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Folk devils and racist imaginaries in a global prism: Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in the twenty-first century

Pnina Werbner

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Abstract
Rather than discourse this article argues that the challenge facing anti-racist scholars is to grasp the visceral, atavistic nature of the differential social imaginaries and deep-seated psychological fears of difference and sameness that constitute contemporary racisms and their historical mutations. Is it the case, as Said argued, that essentialized, contrastive racist constructions of Islam and Judaism persist over many centuries or is it possible that current affairs – globally transmitted violent encounters such as 9/11 or the Gaza Cast Lead operation – can transform racist imaginaries about the essential and unchanging nature of protagonists, Jewish and Muslims, and in doing so, unconsciously reverse earlier stereotypes? Depicting three paradigmatic racist folk devils, the paper examines the particular conundrums associated with anti-Zionism and its equation with the ‘new’ anti-Semitism. It concludes by exploring the implications of self-critique in seeking peace between Muslims and Jews.

Keywords: racist imaginaries; discourse; new anti-Semitism; Islamophobia; anti-Zionism.

Introduction
Reflecting on the historiography of scholarly accounts of racism, Ann Stoler (2002, p. 370) notes a widespread insistence that there is ‘no single object called racism, but a plurality of racisms which are not rehearsals of one another but distinct systems of practice and belief.’ They arise contextually, in response to different historical circumstances. Despite this, she notes, such accounts share ‘surprising’ commonalities, linked perhaps to a shared scholarly vision of an
evolution in racist practice and discourse from overt to implicit, ‘insidious’ and ‘subtle’, from ‘biologised’ and ‘somatic’ to a ‘more nuanced culturally coded and complex racism of the present’, defined as the ‘new’ racism (Stoler 2002, p. 371).

Difference and similarity are, of course, questions at the heart of any attempt to compare contemporary Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, old or new, all the more so as we find these concepts and the protagonists who enunciate them entangled with each other in mutual recriminations, invoking a wide concatenation of ambiguous, polysemic, ideological tropes: Zionism, Islamism, racism, colonialism, apartheid, genocide, terrorism, Nazism, orientalism, occidentalism. These entangled ambiguities fit well Stoler’s particular take on Foucault’s ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive formation’, according to which the different elements constituting racist discourse at any one time are neither ‘consistent’ nor ‘constant’ (Stoler 2002, p. 379); they are typified by ‘vacillations’, ‘dynamic motility’ and ‘polyvalent mobility’; by ‘erudite’ as well as ‘subjugated’ forms of knowledge (Stoler 2002, p. 376), both demotic and statist (Stoler 2002, p. 377). This suggests a kind of fluidity and openness in representations of racism that goes against – as Stoler herself acknowledges – Foucault’s more commonly understood notion of discourse as a body of unified, coherent practices of knowledge/power. Problematically, Stoler’s discussion makes no reference to the normalizing, exclusionary practices, or the scientific, theorizing and moralizing normativities we usually associate with racism-as-discourse (see e.g. Goldberg 2002, pp. 289–94).

Without denying the subtlety of Stoler’s portrayal of the historiography of racism, the extreme fluidity she attributes to racist discourses calls into question whether the notion of racism as ‘discursive formation’ or ‘ideological formation’ (Sheehi 2011, p. 170) is indeed the most apt for disclosing salient aspects of racist narrativizing. Rather than discourse, the challenge facing anti-racist scholars, I propose, is to grasp the visceral, atavistic nature of the social imaginaries and the deep-seated psychological fears of difference and sameness that constitute contemporary racisms and their mutations in the face of changing historical circumstances.

Charles Taylor (2004, p. 23) defines a social imaginary as the way that ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, not theoretically but in terms of ‘images, stories, and legends’; it is a ‘common understanding’ that leads to a widely shared ‘sense of legitimacy’. The expanded psychoanalytic perspective adopted here regards racist imaginaries as formed out of the fantasies, fears, symbols, caricatures, stereotypes, jokes, myths and nightmares of a threatening ‘Other’, as they are encapsulated in images of inhuman violence and a capacity for cruelty and violation. These images essentialize the Other as being radically different, without being in any sense consistent or coherent.
Recognizing that victims of racism are subject to such imaginaries enables a further insight: that while there may be many historically contingent racist discourses, as Phil Cohen (1988) noted early on, the experience of racism in the perception of its victims is one: a violation of the self and body, of property, of sacred symbols and autonomy (see Werbner 1997, pp. 236–7).

