

# RESEARCHING ISLAMOPHOBIA

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I have probably dedicated more time and energy to researching and teaching the topic of Islamophobia than any other academic in Norway, yet I cannot quite recall where and when I first encountered the term. It would be a fair assumption that the first time I came across it was back in 2009 when I hosted a visit from an American academic. I was launching a series of public lectures in anthropology at the then recently established House of Literature in Oslo.

From 2009 to 2014, I invited a number of accomplished international scholars in my own field of anthropology to Oslo to provide them with a platform to discuss their own work and engage with a largely non-specialist audience. The core funding for the series was provided by Norway's Fritt Ord Foundation, established in 1974 to protect and promote freedom of expression in Norway and internationally. At a time when my own field of study seemed to be retreating in the face of Norway's neo-liberal marketisation of universities, and engaging with the public on issues of contemporary concern (a process brilliantly described in the case of the UK by Stefan Collini in his book *What are Universities for?*) was shunned, the series was intended to promote the continued relevance of public anthropology. My main criteria for the scholars I invited, in co-operation with other education institutions and research centres in Norway, were that they had an exceptional academic record, wrote about issues of broad concern and interest in international affairs, and they were willing, able and enthusiastic about engaging with non-specialist audiences. The first guest in my series was Matti Bunzl, at that time a professor at Illinois University at Urbana-Champaign in the USA. Bunzl had published an article, in 2005, in the anthropological journal *American Ethnologist* on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, that has subsequently become one of the scholarly reference points in the literature on Islamophobia. This article, which had generated a lively, yet respectful

debate in the pages of the *American Ethnologist*, was picked up two years later by Marshall Sahlins, one of the real grand old men of US anthropology, and published as a pamphlet by Prickly Paradigm Press. I had ambitiously booked the largest hall at the House of Literature for Bunzl, but did not quite know what to expect either of him or the audience. Bunzl, whose profound interest in art and literature would a few years later see him become artistic director of the Chicago Humanities Festival, proved to be a perfect start to the series. A lively, witty, bald and bespectacled gay Jewish man with a large frame in his thirties, who might have come straight out of the sitcom *Seinfeld*, Matti seemed to relish the opportunity. It was extra touching that he had invited his ageing father, the Austrian scholar and historian John Bunzl, who, I did not know at the time, had also published extensively on Islamophobia in his native German.

The event with Bunzl at the House of Literature, which took place in September 2009, subsequently providing the basis of an article for the anthropological journal *Ethnos* in 2010, consisted of a one-hour conversation between myself and Matti, followed by a one-hour question and answer session between him and the audience. I have little record or recollection of the Q&A itself, although I do remember that there was hardly any reservation from the audience to Bunzl's extensive usage of the term Islamophobia. After all, the term was then relatively new to a Norwegian general public, and Norwegian far-right activists were not paying much attention to discrediting it or dissuading its use. As for myself, I was at that point still undecided about using the term in my work.

A foretaste of the future came, however, in the form of an academic seminar at the Center for the Studies of The Holocaust and Religious Minorities (The HL-Center) in Oslo held the day before Bunzl's appearance at the House of Literature. The centre was established in 2001, partly funded out of the 450 million Norwegian kroner (around £38 million) awarded by the Norwegian Parliament to the small Jewish community in 1997 as compensation for the economic liquidation Norway's Jews suffered during the Nazi Occupation and the forced deportation of 772 Jews by Norwegian Nazified state police officers to Auschwitz between 1942-43. The HL-Center is located in the villa the Norwegian Nazi and collaborationist Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling

(1889–1945) had built at Bygdøy in Oslo West. Together with the HL-Center’s senior researcher Cora Alexa Døving I had invited a number of distinguished Norwegian academics to the seminar. Present at the proceedings was also the cultural and op-ed editor at the liberal-conservative *Aftenposten*, for many years Norway’s most influential mainstream newspaper, sitting at the back silently taking notes. In the break, he came up to me and asked whether it was correct that Bunzl was Jewish. To which I responded that I believed so. I could not quite understand what that had to do with anything, but from the comment column he penned, which appeared in the pages of *Aftenposten* on the following day, it became much clearer. In this, the editor took Bunzl to task for even mentioning Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in the same breath. To do so, the column implied, was to betray the memories of the darkest chapter of modern European history: the Nazi extermination of some six million European Jews in the Holocaust during World War II. And for a scholar of Jewish background such as Bunzl to do so, was even worse.

