

Anarchism and the Struggle Against Islamophobia: Three Arguments for the Hesitant

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Surprisingly, some anarchists hesitate to join the struggle against Islamophobia. The principle of an unconditional rejection of religion seems to stand in the way of committing to a struggle that is, above all, directed against the state and oppression.

To convince the hesitant, I argue that Islamophobia should be understood as 1) racism, 2) state paternalism, and 3) colonialism. Each time, I will recall what, in my view, should be obvious: namely, that it should not be so difficult for anarchists to stand alongside those who suffer this triple oppression.

1. Islamophobia is racism

Let us begin with a definition: what can be called *Islamophobia* in France today refers to the set of laws, discourses, or practices in which criticism of Islam serves as a pretext and a mask for the most blatant racism. It is therefore a strategy that indirectly seeks, through attacks on a religion, to justify xenophobic attitudes toward Muslim people or those perceived as such.

This strategy is based on the identification of an internal enemy within a nation whose boundaries are drawn in ethnocentric and intolerant ways. It takes place in a context of racist and conspiratorial fantasies about a “great replacement” or a supposed “cultural insecurity” that portrays Muslims—that is, for Islamophobes, anyone who is to any degree from a country where Islam is the majority religion—as threats to the purity of a completely fabricated and fictitious “national identity”.

This fantasy is of course above all that of the far right, which has to a large extent replaced denunciations of immigrants with denunciations of Islam, the two being interchangeable in its eyes. But the far right is far from having a monopoly on Islamophobia, since it finds powerful support in the state policy of stigmatizing people identified as Muslims. They are portrayed as threats to republican values, incapable of integrating, manipulated by foreign powers, or even suspected of terrorism, which conveniently allows Islam to be reduced to its most authoritarian forms. The perception of Muslims in the state’s republican rhetoric thus ticks every box of an institutional racism that legitimizes all the discrimination suffered by those affected. In this framework, French secularism (*laïcité*) is merely a smokescreen: nobody is fooled by the fact that behind the recurring debates about religion in general, it is Islam that is being targeted. Islamophobia, simply put, is one of the strongest points of convergence between the far right and the French state.

How could anarchists, who are generally endowed with discernment, decently join this nauseating chorus? By what misunderstanding would criticism of religion lead them to support this convergence between far right racism and state racism? Without renouncing our principles, we must have a sense of priorities: the view that all religion has the potential to be oppressive (like every political or religious doctrine founded on a universal truth) should never take precedence over the defense of the oppressed and the struggle against xenophobia. It would be absurd to prioritize a general principle detached from context over concrete, current, and urgent engagement alongside people who are victims of racism. In other words, one must choose a side.

2. Islamophobia is state paternalism

Let me now introduce a second definition: paternalism is the attitude of rulers who want to forcibly guide citizens toward the “right” values, the “right” choices, and prevent them from making “wrong” decisions. It is therefore the process by which the state substitutes itself for individual reason, for the capacity for reflection, or even simply for free will, including the possibility of making mistakes.

Islamophobic state paternalism manifests itself particularly toward Muslim women. It takes the form of a patriarchal and sexist control of their bodies and their clothing, in order to subordinate them to an authoritarian model of “proper” republican femininity, modeled on the Western liberal ideal. The goal is to impose an identity conforming to prevailing norms by neutralizing any manifestation of alterity in an ever-growing number of spaces. The republican “public space” thus operates through the authoritarian invisibilization of differences: people with cultural and religious particularities, disabled people who defy ableist imperatives, LGBTQIA+ people who transgress gender norms all face daily injunctions to disappear or stay out of sight.

Repressive anti-veil and anti-abaya policies are the clearest expression of this, as illustrated by the widespread Islamophobia surrounding the start of the 2023 school year. The women targeted are treated as if they were alienated individuals whom the paternalistic state claims to be saving against their will. They are deemed incapable of making their own choices and deciding for themselves about their values and convictions: they are supposedly manipulated by hidden authorities (presumably fundamentalist ones), as if patriarchy could not tolerate that a woman be autonomous and as if one must always look for men’s hidden influence behind her choices.

Here too, republican arguments in favor of secularism should not deceive us: forcing women to remove the veil is no better than forcing them to wear it. Hatred of the veil is racist hatred. It is a denial of existence.

Anarchists would therefore be in very bad company if they were to take pride in endorsing this state paternalism. Is anarchism not founded on a demand for individual and collective autonomy and self-determination? Within this framework, there can be no question of forcing anyone to take the “right” path according to values or principles one would wish to impose. Will the anarchist world as we imagine it see valiant anarchist and secularist males tearing the veil from women in the streets, on public transport, or at school gates? For my part, I have no particular desire to live in such a world. In fact, I would fight it.

3. Islamophobia is colonialism

The use of criticism of religion for racist and paternalistic purposes has its origins in colonialism, on two levels. The first is global: it is that of civilizational imperialism, based on the Western universalist claim which reached its full extent with the conquest of the “Americas”—that is to say the genocide of Indigenous peoples, their enslavement, and the systematic eradication of their culture. From this colonial perspective, the ways of life of non-European populations are relegated to the status of backward or obscurantist practices: foreign peoples must be “awakened,” brought by force toward the light, toward civilization—unless one simply decides to maintain them in a position of racial subordination.

On a second level, Islamophobia is inseparable from French colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose effects are still fully perceptible today: military massacres, racial hierarchization, classification and surveillance of Muslim populations reduced to an inferior status of semi-citizenship, and of course suspicion toward Islam, at once despised, disciplined, and instrumentalized. Throughout the entire colonial period in Algeria, France experimented with bureaucratic and police techniques that later influenced authoritarian and repressive regimes around the world.

This colonial rootedness of Islamophobia still permeates the perception of Islam and, through this religion, the perception of racialized people in the public space. Internal colonialism still operates by dividing populations between a dominant group that enjoys all the privileges associated with belonging to a category defined by race-based criteria, and dominated actors treated as second-class citizens. And the obsession with the veil or with clothing expresses the Western-centric will to “civilize” Muslim women, to impose “progress” upon them while keeping them under the patriarchal domination of a state republicanism that perpetuates colonial methods.

Anarchism would fall into this colonial trap if it allowed criticism of religion to drag it toward a racist anarcho-republicanism imbued with intolerance. As anarchists, we have no civilizational “virtues” to impose, no “separatism” to combat, and no “communitarianism” to deplore. All of that is the language of Western imperialism and expansionism, whose ravages we know well. It is in this sense that I see no other perspective today for anarchism than to be resolutely decolonial, which necessarily includes the struggle against hatred of Islam.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would add that the struggle against Islamophobia is part of the proliferation of struggles (against transphobia, ableism, etc.) which today are added to the traditional fights against class domination, sexism, homophobia, or antisemitism. People who were once forced to remain silent or to accept silence about their oppression now make claims that deserve to be heard. It should leave no doubt in the eyes of anarchists that these claims are compatible with one another, that their proliferation undermines the foundations of the state and domination, and that the struggle against Islamophobia is an essential component of this work of undermining.

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Published in French in *Le Monde Libertaire*, no. 1855, November 2023 | *This text was written in the context of the start of the 2023 school year in France, when an Islamophobic debate broke out over the clothes worn by young Muslim women. This debate led to the state's repressive ban on the abaya. Within French anarchist circles, atheism and the rejection of religion still lead some activists to hesitate to oppose this ban, and some even support such authoritarian measures and encourage state racism and Islamophobia. Originally published in Le Monde Libertaire, this text was meant to push back against that trend.*

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