

Constructing Subaltern Muslim Subjects: the Institutionalization of Islamophobia

Construyendo sujetos musulmanes subalternos: la institucionalización de la islamofobia

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Abstract

The purpose of this special issue is to go beyond the terminological debate on Islamophobia and to focus on the practices, which are involved in, and cause, the construction of subaltern Muslim subjects within the Spanish state. The six articles of this monograph attempt to shed some light on the dynamics and extent of the processes of exclusion through which persons and groups (self-)identified as Muslim are being stigmatized and discriminated against in a structural manner, as a result of different kinds of institutionalized Islamophobia.

Keywords: Muslims, Spain, Islamophobia, Anti-Muslim Racism, Racialisation

Resumen

El objetivo de este monográfico es ir más allá de los debates terminológicos sobre islamofobia, para centrar nuestra atención en las prácticas que causan y están implicadas en la construcción de sujetos subalternos musulmanes en el seno del Estado español. Con los seis artículos del

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monográfico se busca profundizar en la comprensión de las dinámicas y el alcance de los procesos de exclusión a través de los cuales las personas, y los grupos, (auto)identificados como musulmanes son estigmatizados y discriminados de un modo estructural, por medio de diferentes tipos de islamofobia institucionalizada.

Palabras clave: musulmanes/as, España, islamofobia, racismo anti-musulmán, racialización

This special issue is the result of a collaborative work by researchers from different fields and universities, who have been working together over the last years in various research projects related to Muslim populations in Spain and Europe. The three coordinators of this monograph and part of its authors are also members of GRAIS (Group of Analysis on Islam in Europe), a Complutense research group created in June 2016 for the analysis of social, political, economic, religious and legal dimensions related to the presence of Muslim minorities in European societies [<http://www.ucm.es/grais>].

The outset of this publication is to be found in a panel organized for the III International Symposium of EDiSo (Association for the Study of Discourse and Society) held in June 2017 at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. Said panel, titled *Las dimensiones de la islamofobia: un análisis desde los discursos*, aimed to analyse the discursive practices of Islamophobia and specifically those dimensions of institutional Islamophobia that derive from biases within the legal system or from the mechanisms through which the so-called “radicalized subject” is constructed.

Twenty years after the publication of the 1997 Runnymede Trust Report on British Muslims and Islamophobia (*Islamophobia: A challenge for us all*), which had defined Islamophobia not only as an unfounded hostility towards Islam, but also as a discrimination of Muslims and their exclusion from mainstream political and social affairs (1997: 4), the consideration of Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism, i.e. the external ascription to a religious group, independent from one’s own beliefs (Modood, 2005), has nowadays become accepted more generally. In fact, the 2017 report leaves no space for doubt and clearly mentions that “Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism” (Runnymede Trust, 2017: 7). Over these two decades, annual reports have been prepared in many countries with information and statistics on Islamophobia considering it part of the xenophobic and racist practices that take place all over Europe (EUROISLAM, 2013; European Islamophobia Report, 2016; ENAR, 2016; Plataforma Ciudadana Contra la Islamofobia, 2017).

The concept of racialisation (Cole & Maisuria, 2007; Fassin, 2011; Khiabani & Williamson, 2008; Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2009; Moosavi, 2015) serves to connect racism and Islamophobia. The racialisation of Muslim people provides for a focus on groups and individuals who are the sites of racial inscriptions, instead of concentrating on religious prejudice or intolerance (Meer, 2013: 390). According to De Koning (2016: 174), the process of racialisation transforms a diverse set of people into an allegedly homogeneous category and denies their individuality. Daniel Gil-Benumeya (this issue) notes that “it is precisely the concept of racialisation that tackles analytically the affiliation between Islamophobia and racism, to the extent that race is considered a fiction created to naturalize a relation of dominance”. This argument is congruent with the work of Garner & Selod (2015) and López Bargados & Ramírez Fernández (2015), who consider that Islamophobia is a form of racism which makes the rejection of difference and dissent (based on an alleged contempt towards religion) acceptable. Such rejection or exclusion may not always be direct (Peter, 2013), but can be hidden in other discriminatory practices which are less evident. Vincent Geisser (2003) supports the notion that this “new” or “latent Islamophobia” excludes

Muslim people from the social, economic and public life, while being validated by a dominant discourse of universalism and defence of human rights. Following Sayyid (2014), Islamophobia should be understood as the undermining of the ability of Muslims to project themselves into the future *as* Muslims (2014: 14). The author considers Islamophobia as a form of racialized governmentality, i.e. “a series of interventions and classifications that affect the well-being of populations designated as Muslim” (2014: 19) and, therefore, it concerns a political hostility which exceeds the emotional, religious and cultural.