Now, as it happens, some of the scholars who have written most insightfully about Islamophobia in recent years, like Bunzl, happen to have a Jewish background. To imply that it should matter to us whether an academic happens to be of Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, atheist or other background in the evaluation of their work seems to me to open up a kind of scholarly identity politics which I personally find both reductionist and abhorrent. Now, at the very same seminar, there was also a young and aspiring left-leaning journalist. She had, I was later told, taken the opportunity to interview Bunzl while they were both travelling back to central Oslo on the same bus. This led to an item in the Norwegian weekly for which she worked, *Dag & Tid*, bearing a title which suggested that Bunzl had implied that ‘Muslims were the new Jews’ of modern Europe. In light of the fact that Bunzl had, in his various publications, explicitly argued that the analogy had serious limitations, this was most unfortunate.

So the first question I posed to Bunzl at the House of Literature the following day was ‘is the analogy valid?’. ‘I have a feeling that sometimes newspaper editors’, Bunzl replied, ‘are quite attracted to lines like that because they sound good and they do have some punch, as we would say

in the US. But on a general level, two groups are never identical. This is a philosophical point: Jews and Muslims will never be the same, and Muslims of today could not possibly be the Jews of the early twentieth century. On a purely formal philosophical basis, such a statement does not make sense'.

Perhaps the most insightful guide to the limits of the analogy between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism is the Oxford philosopher Brian Klug. In an article in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Klug notes that in Islamophobic representations there are no equivalents to classical anti-Semitism's ideas about the 'hidden hand of Jews' controlling and orchestrating international finance. Nor are the Muslims of Islamophobia, unlike the Jews of classical anti-Semitic tropes, represented as agents of materialistic modernity or as 'Christ-killers'. Yet even if Klug, much like me, is averse to direct analogies between the two terms, he is a clear proponent of the view that comparisons between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism may have their uses.

### *The Norwegian Context*

At this point, I need to say something about the context for, and of, Islamophobia in Norway. Norway is in no way a unique case. As elsewhere in Western Europe, what the American political scientist Erik Bleich referred to as 'indiscriminate negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims', articulated in the public sphere, have become part of Norwegian mainstream politics, particularly after 9/11. These sentiments have become a mobilising factor for the far-right in Norway. In our time, more than ever, ideas travel, and they travel very fast. In tracing the origins of specific ideas which form part of the Islamophobic repertoire in Norway, I have often been struck by the extent to which these ideas have originated elsewhere, but have been adapted to the local context and put rapidly into circulation. I have often, in jest, remarked to Muslim friends that the only idea I have yet to encounter in the European Islamophobic repertoire is that Muslims represent a mortal threat to Norway's favourite pet – dogs. Such is the case with 'Eurabia', which is certainly of transnational provenance. 'Eurabia' is the idea that the European Union and various Middle Eastern and North African countries have, since the petroleum crisis in 1973, secretly plotted to turn the continent of Europe into an Islamic territory (state or caliphate) by means of high fertility rates, mass

immigration and terror. As British writer Matt Carr and others have pointed out, the 'Eurabia' genre is a contemporary far-right conspiracy theory that shares significant structural resemblances to the anti-Semitic Tsarist forgery *The Protocols of The Elders of Zion*. As a conspiracy theory, it is non-refutable on factual and empirical grounds to those who happen to believe in it, for those who do argue against it are often cast as part of the conspiracy itself. The term 'Eurabia' originated with the late Italian feminist Oriana Fallaci in 2004, but the idea was first systematised by the octogenarian far-right Cairo born, Swiss-Israeli, author Bat Ye'or (pseudonym of Gisèle Littmann) in his 2005 book, *Eurobia: The Euro-Arab Axis*. By the following year the term was adopted by Norwegian far-right bloggers such as the biological racist 'Fjordman', (Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen), an MA student at the University of Oslo whose writings, calling for Europeans to arm themselves against Muslims and for the ethnic cleansing of Europe, would later provide the main inspiration for the right-wing extremist and mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik.

