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Devils from our past: liberal Islamophobia in Austria as historicist racism

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ABSTRACT



This paper examines discourses of liberal Islamophobia in Austria, analysing interviews with journalists from national newspapers, magazines and TV station. Using a theoretical framework that combines a Gramscian analysis with methods of discourse analysis, it identifies “temporalization” as an effective discursive mechanism in the construction of the Muslim “Other” as a “folk devil”. It argues that liberal Islamophobia works as a historicist racism, which allows differently positioned subjects to invest into, and reproduce, a mythical space of representation where the Muslim “Other” figures as a “devil from our past”, embodying everything Austrian society has supposedly done away with in the years of political reform after 1968.

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This paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism,¹ in Europe. More specifically, it examines articulations of anti-Muslim racism that have recently been termed “liberal Islamophobia” (Mondon and Winter 2017, 2162), “post-liberal racism” (Tsianos and Pieper 2011), “identity liberalism” (Lentin and Titley 2011, 121) or “enlightened Islamophobia” (Hafez 2013, 128). This is a kind of racism articulated around the “Muslim question” (Norton 2013; Vakil 2013), which constructs the Muslim as an insufficiently progressive and emancipated, “illiberal Other” (Lentin and Titley 2011, 121).

Drawing on a “Gramscian” approach to the study of racism pioneered by Stuart Hall (1986; Hall et al. 1978), this contribution posits an alternative to currents within Islamophobia studies relying on agential, instrumentalist or intentionalist analytical models of racism (cf. Opratko 2017). Such an approach asks how particular racisms become part of popular “common sense” and analyses

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how racisms effectively construct a cross-class consensus. This theoretical framework is laid out in the first part of this article. In sections two and three, I present an analysis of original data gathered from 18 interviews conducted with editors and journalists from 11 major national media outlets in Austria. Combining the theoretical framework with methodological instruments developed in the field of discourse analysis, I argue that the metaphor of the folk devil can help decipher the ongoing and cumulative production of the Muslim as “Other” in the discourses analysed. More specifically, the Muslim Other figures as a haunting presence from “our past”, embodying what Austrian society has supposedly done away with in the years of political reform after 1968. In section four, the paper offers a theoretical reflection of these findings. Building on David Theo Goldberg’s notion of “racial historicism” (Goldberg 2002, 74–97) and Stuart Hall’s interpretation of racism as “mythical space” (Hall 1992; Laclau 1990, 61), I argue that a specifically *historicist racism* allows differently positioned subjects to invest into, and reproduce, Islamophobia in its liberal variation. Concluding, I discuss how an analysis of the production of the Muslim Other as a “devil from our past” allows wider reflections about the social and political conjuncture in which this articulation takes place, connecting it with the ongoing scholarly debate of today’s “Muslim question” in Europe.

Reconsidering “Gramsci’s relevance”: racism and folk devils

The case for a “Gramscian” analysis of racism was most forcefully put forward by Stuart Hall. From the late 1970s onwards, he argued for “Gramsci’s relevance for the study of race and ethnicity” (Hall 1986). In “Policing the Crisis”, a collectively authored study of the “mugging panic” in 1970s Britain, we find a Gramscian analysis in action, and one that, although not singularly occupied with the question of race, provides some invaluable insights and tools for any critical analysis of racism (Hall et al. 1978). The seemingly marginal phenomenon of petty street crime – the stick-ups, often perpetrated by black youth in English cities’ poorest areas, that became referred to as “muggings” – were used as an entry point for a *conjunctural analysis* (Hall et al. 1978, 18). Hall and his colleagues argued that an authoritarian “cross-class consensus on crime” existed (Hall et al. 1978, 139), internally structured by a number of “core images” or discursive “elements” that they distilled from their analysis of newspaper articles, letters to editors, and statements by politicians, police officials and judges. The widely shared interpretations of mugging, and crime more generally, were *hegemonic*: they formed a framework of common sense. This framework was constructed around the mugger as “folk devil” – a term adopted from Stanley Cohen’s “Folk Devils and Moral Panics” (Cohen [1972] 2011). Originating in the sociology of crime and deviance, a moral panic is generally defined as “an episode,

