

## Reading Islamophobia Through the Lens of James Baldwin

by Farid Hafez

### **Abstract**

*This article challenges the claim that the statement 'Islamophobia without Muslims' is unique to the Eastern part of Europe, which is populated by a very small number of Muslims. Rather, it argues that every form of racism essentially relates not to realities but imaginations, not to ontological categories of Muslimness, Jewishness, or Blackness, but imaginations about the racist's perceptions. The existence of racism is to be understood as a projection of the racists, and as something that tells us more about the racists than about the racially excluded. This argument is developed on the basis of the writings of James Baldwin.*

Farid Hafez (University of Salzburg, Austria)

### **Why does a political scientist choose James Baldwin?**

I am a traditionally trained political scientist. Like many graduates from the University of Vienna, I studied political science from my first year in college until receiving my Ph.D. A year after receiving my Ph.D, I founded the *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*, an annual academic interdisciplinary journal dedicated to research on Islamophobia. But why should a political scientist choose a literary critic and novelist to discuss Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism in the East of the European Union? And why a social critic like James Baldwin, who lived at the time of segregation and the uprising of several Black freedom fighters in the 1960s? Some authors may suggest that even theories from Western Europe would be insufficient to discuss Islamophobia in the Eastern part of Europe. So why import theories developed even further away in time and space? Theories from the 1950s to the 1970s developed in the United States of America?

This is the exact point of this article, which is to question the assumption that racism differs across time and space. In this article, I suggest that every kind of racism shares an essential trait across time and space. By suggesting this, I also question one of the phrases that is read and

heard most when it comes to Islamophobia in the East of Europe. This title is 'Islamophobia without Muslims'. More important than being a phrase, it also suggests a relationship between Islam and Muslims, which is a belief shared even beyond the Eastern region of Europe. It is an old myth that surfaces in every debate on racism. With the Jews, it was the idea that there was a 'Jewish question'. With the Blacks, it was the idea that there was a 'Negro question'. And with Muslims, it is the idea that there is a 'Muslim question'. And it is this beautiful way that Baldwin, drawing on the works of so many other Black scholars that preceded him, interrogated this question (one taken for granted by the dominant society) that seems to me so fruitful to discussing Islamophobia, first in the East of Europe, and second in a very general way.

### **Islamophobia without Muslims?**

When it comes to a comparative perspective on Islamophobia in the East and the West of the European Union, many authors tend to stress the idea of 'Islamophobia without Muslims' as an essential trait of the East. Largely in contrast to antisemitism and other forms of racism, Islamophobia today is discussed against the backdrop of a perceived 'real' Islam and Muslims. In this article, I want to a) fundamentally question the assumption that 'Islamophobia without Muslims' is specific to the region of the East of Europe, and b) propose that 'Islamophobia without Muslims' reveals a fundamental essence in every form of racism and is therefore also not true for the Western region of Europe. This draws on a basic assumption that racism as a global phenomenon is also based on a shared global history. Neither can we separate Islamophobia from antisemitism, nor antisemitism from what is generally referred to as racism. Antisemitism, Islamophobia are nothing but different faces of a global racial order.

### **A shared story of racism(s)**

Many authors have shown that imagining both the Jewish and Muslim other as the Oriental other, one inside and the other outside of Europe, represents a 'shared story'. One example of many here is

that Jews were charged with poisoning a well in 1321 based on the notion that Muslims had incited them to do so.<sup>1</sup> Also, as Achille Mbembe has argued in his *Critique of Black Reason*, Islamophobia was nothing but an extension of the global colonial expansion and its colonial heritage of classifying people, placing them into hierarchies, and differentiating between them. And, as James Q. Whitman has recently shown in his study *Hitler's American Model – The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, American race law provided a blueprint for Nazi Germany. He shows that American citizenship and anti-miscegenation laws proved directly relevant to the two principal Nuremberg Laws—the Citizenship Law and the Blood Law.<sup>2</sup> Based on this interconnectedness of different forms of racism in place and time, there is much reason to transfer insights from one form of racism to our understanding of seemingly new and current forms of racism such as Islamophobia.

#### James Baldwin on racism

This will be done by drawing on the writer and social critic James Baldwin, especially with regard to his unfinished manuscript *Remember This House*, which became famous when it was expanded and adapted for cinema as the Academy Award-nominated documentary film *I Am Not Your Negro*. By connecting Baldwin's thinking to the question of Islamophobia in Eastern Europe, I want to gain an insight into Islamophobia by doing what I think was essential for the literary figure Baldwin: turning the tables and asking different questions.