Another early and eager convert to the 'Eurabia' conspiracy was the Norwegian lesbian secular-feminist civil society activist Hege Storhaug of the Progress Party, which is supported by the think-tank Human Rights Service (HRS). By 2007, a former Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament, Hallgrim Berg of the Conservative Party, had made the first Norwegian contribution to the 'Eurabia' genre in the form of the self-published pamphlet *Letter to Lady Liberty: Europe in Danger*. Yet the central ideas of the 'Eurabia' literature are hardly novel, and what Ye'or and her followers did during the US-led 'war on terror' (2001–08) was simply to systematise ideas that had been in wide circulation in far-right circles in Western Europe and the USA for quite some time. An early precursor of the genre in Norway is in fact a speech made by the Progress Party's legendary chairman from 1978 to 2006, Carl Ivar Hagen at a Progress Party election rally ahead of the Norwegian county and municipal elections of September 1987. Reading out what later became known in the media as the 'Mustafa letter', Hagen claimed to have received a letter from a Muslim from Oslo called Muhammad Mustafa. Hagen pointed to the letter as manifest evidence of a Muslim plot to turn Norway into an Islamic state. For in the letter, Mustafa asserted that Hagen was 'fighting in vain' against Muslims, since 'Islam will conquer

Norway too' and 'one day, mosques will be as common in Norway as churches are today'. Ominously, the letter warned that 'one day, the heathen cross in the flag would be gone'. And the cause of this future state of affairs was, according to the letter, that 'we' Muslims 'give birth to more children than you' and that 'many right-believing Muslim men of fertile age' were arriving in Norway every year.

The real Muhammad Mustafa, a hard-working pizza baker and married man with children from the inner-city suburb of Tøyen in the capital of Oslo, had never written such a letter. After being awoken by racist phone-calls for days and nights on end, he decided to sue Hagen for forging the letter. The matter was settled out of court, and Hagen is reported to have been forced to pay hundreds of thousands in financial compensation to Mustafa. Yet Hagen knew very well what he was doing: he never apologised, but claimed to have acted in good faith, and asserted that it could have been true. In the elections that followed Hagen's speech the Progress Party polled higher than it had ever done before, winning 12.1 per cent of the total vote. The Progress Party, originally established by rather crank libertarian right-wingers as a party opposed to taxation and bureaucracy, had discovered its winning formula.

Ever since then, opposition to immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric has been a regular feature of the Progress Party's electoral campaigns, helping bring its best result to date in the parliamentary elections of September 2009, when the party obtained 22.9 per cent of the total votes cast, and became Norway's second largest party in parliament. The years 2001–11, which I have covered extensively in my own monograph *Anders Breivik and The Rise of Islamophobia*, saw a gradual but steady turning up of the volume and intensity of the Progress Party's Islamophobic discourse, to the extent that the party chairperson (and from 2013, Norway's Finance Minister) Siv Jensen in a speech to the party's congress in February 2009, ahead of that year's parliamentary elections, referred to an alleged ongoing 'islamisation by stealth' of Norwegian society. What she meant by the term was rather unclear, for the only actual instances of 'islamisation' Jensen was able to refer to in her speech were the provision of halal foods for Muslim prison inmates, failed demands to gain state acceptance for female Muslim police officers to wear the hijab as part of their uniform, and alleged gender segregation at Norwegian schools with Muslim pupils. To the extent that such demands had

been made by Norwegian Muslims, they had gone through democratic channels and procedures, openly, and not stealthily. The very notion of an ongoing 'islamisation by stealth' of Norwegian society had originated in Norwegian far-right circles. The US Islamophobic kingpin and ideologue Robert Spencer (also to become a significant inspiration for Anders Behring Breivik) had even dedicated a whole book to the topic, published in 2008.

What is crucially important to note about the Norwegian context, however, is that Norway has weathered the recurrent and ongoing financial crises in Europe extremely well. Although Norway has increasing levels of social and economic inequality, it has comparatively extremely low levels of unemployment, especially youth unemployment, and comparatively high rates of minority labour market participation. The reasons for the existential fears generated by the presence of Islam and Muslims in the Norwegian context must therefore be sought in other places than material factors. A key, I have long argued, is to be found in the resentment and feelings of marginalisation from deliberative democratic processes experienced by certain sections of the white Norwegian working class turned service class in the course of the de-industrialisation that Norway experienced between 1970 and 1990. This, coupled with the rise of a technocratic politics, neo-liberal economics and state feminism, has left many voters open to the appeal of a party – which though it was in government since 2013 demonstrated that it is as dominated by technocratic elites as any other party, and as ready, if not more, to abandon the interests of ordinary Norwegian workers for the sake of political expediency as the rest – claims to represent the interests and the voices of the average Joe and Mary. And perhaps more Joe than Mary, for in line with research findings about the supporters of other far-right political formations in Europe, it is now a well-established fact that the overwhelming majority (91 per cent in the parliamentary elections of 2009) of Progress Party voters are male, white and relatively poorly educated. So why the focus on Muslims, who after all on current estimates represent no more than 3.8 per cent of the Norwegian population? To understand this, we have to link the Norwegian context to the international situation which has pertained since 2001 in which Muslims have been often cast as threats not only to national and international security, but also to various liberal freedoms, a development examined by Joseph Massad in his recent book, *Islam in Liberalism*.

