process of conspiratorial racialization” that “attempts to racialize Jews and Muslims as the ultimate ‘Other’ determined to destroy ‘Us’” (pp. 150-151). However, in the French (and more broadly, European) context, there are “significant symbolic differences” rooted in historical paradigms (p. 153). “Whereas Jews were described by their desire to self-segregate and surreptitiously acquire political and financial power, Muslims are characterized by their refusal to conform to liberal and secular values” (p. 153). The salient difference is bound in ideas of citizenship and nationhood: “whereas anti-Semites questioned Jews’ fitness for inclusion in the national community, Islamophobes are not particularly worried whether Muslims can be good Germans, Italians or Danes. Rather, they question whether Muslims can be good Europeans” (p. 161). Islamophobia, thus, “functions less in the interest of national purification than as a means of fortifying Europe” (p. 161).

Islamophobia characterizes “the control of bodies and the disciplining of Muslim subjectivity” (p. 75). An important aspect of naming Islamophobia as a real phenomenon in French society entails debates about gender and equality. The mere suggestion of the term calls up (certainly in the anglophone setting) other “phobias” that incite racist acts: homophobia and xenophobia. Thus, the term must also be conceptualized through discourses of sexuality and ethnicity. Hajjat and Mohammed stipulate that Islamophobia is a form of gendered racism. Women wearing hijab and traditional Muslim dress are primarily the targets of racist acts in French streets and in public spaces. “Islamophobia-related physical attacks are thus more common[ly]...directed at women wearing hijab” (p. 128). Since 1989, the foundational year of “L’affaire du foulard” when the first hyper-mediatization of the conflict between Muslim and French ideas pertaining to public space (and what should and should not be worn in it) came to the fore, the overtly gendered aspect of Muslim marginalization became evident. Islamophobic micro- and macro-aggressions against Muslim women have increased since the 1989 incident pitted Muslim girls wearing hijab against the laicity of the public school system in Créteil. Feminist associations in France have done little to support women who wish to wear their religion openly, and/or to mitigate the negative impact on Muslim women from laws maintaining the separation of church and state.

The book’s fifteen chapters are divided among five parts: Realities of Islamophobia, A History of the Concept of Islamophobia, The Construction of “The Muslim Problem”, Compiling an “Anti-Muslim” Archive, and Islamophobia: Denial versus Recognition. The term (as well as its denial) gained resonance in the early 2000s and reflects essentialized knowledge rooted in colonialism and, in turn, the Orientalist history fabricated most acutely by European powers in the nineteenth century. An inaccurate, essentialized, racist “body of knowledge about Muslim societies” purported the idea that “the history of Oriental societies cannot be analyzed in the same way as European ones”: this idea fueled another that the “individual and collective behavior of Muslims

is above all determined by their religious affiliation, and not by political, economic, and social determinants” (p. 142). European Orientalist essentialization by intellectuals and politicians over the course of two centuries has also been constantly infused by a second “ahistorical vision of history” based on preconceived notions about race that promote “the existence of separate races within the human race, each one with inherent biological and psychological features” (p. 142). This inaccurate view influenced the social sciences, contributing to racial anthropology (p. 142). Today, Islamophobia is a product of the constantly promoted binary of Us-against-Them; cultivated during the colonial eras, but also reflective of a dialectic that has played out for centuries since the Crusades.

The authors’ discussion of how this distant past continues to stoke the fires of fear and loathing in contemporary France is particularly interesting. The binary Us-against-Them is also further exacerbated by the French Republic’s national ideology rooted in staunch ideals about *laïcité* (separation of church and state) and the foundational universalisms of *Egalité, Fraternité, et Liberté*, which are the bedrock of the modern French nation. An unwillingness to reconceptualize what these national ideas mean within the current multicultural climate of Europe is where debates about Islamophobia (and its denial) come into play. In terms of contemporary sociopolitical debates, the American reader will recognize similarly antiquated views as those about guns and personal freedoms expressed in political pundits’ refusals to reconsider certain eighteenth-century ideas of nationhood because they are perceived as galvanized in the US Constitution. For the French in the 2000s, *laïcité* and upholding ideas of separation of church and state in public spheres expands “the Muslim problem” to “Islamic terrorism”, placing both in the same basket, as they are both viewed as direct attacks on the very ideals of the French nation (p. 112).

Hajjat and Mohammed’s discussion of *laïcité* and *néo-laïcité* documents how French ideas of republicanism and citizenship have changed over the last decades with respect to the “Muslim Problem.” Whereas a 1905 law officialized the separation of church and state in France and “guaranteed the freedom of religious expression for pupils within the confines of state-schools, *néo-laïcité* seeks, on the contrary, to restrict it. It therefore means reconfiguring the division between the public and the private by rejecting ‘conspicuous’ religious signs in public space and the intrusion into private intimacy in order to assess compliance with republican values (with the criterion of assimilation being made a prerequisite for obtaining French nationality, for example)” (p. 111).