often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order" (Krinsky 2013, 1). At the centre of such an episode is usually a figure blamed not only for the scandalized acts themselves but seen as posing a threat to social order as such. Although the "folk devils" originally studied by Cohen were predominantly white youth, he pointed out similarities to "racial stereotyping": "Thus Jews are intrusive, but also exclusive; Negroes are lazy and inert, but also aggressive and pushing; Mods are dirty and scruffy, but also slickly dressed; they are aggressive and inflated with their own strength and importance, but they are also cowardly." (Cohen [1972] 2011, 56). For Hall and his colleagues, the moral panic surrounding the figure of the "mugger" in 1972–73 "fits in almost every detail the process described by Cohen" (Hall et al. 1978, 17). But they go beyond Cohen's perspective by integrating the concept of the folk devil in a Gramscian conjuncturalist analysis, where representations of the Other as "folk devil" play an important role in the universalizing of a particular, class-specific outlook, forming "the basis for the myth of a single, English kind of thought" (Hall et al. 1978, 156). By organizing their hegemony and establishing a common sense that allows subjects from different socio-economic backgrounds, both dominant and subaltern, to "make sense" of their daily lives within a shared framework of "Englishness", the leading social forces are able to forge a "basis for *cross-class alliances*" (ibid., emphasis in original). This, in turn, is seen as contributing to sustaining an "order of *cohesion*" of the social formation as such (Hall et al. 1978, 204, emphasis in original). Insofar as racist ideologies fulfil a similar role, we should understand them as contributing to the delicate balance of consent and coercion through which political power operates, and which Gramsci called hegemony. This forces us to consider the concrete articulations, the production of tropes, metaphors and codes that structure the forms of racism that underpin a particular historic bloc (cf. Hall et al. 1978, 162).

To summarize, Hall insists that to understand a specific form of racism, "we would have to begin by investigating the different ways in which racist ideologies have been constructed and made operative under different historical conditions" (Hall 1980, 341–2). As part of common sense, racist divisions between "us" and "them", become "practical", orienting collective behaviour and underpinning practices of inclusion/exclusion. Crucially, the "Other" produced by racism is not just "out there", Hall insists: "The devils do, indeed, have to be *summoned*" (Hall et al. 1978, 162, emphasis in original). Therefore, if we understand Islamophobia as a modality of racism, we need detailed analyses of its precise ideological operations, of the systems of meaning it establishes, and of its operative categories and metaphors. It is to the ways in which the figure of the "Muslim Other" is summoned as a "folk devil" in a specific spatio-temporal context that I turn now.

Analysing anti-Muslim racism in Austria: context and methodological considerations

Recent years have seen a small surge in academic interest in Islamophobia in Austria (Bunzl and Hafez 2009; Cherribi 2011; Dautović and Hafez 2014; Furlinger 2013; Hafez 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Hödl 2010; Krzyzanowski 2013; Muftić 2012). Most publications focus on what Mondon and Winter (2017, 2158ff.) call the “illiberal” variations of Islamophobia, especially the far-right “Austrian Freedom Party” (FPÖ). However, my interest is in the articulation and reproduction of Islamophobia by agents considered – and considering themselves – as liberal, non- or anti-racist. This is necessary for understanding the broad appeal of contemporary Islamophobia across political fault lines and well beyond the far-right (Cakir 2014, 15ff; Leibold and Kühnel 2003, 113), and its becoming part of a wider “common sense”. It is also relevant to understand the political strategies of the “illiberal” FPÖ, which has strategically adopted some liberal-feminist arguments in efforts to present itself as a defender of (Austrian, non-Muslim) women against “patriarchal” Islam (cf. Mayer and Sauer 2017; Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer 2014; Sauer 2017). More recently, liberal varieties of Islamophobia have also become politically effective on the left of Austria’s political spectrum. Examples include support by Austria’s Social Democratic Party for the controversial “Islam law” in 2015, which has been described as “institutionalized Islamophobia” (Dautović and Hafez 2014, 54; cf. Hafez 2017) and, in 2017, for a law banning the wearing of the full-face veil in public (cf. Hafez 2018, 55–7). In the same year’s national elections, a group led by former long-standing Green MP Peter Pilz that had formed just two months earlier, entered the *Nationalrat*. In their election campaign, the “Liste Pilz” campaigned against the supposedly growing influence of “political Islam” in Austria. Pilz himself published a book, titled “Heimat Österreich” (“Homeland Austria”), reproducing anti-Muslim stereotypes and denying the existence of Islamophobia altogether (Pilz 2017, 85). For Pilz, to “defend” the Austrian Homeland is to defend “our liberal culture”, and particularly women’s rights: “The basics of our culture are rights and duties. The right of men and women to be treated equally establishes the duty to respect women’s rights. Those who do not want this can leave” (Pilz 2017, 85).²