James Baldwin's reflections in a debate with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, together with moderator Kenneth Clark on 24 May 1963, reveal a central insight of racism theory. He argued:

„But the Negro in this country ... the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or dark as the future of the country ... What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why

<sup>1</sup>Wolfgang Benz, *Antisemitismus und Islamkritik. Bilanz und Perspektive*, Berlin 2011.

<sup>2</sup>James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model. The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, Princeton 2017.

it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place, because I am not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him ... I'm not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it is able to ask that question.“

Baldwin is asking, like other scholars of antisemitism, racism and Orientalism, what was really behind the invention, marking and subsequent exclusion of the 'other'. Because, as Sartre argued in his *Anti-Semite and Jew*, „if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him“<sup>3</sup>. Or, as Edward Said put it in *Orientalism*, the imagination of the Orient was based on „desires, regressions, investments, and projections“.<sup>4</sup> Following Baldwin, we have to find out why this figure of the 'other' was invented. For Baldwin, similarly to Said, who saw Orientalism as a powerful political instrument of domination, it is about power:

„I attest to this:

the world is not white;

it never was white,

cannot be white.

White is a metaphor for power [...].“<sup>5</sup>

Hence, the problem is not a 'Jewish problem' or a 'Muslim problem'; rather it is a problem of the dominant society itself. Similarly, Said argues that Orientalism was „a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient“. So what ideas do Islamophobes project onto Islam? Or, according to Baldwin himself, the dominant society has to find out why it had to invent the Muslim 'figure'. And also: can we identify a will to govern in terms of contemporary Islamophobia?

It would be wrong to generalize with regard to Islamophobes. Islamophobia has become a hegemonic discourse that is shared by numerous

<sup>3</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Schocken 1948.

<sup>4</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

<sup>5</sup>Raoul Peck / James Baldwin, *I am not your Negro*, New York 2017.

actors from a diverse range of social milieus: right-wing extremists, but also Christian democrats and social democrats, as well as more leftist political actors, Christian fundamentalists, white feminists, ideologically driven racists, Muslim governments and self-orientalizing Muslims. It has recently become a more relevant force in international politics, domestic political culture, and the arts, and it is therefore manifested in different ways.

For reasons of clarity, I will only take some examples here to discuss Baldwin's question as to 'why' this Muslim figure was invented, and what the white metaphor of power means in this invention. To indicate the variety of actors of Islamophobia, I discuss two studies that deal with quite different actors and material that they have produced. I do so in order to illustrate the diversity within the hegemonic discourse of Islamophobia.

#### **Islamophobia in US Foreign Policy**

In contrast to the case of anti-Black racism, Islamophobia today first and foremost plays a central role in international relations. Islamophobia in its current formation has recently been shaped especially in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of an age of 'a clash of civilizations', as theorized by Samuel P. Huntington. The single superpower on this planet, the USA, has relied heavily on Islamophobia as a discourse to widen its power. The demonization of Saddam Hussein with the false allegations that he possessed nuclear weapons to invade Iraq, the declaration of the 'war on terror' to mobilize many Western countries in its fight against the Muslim enemy, the invasion of Afghanistan to free women from oppressive Muslim men: all of this happened with the help of an Islamophobic discourse that allowed the US to intervene, kill, and destroy while representing itself as free, enlightened, and freedom-seeking. Stephen Sheehi has shown in his *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims* that Islamophobia was deployed primarily to keep the US empire relevant. His main argument is that „Islamophobia is an ideological construct deployed to facilitate US presence and, in fact, make US domination

seem necessary“<sup>6</sup> in those countries that were torn by war after US invasion. He argues further that „the parallax of American power is such that it must convert its vision into reality if it is to remain *relevant* in the Arab world, in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, remaining relevant, not oil or the spread of democracy, is the United States' primary *raison d'être* for its presence in the Middle East. [...] a more effective strategy in maintaining relevance in Iraq and the region is to maintain a state of tension and conflict intense enough to make local allies need Washington's military, political and economic assistance, but also sufficiently low-grade that it does not call for the presence of American boots on the ground. The United States profits from instability just as it benefits from fear. Instability activates the militaristic, patriotic, if not jingoistic tendencies in the population that easily justify what otherwise seems like boldfaced aggression or occupation.“<sup>7</sup>

Stephen Sheehi shows the central role of Islamophobia by referring to the works of important scholars who advise the US political elite and regularly inform the US public in regard to US politics in the Middle East such as Bernard Lewis and Fareed Zakaria. According to Sheehi, an additional reason why Islamophobia has become engrained in American culture and its political unconscious is that Islamophobia operates in a society with its own troubled history of racism: „The United States has a sustained history not only of the dehumanization, disenfranchisement and occupation of Blacks, Native Americans, and Asians but also of transforming this racist hate into political action, with hunts and pogroms to control dissent and discontent. Islamophobia has now been interwoven within this same history“.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, we can argue that Islamophobia is a means of gaining, stabilizing, and widening power for the US empire.

