Islamophobia as a Fundamental Fantasy

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Abstract: In this essay, I start with addressing the question of "has Islamophobia reached a tipping point in the United States"? Then I apply Lacanian social theory, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's analysis of anti-Semitism through the seven veils of fantasy, to Islamophobia in an effort to conceptualize the complex psychosocial phenomenon as a fundamental fantasy, which ideologically sustains the 'war on terror' discourse. Finally, I end with a brief remark on the possibility of Islamophobia as a counter-discourse.

Keywords*: terrorism, Islamophobia, tipping point, fundamental fantasy, counter-discourse

Islamophobia as a Fundamental Fantasy

> The notion of reinscribing scientific drive into the constraints of the life-world is fantasy at its purest – perhaps even the fundamental *fascist* fantasy. (Žižek, 1998, p. 213, emphasis in original)

In this essay, I start with addressing the question of "has Islamophobia reached a tipping point in the United States (US)"? Then I apply Lacanian social theory, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's analysis of anti-Semitism through the seven veils of fantasy, to Islamophobia in an effort to conceptualize the complex psychosocial phenomenon as a fundamental fantasy, which ideologically sustains the 'war on terror' discourse—a discourse, which I have critiqued elsewhere (Beshara, 2018). Finally, I end with a brief remark on the possibility of Islamophobia as a counter-discourse.

Has Islamophobia Reached A Tipping Point in the US?

Malcolm Gladwell (2000) is credited for popularizing the concept of the tipping point—incidentally, his bestselling book was published one year before tragic events of September 11, 2001 (or 9/11). He defines the tipping point as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point" (p. 12) then he goes on to list the three characteristics of tipping points: 1) 'contagiousness', 2) "little causes can have big effects", and 3) "change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment" (p. 9). Gladwell's (2000) whole book is premised on the following foundational analogy: certain psychosocial and biological phenomena are structurally similar in terms of how they dramatically change. Following this logic, we are encouraged to think of Islamophobia as a 'social epidemic' because we are told "[i]deas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do" (p. 7). So the question becomes: Are Americans infected with Islamophobia? And if so, what is the cure?

If Islamophobia is about to reach, or has indeed reached, a tipping point then we should feel happy because that would mean that what follows is a steep decline in anti-Muslim racism. However, I do not think we are there yet, but perhaps if we apply Gladwell's 'three rules of epidemics' to Islamophobia, we can assess its current status, at least in the US.

The Law of the Few

According to the first rule of epidemics, the 'Law of the Few', social epidemics are "driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people" (p. 21). We can see that this 'agent of change' is applicable in our case since Islamophobia is sustained by both the Islamophobia industry (Lane, 2012) and the 'terrorism experts' industry (Stampnitzky, 2013), whose functions are to sell the public misinformation about Muslims/Islam and terrorists/terrorism, respectively.

The Stickiness Factor

According to the second rule of epidemics, the 'Stickiness Factor': "there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable; there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes" (p. 25). 9/11 is exemplar of a *memorable*, albeit tragic, event; it was a collective trauma, whose 'spectacular' (Kellner, 2004) images in the media will haunt us for life. Islamophobia is 'sticky' as a result of the politico-media complex's (PMC) capitalization on the suffering of millions of Americans. Since, and arguably before, 9/11, the PMC has been (and still is) selling to the public the following falsism: "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims".

Islamophobia's 'stickiness' then is achieved through ideologies and discourses of *othering*. The media industries' ideological mechanisms, through propaganda or the repetition of fascistic signs, render the public susceptible to the *aestheticization of politics* (Benjamin, 1968, p. 416), which desensitize us to, and hence normalizes, images of violence related to war in particular. Furthermore, we become docile bodies when we are positioned as subjects of a hegemonic (and binary) discourse, which manufactures consent through a *politics of fear*. The ideologies of othering are sustained by myths of 'exceptionalism', while the discourses of othering index grand narratives of 'Holy War'. To put it differently, Islamophobia is contagious because the WOT is rhetorically powerful. Therefore, as scholar-activists in critical psychology, we have a tremendous responsibility of not only theorizing about counter-ideologies and counter-discourses but, more importantly; we need to conceive of an ethically sound *praxis of resistance*. Following Walter Benjamin's (1968) suggestion, in his epilogue to *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, one powerful counter-ideological form of resistance in the aesthetic realm is what he calls the *politicization of art* (p. 416).