A key feature of racist imaginaries that is left uncaptured by the notion of discourse is the visceral, highly emotional charge of racist images and narratives for both perpetrators and victims, and their contradictory, fragmentary nature. Rather than simply rising and falling, however, such imaginaries often persist over lengthy periods even in different historical circumstances, while continuously being amplified with new examples of aberrancy. In an earlier article (Werbner 2005), I proposed that the ‘folk devils’ of different racialized groups vary in recognizable ways. The present paper develops this argument further by asking: In what sense do media images of terror, war and violence impact on existing racist imaginaries? More specifically, have post-9/11 events in Europe and the Middle East changed imaginaries of Muslims or Jews, their self and mutual perceptions, or simply augmented existing imaginaries?

The paper considers how the Madrid railway and London 7/7 underground bombings in 2005, and violent conflict in the Middle East have impacted upon the current state of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. I thus revisit my analysis of contrastive black, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic racist imaginaries, in order to reflect whether the latter may have changed and converged in response to global terror conspiracies and unjust wars. The third part of the paper addresses the widely debated question of whether anti-Zionism can be regarded as a ‘new’ form of anti-Semitism. I argue that the Israeli, Jewish and British Muslim responses to these far-reaching critiques reflect the contradictions and anguish inherent in debates about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia today.

Differential ontologies of racism

One approach to racism sees it as born out of the economic and political contradictions, scarcities and uncertainties of modernity and late western capitalism. The folk devil of racist imaginaries is, in this view, a displaced figure of collective anxieties and fears and, as such, an arbitrary scapegoat embodying racist paranoid convictions that only cultural, ethnic and racial purity can stem the breakdown of social order and the collapse of society. This view sees the racist gallery of folk devils, and the differential or cultural racist fantasies of which they are constituted, as mere facades disguising more unitary, fundamental processes in which a constellation of Others – blacks,
Jews, liberals, Asians, Muslims – is constructed as a threat to the purity and order of the nation, the ethnos, seen as a moral community. From this perspective there is only one racism, which disguises itself opportunistically beneath a variety of publicly acceptable codes and discourses, appropriating the sacred symbols of the nation, as Bjorgo (1997) demonstrates for Scandinavia, and common-sense understandings of ‘community’. In this interpretation, beneath the surface of apparently different racist discourses lurks a single, violent message: the Other must be effaced and subordinated – physically, culturally, economically and politically.2

Against this singularity, Wieviorka (1995) has argued that the logic of racism is a dual logic – of inferiorization and differentiation; subordination and exclusion. Racial inferiorization, Marxists have argued, fits capitalist interests. The subordination of certain segments of the working class allows for flexible and cheap exploitation of labour reliant on a reserve army of labour, recruited or expelled from the labour market according to prevailing market demands. Differential racism, by contrast, is an ideology of social and cultural exclusion based on an assumption of innate difference. Most racisms, Wieviorka contends, combine the two principles: inferiorization and differentiation. By defining the collective Other as naturally different and inferior, such ideologies legitimize both collective oppression and violent exclusion.

The duality seems to explain the three central historical exemplars of racism that form, as Étienne Balibar (1991) recognizes, our imaginaries of racism: American slavery, colonialism (including apartheid) and the Holocaust. But the racisms of late modernity, as Stoler notes, are altogether more subtle and insidious. In our era of heightened self-consciousness and cultural reflexivity, a further principle or logic of racism becomes apparent. This is suggested by Zygmunt Bauman (1993) who argues, citing Lévi-Strauss, that the uncertainties of modernity crystallize around the disturbing figure of the alien or stranger. We deal with the stranger in our midst, Bauman contends, through two strategic alternatives: anthropophagy – literally, cannibalism, and by extension, ingestion, assimilation; or anthropoemy – literally, vomiting, and by extension, expulsion, exile, incarceration. The first ‘assimilates’ the strangers to neighbours, the second merges them with the aliens. Together, he says, ‘they posit a genuine “either/or”: conform or be damned, be like us or do not overstay your visit, play the game by the rules or be prepared to be kicked out from the game altogether’ (Bauman 1993, p. 163).

