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Islamophobia and its long Tradition in the Media Coverage

Thank you very much for the invitation.

For me, this trip and this talk are something like a return to the beginnings of my work. In 1991, I began doing research on "The portrayal of Islam in the French press". And for those who don't remember that today's discourse is at least 20 years old (i.e., since the Iranian Revolution of 1979), I've brought with me a 1989 cartoon from *Le Monde:*

(Mo 14/4/89, S.6)
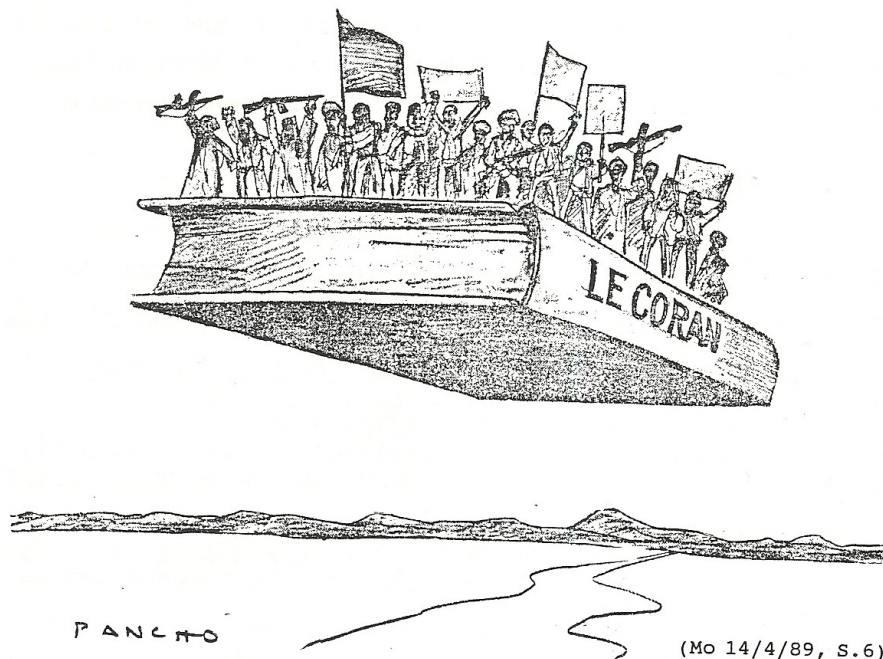
My master's thesis, which was submitted in 1993 and analyses media texts from the daily *Le Monde* and the weekly *L'Express* from the 1980s and early 1990s, shows that all of the elements of the discourse on Islam and Muslims already existed back then: Islam as violent, backward, and oppressive, claims that are/were supported with examples from women's biographies.

Here are a couple of cartoons from the time on the subject, which already show an important tendency: Eclipsing the political context, in this case the undemocratic refusal to recognise the results of the Algerian elections.

(Mo 19/6/85, S.4) Merkmalübertragungen von Knebel auf Schleier

(Mo 9/11/89, S.2)

METS TON VOILE!

J'TE DIS DE METTRE TON VOILE!!

HEUREUSEMENT QUE J'ÉTAIS LÀ!

(EX 23/1/92, S.16) Frau (durch Kind identifiziert) als Symbol; klare Schuldzuweisung bezüglich des Aussetzens der Wahlen in Algerien

This renders superfluous the claims, such as the one recently made by Daniel Sibony in *Le Monde* (3/1/2011), to break the "taboos" relating to Islam. There is no shortage of criticism of Islam – what is lacking are aspects of life in "Islamic" countries in another than the violent framing. Our archive is equally full of German and French examples in which evil is attributed to Islam itself. There is no qualitative difference in the portrayals before and after 11 September 2001; however, there is a quantitative difference: The number of generalising statements that impute drawbacks amongst Muslims to Islam has shown an enormous increase.

1995   2001

New is the ever-more-common "concerted action" thesis, which claims that the immigration of Muslims is an intentional campaign to islamise Europe and, ultimately, the whole world. Although this subject, too, could be read into the 1989 *Le Monde* cartoon, no such conspiracy theory existed at that time.

The homogenising perception of Muslims has always been furthered by the work of foreign correspondents. This is what defined the image of Islam first in France, and later in Germany. Nuisances, crises, and catastrophes in the world were long mentioned and illustrated with Islamic symbols, regardless of whether there was a causal relationship with Islamic issues or not. Accordingly, Islamic symbols such as prayer, mosques, headscarves, and the Qur'an have negative connotations.

1993   1998   2004   2006

Recent attempts at nuanced educational broadcasts, or feature reports in the newspapers, have demonstrably had no effect on the marked negative slant of day-to-day reporting, where normal, everyday life and the complexity of issues simply have no place.

Particularly problematic is the fact that many people do not realise that it is mostly them who are deriving generalisations from the selective coverage of the media, less so when their own community is concerned, but much more so when others are concerned. Viewers should ask themselves self-critically why they consider one piece of information to be the norm/confirmation and another as the exception/contradiction much more frequently. Perhaps the media-mediated prototype of "Islam" or "The West" is not representative at all. It should be well known that there is a tendency to idealise oneself and demonise the other – the Franco-German history also provides examples of such attributions, of those attributions being overcome, but also of the possibility of reviving them.

Here is another example from *Le Monde,* which depicts a scene on the occasion of the 1985 World Conference on Women. In response to his wife's planned departure, the husband asks: "When are we eating?" Here, a scene occurring all over the world is projected into the Orient by means of clothing. Today, many issues - like, for example, the treatment of female genital mutilation, violence against women and even polygamy - are discussed as "Islamic issues", even though they are in no way specific to Islam.