To investigate the reproduction of anti-Muslim discourse “in the name of liberalism” (Gustavsson, van der Noll, and Sundberg 2016), I conducted 18 interviews between February and September 2014. The respondents were journalists working at 11 different news media outlets in Austria (seven daily newspapers, two weekly magazines, two TV broadcasters). All of the respondents identified as “Austrians”, and none of them as Muslim. The guideline-based interviews were semi-structured, offering space for the informants to freely narrate and associate. They were asked to speak about their

experiences when dealing with topics related to Islam and Muslims in their daily work, about how they understand their own professional role in covering these topics, and about their personal views on some of the most widely discussed topics related to Islam.

The decision to do qualitative interviews with journalists follows from reflections on the theoretical framework sketched above. From a “Gramscian” perspective, journalists fulfil a specific role in the struggle over hegemony: They can be considered as “minor” organic intellectuals (Demirović 2007, 35), acting as popularizers and mediators, translating different elements of hegemonic leadership into languages of common sense, and shaping it in complex and contradictory ways. But they are also embedded in hegemony as “functionaries of the superstructures”, as Gramsci put it: “administrators’ and divulgators of pre-existing, traditional, accumulated intellectual wealth” (Gramsci 1971, 12, 13). My methodological hypothesis is that analysing the “common sense” of such “minor” intellectuals offers a window into hegemonic elements in the present conjuncture, and thus an entry point into the analysis of actually existing relations of hegemony.

Following Stuart Hall’s advice to “start [...] from the concrete historical “work” which racism accomplishes” in the field of meaning and representation (Hall 1980, 52), the analysis of the interviews seeks to identify and interpret *discursive mechanisms*, and explain how they operate in the historical context of the present conjuncture. The aim is to identify (a.) the ways in which the Muslim “Other” is constructed as a “folk devil”; (b) the “shared framework” around the “Muslim question”, and the experiences, struggles and contradictions articulated with it; and (c) structural similarities to other forms of racism.

In the following analysis, I focus on one specific discursive mechanism of anti-Muslim discourse that can add to an integral understanding of liberal Islamophobia. I argue that one of its peculiar features is the way it interpellates its subjects – those it includes in the imagined community of “Us” as well as those it excludes as the Muslim Other – through the discursive mechanism of *temporalization*.

Among us, from another time: Muslim devils from our past

In this section, selected passages from the transcribed interviews are presented and discussed in order to shed light on one specific discursive mechanism, which emerged as particularly conspicuous in the course of interpreting the material. This is the mechanism I call “temporalization”, which involves the discursive relegation of the figure of “the Muslim” to a constructed, Eurocentric past. For the analysis, I identified linguistic elements that operate as *temporalizing markers*: references to historical events, periods or personalities; adjectives and adverbs attributing a certain temporality to their objects, such as

“traditional”, “archaic”, “regressive”, “modern” or “progressive”; and modal particles signifying temporal distance, such as “already”, “not yet” or “still”.

A first example is in the following quote. The journalist discusses controversies in public debates commonly associated with Islam. His first reaction is to refer to “the role of the woman in society” (*Interview 1, m*); from there, he proceeds to what he sees as different “images of the family” in different religions and cultures:³

I take it for granted that a kind of liberal image of the family is already established in Austria. And Muslims are, in societal terms, in terms of numbers, certainly less liberal. And that means ... and not only in relation to questions of homosexuality. There it is certainly extreme. I am convinced that even Muslims that call themselves liberal are very likely to reject that, and – I mean, not in a militant way, I can’t accuse all of them of being violent – but they are certainly more explicit, more vehement in their rejection [of homosexuality] even than conservative circles in Christian society. (*Interview 1, m*)