The impulse of the modern nation state to pulverize its ethnic peripheries and stubborn minorities in the cultural blender of nationalism, to nationalize the cultural Other in a continual process of education, socialization, intimidation and sheer coercion, has been
widely documented by anthropologists, from Ernest Gellner to Stanley Tambiah. Whether or not this is the way nationalism is actually pursued in contemporary Europe today – French republicanism, expressed most recently in anti-hijab and anti-niqab laws, seems to signal that not much has changed – there is little question that the impulse towards cultural homogenization exists in most modern nation states. If the community of the nation is a self-governing society, it tends to seek a shared basis for this self-governance in moral and cultural values held in common. Summarizing Wieviorka and Bauman’s views in tabular form (Table 1), it is evident that column B defines a single phenomenon – that of ethnic/national self-purification. Against that, column A refers to quite different forms of racism – the first, based on the principle of hierarchy and subordination, the second, on equality and cultural destruction of minority cultures in the name of that equality.

By combining these two dualisms into a single theoretical framework, we can arrive at a more contemporary vision of the multiple types of strategies deployed by racist and xenophobic movements and structures. In this model, the logic of racism is triadic:

1. self-purification = physical expulsion/elimination
2. subordination = physical exploitation of labour
3. assimilation = cultural destruction

These strategies are intended to control or banish forever an imaginary cast of folk devils, the fantasized demons that threaten in this dystopic vision to destroy the social order, the very fabric of society. The array of imaginary folk devils, although undoubtedly plural and historically specific, has its roots in three parallel racist ontologies produced by the triadic racist tendency outlined above towards expulsion, subordination or assimilation. All three ontologies are grounded in the past – in apocalyptic fears and collective mythologies of prior suffering, oppression and death. These, according to extreme nationalists, threaten to repeat themselves in the present and future. They share the paradoxical feature that violent racists perceive themselves as the historical victims of oppression and violence, defending the nation against the threat of an evil aggressor and potential usurper (see

**Table 1 Racist dualisms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal racism within the nation (A)</th>
<th>Externalizing racisms (B)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wieviorka</td>
<td>Inferiorization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bauman</td>
<td>assimilation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>differentiation (genocide)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>expulsion</td>
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Werbner 2009a). As I show below, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are as much the mutual imaginaries of Jews (Israelis) and Muslims (Palestinians, Pakistanis, North Africans) of one another, grounded in their sense of unrecognized victimhood, as they are the secularized or Christian perceptions of Euro-Americans and other westerners.

**Globalising racist imaginaries: the ‘slave’, the ‘witch’, and the ‘Grand Inquisitor’**

Since 9/11, both in Britain and the rest of Europe Muslim immigrants have been subjected to widespread indirect discrimination in the form of proliferating securitized regimes, as well as more direct racism. The public defence for such measures, experienced by Muslims as ‘racist’ or Islamophobic, is that they are simply pragmatic attempts to avert further seditious plots by young Muslims in post-9/11 Europe, to protect Muslim women from intimidation, and to encourage integration. Whatever the case, the effects of securitization and the attacks on Islamic symbols are racist, in the sense that they license the actions and discourses of individuals and groups who promote more offensive racist imaginaries. The latter construct moral allegories of fear, violence and evil associated with Islam. In particular, the figure of the Muslim terrorist, the religious fanatic/fantasized as the violent and intolerant jihadist fundamentalist feeds a special, perhaps historically unique, racist imaginary.5

This figure may be contextualized within the three logics of racism I outlined above. The triadic logic generates three archetypal demonic figures conjured up by the racist imagination. I would like to call these the slave, the witch and the Grand Inquisitor. Where exploitation and subordination are the key defining principles of racism, the fear is of the physically powerful, wild, out-of-control slave, the hewer of wood and carrier of water. This is the dangerous street mugger who threatens the law and order of society, as Hall and colleagues (1978) show in *Policing the Crisis*, a figure reflecting fear of insurrection. There is evidence that such criminalizing constructions now encompass Asians as well as blacks in Britain and feed into the statistics of race crimes.6

But of course, not all racialized subjects are subordinate. Indeed, some of the worst acts of genocidal terror or expulsion have historically been directed against economically successful minority groups – middleman minorities as Bonacich (1973) famously called them. These groups, highly assimilated, cultured, successful and wealthy, are the subject of another archetypal folk devil – the witch. The witch crystallizes fears of the hidden, disguised, malevolent stranger, of a general breakdown of trust, of a nation divided against itself. Your neighbour may be a witch who wants to destroy you. He or she is culturally indistinguishable in almost every respect because the
witch masquerades as a non-alien. Hence, long-settled middleman minorities – Jews, Indians, Chinese – although often publicly compliant and assimilated, become intermittently the object of extreme destructive violence or national purification. Anti-Semitism feeds on the folk devil of the Jew as the nefarious feeder on the blood of children and perpetrator of violent global conspiracies, whether capitalist, Bolshevik or anarchist. Meer and Noorani (2008, p. 213) report that as late as 1920 in the UK, *The Times* published the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a forged document alleging Jewish conspiracy to conquer the world, now accepted as a valid testimony throughout the Arab world (see e.g. Taguieff 2004, p. 64).

