“Dangerous Definitions: On the Politics of Defining Racism”

Antisemitism & Islamophobia Workshop
Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue

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24 May 2019
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1. WHAT MAKES A DEFINITION USEFUL FOR FIGHTING RACISM?
Notes on Methodology/Perspective

• My material/account is very UK-specific & linked to British politics. Being the subject of an ‘inquiry’ at Bristol – what I learned from having my views institutionally adjudicated through the IHRA definition

• Not only me. My experience of being silenced/persecuted for my views is experienced in a greater degree by those in more precarious positions, and esp. by Palestinian colleagues with whom I am collaborating.

• Rarity of a principled, intersectional stance. Many who supported me—whose support I was & am grateful for—are less concerned by the implications for free speech of silencing contrary points of view than I came to be through my experience. By contrast, I cannot passively consent to the trivialization of this concept, notwithstanding its rightwing appropriation.
A Good (Politically Useful) Definition of Racism

• Should be **generalizable** to broader cases
• Should focus on **core** rather than **peripheral** features
• Should carefully contemplate the **context of its application**. We should resist the impulse to use definitions (such as the IHRA definition) in contexts they were not intended for.

• How can we operationalize it? Definitions that are excessively context-specific and group-specific fail to fulfill their mandate and risk giving **too much power to administrators and institutions charged with implementing the definitions**. In the world we inhabit, every definition of racism will necessarily be implemented in a racist society and **OFTEN BY RACISTS**
2. DEFINING ISLAMOPHOBIA (5 versions)
THREE YEARS LATER:

In the Runnymede report, Islamophobia was defined as "an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination."

Runnymede: A Definition without Clear Temporal Boundaries

Three years later:

...
Further erasing temporal boundaries

“Islamophobia” is a modern word for a prejudice that dates back to the Middle Ages and that permeates Western societies in the 21st century.”

Todd Green, “Islamophobia” (2019)

Q: Is an account of contemporary Islamophobia that roots it in medieval prejudice useful for understanding and fighting it in the present? What about antisemitism?
Good things: Linking Islamophobia to racism is in my view a positive step and it helpfully moves us beyond the terms of the IHRA definition. However, the context that would be needed to adequately adjudicate Islamophobia in the APPG report is completely lacking.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IS ROOTED IN RACISM AND IS A TYPE OF RACISM THAT TARGETS EXPRESSIONS OF MUSLIMNESS OR PERCEIVED MUSLIMNESS.**
All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims

What is missing from the APPG’s 72 page report?

• **State complicity:** Securitization context ignored, as is the complicity of the state in generating Islamophobia. No serious consideration of the damaging impact of Prevent and the War on Terror.

• **Ignoring past failures:** Attention to ways in which the IHRA def. has resulted in free speech violations, including the suppression of Palestinian voices.

• **Silencing of Muslim voices:** groups such as CAGE and MEND are excluded/marginalized from the report, notwithstanding their substantial contributions to exposing Islamophobia. Presumably they are seen as extremists, and not good for PR to coordinate with them. CAGE issued a response to the APPG report, which has to date been ignored by the APPG.
Islamophobia at the intersection of Racism & Colonialism (Sayyid, *Thinking Through Islamophobia*, p 16)

“Islamophobia can perhaps be defined as the disciplining of Muslims by reference to an antagonistic Western horizon….Such an understanding…rejects the view often taken by many well-meaning Muslims to understand it as a transhistorical phenomenon…to consider every moment of Islamicate history where Muslims are marginalised or excluded an instance of Islamophobia. The first Islamophobes then would be found among the Makkan aristocracy who opposed the Prophet, making life for him and his early followers so difficult that they had to leave Makkah. Such an interpretation…[is] similar to perennially popular accounts of anti-Semitism as the longest hatred”

Q: what are the geographic parameters of Islamophobia (in the sense we may wish to put forward for legal/definitional purposes)?
Islamophobia & the War on Terror

“We regard the state, and more specifically the sprawling official ‘counter-terrorism’ apparatus, to be absolutely central to production of contemporary Islamophobia – it is the backbone of anti-Muslim racism. An increasingly powerful and largely unaccountable set of institutions, with close relations with multinational technology and security companies, targets ‘extremists’ and those said to have been ‘radicalised’, focusing on Muslims in particular. These concepts are imprecisely defined in official discourse. Consequently, the way they are operationalised in the state bureaucracy, together with the routine practices of the police and other public servants, means that many thousands of people in the UK, including non-Muslims, are now regarded as legitimate targets for suspicion, surveillance and intelligence-gathering.” (Massoumi et al, 2017: 8)

Massoumi, Mills, and Miller, What is Islamophobia? (2017)
3. RESPONSES TO THE ISLAMOPHOBIA DEFINITION BY UK POLITICIANS & COMMENTATORS
Sayeeda Warsi MP (prominent Conservative MP)

Why Warsi’s approach is (in my view) flawed:

**Ineffective.** The Community Security Trust (CST) & Board of Deputies have completely ignored her call & have not expressed solidarity w/efforts to obtain gov’t recognition for the Islamophobia Definition

**Wrong allies:** Ironically, her hashtags (including the perhaps unintended allusion StandWithUS), are implicated in the silencing of Palestinian voices.