The Power of Context

According to the third and final rule of epidemics, the 'Power of Context': "human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem" (p. 29). When discussing this 'agent of change', Gladwell (2000) invokes the 'bystander effect' from social psychology to show how others influence our behavior, but another, more *powerful*, way of describing *context* can be achieved through a Foucauldian reading of *general history* (see Kendall & Wickham, 1999).

In conclusion, the social epidemic of Islamophobia will tip or be 'jolted out of equilibrium', according to Gladwell (2000), when "some change has occurred in one (or two or three) of those [agents of chang listed above]" (pp. 18-19). I imagine that the tipping point for Islamophobia will occur when the CT discourse significantly shifts or when it completely loses its legitimacy. Hence, I suggest that we drop the biological metaphor of a social epidemic in favor of doing an archeology of (counter)terrorism (see Beshara, 2019), since it is precisely the WOT discourse, which structures Islamophobia as a fundamental fantasy.

Islamophobia as a Fundamental Fantasy

Islamophobia Studies scholars have traditionally compared Islamophobia to other related phenomena, such as xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and Orientalism. Even though Islamophobia is not a new term, since one can trace it to the early 20th century (López, 2011), it is a relatively recent field of study, which dates back to the publication of the Runnymede Trust report in 1997. In an effort to understand Islamophobia as a fundamental fantasy, I will specifically draw on Lacanian social theory as articulated by Žižek (1998) in *The Plague of Fantasies*.

If we use the shorthand definition of Islamophobia as 'anti-Muslim racism' for a moment with the awareness that said racism is cultural, affects 'Muslim-looking' subjects too, and must be situated in Muslim-minority countries, then we can understand, following Lacanian psychoanalysis, Islamophobia as a *fundamental fantasy*:

> [I]t is the symbolic order of racial difference itself that governs seeing, rather than the reverse. We *believe* in the factuality of difference in order to *see* it, because the order of

racial difference is an order that promises access to an absolute wholeness to its subjects—white, black, yellow or brown. The relation of fantasy to the symbolic order of race must be construed somewhat differently. The fantasy of wholeness, of being, that the signifier [Whiteness[i]] holds out is not a case of narcissistic misrecognition, but is a fundamental fantasy that determines the trajectory of the subject of 'race.' Thus visuality in the realm of race should be understood as functioning in support of *and* as a defence against the fantasy of a totalized subject. (Seshadri-Crooks, 2002, p. 5, emphasis in original)

Žižek's (1998) lucid description of the seven 'veils' of fantasy, particularly his examples of anti-Semitism, afford us a conceptualization of Islamophobia as a fundamental fantasy. The seven 'veils' of fantasy, according to Žižek (1998), are: 1) the fantasy is a transcendental schematism, 2) the fantasy has two dimensions, 3) the fantasy creates a multitude of subject-positions, 4) the fantasy is radically intersubjective, 5) the fantasy is a narrative, 6) the fantasy involves an impossible gaze, and 7) the fantasy stages castration. In a number of the subsequent quotes, I alter a few of words in Žižek's sentences to consider the applicability of Lacan's theory in relation to Islamophobia. My argument is as follows: Pseudo-patriotism, or *national identity as fear of the other*, was a reaction formation to 9/11. In other words, when the *desire* for American exceptionalism meets the *drive* to kill 'terrorists', Islamophobia materializes as a fundamental fantasy, which can be traversed either in the battlefield or the clinic. If not traversed, Islamophobic symptoms resurface on a cultural level signaling the 'return of the repressed'.

In the introduction to his chapter, Žižek's (1998) tells us, "Fantasy conceals [the horror of the real], yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, namely its 'repressed point of reference" (pp. 190-191). It is not easy to describe fantasy because it is inherently paradoxical (e.g., *thinking* one is Whole, while in reality *being* fragmentary); "in order for a fantasy to be operative, it has to remain 'implicit' i.e., a distance must be maintained between it and the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it" (p. 204). For this 'distance' to be 'maintained', fantasy produces "a gap that forever separates the fantasmatic kernel of the subject's being from the more 'superficial' modes of his or her symbolic and/or imaginary identifications" (p. 209).