Racist folk devils are no mere illusions and fantasies. They represent deep-seated, atavistic, real fear, displaced onto strangers and what strangers come to represent symbolically. In the case of the mugger, the insurrectionist slave, the real fear is of unemployment and destitution – the loss of job and home and all that this would imply. In the case of middleman minorities such as the Jews, such fears are compounded by a sense that trust and order are breaking down inexplicably, that all social relations have become uncertain and threatening.

But what archetype embodies the fear of Muslims? How are we to understand Islamophobia? Muslim and Arab social theorists from Edward Said (1978) to Tariq Modood (1997) – and indeed many western scholars – regard the cultural racism directed by the West against Muslims as in some sense unique. Many, including myself, have also shown that some Muslims tend to globalize local predicaments, constructing a world view of polarized oppositions between the Islamic *ummah* and the West, the latter seen to be led by a Jewish–American conspiracy, in a Manichean revival of the earlier stereotypes and animosities of medieval Christendom (Werbner 2004; see also Silverstein 2010 on the analogies drawn by diasporic Muslims between their own sufferings and those of their brethren who are victims of western wars in the Middle East). The reverse is undoubtedly equally true: globalized images of Islamic terror are imposed by western racists – and not only racists – on local Muslim settlers in Britain.

To interpret the unique significance of Islamophobia as a form of differentialist racism, we need to reflect on a further theory of racism, one that argues that racism is in some measure reflexive. This is the position that draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory and, more directly, on the work of Frantz Fanon as it has been developed by Homi Bhabha (1994) and Ali Rattansi (1994). According to Fanon (1965), the colonizer and the colonized cannot escape each other – their internalized subjectivities mirror each other’s hates and fears so that the colonized assumes the image of radical difference imposed upon him or her by the colonizer, and comes to be deracinated, marked by self-hatred for his/her own culture and people, while in the
face of popular insurrection the colonizer is filled with the bestiality and violence he attributes to the colonized. The ‘third’ space that is thus created through this encounter between colonized and colonizer is a pathological space of distorted particularities where the stress on radical difference is transmuted into a dialectical mirroring of violence, inhumanity and self-denial. Wieviorka (1995, p. 23) lucidly sums up a related theory: ‘Racism, particularly in the psychoanalytic perspective, comes to be seen as the incapacity of some people to manage difference, but also with the incapacity to cope with resemblance with the Other, the foreigner and, also, women.’

He cites Pontalis who argues, much like Fanon, ‘that dread is a fascination and thus also an attraction’. Kristeva goes even further, arguing that ‘the Other, the alien producing animosity and irritation, is in fact my own unconscious, the return of the repressed’ (Wieviorka 1995, p. 23).

Such an approach illuminates why Islamophobia may be conceived of as a very postmodern kind of fear. The insurrectionist slave is a powerful iconic embodiment of the id – of sexuality unbound – but in the permissive society of today such an icon loses much of its terror. The nefarious Jewish merchant, icon of suppressed greed undermining the integrity of the ego, seem less threatening in a postmodern age that celebrates consumption and individual self-gratification, thus necessarily less obsessed than previous generations with the fear of hidden forces of disorder, desire and greed. By contrast, the Muslim, the religious fanatic, the violent terrorist, negates – indeed despises – all these impulses motivated by the id and ego. He is, therefore, the folk devil par excellence of a postmodern age. The threat is not simply to the uneducated working class or petit bourgeoisie. Islam seems also to be a threat to the intellectuals and elites in western society because it clashes with contemporary intellectual trends towards anti-essentialism and relativism. Fischer and Abedi (1990, p. 153) seem to mirror these fears when they argue that the:

rhetorics of contemporary politicized Islam...are indifferent to the rights of individual conscience, due process of law, and civil and human rights, and are insistent that social disciplines and the imposition of Islam, as they see it, override all such rights.