The first thing to notice here is the temporalizing marker “already”, which functions to distinguish between an “Us” – “Austria”, which has “already established” a “liberal image of the family”, and “Them”. It is clear that the referential mechanism of constructing a binary difference is linked to a predication mechanism of evaluating the two groups differently (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 44): that a “liberal image” is something desirable, while its “rejection” is discursively linked to “violence” (even though the respondent immediately qualifies his statement – he can’t accuse “all of them”). Here, the term “liberal” does not designate a political camp within society (as opposed to “conservative” or “socialist”) but is used to describe Austrian society as a whole. What is crucial here is the implicit historical reference, which comes up frequently in a number of interviews, to the liberalization of social norms regarding family, gender and sexuality in the 1970s. Invoked by both male and female respondents, this production of “non-coevalness” (cf. Fabian [1983] 2014) of Muslims and non-Muslims works through the idea that “here” – designating Austria, or, sometimes, Europe – some norms have “already” been established, but only for “us”. “They”, while living among “us”, have yet to go through this process. The next statement, taken from a different interview, confirms the coupling of this particular mechanism of historization with the theme of Muslim “immaturity”. The journalist was asked what he believes to be reasons for the increasing prominence of the “Muslim question” in public and political discourse. Very quickly, he relates this to questions of gender and sexuality:

We have achieved quite something, this generation of the so called 68ers, and now all of a sudden some people come again and say, no, no, that headscarf thing is alright, and I’m the one choosing the boyfriend, and if I can’t choose the boyfriend then I’ll stab the woman. And we speak about that openly. And that has nothing to do with being on the right, but with being very far on the left!. (*Interview 2, m*)

Here, the respondent summons the theme of a “historical achievement” and directly connects it to a subject: “We have achieved quite something”. He also makes clear who he excludes from this “We”: “these people”, referring to Muslim immigrants. In this case, the “achievements” are linked to a specific historical marker when calls himself and “his generation” the “68ers”. Significantly, in both interviews, the respondents link the topics of gender and sexuality with violence. The achievements of feminism and sexual liberation, and by extension the safety of women and LGBT persons, are seen as threatened by those who have never learned the lessons of these struggles. Hence, the temporalization of Muslims produces not just difference through (temporal) *distance*, but at the same time a sense of threat and fear through (spatial) *proximity*.

Later in the same interview, the theme of a gendered Muslim “threat” emerges even more forcefully. Asked how he understands his own role as a journalist in this context, he responds:

Well, one of our jobs is to inform people, isn't it? And I don't mean in the sense of infotainment, you know, a little news and a lot of haha – no, you can actually ... If you write it often enough, perhaps someone will think twice, perhaps a woman will think twice before she decides to marry, say, an Iranian. Not because he's necessarily a bad man, but because his mindset is just completely different, and then it might well happen that she ends up locked up at home, or that she will be beaten because she wants to see her friends. I don't say everyone is like that, but it's much more common than here. And people should know that. I mean, you can play a game of water polo against crocodiles, if you feel like it. But you should know before that they are crocodiles. (*Interview 2, m*)

Here, the construction of a “folk devil” again operates through combining the temporalization of “the Muslim” with the construct of a threatening spatial proximity. It is a textbook example of a “folk devil”: An inherently violent, male figure threatening “our women”. The second passage makes it very clear that Muslims – or, more precisely in this case, Muslim men – are represented as inescapably *locked* in their backwardness, as it has become part of their very essence: They cannot escape their “mindset”. Muslim men are just what they are, like a prehistoric reptile preying on the guileless.

Again, the folk devil is not just dangerous because, as a simplistic interpretation of these statements as “cultural racism” would suggest, he is seen as culturally “different”. The peculiar obsession with it, I contend, has to do with its representing not the strange, but the all-too familiar. As Tyrer (2013, 76) notes, “racism works by attempting to increase social distance precisely because it is felt in proximity”. The Muslim folk devil is a haunting presence, because it stands for “our own” past, or rather for practices the respondents want to see relegated to the past. This is made clear by statements such as the following, taken from an interview with a female journalist. She is careful to reject any simplistic or culturalizing argument. During the interview, she repeatedly

explains her desire to overcome dualistic representations of Muslims versus Non-Muslims and to contribute to a “normalization” of the topic, emphasizing commonalities between Muslims and Non-Muslims, and focusing on social issues rather than religion. However, while rejecting culturalist dichotomies, the following segment does reproduce a temporalized Muslim “Other”:

I would rather talk about patriarchal structures than about religion. Because these patriarchal structures exist in Christianity just as much. And I grew up in the 70s in the countryside, I know all of this totally well, these interferences from the church and all that ... I'm a child of the Kreisky era. I liberated myself exactly from this, with this collective dream of equal opportunities for all. And by moving from the countryside to the city. And a lot of the things I see in Turkish families now, I know them from my own childhood. (*Interview 3, f*)

Her claim that she knows “all about this”, referring to patriarchal structures present in Muslim families and communities, is supported by invoking a narrative of individual and social liberation, in which personal and political histories are interwoven into one History. Where the previously discussed respondent invoked the “68ers” as a historical point of reference, here it is the “Kreisky era”. Bruno Kreisky served as *Bundeskanzler* (Head of Government) from 1970 to 1983 and oversaw a period of post-1968 progressive reforms, including the liberalization of penal law, de-criminalization of abortions and of homosexual practices. The reference to Kreisky invokes experiences of personal emancipation, especially concerning gender norms and sexuality.

