

Responses to terror attacks helping to fuel Islamophobia in society

21 June 2017, by Andy Dunne

The recent string of terrorist attacks across Europe has led to a spike in Islamophobic acts, from daily harassment to the horrific event this week in Finsbury Park. Yet while extreme acts of Islamophobia are generally denounced by political actors and the media, a new study suggests that more insidious forms of Islamophobia, couched in liberal terms, are helping normalise such forms of racism in society.

Published in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the study by Dr Aurelien Mondon at the University's Department of Politics, Languages & International Studies and Dr Aaron Winter at the University of East London, explores the relationship between liberal and illiberal articulations of Islamophobia which it suggests is fundamental to understanding the roots and prevalence of this particular type of racism and its full impact.

Definitions of Islamophobia

Comparing the situation in France with the USA, their paper argues that illiberal Islamophobia is akin to traditional racism and far-right hate and typically denounced by liberal norms as unacceptable, 'alien in to our post-racial societies'. "Liberal Islamophobia", by contrast, has developed as a perceived defence of liberal values – democracy, freedom of speech, gender, sexuality and equality.

The authors suggest there are links between the two, with more extreme groups borrowing the arguments put forward in defence of liberty and equality on gender or sexuality to legitimate their standpoint. However, underlying both Islamophobias, they suggest, is a targeting of Muslims in a racist manner.

The authors argue that Islamophobia is a racist construct within which the "Muslim" signifier does not come from the individual Muslim in a subjective

manner, but is defined by the onlooker in a position of power and imposed onto people through various types of generalisation, misperception and stigmatisation.

This can be witnessed through the so-called secular and anti-terrorist laws, but also through media coverage of events related to Islam, where commentators often generalise and homogenise extremely diverse communities.

Whilst there is widespread acceptance that Islamophobia is a serious and growing issue in society among mainstream politicians, social movements and the media, the authors argue that the fight against racism cannot stop at illiberal acts, but must target its more liberal articulations as well.

A focus on elite discourse

In addition to the more bottom-up approaches implemented in local communities to tackle extremism, the authors suggest that a focus on elite discourse (the media and politicians predominantly) and its impact on the mainstream is essential to get to the roots of the problem. In order to challenge hate and improve policy responses, their research proposes a more complex and multifaceted definition to capture these multiple articulations, how they develop, function and are deployed.

The authors stress that: "Overall, the debate between Islamophobia being about religion or race is not solely about what Islam is, but what one wants to say about it and how they do it. Religion does provide a convenient cover for those wishing to argue that they are attacking a belief and not people, and in a context where [racism](#) is allegedly unacceptable, wriggle out of or deflect such charges."

More information: Aurelien Mondon et al. Articulations of Islamophobia: from the extreme to the mainstream?, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2017).

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