Portrayed here is an apparently stark, polarized opposition between political Islamism and a postmodern, democratic ethos. Less important than whether such views are in fact held by the majority of Muslims (they are not) is the fact that enlightened intellectuals throughout Europe believe them to be so held and perceive them as a real threat. Those attempting to defend Muslims, like Asad (1993) or Modood (1995), respond by talking of secular fundamentalism.
But what precisely are these so-called secular fundamentalists fearful of? What is the real folk devil conjured up by political Islamism?

I have deliberately named this folk devil the Grand Inquisitor rather than using several more obvious epithets (the terrorist, the fanatic, the fundamentalist, the jihadist, the Grand Ayatollah), my reason being to draw attention to the reflexive fear that Islam conjures — not (as in the case of the black mugger) the fear of physicality unbound, the Freudian id let loose, but the fear of the super-ego gone wild. European history is marked by the long struggle to escape the Grand Inquisitor, the domination of the Church over the soul, the stranglehold exerted over the bound body. In this respect Islamophobia is like other phobias and racisms; it reflects an incapacity to cope not only with difference but with resemblance. At stake is not the battle between Christendom and Islam, as many Muslims believe. What is scary about Islam is the way that it evokes the spectre of puritanical Christianity, a moral crusade, European sectarian wars, the Crusaders, the Inquisition, the attack on the permissive society. This is recognized by Asad (1993, p. 286) when he says, in relation to *The Satanic Verses* affair: ‘My argument is not that European readers are...filled with an irrational hatred of Islam, but [that] it brings into play metanarratives of Western modernity.’

The danger is that although the secular fundamentalist defence of permissiveness and differance is grounded in ethical considerations and commitments, it may easily encourage a ‘new’ racism. The Islamic Grand Inquisitor is not a disguised, assimilated threat as the Jewish ‘witch’ was; ‘he’ is not subservient and bestial like the black ‘slave’. He is upfront, morally superior, openly aggressive, denying the promiscuous society and the validity of other cultures — in short, a different kind of folk devil altogether (Figure 1). He is a figure constructed by fearful elites that may nevertheless legitimize far cruder forms of biological racism. Anti-fundamentalist images provide these racists with a legitimizing discourse against Muslims, to which may be added the usual epithets directed against all racialized groups: that they are dirty, promiscuous, licentious, violent and so forth.

What we have, then, uniquely in the broad spectrum of citizens rejecting so-called radical Islam, is an oppositional hegemonic bloc that includes intellectual elites and ordinary folk — as well as organized, often violent racists, like members of the British National Party, who exploit anti-Muslim discourses to license racial attacks on Muslims in particular. Within this bloc are diasporic Jewish supporters of Israel who see an additional danger in Islamists’ denial of the Holocaust and their public threats to ‘obliterate’ Israel (Taguieff 2004, p. 130). It is the latter discourse that is referred to as the ‘new anti-Semitism’, emanating primarily from parts of the Muslim world and
intrinsically related to support for the Palestinian cause, an issue I return to below.

Different folk devils elicit different national responses. The rebellious slave, the mugger who refuses to accept his lowly place, must be controlled and subordinated. In contrast, the dissembling, apparently assimilated but nefarious witch, along with the publicly aggressive Islamic Grand Inquisitor, must be ghettoized or preferably expelled from the society, since they represent a threat to the very culture of the nation and its moral fabric. The difference between them is that in our postmodern world, minor cultural differences in the context of broad cultural assimilation are defined as acceptable and with this acceptance, the fantasy of the hidden witch is kept at bay for most Europeans – although not, it has to be said, for Muslims who see themselves as victims of a grand Jewish–American conspiracy. In Europe and America, however, it is the jihadist, the Islamic Grand Inquisitor, who is most feared across classes and, indeed, across nations. It is ‘he’ who is the hunted subject of the ‘war on terror’, amid intense expansion of securitization systems.

**Racist imaginaries revisited: the new anti-Semitism and dilemmas of self-critique**

Since first delineating these three racist imaginaries (in Werbner 2005), events in Europe, America and the Middle East have raised the possibility of a *convergence* between the Jewish and Muslim folk devils or, alternatively, the rise of new ones. In particular, the increasingly
open, disproportionate violent aggression by Israel against Palestinians in the occupied territories, along with public expressions of racism within Israel itself, were paralleled – until the 2010–11 Arab Spring uprisings – by the rising influence of Islamists in the Middle East and Pakistan and the multiplication of young Muslim seditious plots in Europe and the USA. It seems thus that the imaginary roles have apparently been reversed: Jews are now seen to be openly violent while Muslims have now become secret plotters. The intense hatred felt by Muslims themselves towards the ‘Great Satan’, America, following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, constructs it as a demonic figure paired with Israel/the Jews as the ‘Little Satan’ (Maghen 2009).