The discursive mechanisms described so far bear some similarities with phenomena described by other scholars as “enlightened fundamentalism” (Fekete 2006) or “eurocentric Islamophobia” (Jackson 2018). However, these analyses focus on the shift from “racial” to “cultural” justifications for the discrimination of Muslims (Fekete 2006, 7) and its spatial dimensions, where “Islamophobia emerges from a cultural anxiety generated by the notion that previously Western spaces are being undermined by the presence of Muslims” (Jackson 2018, 145). The *temporal* dimension, which is crucial to the material analysed here, does not receive similar attention. Two other prominent concepts introduced recently to describe the mobilization of feminist and pro-LGTBQ tropes in anti-Muslim discourses seem to connect more directly with the analysis presented here: “femo-nationalism” (Farris 2012, 2017; cf. Hark and Villa 2017) and “homo-nationalism” (Puar 2007; 2013; cf. Ahmed 2011; El-Tayeb 2012; Haritaworn 2015; Petzen 2012). While not directly concerned with temporalization, they do acknowledge this dimension at least in passing (Farris 2017, 138–44; El-Tayeb 2013). However, the two approaches, which are quite different from one another, come with additional problems.

Sara Farris’ political-economic explanation of femo-nationalism rests on the claim that Muslim women are included in femo-nationalist discourses because of the growing demand for care and domestic workers in Europe: “The useful

role that female migrant labor plays in the contemporary restructuring of welfare regimes and the feminization of key sectors of the service economy accounts in a significant way for a certain indulgence by neoliberal governments and for the deceptive compassion of nationalist parties towards migrant women (and not migrant men)." (Farris 2012, 194) As Muslim women make up significant portions of female migrant care laborers, and "play the role of a synecdoche for the European stereotype of the female immigrant", Farris argues, they are being instrumentalized by far-right parties who "co-opt feminist ideals into anti-immigrant and anti-Islam campaigns" (186f.). This argument is based on a number of debatable assumptions. First, it generalizes the position Muslim women tend to take in the division of (care) labour. Second, it misreads the far-right's instrumentalization of feminist discourses as a genuine "compassion of nationalist parties towards migrant women (and not migrant men)" (194). And finally, Farris does not explain why femo-nationalism takes the form of a specifically anti-Muslim discourse. In contrast to the explanation offered by her, Muslim women's role as immigrant care workers play no role at all in the interviews conducted for this study. In fact, in Austrian far-right anti-Muslim discourse, Muslim women are frequently denigrated because they supposedly do *not* perform "useful" care work: Norbert Hofer, the current leader of the FPÖ, asked his supporters during his campaign for the Presidency of Austria in 2016: "Has anyone of you ever seen a Muslim working in the care sector, who is willing to perhaps change our elderlies' diapers? I don't know any." (cit. in *Die Presse*, November 16, 2016).

In contrast to Farris' Marxist-feminist concept of femo-nationalism, analyses of homo-nationalism mostly draw on Deleuzian theories of assemblage and affect (Puar 2013). They do not share the shortcomings identified in Farris' work on femo-nationalism. However, we encounter a different problem here. Analyses of homo-nationalism revolve around color-coded articulations of racism, where homo-nationalism "serves to naturalize the *whiteness* of dominant gender and sexual politics, and the ways in which these have often been complicit in colonial and racist projects" (Petzen 2012, 99, my emphasis). But in the versions of Islamophobia discussed in this article, we do not find colonial and color-coded versions of racism. Whiteness does not play a role in the statements analysed above. Even if we accept that a critical concept of "whiteness" is not necessarily linked to phenotype or skin colour, it's analytical power derives from its construction as a *racial* category. However, I suggest that we need to take the reality of "racism without races" seriously. As I have argued elsewhere, Islamophobia can function as "a racism which is genuinely and literally one 'without races', i.e. operating in different, and sometimes historically older, registers of othering, hierarchisation and exclusion – such as the civilised versus the barbarian" (Opratko 2017, 80). The othering of Muslims as, for example, intrinsically homophobic