(Mo 30/7/85, S.3) Die Kleidung
versetzt die hier gezeichnete
Situation, die überall vor-
stellbar ist, in den *Orient*.

Although there are significant differences between the situations in Germany and the one in France, there are comparable attitudes and statements, as well as actions, with regard to Muslims, which indicate that the discourse is an influential factor. Unlike Turkish immigrants in Germany, the Arab immigrants in France had a common educational history with the motherland from the colonial period. Additionally, anyone who is born in France automatically becomes a French citizen. Linguistically, too, there were fewer problems, because of the long tradition of French schooling in its colonies: It certainly is not due to an insufficient command of French that many French people of Arab descent have worse prospects for educational and social success – especially on the labour market. And the differences between French and German secularism seem to dissolve into thin air with regard to Islam and Muslims. The discourse appears comparable throughout Europe, even taking into account all of the country-specific facets, such as the recognition of Islam as a religion in Austria.

In Germany, the discourse is currently determined by the following components: The traditionally strong negative loading of "things Islamic", as well as regular scare campaigns, have led to a pronounced discourse of mistrust that questions Muslims' loyalty (similar to the discourse on Jews at the end of the 19th century). At the same time, a dualism is propagated declaring "Islam" to be inconsistent with modernity, enlightenment, the rule of law, and human rights, and insinuating that Muslims wish to introduce "Sharia". Muslim voices are becoming more manifold in public discussions, but only as part of the following tendency: "Star witnesses" confirming the aforementioned suspicions are preferred. So-called "moderate" Muslims, on the other hand, are quickly suspected of doing "Taqiyya", i.e., that they are lying in order to infiltrate *us*.

Over the course of the economic crisis, the already-marked group, Muslims, are additionally scapegoated – with the help of the mass media – through the accusations of former Bundesbank official Thilo Sarrazin that the Turkish-Muslim immigrant community are at fault for the "degeneration" of Germany. The fear of terrorism, which has long been stoked, is now complemented with the fear of social decline. Racist discussions and exclusionary legislation (headscarf ban, immigration laws) are the consequences of this development, whereas the existence of islamophobia is still denied despite a murder motivated by anti-Islamic sentiment as well as attacks on mosques and cemeteries.

But there is now a discussion about islamophobia. However, a statement of our Minister of the Interior shows where the problem is. On the occasion of a meeting with Imams, on 8.12.2010, the Ministry of the Interior issued the following press release concerning the firebombing attacks on mosques: *"Against this background, De Maizière condemns the recent firebombing attacks on mosques in the strongest possible terms. However, it must not be ignored that radicalisation – up to and including the willingness to join violent groups – also occurs amongst Muslims living here."* This phrasing, which can be seen as a relativisation of and a lack of clarity in the condemnation of islamophobia, left a painful gap – which was already the case after the murder of Marwa El-Sherbini. Leaving open the possibility of regarding possible or actual crimes by Muslims as legitimation of anti-Islamic crimes is a signal in the wrong direction.

Our Minister of Family Affairs, Schröder, topped this by trying to distract from the issue of anti-Muslim racism by bringing up "anti-German racism". As if Germans were subject to systematic discrimination in Germany, and schoolyard insults like "potato"

and "pork eater" were not a reaction to years of discrimination experienced by real minorities according to Henri Tajfel's definition. Instead of giving clear signals, in some places there is even a debate as to whether islamophobic websites should be used as a source when researching Islamist activities. No criminal proceedings are initiated against the hatred-inciting blogs, although many of the people behind them are known.

One excitement is now following the other: our chancellor Angela Merkel declares multiculturalism "dead", while our president Christian Wulff acknowledges that Islam is meanwhile a part of Germany, too.. After the publication of the racist book of Thilo Sarrazin we can observe regular publishing of social welfare rankings of Muslims and a terror warning from time to time. The framing US vs. THEM is being installed and nourished and helps polarizing the people.

Anti-Islamic crimes are still not separately documented, meaning that they do not exist in crime statistics. In addition to this failure, a centre for the study of islamo-phobia, or, more generally, a centre for the study of prejudice, remains a desideratum of anti-racist work. What we do not need, however, is the further islamisation of de-bates that are not religious in nature. Many well-meaning educators, media figures, and politicians emphasise intercultural and culturally sensitive education, more know-ledge of Islam and Muslims, and an Islam conference rather than the implementation of constitutional duties within a secular state. This is counterproductive because it gives the impression that something is not right (with Islam and Muslims). Of course it would be good not to hide a mainstay of our culture in general school education and include the arabo-islamic knowledge coming from Spain and Italy.

However, media portrayals paint a different picture, because making something the subject of discussion has always implied that a problem is being discussed. Thus, systematic media education would also be beneficial for anti-racist work, as my final example shows. Recently, a man at an event called out, "Why are 9 out of 10 terrorists Muslims?" The answer is: "Because you don't understand the media!" If you compare the Europol statistics – of 500 terrorist attacks in recent years, one each year had an "Islamistic" background – with the subjective perception of this man, it becomes clear what kind of potential the magnification of marginalia by the media has. This also shows how much potential a systematic media education has to deconstruct prejudices. Showing how a news item is constructed would be beneficial for many issues – not just for the de-demonisation of Islam.

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[1] Jürgen Link in: Jäger/Halm (Hg.) Mediale Barrieren. Münster 2007: p. 151ff.