

# Racism and Islamophobia

Memet Uludag and John Molyneux

Memet Uludag, People Before Profit candidate for Castleknock in the recent local elections, found his posters were the object of sustained attack. First, there were pieces of bacon sellotaped to some of them, then many others were taken down or cut up and finally pictures of a pig's head were attached to a number of them. The symbolism left no room for doubt -this was an ugly and vicious Islamophobic campaign.



Memet Uludag replacing his defaced election posters with ones baring anti-racist messages from the local community.

However, the response to this outrage, or lack of it, on the part of a number of organisations and individuals on the left, showed a worrying degree of uncertainty, confusion and unease when dealing with the issue of Islamophobia. Two questions in particular arose, and do arise, with some regularity: Is Islamophobia a form of racism, isn't it about religion? Isn't Islamophobia to some extent justified given the alleged reactionary beliefs and practices of Islam as a religion and of states claiming to be Islamic. But clearly this is not some local difficulty in Ireland, rather it is a problem that affected the left right across Europe and has in many cases weakened the ability of the left to deal with emerging right wing and Islamophobic forces.

The purpose of this article is to argue a) that Islamophobia is most certainly a form of racism; b) that our opposition to Islamophobia should in no way be weakened or mitigated on account of Islamic beliefs or the behaviour of states in the Muslim world, c) that singling out Islam for special criticism as being particularly reactionary among religions is false and itself a manifestation of Islamophobia, d) that clarity on the left and among avowed anti-racists on these matters is vital because Islamophobia is one of the most important forms of racism in the world today and one of the main ideological weapons of divide and rule internationally for both the forces of fascism and the far right and for mainstream parties and imperialist ruling classes as a whole.

## Islamophobia is racist

The argument that Islamophobia is not racist because Islam is a religion not a race is completely false. First of all the definition of racism cannot be made dependent on whether or not its targets and victims constitute a distinct race for the simple reason that distinct biological races do not exist. The 'white' race does not exist; the 'black' race does not exist; nor the Jewish race, nor the Asian race, nor the Indian and so on. Human beings are all members of a single species. Irish people were long subjected to major racist stereotyping and discrimination in Britain but 'Irish' is a national identity and not a race.

The fact is the term 'racism' is firmly established in our language and social usage internationally -it is entrenched in the political discourse and debate of all countries -so we can't and shouldn't try to

opt out of it. But what matters is not some arbitrary or fixed 'dictionary definition' of the word but an understanding of how racist ideology developed historically and of the social and political roles it has played. Socialists should start not from words but from social realities and processes and once this is done it becomes absolutely clear that Islamophobia is a form, the 'latest' form, of racism.

Racist ideology, in the form of prejudice against people of colour, arose and took definite shape along with the development of capitalism in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries as a justification for the immensely profitable slave trade<sup>1</sup>. It was developed and established by the European ruling classes, especially the British ruling class. At the time the rising bourgeoisie was engaged in a struggle against the feudal aristocracy waged, so as to attract popular support, under the banner of 'the rights of man' and 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. This could only be reconciled with the mass enslavement and forced transportation of millions of Africans to the New World -a process crucial to the development of capitalism -by denying equal humanity to black people, by insisting on their innate wickedness, inferiority and incapacity.

Racism further evolved as the ideology of empire, legitimising and rationalising the systematic conquest and subjection of the rest of the world (Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Polynesia etc) by the rulers of Western Europe and their offshoots (in the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa etc) -a process which developed over centuries and reached its apogee in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Empire was justified because non-European peoples were 'child-like' and incapable of self rule, at least until they had

been led through a long period of 'education' by their imperial masters. The racism of empire was promulgated by the imperialist bourgeoisie but it was important to them that it became 'popular' i.e. percolated down into the working classes because it was the working classes who had to provide the soldiery for imperialist wars and more generally because racism served to bind the workers into support for the imperialist project as a whole.

With the decline of empire and the gradual disintegration of overt colonialism, which started with the First World War and intensified after the Second, racism mutated again. Now its main target became the immigrants who came to the advanced capitalist countries from the former colonies. Whereas the racism of slavery and empire emphasised biological inferiority, anti-immigrant racism stressed cultural difference and economic competition. 'We' were always about to be 'swamped' by foreigners with an 'alien culture' who didn't share 'our culture'. 'They' were always 'taking our jobs' and being given 'the pick of housing'. The form of this racism was determined by its function for the ruling class, not justifying British rule of India which was now impossible, but dividing the working class and providing scapegoats for the problems of the system. This became a racism that could deny it was racist claiming always and everywhere to just be about 'numbers' and 'resources'. Hence the refrain, 'I'm not a racist but'

In analysing the historical evolution of racism it is important to understand that there was both change and continuity. Each shift in the dominant racist discourse built on the foundation laid by the previous form. Thus the anti-immigrant racism spread by the likes of Enoch Powell, Margaret Thatcher, UKIP and Marine le Pen

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Fryer's powerful account in Ch.7 of his magnificent *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain*. Pluto Press, 2010.

doesn't foreground the idea that black or Asian people are inherently inferior or uncivilised but nevertheless quietly trades on it. It is not said openly that Africans or Romanians are born criminals, but the assumption is made that having them live next door is 'a problem'. No one uses the n-word when they know the cameras are rolling but when they think they are switched off it is a different matter.