#### **Anders Behring Breivik**

A different case would be a single and powerless actor who is embed-

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims*, Atlanta 2011.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 225.

ded in a digital network of racist conspiracy theorists: Anders Behring Breivik, who murdered 77 people on 22 July 2011 during a socialist youth camp, targeting future leaders who for him represented a multiculturalist elite that would enable an Islamicization of Europe. As Sindre Bangstad has shown in his study *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, Breivik regarded himself as a 'conservative Christian' and was linked to the right-wing populist Progressive Party (PP) from 1997 to 2006.<sup>9</sup> In his *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, Breivik argued that the enablers of the Islamicization of Europe, cultural Marxists together with Muslims, had to be stopped, while in court he defended his killing of 77 mostly teenagers as necessary. Breivik presented himself as a pro-Zionist who was antisemitic, as a conservative Christian who wanted to rescue the Christian West and defend it against Islamicization, as a Freemason whose order had excluded him on the day that his attacks were revealed to the public. He was convinced that his act of mass killing was „cruel, but necessary“ to stop the Islamic 'conquest' and 'colonization' of Europe.<sup>10</sup> According to Breivik, the European elite, represented by 'cultural Marxists' and the 'multicultural/ist alliance', have „entered into a 'devil's pact' with the enemy leading to the impending establishment of a Eurabia“.<sup>11</sup> For Breivik, Islamicization had already taken place and was ongoing. Hence, can we say that Breivik projects nothing less than his own wish for Europe to be not multicultural, but mono-cultural? A Europe that is Christian and only Christian, and that has no space for people of other faiths? A Europe for what he calls 'native Europeans', which suggests that he longs for a 'racially pure' Europe? Is it exactly this longing that explains Breivik's Islamophobia? For Breivik, Europeans have to abolish the European Union, which for him is „currently the principal (though not the only) motor behind the Islamicization of Europe, perhaps the greatest betrayal in this civilisation's history“.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Sindre Bangstad, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, London 2014.

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Berwick, *2083. A European Declaration of Independence*, London 2011.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. 73.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. 314.

Quoting his main inspiration, an author called Fjordman, he argues: „We also need to reject the 'You turn into what you fight' argument. The British, the Americans and the Canadians didn't become Nazis while fighting Nazi Germany, did they? The truth is, we will become like Muslims if we don't fight them and keep them out of our countries, since they will subdue us and Islamise us by force. The West isn't feared because we are 'oppressors'; we are despised because we are perceived as being decadent and weak.“<sup>13</sup>

Hence, as many have argued, Breivik himself projects a certain kind of masculinity in what is generally portrayed as the hyper-masculine, strong, armed Islamist warrior. In the case of Breivik, it might also be the lack of recognition that he received as a person that might explain his commitment to leading a struggle against Islamicization. Hence, he sees himself in a long war, which others such as Pope Urban II, Charles Martel and others have waged before him.<sup>14</sup> Hence, is it this lack of recognition, this irrelevance of his person in the history of humankind, that he aims to compensate for by his act of killing and presenting a message of war between Islam and Christianity?

Again quoting Fjordman, Breivik sees that Europe today has three enemies in its fight against the Islamicization of its lands: „Enemy 1 is the anti-Western bias of our media and academia, which is a common theme throughout the Western world. Enemy 2 are Eurabians and EU-federalists, who deliberately break down established nation states in favour of a pan-European super state. Enemy 3 are Muslims“.<sup>15</sup> Is it the amount of self-criticism of the Western intellectual public, especially of some of its leftist imprint, that disturbs Breivik? Is it the supranational European Union that represents what many nativist right-wing parties see as a threat to their imagined Europe of sovereign nations that disturbs him? Is it Muslims, whom Breivik imagines as the masculine, violent embodiment of heroism on one side and the threat to Europe on the other side?

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 335.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 243, 44.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. 378.

### **Baldwin again**

We can echo the words of James Baldwin when he speaks as a black man to white America about the question of the black figure: „It is not a racial problem. [...] It is a problem of whether or not you're willing to look at your life and be responsible for it, and then begin to change it. [...] And it is because the American people are unable to face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, created by them. My blood, my father's blood, is in that soil“.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Raoul Peck / James Baldwin, I am not your Negro, New York 2017.