*Choosing 'Islamophobia'*

'Men make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing' is a statement often attributed to Karl Marx. In my own case, it was not until the Norwegian winter of 2010-11 that I actively chose to use the term Islamophobia in my writings. Like many others, I had reservations. Firstly, the term has both descriptive and denunciatory properties. To declare something or someone to be Islamophobic is not a neutral act: it is to declare that such a person or a movement which engages in Islamophobia as ranking low on one's moral spectrum. Secondly, the term has the risk of conflating (often warranted, and perfectly legitimate) criticisms of Islam or interpretations of Islam – which in our time should by no means be exempt from criticism, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims – with unreservedly negative attitudes and sentiments towards Muslims in general. If one, for the sake of the argument, finds criticism of Saudi Arabia and Iran's appalling record on human rights and women's rights 'Islamophobic', or finds the fears for the global influence and reach of the moronic and barbaric creed of salafi-jihadism, as represented by ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban 'Islamophobic', then one has certainly entered into the realm of the absurd. And thirdly, the term often seems to imply that people who express negative ideas and sentiments about Islam and Muslims are somehow 'phobic'.

So what, then, were the circumstances that let me to choose and use the term Islamophobia? In late November 2010, the private but national Norwegian TV channel TV2 screened a speculative documentary on the 'Eurabia' genre featuring a number of secular-orientated Egyptian intellectuals along with representatives of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Entitled *Freedom, Equality and The Muslim Brothers*, and funded by TV2 itself in conjunction with the Fritt Ord Foundation, it was directed by the Norwegian documentary filmmaker Per Anders Magnus. The script was written by a Norwegian-Iraqi atheist political activist, poet and popular author by the name of Walid al-Kubaisi, who also played the lead as the documentary's investigator and interviewer. In the documentary, which was set to an ominous musical score, these Egyptian intellectuals, more or less all aligned with the interests of the corrupt and authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak and his National Democratic Party, told the filmmakers about their fears for a future Egypt run by the

Muslim Brothers. These fears were of course genuine, but the documentary had nothing at all to say about the increasingly repressive rule of Mubarak and his neo-liberal cronies: the plot line basically being that everything would have been hunky-dory in Egypt if it was not for the Muslim Brotherhood plotting to take power. Through investigative reporting by the leftist daily newspaper *Klassekampen's* Cairo-based Middle East correspondent Amal Wahhab, it later turned out that neither the Iraqi-Norwegian filmmaker nor the director had informed the Egyptian intellectuals appearing in the documentary that in the final product their statements would be used to imply that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were secretly plotting to 'establish an Islamic caliphate in Norway' through the means of 'baby trolleys, the hijab, democracy and freedom of expression'. The Norwegian-Iraqi filmmaker appeared in numerous media interviews, in which he declared, virtually uncontested by any journalists or editors, that he had made a film 'against the fascism of our time'; and charged any number of moderate mainstream Muslims in Norway with being either Islamists or 'errand boys for the Islamists'. In the ensuing media storm which inevitably followed, the Progress Party launched another parliamentary motion proposing the banning of the hijab in Norwegian public schools, citing previous op-eds from the filmmaker to the effect that the 'hijab was the Islamists' uniform'. The filmmaker of course wanted everyone to believe that his target was Islamism, and not Islam, but in fact he had for a number of years actively contributed to blurring the line between the two in Norway's mediated public spheres, by accusing all and sundry among mainstream Norwegian Muslim representatives of being 'Islamists'. This was the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' writ large in order to cast aspersions on Norwegian citizens of Muslim background in general, and clearly a contribution to the 'Eurabia' genre.