Covering this gap, "fantasy is the screen that separates [the Islamophobe's] desire [for exceptionalism] from [his death] drive " (p. 209).

In his segment on the difference between desire and drive in relation to fantasy, Žižek (1998) contends that:

> In the [Islamophobic] ideological fantasy, social antagonism is explained away via the reference to the [Muslim] as the secret agent who is stealing social jouissance from us … For that reason also, the notion of fantasy is ambiguous: beatific fantasy … is supported by a disturbing paranoiac fantasy which tells us why things went wrong … Traversing, going through the fantasy, means we accept the vicious circle of revolving around the void of the object and find jouissance in it, renouncing the myth that jouissance is amassed somewhere else. (p. 210)

1. The Fantasy is a Transcendental Schematism

In other words, "A fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e. it literally 'teaches us how to desire'" (p. 191). American exceptionalism is the Other's desire for Wholeness, which, of course, 'white' Americans have internalized over the years as their desire. It is the Anglo-Saxon version of the myth that Jews are 'the chosen people'. The ideology of American exceptionalism is premised on three assumptions: that the US is unique (as succinctly captured in the patriotic phrase 'God bless America' or the myth of 'Manifest Destiny'), that the US is destined to change the world (which it has done chiefly through humanitarian imperialism), and that the US is the best country in the world (in terms of economics, politics, etc.). The implications of these assumptions are threefold: although the US is a secular state it is really a Christian nation, humanitarian imperialism is the form of neo-imperialism, and neoliberal capitalism as well as representative democracy are endlessly promoted as the best and only viable politico-economic systems. These implications are the backdrop to my descriptions of Islamophobia and the WOT; also they foreclose possibilities for social change, such as revolutionary socialism or radical democracy.

2. The Fantasy Has Two Dimensions

According to Žižek (1998), "fantasy has [both] a beatific side, a *stabilizing* dimension, which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity … [and] a *destabilizing* dimension, whose elementary form is envy" (p. 192, emphasis in original). In this sense, fantasy conceals the Cartesian gap between thinking and being; let us then apply this 'veil' to Islamophobia:

> Fantasy$_1$ [pseudo-patriotism] and fantasy$_2$ [Islamophobia] are thus like the front and back of the same coin. Insofar as a community experiences its reality as regulated and structured by fantasy$_1$, it has to disavow its inherent impossibility, the antagonism in its very heart, whereby fantasy$_2$, for example the [Islamophobic] figure of the 'conceptual [Muslim],' gives body to this disavowal. In short, the effectiveness of fantasy$_2$ is the condition for fantasy$_1$ to maintain its hold … The function of the 'conceptual [Muslim]' is precisely to render ['the gap in the midst of my self-identity'] invisible. (p. 192)

3. The Fantasy Creates a Multitude of Subject-Positions

Here one can easily draw a parallel between my previous analysis of the multiple subject-positions afforded by the WOT discourse (Beshara, 2018) and multitude in fantasy. This multitude can also be described as 'a pure gaze', for "the fantasizing subject does not identify with his or her own appearance in the fantasmatic space … [because] fantasy creates a multitude of 'subject-positions,' among which the (observing, fantasizing) subject can freely float" (p. 193). Islamophobia takes place mostly between S_2 and $\sim S_1$ in the semiotic square (Greimas, 1968).

4. The Fantasy is Radically Intersubjective

In the following quote, my modification of Žižek's (1998) analysis of anti-Semitism is illuminating:

> It is again [Islamophobia], the [Islamophobic] paranoia, which renders visible in an exemplary way this radically intersubjective character of fantasy. Fantasy (the social fantasy of [Eurabia], for instance) is an attempt to provide an answer to the question

'What does society want from me?' It contributes to unearthing the meaning of the murky events in which I am forced to participate. For that reason, the standard theory of 'projection,' according to which the [Islamophobe] 'projects' onto the figure of the [Muslim] the disavowed part of himself, is not sufficient. The figure of the 'conceptual [Muslim]' cannot be reduced to the externalization of the [Islamophobe's] 'inner conflict.' On the contrary, it bears witness to (and tries to cope with) the fact that the [Islamophobe] is originally decentered, part of an opaque network whose meaning and logic elude his control. (p. 195)

The ideology of American exceptionalism, particularly as fueled by the WOT discourse, is what sustains fantasy$_1$ (i.e., pseudo-patriotism) and, consequently, fantasy$_2$ (i.e., Islamophobia).