**Uncritical:** as per usual, total failure/refusal to recognize the damage that has been wrought by the IHRA definition, particularly on university campuses.
Press release

New process set out to establish a working definition of Islamophobia

Communities Secretary announces a process for establishing a working definition of Islamophobia.

Speaking at the debate, the Communities Secretary agreed that there needs to be a formal definition of Islamophobia. He made clear that the APPG definition raises practical and legal challenges.

The APPG proposal defines Islamophobia as “a type of racism”, which is not in line with the definition enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. The Communities Secretary said that conflating race and religion in conflict with legal definitions could cause confusion, undermine free speech and may not adequately address sectarian hatred.

He announced the government will instead appoint 2 expert advisers to lead a new study in close collaboration with the cross-government Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.
Nasrine Malik (commentator for The Guardian)

It’s not difficult to define Islamophobia. So why does Britain struggle with it so much?

Nasrine Malik

All Muslims are asking for is a moral gesture, a step towards grappling with what is happening to them. I am afraid Shah is either naive or generous. The pushback is not something as benign as “stupid”: the fixation on a nonexistent legal dimension is, in itself, a manifestation of Islamophobia which refuses to see Muslims as individuals with rights, but as part of a sinister whole. One could even say it is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness. A helpful definition, isn’t it?
4. EXEMPLIFYING ISLAMOPHOBIA (OR NOT)?
Jess Philips, Labour MP for Birmingham & a protester against education regarding same-sex marriage

Play clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zy9FAko75hE
Q: Does a concept/definition of Islamophobia help us think about this incident?

BOTH SPEAKERS SHARE PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS

• 1 anti-LGBTB protest treated as a representation of “the Muslim community” that may damage Muslims’ ‘reputation’. Would the same claim ever be made of a Jewish protestor?

• MP declares her desire to ‘protect’ Muslims. She patronises Muslims & makes the part represent the whole.

• Equally, the protestors claim that the MPs reaction is (being perceived as) Islamophobic is problematic. Using a definition of racism to seek state backing for the views of a particular member of that religion sets a bad precedent.
Further examples to deliberate on

Questions:

Does the concept of Islamophobia gain by incorporating these examples? Or will it lose its political value through such broadening?

• The Crusades as an inaugural “Islamophobic moment”
• Iranian hostility towards Arabs & Arabo-Islamic culture
• Uyghur Muslims in China (arguably yes given the Eurocentric even if transnational nature of the War on Terror discourse).
What I Have Learned About Definitions of Racism

• Don’t start from scratch Begin with the concept of hate crime (not non-crime). Build on existing jurisprudence of criminal acts so as to strengthen recognition of their racist dimensions.

• Intersectionality In the contemporary context, most perpetrators of hate crime in Europe and North America are influenced by antisemitism and Islamophobia. Racism is intersectional. Intersectional definitions are better than group specific ones.

• Narrowness = Precision The narrower we can be in our definitions while accurately capturing the phenomenon, the better.

• Free Speech Matters Resist the right wing appropriation of the concept of free speech. The right to free speech is a condition of possibility for our ability to protest.
Further Recommendations

• Don’t get bogged down in (a)historical narratives. Engage with the past in its own terms and not through the prism of contemporary Islamophobia/antisemitism. Intersectional links between Islamophobia & antisemitism are modern, not medieval (another reason to avoid rooting contemporary definitions in ‘ancient hatreds’).

• Resignification. Worth noting the problems with the term itself, but we also have the power to resignify it & give it new more specific meaning.

• (From a Palestinian colleague). Unity is strength. With the Muslim community divided over the definition (CAGE vs APPG), it’s hard to move forward. The IHRA def. has been effectively mobilized as a result of (apparent) unity among the Jewish community (there are dangers in such unity as well, but a well-constructed definition could address that).
Further Reading (my past & forthcoming work on this topic)


• 2019 “Is the ‘Hate’ in Hate Speech the ‘Hate’ in Hate Crime? Waldron and Dworkin on Political Legitimacy,” Jurisprudence (Online First: https://doi.org/10.1080/20403313.2018.1552468)

• 2018 “Legal Form and Legal Legitimacy: The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism as a Case Study in Censored Speech,” Law, Culture and the Humanities (Online First: https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872118780660).

• 2018 “The IHRA definition’s imprecision makes it a threat to free speech,” Prospect Magazine