(cf. Haritaworn 2015) does not, in our case, constitute a *white* subject, but a progressive, tolerant, free and civilized – in short: *liberal* – subject. This is important, not least because it might be precisely the decoupling of colonial/color-coded attributions from anti-Muslim racism that allows agents to participate in the reproduction of liberal Islamophobia. In other words, only the fact that it does not have to identify itself as white enables the liberal non-Muslim subject to invest symbolically, affectively and materially into anti-Muslim racism. Finally, I claim that the temporalizing dimension in liberal Islamophobia is much more significant here than in both Farris' and Puar's accounts. When the journalist quoted above says that she knows "all about this", she does not refer to actual Muslim families living in Austria today. What she does know "all about" is patriarchal structures that she, as a Non-Muslim Austrian, has supposedly left behind her. Her emancipation is a completed act: "I liberated myself exactly from this". The Muslim Other remains trapped in the Non-Muslim's past. It is this structure of argument that allows people self-identifying as liberal, feminist or progressive – even "very far left", as the respondent in interview 2 represented his own position – to invest in anti-Muslim discourse.

The temporalization of "the Muslim" works not only via references to "1968", "Kreisky" or other signifiers for "emancipation", but can flexibly incorporate a variety of different historical markers. The following quote, from a catholic conservative journalist, indicates as such. It is part of a longer passage in which he reflects on what he sees as the main differences between Christianity and Islam. In this context, he states:

That process is now going on within Islam, where they learn to be just one part, and not being one hundred percent right in everything ... And yes, that's an eternal problem, for Christians too! Our religion is, in my opinion, in our opinion, salvation and the ne plus ultra, but I still accept the fact that other people practise other religions. We cannot solve this completely. We have learned that somehow, painfully, the hard way ["wir haben viel auf die Mütze bekommen" – "we got slapped on our heads a lot"], and now the Muslims are learning it the hard way ["are getting slapped on their heads"] (*Interview 4, m*)

While the topic of "liberality" does play a role here as well, the dominant historical point of reference is not "1968", but European secularization. "That process", as the respondent calls it, is represented as a "painful" one – a claim amplified by the metaphor "auf die Mütze bekommen" – "getting slapped on the head" – but one he sees as completed as far as Christianity is concerned. The figure of the Muslim as a subject of the "not yet" – in this case, as having not yet learned the lesson of secularization – emerges as an element in the common sense of a more traditional, Christian intellectual. Another element of the discursive mechanism of historization is the open or latent fear of *falling back in time*. This can be illustrated by segments from another interview. Reflecting on the role media should play in covering

what he called “culture clashes” earlier in the interview, this journalist becomes observably agitated, speaking louder and with stronger Viennese dialect than before:

And that’s my personal point! We are reviving – no, we are not reviving, there *is* now, suddenly, in our society, which painstakingly struggled so much to distance itself from ... from a totally authoritarian society, authoritarian upbringing, from xenophobia, from anti-Semitism, and now we have all of this all over again! We have to start again, from the very beginning, with a significant part of the population now! This is something that makes me a bit desperate. As someone who fought against prejudice, against authoritarian thinking ... and fought, in part at least I think, successfully, in my segment at least, in the segment of middle-class [bürgerliches] Austria ... and now all of this is coming back! Yes, now we have it all again, these, these slogans on the street, and this worshipping of an authoritarian leader [“Führer”] again. That is a little troublesome. (*Interview 5, m*)