Discourses of neo-*laïcité* have been interjected into debates about the “Muslim problem” on the left and right of the political spectrum. A 2004 law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools prohibits wearing any religious sign in French public spaces, including any government office, as well as primary and secondary schools. As Hajjat and Mohammed point out, the Muslim headscarf, the most obvious religious sign one can wear, has been the principal target. Neo-*laïcité* as pronounced in this law has now integrated a structure in French society understood as “state policy”, allowing for the targeting of “not only French and immigrant Muslims but also civil-service employees” (p. 113). Assimilation into French society can, therefore, only be possible if cultural markers are effaced from the individual’s personhood. Some notable intellectuals, feminists, authors, academics, journalists, and government officials— often writing for journals not only on the right but also on the left—have supported the ideals of neo-*laïcité* as the only means to protect public institutions of learning. Élisabeth Badinter, Élisabeth de Fontenay, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, and Cathérine Kintzler are some of the leading

pundits of a hardline approach to maintaining secularity in schools (p. 114). Proponents of neo-laïcité have not stopped at secondary schools, but have, in recent years, begun monitoring university professors and their work for signs of “Islamism-leftism” (p. 231). As recently as 2020, when the French government approved a bill to “consolidate” respect for the principles of the Republic—*Projet de loi confortant le respect des principes de la République*, a bill that proposed to “combat radical Islamism and separatism and hence act against those who want to undermine the French Republic and its values”^[1]--many university professors, particularly in the humanities, found themselves under attack. In 2021, President Emmanuel Macron, a staunch supporter of néo-laïcité, stated that university professors in France had no business courting “their identity through a post-colonial or anticolonial discourse.” He further underscored that “academic social and cultural theories...imported into France from the United States” were causing a vision of society that was “identitarian” and, thus, “alien and corrosive to France’s rigidly secular, institutionally race-blind society.”^[2] This view is squarely positioned within the larger Islamophobia debate as well as ancillary discourses about terrorism and immigration.

The rigor of Hajjat and Mohammed’s work is noteworthy. The most important aspect of the book is the historical mapping of Islamophobia that the authors trace throughout the fifteen chapters. These chapters reveal how discrimination against Muslims has developed due to the historical fear-of-biblical-proportions outlined above. They also map the last thirty-five years in France, focusing on how the rise of neoliberal and global economic forces has shaped ideas about otherness, alienation, belonging, and citizenship. A salient takeaway is that racist acts in contemporary French society (as elsewhere), although internal, are also linked to external global forces--climate change, wars, economic instability throughout the Arab world and Europe, etc.-which have fostered increased xenophobia.

There are a few weaknesses in *Islamophobia in France* that should be mentioned. For anglophone readers, certainly those in the US, who are not as aware of the European historical dimensions of the authors’ arguments, it would have been more useful in the translation to restructure chapters and information, placing all historical material at the beginning. Additionally, while French presses normally do not include indexes, anglophone critical studies usually do: it is perplexing that the University of Georgia Press opted not to include one. An index would have been exceedingly useful for academics and students researching certain key topics that are fundamental to understanding the parameters of Islamophobia. A list of French acronyms for the overwhelming number of associations, groups and activist organizations that are listed throughout the work would also have been useful. Unfamiliarity with these acronyms creates confusion in understanding the players in various references made by the authors.

More nuance about the 1989 “Headscarf Affair” is warranted. The affair was not only over scarves but also due to the fact that Muslim girls were told by their parents not to participate in gym and other extracurricular activities, going against the universal idea of equal access to all curricula in French public schools. This fact was a key element in the debate at the time. Another historical oversight is the important “Le droit à la différence” movement of the 1990s in France, which contributed significantly to opening up debates about hyphenated citizenship and whether or not French citizens could officially indicate two origins in how they define their identity.

While Swiss Islamic scholar Tariq Ramdan’s “leadership in social movements” (p. 201), particularly his dedication to “a Committee for Free Speech for Muslims in France” is discussed throughout the book, his “ban...from entering [France]” requires more context, which the

authors do not provide (p. 201). Ramdan is a leading scholar and a public voice for Muslims across Europe and the US, but it cannot be denied that he is facing legal proceedings for alleged rapes in 2009, 2016, and 2017 in France and Britain.^[3] While he has been acquitted of one charge, he is still facing others.^[4] This fact (not acknowledged by the authors) could have played a role in why he has been barred from speaking at several conferences in France. In the wake of the struggling French #MeToo movement (which has also caused a weakening in feminist causes, groups, and associations that could otherwise play a role in combatting Islamophobia) Tariq's complete profile should at least be included in a note.

Despite these criticisms, when we consider the importance of this book—particularly at a time when the bloody conflict in Palestine/Gaza is growing worse daily—Hajjat and Mohammed remind us of the extent to which Islamophobia has been woven into the day-to-day political discourse of Europe, France, the United States, and elsewhere, as the West perceives itself as under attack from the Muslim world. In this, we are reminded that “Islamophobia demonstrates the West’s anxiety about its continuing cultural, economic, and military domination” as it refuses to recognize “the possibility of Muslim autonomy” and “Muslim political identity” as legitimate (pp. 75-76).^[5]

NOTES

[1] <https://theimpactlawyers.com/articles/the-french-bill-comforting-the-respect-of-the-principles-of-the-republic>

[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/02/22/france-macron-islamo-leftism/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/24/tariq-ramadan-cleared-rape-sexual-coercion-swiss-court>

[4] Ibid.

[5] See also: “A crisis of one’s own: The politics of trauma in Europe’s election year”, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-crisis-of-ones-own-the-politics-of-trauma-in-europes-election-year/>

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