In order to fully understand the scope of anti-Muslim racism, we must refer to gendered Islamophobia and its entwinement with institutions. Though our panel at the EDiSo Symposium comprised a presentation on this subject matter, unfortunately it has not been possible to include such contribution in this monograph. However, it is undeniable that in recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the gendered nature of Islamophobia, focusing on how Muslim women are a focal point of the Islamophobic discourse and practice becoming the most vulnerable group among Muslims (Hammer, 2013; Khiabani & Williamson, 2008; Zine, 2006). The negative construction of a female Muslim embodiment becomes particularly apparent when the *hijab* or Muslim headscarf is called into question (Mijares & Ramírez, 2008; Mijares, 2014; Ramírez, 2011; Scott, 2010). Academic investigations on the centrality of Muslim women in Islamophobic policies or actions indicate how the characterization of these women as being oppressed and in need of being “saved from Islam”, forms the core axis of Islamophobia. Therefore, stating that anti-Muslim racism is deeply affected by gender issues goes far beyond the mere consideration that women are its main victims; it implies the instrumentalization of the oppression of Muslim women to legitimize Islamophobia in all its strands.

With this special issue our intention is to go beyond a terminological debate and to focus on the practices which are involved in, and cause, the construction of subaltern Muslim subjects within the Spanish state (with an analysis of the European context in Relaño’s article). The six articles of this monograph pretend to improve our comprehension of the dynamics and extent of the processes of exclusion through which persons and groups (self-)identified as Muslim are being stigmatized and discriminated against in a structural manner. These processes are embedded in power relations and therefore we want to emphasize the importance for academic investigations to include the specific local (and international) social and political contexts in which discrimination against Muslims take place.

Our perspective is based on different studies, mostly from the last ten years, which argue that Islamophobia is an ideological construction embedded in the political role of the United States of America as the global leader in a unipolar world (Sheehi, 2011) and, as a structural feature of capitalism, facilitates the projection and denial of imperialistic violence (Kundnani, 2016). Massoumi, Mills y Miller (2017) identify the State as one of the main pillars of Islamophobia causing and legitimizing anti-Muslim racism through its anti-terrorist activities². These investigations therefore connect Islamophobia with the “war on terror” politics deployed since the

² The authors identify “five pillars of Islamophobia”, specific social actors that produce the ideas and practices that result in disadvantage for Muslims. These five pillars are: 1) the state as the result of the activities of counter-terrorism; 2) the neoconservative movement; 3) (parts of) the Zionist movement; 4) the counterjihad movement and the far right; 5) elements of liberal, left, secular and feminist movements (Massoumi, Mills and Miller, 2017: 4).

attacks of September 11, 2001 (Akhtar, 2011; Allen, 2004; Moosavi, 2013; Nabi, 2011; Tufail & Poynting, 2013) and conceive counter-terrorism policies, either justified by the defence of human rights or based on (inter)national security, as indicators of the presence of Islamophobia in the institutions of the State. According to Sheehi (2011), this racist ideology intends to increase the power of the United States and to manage dissident voices, to protect the economic order of global capitalism. In this regard, a recent study by Ruiz Bejarano (2017) informs about the tendency to target the expanding Islamic economy in order to hinder the growth of *halal* commerce. In addition, Kundnani (2016) considers that Islamophobia is fully integrated in our political and economic structures and serves to racially classify populations, in order to organize the spatial distribution of rights, naturalize an unfair social order and to depoliticise any resistance. In this respect, the extent of this political rationality exceeds Muslims as a group targeting the “potentially dissident” population in general (Ramírez, 2016).