Two significant historical points of reference emerge in this segment. One is, again, the post-68 era, in this case represented as a struggle of “our society” against authoritarianism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism; the other one, closely connected to the first, is Nazism and the Holocaust. The first is presented above all as a struggle against the legacy of the second one. The function of the “Muslim Other” is, again, to refer to the invasion of the past into the present: “We” have defeated fascism and its legacies, but now “they” are bringing it back – and, as he puts it, “we have to start all over again”. The reference to the “Führer” at the end of this quote is particularly interesting. The interview was conducted days after Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke in front of a large crowd in Vienna, a visit that also provoked a protest march organized by Turkish and Kurdish opposition parties and organizations. Large parts of media coverage was predicated on the idea that “the Turks” were dragging their conflicts onto Austria’s streets. If we read the passage carefully, the link drawn between Erdoğan and Hitler is not so much a statement about the Turkish President, but about those who voice their support for him on the streets of Vienna. He starts by claiming that “all of this is coming back” and uses the phrase “again” two times in the following sentence, referring to a *return* of Austria’s Nazi past. It doesn’t seem far-fetched that the “slogans on the street” and “worshipping of a *Führer*”, alludes to the historical event, very present in Austrians’ collective memory, when Hitler declared Austria’s “Anschluss” to the German Reich on March 15th 1938 in front of hundreds of thousands of cheering supporters on Vienna’s Heldenplatz. It has been frequently noted in Islamophobia Studies that one important effect of Islamophobia in Europe, especially in German speaking countries, is the symbolic displacement of Antisemitism, singling out Muslims as bearers of contemporary Antisemitism (Attia 2013, 12ff.; Müller-Uri 2014, 120ff.). This observation can be integrated into the broader context of the temporalization

of the Muslim Other and related to the construction of the Muslim as a folk devil from our past. Not having learned the “lessons” of the Holocaust, Muslims represent the threat of a return of authoritarianism and anti-Semitism – and thus the danger of society as a whole falling back into “their” time, which is at the same time “our” past. This topos can be further illustrated by the next and final example. This journalist mentions that when it comes to topics such as a possible ban of Islamic veiling, “this is not a question of lower class, upper class, middle class, but I think this is ... in principle, this is of interest to everyone” (*Interview 6, m*). When asked why, he continues:

Because it [support for a ban] is precisely not just based on xenophobia, but also on the question: Do we have a part of the population, did we get a population, through migration, that sets us back in our striving for a better, more emancipated society? That’s the big question in the more educated layers of society, and it is also something I discuss with friends. (*Interview 6, m*)

Here we find the threatening presence of the non-coeval Muslim Other in its clearest form. Again, the temporalizing markers are obvious – the Muslim migrant population “sets us back” – as is the historical reference: In this case, Austria’s history of migration. The fact that the “backwardness” of Muslims is not only “elsewhere” – in what is often revealingly, as if it were a distant planet, referred to as the “Muslim world” – but, crucially, within “our society”, adds a specific element to the historization of Muslims. Because “they” are “among us” – oscillating, as Tyrer (2013, 41) remarks, between “invisibility” and “hypervisibility” – the construction of temporal difference implies not just a logic of colonial pedagogy, in which the Other is to be raised into modernity, but also the existential threat of a reversal of modernity itself. That Europe – “our civilisation” – might descend back into the darkness of barbarianism. The Muslim folk devil threatens, through its sheer presence, to displace “our society” into the timeframe of the Other; to make “Us” coeval with the sexist, homophobe, anti-Semitic, violent, in short: barbaric Other. The folk devils summoned in contemporary liberal Islamophobia are, it turns out, the devils from “our” own past.

Historicist racism and the dream life of a culture

The logic of this ideological formation is similar to some versions of historical and contemporary racisms, and quite different from others. Following up on comments by Fatima El-Tayeb (2016, 45) and Vassilis Tsianos and Marianne Pieper (2011, 120), I claim that the example of “racial historicism” can help us make sense of contemporary liberal Islamophobia. David Theo Goldberg (2002, 2008) introduced this term to capture racist tropes which “conceived of the non-European as historically immature in contrast to European culture and ethos rather than as naturally inferior to Europeans and their descendants” (Goldberg 2008, 163). While not identical, there are dynamics at

work in contemporary discourse about Muslims and Islam which are strikingly similar to racial historicism. Because they do not rely on the category of “race” and do not involve a process of “racialization” (cf. Hund 2012), I prefer to use the term “historicist racism” to refer to the discursive mechanism portrayed above, rather than Goldberg’s original “racial historicism”.⁴ In contemporary hegemonic discourse about Islam in Austria, Muslims are interpellated as not only immature, but as in a profound sense non-contemporaneous: As *subjects of the “not yet”*. They are not yet where “we” have arrived, they have not yet gone through “our” struggles, and, most importantly, they have not yet learned the lessons of what are assumed to be the defining historical “markers” that constitute the cornerstones of European civilization and/or Austrian national identity. The Muslim Other is thus constructed as a folk devil, abjected from what Morgan and Poynting, who introduced the concept of a “Muslim folk devil” in Islamophobia studies, called “imagined moral communities” (Morgan and Poynting 2012, 6). At the same time, there is quite some variation as to which struggles and lessons exactly are defining the boundaries of these communities. I interpret this as one mechanism allowing the broad appeal of Islamophobia.