In an opinion poll taken shortly after the screening of the documentary, a full 61 per cent of those surveyed in a national representative sample of Norwegians declared that they feared 'conflicts with Muslims' more than anything else in the future. By February 2011, central Progress Party members in Oslo were referring to Islam as 'Nazism' and thereby implying that Muslims in general were akin to Nazis. It was in this context that I, as the first Norwegian academic to do so, started to sound the alarm about the

state of public discourse on Islam and Muslims in Norway, and decided to use the term Islamophobia. My first recorded use of the term in a scholarly essay was in a piece for the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) blog 'The Immament Frame' published on 16 June 2011. The worst terror attacks in Norwegian history, perpetrated by a white right-wing extremist from Oslo West, who had unknown to all but his closest family, shut the windows on the real world and immersed himself in the darknet's netherworld of far-right Islamophobia and 'Eurabia' ideas, were to occur a few months later.

Though I have opted to use the term Islamophobia myself, as does various UN and EU organs, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and others, I have long favoured an agnostic and pragmatic attitude to its usage. I can understand why other people would opt for terms such as 'anti-Muslim attitudes' or 'anti-Muslim hatred' instead of Islamophobia, if only to underline the point that it is unreservedly negative attitudes and sentiments about Muslims, rather than Islam itself, that we should be worried about if we are concerned about equal rights and the ability for all citizens regardless of background to live their lives in dignity and peace in liberal and secular societies. In the context of my teaching, I have heard from Norwegian Muslim civil society activists who refrain from using the term because they consider it to be too much of a 'conversation stopper'. And they have a point: for if the debate about this becomes one of the appropriateness of specific analytical terms rather than what to do about the regrettable situation which these terms seek to capture, it is too easy for all parties to get side-tracked. The attempts to dissuade scholars and the wider public from active use of the term have been relentless, have come from various quarters, and have involved senior media editors in the Norwegian mainstream press. One of the early strategies was to launch genealogies of the term which had no basis in any historical research. The Spanish historian Fernando Bravo López established, in a 2011 article published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, that the first known scholarly usage of the term dates back to 1910, in the work of two French West Africanists (one of whom was a French colonial administrator in West Africa to boot, and not likely to have been overly sympathetic to Muslims) namely Maurice Delafosse and Alain Quillien. However, in far-right online media in Norway the idea that the term emerged variously from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist regime in Iraq, or even with Tariq Ramadan, continues to be put forward as a serious proposition. In

my monograph *Anders Breivik and The Rise of Islamophobia*, written as my personal way of dealing with the darkest days many Norwegians had ever experienced in July and August 2011, following Breivik's massacre, I catalogued some of these fabricated genealogies. I soon discovered that these genealogies were never ever accompanied by any substantiating references or data: it was as if their mere enunciation in various places online meant that they were to be taken seriously. That also tells us something about the time in which we live, in which distortions and fabrications have become ubiquitous and so commonplace that trying to insist on facts and substantiation involves one in a series of futile exercises leading to exhaustion. Another strategy has been to trivialise the actual experiences which the term Islamophobia is meant to capture. A female literary reviewer in Norway's *Aftenposten* writing in April 2011, compared Norwegian Muslims complaining about the prevalence of Islamophobia in Norway to small children exaggerating in order to obtain favours from their parents. Perhaps the most amusing attempt at discrediting the term came from another literary reviewer, this time in Norway's *Dagbladet*, who simply informed his readers that since he was not able to find the term in his dictionary, the phenomena to which it referred could not possibly exist.

The term Islamophobia has now been used so regularly and frequently as to warrant Brian Klug's conclusion that it has 'come of age' in scholarly literature and in the media, if not yet in the general public. Regardless of this, attempts to discredit the term and dissuade scholars from using it are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. So scholars and intellectuals need to do much more. We need to move from a phase in which we deliberate over intellectually responsible definitions of the term to operationalising it, for it to be used as a tool through which to explore and measure European Muslims' experiences of stigmatisation, discrimination and racism. In contemporary Europe, we find ourselves in troubled times.

**Citations:** For the House of Literature series on public anthropology, see the forthcoming edited volume S. Bangstad, *Anthropology in Our Times: A Series in Public Anthropology*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2016. For the work of Matti and John Bunzl, see M. Bunzl, 'Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some thoughts on the New Europe', *American Ethnologist* 32 (4) 499-508 2005; M. Bunzl, *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds New And Old in Europe*, Prickly

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