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For those who denounce the so-called cancel culture, Islamophobia would be only a temporary trend because of which “you can’t say anything anymore”, a strategy of the “Islamists” to be accepted in the heart of Western civilization. Sahar Aziz’s new book, *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom*, instead, adds a step in the critical analysis of anti-Muslim racism, describing it as structurally necessary to the perpetration of the “Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-Centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel 2013: 81). Grounding her analysis in the US context, Aziz interrogates the reasons why “Muslims are being treated as … a suspect race, rather than as a religious minority to be protected from persecution” (p. 3). From her law professor perspective with an interdisciplinary approach, Aziz’s work recalls that of Kimberley Crenshaw, in which juridical science is combined with social sciences to achieve change: indeed, her work is not limited to the analysis of society, but seeks as an ultimate goal, social justice.

When faced with the various laws protecting religious freedom in the United States, including the First Amendment, Aziz points out that “immigrant Muslims” suffer a form of racialization that criminalizes their identities, imposing “forms of subordination not currently experienced by other religious minorities” (p. 169): from hate crimes to the targeting by police forces, from the difficulty in finding a job to the impossibility of building mosques, racialization is not only manifested through discriminatory acts against individuals, but also in systematic and pervasive forms. Thanks to an extensive bibliography, very useful for those who want to further investigate the elaborated themes, *The Racial Muslim* frames Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism as expressions of structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997): “an exaggerated fear of, hatred of, and hostility to Islam and Muslims by the state and the public as a result of imputed inferior biological and cultural traits based on a religious identity that produces systemic bias, discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (p. 21).

That Islam is often portrayed as monolithic, irrational, primitive, aggressive, violent, and much more is a well-known fact. Aziz, however, goes back to the root of this phobia by examining “in detail the central role religion plays and how it racializes diverse immigrants encompassed in the Racial Muslim construct … showing how empire, American race/racism, xenophobia, and religion interact to
racialize immigrant Muslims in the post-9/11 era” (p. 5). While 9/11 is undoubtedly a turning point in the reactivation of Neo-Orientalist rhetoric and practices, the author argues that the Racial Muslim construct did not originate at that moment, but rather “it accelerated and deepened. The English settlers who established the United States of America brought with them Orientalist beliefs of the so-called Mahometans as uncivilized and barbaric” (p. 111). The importance of a structural reading of Islamophobia lies in the new tools it provides to the anti-racist struggle in challenging the securitarian rhetoric (Cesari 2009) that associates terrorism and migration, terrorism and Islam (Mahmood 2009). But Aziz goes one step further in debunking Muslim racialization, showing that Islam is perceived and represented as “a political ideology” (p. 136), “a political system” (p. 157), “a totalitarian ideology” (p. 164) rather than a religion: therefore “it could not count on the First Amendment protection of freedom of religion” (p. 136). Similarly, “mosques are not [seen as] houses of worship under the purview of religious freedom protections. Rather, they are nefarious places that breed terrorists” (p. 156): for that reason, their construction and diffusion must be prevented.

Aziz questions the alleged neutrality of Western knowledge: she deconstructs the foundation of the attack against Islam and Muslim people that would be the basis of the Neo-Orientalist “clash of civilization”, unmasking – as claimed by Prof. John L. Esposito in the foreword – the “often-overlooked deep historical roots of Anglo-Saxon Protestant nativism and White supremacy” (p. xv). Indeed, Aziz deeply roots her analysis within Critical Race Theory, claiming that “religious freedom in America has always been confined by the race of the adherents” (p. 66). As she discusses in detail in chapters 2 and 3, Aziz relates the contemporary situation of migrant Muslims to, on the one hand, that of Native Americans and African American (Muslims and not), on the other hand, that of Mormons, Eastern European Jews, Irish and Italian Catholics. By revealing how Whiteness is not a once-and-for-all defined category, but a social construction (p. 209), Aziz points out that access to White privilege was made available to the latter of these minorities on condition they “participate in the subordination of African Americans” (p. 72): “the roots of American Islamophobia – claims the author – also lie in the legacy of American slavery and anti-Black racism” (p. 103). Similarly, to address contemporary Islamophobia, “immigrant Muslims face a choice: accept the ‘racial bribe’ and seek mobility toward Whiteness, or engage in cross-racial alliances to end systemic racism grounded in White Judeo-Christian supremacy” (p. 191). While proposing both hypotheses, the author clearly expresses her view of racism as a structural phenomenon, which cannot be overcome only by achieving mutual recognition.

Moreover, Aziz traces a historical trajectory of the “Muslim terrorist trope” construction, which first targeted the Arab Palestinians, then the Iranians, and finally
the Afghan mujahidin. Indeed, after the end of the Cold War, the United States still needed an enemy against whom they could build their own national identity and the nation itself: for that reason, Islam and Muslims replaced Communism as a global threat to national security (pp. 115 and 124). Building on Mamdani’s “good Muslim, bad Muslim” (2009), Aziz also broadens the reading of the “performative and social construction of the Racial Muslim”, claiming that it “is hierarchical, not dichotomous” (pp. 6–7): the categories the author identifies are those (in order of dangerousness) of the Religious Dissident Racial Muslim, the Religious Racial Muslim, the Secular Dissident Racial Muslim, the Secular Racial Muslim, the Former Racial Muslim (pp. 7–10). In the name of the Global War on Terror, all suspected terrorists (meaning Arabs and Muslims) can be arrested and detained, producing a widespread climate of suspicion that Hatem Bazian (2008) has described as “virtual internment”. In the same way that Orientalism as an ideology was functional to colonialism as a project of conquest, so Neo-Orientalism, in the form of Islamophobia that “securitizes and criminalizes [Racial Muslims] as existential threats to the nation’s security” (p. 137), is functional to pursue projects of political, economic and military domination (pp. 113–14): “US hegemonic interests in Muslim-majority countries require the dehumanization and vilification of the native populations, empire building abroad animates anti-Muslim racism at home” (p. 211). For this same reason, it is clear that, in order to “combat ‘Islamic extremism’, [the] racialization of Muslims is bipartisan” (p. 197) within the political scene of the United States – but not only there.

Aziz’s analysis is firmly anchored in the US reality she describes. However, from her reflections it is possible to draw connections with the phenomenon of Islamophobia on a global level. Indeed, the convergence (p. 14) of different actors in stigmatizing Muslim men, for example, is at the heart of Sara R. Farris’s conceptualization of Femonationalism, which “refers both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam … campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality” (2017: 4). Without forgetting the problems that travelling theories can generate (Said 1983), the theorization of Racial Muslim construct is very important and necessary also outside of the USA. The only criticism I feel I can make to this ground-breaking book is that it does not systematically adopt a gender perspective; even if Muslim women’s experiences are mentioned at times (pp. 95, 142, 148, 203), the book does not provide an in-depth analysis in this respect. Several authors have shown, over the years, how the construction of gender is systematically interrelated to processes of racial domination (Davis 1983), colonialism and nation building (Dorlin 2006), and Orientalism (Khalid 2014). Rather than an absence, I believe this is an opportunity to continue to study and further research on the Racial Muslim construct.
References