The main function of anti-immigrant racism in the post-war period was internal, to help maintain social control within the core western countries. The role of justifying imperialist wars and interventions, of which there were many (mainly by the US) was played principally by anti-Communism. Racism was often there as an undertone (the 'gooks' in Vietnam etc) but combating 'the red menace' was the headline story. With the end of the Cold War there was an ideological vacuum - Islamophobia filled it.

Why specifically Islamophobia? First and foremost because of the central importance of oil, and therefore of the Middle East, for western capitalism. If the world's major oil reserves were located in Tibet or the peoples of the Middle East were largely Buddhist we would probably have had Buddhophobia instead. Secondly because of the perceived threat to US control of the region posed by so-called 'Islamic fundamentalism', more accurately termed 'Islamism' or 'political Islam'. Islamophobia started to be developed as a dominant theme in the media after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which took that key country out of the US camp.<sup>2</sup> It was then ramped up many notches after 9/11 as a key ideological underpinning of the 'War on Terror' and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

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<sup>2</sup>One point on which clarity is needed is militant Islamism is absolutely not a threat to ordinary people in America or Europe. There is not the remotest possibility of an Islamic invasion or conquest by any means of Britain, France or Ireland, never mind the US. However Islamism, which is a kind of variant on nationalism, can be a threat to our rulers interests in the Middle East.

Islamophobia thus assumed the classic role of racism as an ideological construct legitimising imperialist war and conquest - one that could serve to motivate the pilots who had to drop the bombs, the soldiers who had to do the shooting and the torture, and to at least confuse (if not positively enthuse) the public at home who had to pay for it all. Moreover in playing this classic role it deployed the tried and tested themes and tropes of racism - the construction of a generalised 'other' - 'they', 'the muslims' who all share or are likely to share the same characteristics: backwardness, fanaticism, and a proneness to violence ('terrorism'); and are therefore a threat to 'our culture, 'our way of life'.

## **Is there any justification for Islamophobia?**

At one level the answer to Islamophobia is the same as the answer to all forms of racism, namely that we are all human beings with our different characteristics and it makes no more sense to see all Muslims as 'the same' than it does to see all black people, or French or Germans or Irish as the same. And most liberal, well meaning people who think of themselves as not being racist would doubtless accept this. Nevertheless it is clear that for many of those people including some who would consider themselves part of the left there is a certain hesitancy, a reluctance to mobilise or denounce Islamophobia in the same way that they would anti-semitism or anti-black racism.

This is usually articulated in terms of Islam being a particularly backward or reactionary religion, especially in its attitudes to women and gay people. The im-

mediate response to those who contrast the 'enlightened' West or 'liberal' Europe or 'tolerant' Christianity to 'intolerant' Islam have extremely short memories and highly selective vision.

On the question of women's rights, even a purely verbal commitment to women's equality is a recent phenomenon in our history, only becoming widely accepted in the last forty years or so. It can hardly be cited as an entrenched 'western' tradition or value and is still far from being achieved in practice. This is even more the case when it comes to LGBT rights where any widespread recognition of equality is a product only of the last couple of decades. In the 20th century the 'enlightened' West gave us two World Wars (claiming about 65 million lives), Fascism and the Holocaust, Stalinism and the Gulag, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Franco's Spain, the Ku Klux Klan, lynching and Jim Crow, the Vietnam War and umpteen other atrocities. And right now in Europe we have the National Front topping the poll in the French Euro elections, Jobbik at 16 percent in Hungary and Golden Dawn at 9 percent in Greece, never mind UKIP etc. In the Ireland of the Magdelene Laundries, the Christian Brothers, Savita, Youth Defence and the Tuam Bon Secours case we should be all too aware of how dubious and flimsy all claims of 'our' tolerance are.