In her book on the “Muslim question”, Anne Norton (2013, 1) writes that “[t]he Jewish question was fundamental for politics and philosophy in the Enlightenment. In our time, as the Enlightenment fades, the Muslim question has taken its place”. In this sense we can speak of the discourse articulated around the Muslim Question as a “mythical space”. According to Ernesto Laclau, a “mythical” space of representation functions “as a surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed. The main feature of a surface of inscription is its incomplete nature” (Laclau 1990, 63). Here, this incompleteness emerges as an openness, allowing actors with various histories, political allegiances, and class positions, to “invest” into anti-Muslim narratives. At the same time, as Stuart Hall argued following Claude Lévi-Strauss, the myths conjured up by racist ideologies give us “privileged access to the dream life of a culture” (Hall 1992, 15). The mechanisms of Othering that are constitutive of racist discourse, he insists, involve more than just the construction of a “world of manichean opposites: them and us, primitive and civilized, light and dark, a black and white symbolic universe” (15). It is more complicated than that, because they are also, at the same time, “mechanisms of splitting, of projection, of defense, and of denial” (16) operating within the seemingly hermetical, pure category of “Us”. In a myth, contradictions unresolved in real life are reconciled in a phantasmatic representation, where real contradictions are transformed into a dichotomy of opposites, and all that is undesirable, or unbearable, is projected onto the Other.

We find in contemporary liberal Islamophobia an unspoken, mythical premise. The representation of European struggles against (hetero-)sexism,

patriarchy, and authoritarianism, as a success story. The project of liberation is constructed as completed, just as the story of the Enlightenment is presented as a smooth process of emancipation from ecclesial authority, cleansed of its racist, sexist and colonial entanglements (Dhawan 2014). This operates as a “myth” in Hall’s sense. In historicist racism, the Muslim folk devil represents that which the hegemonic narrative of individual and collective emancipation cannot accommodate: the continued presence of sexism, patriarchal violence, and authoritarianism in Austrian, European and “Western” society. The construction of the Muslim folk devil as a devil from “our past” refers to the impasse that struggles for political emancipation find themselves in today, and projects it onto an external “Other”.

While the arguments presented here build on the analysis of a specific case and distinct empirical material, they can contribute to a wider, international debate on the nature and development of contemporary Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism. Following the Gramscian conjuncturalist framework of analysis discussed above, we can treat journalists as minor organic intellectuals, and their statements as indicative of current hegemonic relations. This is particularly relevant as anti-Muslim historicist racism in the name of emancipation and progress feeds into a wider discursive field, where authoritarian political forces thrive on illiberal Islamophobia. The analysis of liberal variants of Islamophobia is also a necessary element for developing a better understanding of the recent rise of authoritarian populisms and the current “authoritarian turn within neoliberalism” (Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine 2018, 247). How liberal and illiberal Islamophobia interact in this process is a question further research might address productively in light of the arguments offered in this article.

Notes

1. I prefer the term anti-Muslim racism over the more common, Islamophobia’ – even though the latter has emerged as the most widely used and defining term – to counter the, effect of exceptionalising Islamophobia by disarticulating it from wider expressions or racism’ that David Tyrer (2013, 22) has recently lamented. However, as “there is no putting the genie back in the bottle”, with the concept having “taken root in public, political and academic discourse” at least in the Anglophone world (Bleich 2011, 1584), I will use “Islamophobia” and “anti-Muslim racism” interchangeably, while stating that I consider Islamophobia as a form of racism. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between racism and Islamophobia, and an argument for the integration of Islamophobia in a broad definition of racism, see Müller-Uri and Opratko (2016).
2. In a somewhat ironic turn of events, Peter Pilz had to give up his parliamentary seat in November 2017, after several women publicly accused him of sexual harassment.
3. All quotes are taken from interviews. Journalists and their employers were anonymized. “m” or “f” indicate the respondent’s gender. The interviews were conducted in German; all translations are mine.

4. Goldberg (2008, 43) himself has argued that in today's neoliberal capitalism, civility, and the accompanying dichotomy of, 'savage' versus, 'civilized', has become "the genteel analogue of what earlier and elsewhere I have elaborated as the expanding hold of racial historicism on modernizing racial imaginaries across the globe".

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