The articles of this monograph seek to shed light on the relation between Islamophobia and certain institutions, either by focusing on the top-down structure of Islamophobic discourse and practice (Fernández García, Gil-Benumeya, López Bargados, Relaño and Téllez) or by concentrating on the lived experiences of anti-Muslim racism by Muslims themselves (Mijares & Lems). These discourses and practices can be identified in the policies performed at various levels of government, as in the case of the Barcelona city hall (López Bargados) or at state level (Fernández García on homonationalism and Téllez as regards the Spanish State); in right-wing ideologies and political practices but also in those of the Left (Gil-Benumeya); as well as in supranational and European court decisions and legal regimes (Relaño).

Alberto López Bargados takes us to the city of Barcelona, where in January 2017 the town hall launched a pioneering project to raise awareness of, and fight against, Islamophobia. Following the attacks of August 2017 in Cambrils and Barcelona, and further to the loud opposition displayed in the Prosperitat neighbourhood against the opening of a Muslim prayer center there, the town hall adopted certain measures and policies which were explicitly not based on the nowadays omnipresent rhetorics of fear. Particularly concerned about the impact of “secular imaginaries” (Göle, 2015) on the making and implementation of these local policies, López Bargados examines both the achievements and limitations of the program as elaborated by the city council to fight anti-Muslim racism.

In his article on *queered* Islamophobia, Daniel Ahmed Fernández, following Puar’s definition of homonationalism (2007), analyses the increasingly pervasive homonationalist discourses and their aim to spread an LGBTIQ+phobic characterization of Islam. Based on various forms of ethnography carried out in Spain, South Africa and the Netherlands, Fernández discusses the resistances that have emerged in the last decade(s) against the instrumentalization of *queer* Muslim identities, both in countries of Muslim majority and those located within the “West”.

The article authored by Virtudes Téllez, concentrates on the construction of a Muslim subject as a “potential suspect of terrorism” following the recent implementation in Spain of specific security policies and devices. Téllez analyses the so called “prevention and control” measures and policies and how these actions encourage citizens to suspect of their Muslim co-citizens and urge them to participate in said construction. Hence, the threat of terrorism, and its manipulation based on fear and suspicion, procures other types of political and structural violence, such as a decrease in individual rights and freedoms not only of Muslims but of all citizens.

Although racist attitudes and actions are generally understood to be characteristic of the (extreme) right part of the political field, the anti-Muslim coalition is much broader, though not always as explicit. In his study on the positions within the political Left in Spain and Europe with respect to “the Muslim question”, Daniel Gil-Benumea identifies the agents involved in the (re)production of contemporary Islamophobia and provides an up-to-date account of the role of secularism, feminism and international politics within left wing thought, which reveals antagonistic approaches.

Eugenia Relaño’s article focuses on practices by the EU Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. Based on her analysis of two recent cases (*Achbita* and *Bougnaoui*), the author considers that these European Courts contribute to the denial of personal autonomy of Muslim women and points out how Islamophobic prejudice forms part of their legal reasoning.

Furthermore, this issue includes an analysis on the impact of Islamophobic violence on persons (self)identified as Muslim. The imposition of normativities by political power produces alterities, which at the least hinder any sociopolitical participation by Muslims in the public sphere and, additionally, define the terms under which one is allowed to be Muslim (Ramírez, 2014). This subject matter is dealt with by Laura Mijares and Johanna M. Lems, who explores the ways in which the Muslim populations in Madrid deal with practices of stigmatization and discrimination they are subject to. Based on the material obtained with the Discussion Group technique and following the status model as articulated by Nancy Fraser (2000), the authors analyse the discursive positions existing among Muslims in Madrid about the willingness to participate in any type of (collective) action. The article shows that the awareness of a collective Islamic subalternity is but one of many elements in the construction of the options to demand recognition and redistribution of resources from the State, in addition to gender, place of birth, age, social class, labour precariousness, etc.

Taking into account the worrying rise of anti-Muslim racism in the majority of countries with Muslim minorities, this special issue addresses the different ideologies and practices behind the homogenisation and criminalisation of a group of persons by virtue of their assumed condition as Muslim. To conclude the introduction of this monograph, we wish to underscore the importance of analysing Islamophobia beyond its mere consideration as a social construct focused on Islam as a non-normative religiosity in order to avoid essentializing both the concept and its implications.

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