But there is a deeper point involved here. It is a mistake to see social and political practices and social attitudes as fundamentally based on or determined by religious doctrines or affiliations. Certainly these things have an effect but fundamentally it is the other way round -it is material social relations and conditions that shape religious doctrines. As Karl Marx famously put it, 'The mode of production of material life conditions the general pro-

cess of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'<sup>3</sup>

The history of religion, especially the history of Christianity, dramatically demonstrates the truth of this proposition. We have seen the early Christianity of the slaves and the oppressed in the Roman Empire who believed 'Blessed are the poor', and the Christianity of the Emperors which preached 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's'; the Christianity of the Middle Ages that held that usury (money-lending) was sinful and the Christianity of John Calvin with its Protestant ethic adapted to the rise of capitalism; the Christianity of Thomas Munzer who led the Peasants Revolt in Germany and of Martin Luther who slaughtered them; the Christianity of the Counter-Reformation that gave us the Holy Inquisition and of Oliver Cromwell who overthrew Charles I but crushed the Irish. More Recently we have seen the Christianity of the racist right and the Klan and the Christianity of Martin Luther King; of the pro-Apartheid Dutch Reform Church and of Archbishop Desmond Tutu; of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness; of the Catholic hierarchy in Rome and liberation theology in Latin America.

In other words changes in the real conditions of people's lives changed and shaped the content of their religious beliefs and the division of society into exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed produced out of nominally the same religion, polar opposites in political attitudes and struggle. Exactly the same is true of Islam and Muslims.

There is no space here for a history of Islam but the fact is it has gone through

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<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, 1859 Preface, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

many centuries of change and transformation just like Christianity. There are now many different Islams in the world today -not only of different formal affiliation (Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Wahabee, Sufi etc) but of different emphases and interpretations between different tendencies within each sect or affiliation. There are always significant differences between the Islam of the rulers, the Islam of the bazaar and the Islam of the urban workers and so on.

The horrible brutality of the Saudi Arabian regime, including its appalling oppression of women, is not primarily determined by its being a Muslim country but its being a plutocratic dictatorship controlled by a royal family of immense wealth. Their extreme conservative interpretation of Islam is used to reinforce their rule over their own people but proves no barrier to serving as the ally of the US in the region or enjoying the fleshpots of Europe from time to time.

Egypt is an overwhelmingly Muslim country but this doesn't prevent the Egyptian military ruthlessly persecuting the Muslim Brotherhood and attacking Coptic Christians when it suits them. When the Egyptian masses rose in their millions to overthrow Mubarak many of them paused in the middle of the street fighting to kneel in prayer (under the fire of water cannon).

In other words there is no basis for seeing Islam more inherently any more reactionary than any other religion and even less basis for stereotyping all Muslims or somehow holding them collectively responsible for the deeds of Osama Bin Laden or the Iranian Ayatollahs.

## **Why Islamophobia matters**

As we have shown Islamophobia is a form of racism and racism is always unjust and oppressive, a weapon of reaction everywhere. But there are a number of reasons why clarity on the question of Islam-

phobia is particularly important at the present time. First, Islamophobia has been promoted and normalised by the media throughout America and Europe in a way that has ceased to be the case for anti-black racism, and this is clearly shaped by its usefulness as a cover for wars, interventions and internal repression ('Homeland Security', anti-terrorism legislation, deportations etc).

Second, once Muslims are stereotyped and discriminated against on the basis of their religion this will slide inevitably into discrimination on the basis of skin colour, appearance, name etc. Just as anti-immigrant racism claimed to focus on cultural difference but still built on all the old ideas of innate inferiority, so beneath 'liberal' Islamophobia the cruder racism will lurk and come to the surface.

The racists and Islamophobes who defaced and destroyed Memet Uludag's posters did not trouble to find out whether or not he was actually a muslim -his name and appearance were enough. It will be the same with UKIP, the EDL, Geert Wilders and all the far right parties.

Third, Islamophobia is seized on and used by the actual fascists. The ultimate agenda of fascism is not just racism and ethnic cleansing but the conquest of political power, the destruction of parliamentary democracy and the crushing of the independent organisations of the working class (the left and the trade unions). For the fascists racism is a means to this end, a tool to be used in the building of support and the mobilisation of masses behind its anti-working class banners. From their point of view the question of who are the targets of their racism is a secondary matter. Their strategy is to pick on whoever is selected by the wider society (i.e. by the ruling class) as the scapegoat of the day and present themselves as those who will push the struggle against

this 'enemy' to the limit. In Britain in the 1930s the target of Oswald Mosley was Jews. In the 1970s for the National Front it became Afro-Caribbeans. In the 1990s it was Asians. Now it is 'Muslims'. In much of Eastern Europe it is Roma. If the government says restrict immigration they will say 'send them back'. If the government says 'British jobs for British workers'

they will say drive the foreigners out of the workplaces. If Tony Blair says militant Islam is the main enemy in the world, they will say burn down the mosques.

Precisely because of this an understanding of Islamophobia and its racist character and a determination to combat it is matter of a vital importance for all the left.