5. The Fantasy is a Narrative

Žižek's (1998) states, "fantasy constitutes the primordial form of narrative, which serves to occult some original deadlock" (p. 196). This 'primordial form' is what Jean-François Lyotard (1979) calls a 'grand narrative', such as the 'clash of civilizations' or 'the Crusades'. The WOT discourse indexes the grand narrative of 'Holy War', which consequently reinforces fantasy$_1$.

6. The Fantasy Involves an Impossible Gaze

The gaze of the 'innocent observer' is an 'impossible gaze' because it "is also in a way non-existent, since this gaze is the impossible neutral gaze of someone who falsely exempts himself from his concrete historical existence, i.e. from his actual involvement in the [viz. WOT]" (Žižek, 1998, p. 202). For instance, claiming to be 'apolitical', 'objective', 'unbiased', 'impartial', etc. can be an attempt to depoliticize Islamophobia, which is the very definition of a political act and constitutes fantasy par excellence. In other words, no one is innocent; we are all in this together because ideologies interpellate us and discourses position us. To put it differently, this veil of fantasy speaks to the internalization of Islamophobia, which affects both the subjects and the objects of Islamophobia (i.e., non-Muslims and Muslims alike).

7. The Fantasy Stages Castration

Žižek (1998) asserts that the psychic structure of the fantasizing subject, in relation to the symbolic order, is closer to perversion rather than neurosis because "in contrast to the 'normal,' neurotic subject, for whom the Law functions as the agency of prohibition which regulates (the access to the object of) his or her desire, the pervert's object of desire is Law itself" (p. 203). This perversion is clear in cases of torture (e.g., Abu Ghraib or GTMO) and Islamophobic hate crimes.

So if Islamophobia is a fundamental fantasy, as I have tried to show, what are Islamophobes to do? Žižek (1998) provides us with the Lacanian formula: "l*a traversée du fantasme* (traversing the fantasy) consists, namely in an acceptance of the fact that *there is no secret treasure in me* at all, that the support of me (the subject) is purely fantasmatic (p. 196, emphasis in original). Because "The Other's desire [for exceptionalism] provides the minimum of fantasmatic identity to the [Islamophobic] subject" (p. 196), Islamophobia will cease to exist as a fantasy for the pseudo-patriot only when his or her notion of national identity is not premised on a *fear of the other* but, rather, on a radical love for difference. I must emphasize though that this is a compromise because "the pathetic assertion of ethnic identity" (e.g., 'I am American'), to use Žižek's (1998) words, renders the gap in the midst of one's self-identity visible. The function of the 'conceptual Muslim' is, of course, to render this gap invisible (p. 192) and that is why fantasy works in the first place; to reiterate, "fantasy is the *screen* that separates [the Islamophobe's] desire [for exceptionalism] from [his death] drive " (p. 209, my emphasis).

Islamophobia as a Counter-Discourse

To conclude, I want the reader to consider Islamophobia not only as a discursive effect or a structural fantasy, but, more importantly, as a material *counter-discourse*. Moussa and Scapp (1996) clarify what this Terdimanian notion means: "When … the formerly voiceless begin to speak a language of their own making—a *counterdiscourse*—they have begun to *resist* the power seeking to oppress them. In this narrow sense, the very act of speaking is political" (p. 89, my emphasis). This type of scholar-activism "aims at clearing a space in which the formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their *desires*" (p. 88, my emphasis). In this sense, Islamophobia (studies) is a counter-discourse—countering "the domination of prevailing

authoritative discourses" (p. 88). In sum, the ethical task of scholar-activists in critical psychology is a counter-ideological praxis: 'practical theorizing' in action (p. 90) in an effort to change the world through anti-oppression and (non)violence.

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[i] "By Whiteness, I refer to a master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference. This chain provides subjects with certain symbolic positions such as 'black,' 'white,' 'Asian,' etc., in relation to the master signifier. 'Race,' in other words, is a system of categorization that once it has been organized shapes human difference in certain seemingly predetermined ways. We will therefore have to see how this symbolic structuration is related to visibility" (Seshadri-Crooks, 2002, pp. 3-4).