In light of these events, it might appear at first sight that Muslims have now replaced Jews as the conspiratorial hidden witches, whereas Jews/Americans have generated a new racist imaginary among Muslims – that of the Crusaders, openly violent, inhuman and destructive. In the case of the handful of young Muslims in the UK who have been found guilty of mostly unsuccessful suicide missions and other seditious plots, however, it is clear that they have acted out of a sense of open defiance. They publicly reject what they see as western imperialist attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine, a position they make clear in their suicide videos. They also reject the alleged sinfulness of the West. Thus, despite their pragmatic secretiveness, they still fit the racist imaginary of the Grand Inquisitor, seen from a British, European or American perspective. At least for some westerners, they prove that the Koran itself and the Prophet of Islam are intrinsically ‘evil’ and promote violence. This belief was reflected in the threat to burn Korans in Florida in September 2009, the outcry against building a mosque near Ground Zero in New York City in 2010 (Eposito 2011, pp. xxiv–xxv), the 2009 Swiss referendum banning mosque minarets, and the 2005 Danish *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad, part of a wide range of offensive media caricatures of Islam (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008).

In the eyes of many Muslims, Jews continue to be conspiratorial witches who propagate the myth of the Holocaust and disguise their aspirations to world dominance, aided by America. According to a widespread conspiracy theory, it was Jews who bombed the World Trade Center on 9/11. Certain Arab and Iranian imaginaries are openly racist. Anti-Semitic statements, mainly emanating from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, describe Jews as apes, pigs or vermin. Cartoons in the Arab press depict Jews typically with anti-Semitic features as Nazis, dripping with blood, or as controlling America (see Gross n.d.). Swastikas and the Star of David are routinely drawn side by side by pro-Palestinian activists. Zionism, the historical Jewish national movement of an oppressed minority aiming for a just society, is ‘exposed’ as in fact, a hidden form of racism and colonialism.
According to this narrative, the Jews, whose ancestral connection to Israel is denied, have committed genocide comparable to the Holocaust through killing, ethnic cleansing and the destruction of Palestinian homes and culture, and the only response possible is thus an obliteration of Israel (the ‘Zionist entity’ as it is usually called).

These are the contours of the ‘new anti-Semitism’. They make the task of Jewish and Muslim peace aspirants in the Middle East and the diaspora extremely difficult. In Israel since 2011, Jewish human rights activists have been fighting new ‘McCarthyist’ laws, as Israel’s right-wing government attempts to close down non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor violations of Palestinian human and civic rights. The UN Goldstone Report warns against repression of dissent in Israel as well in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (UNHRC 2009).

Palestinian and Israeli extremist actions seem intent on confirming the worst racist imaginaries each group has of the other. Israel dispossesses as it expands Jewish settlement on the West Bank, and uses disproportionate violence against innocent Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. In an attempt to muzzle dissent and create an explicitly ‘Jewish’ state, its government began in 2010 to submit for parliamentary approval a raft of overtly racist laws aimed at delegitimizing Palestinian Israeli citizenship. On the other side, Islamic rhetoric in Gaza threatens the very existence of Israel and brooks no internal dissent, apparently confirming the image of a violent Islam. Under these circumstances, diaspora Jews often feel compelled to defend Israel despite their reservations about its policies, although in 2010, as reported by *The Jewish Chronicle*, leaders of the Jewish community declared their right to make ‘outspoken criticism’ of Israel (e.g. Rocker et al. 2010, pp. 1, 4–5). Some progressive Jews have joined what has come to be known as the ‘Red–Green Alliance’, a coalition of British trade unions, churches, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and other left-wing groups, Jewish peace groups and Muslim organizations (Rosen 2010). They support the global Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which accuses Israel of being an ‘apartheid’ state and seeks to use the same tactics that were effective against South Africa’s apartheid regime. This Jewish participation is constructed by the Israeli government and the majority of diaspora Jews as a horrifying betrayal. Some Jews are also linked to a campaign to have senior Israeli leaders arrested for alleged war crimes when they visit European countries, including Britain (Rosen 2010, p. 34).

The fact that other activist members in this movement are said to support Hamas and other Islamist organizations that often go beyond reasonable critiques of Israel, accusing it of being a Nazi state or calling for its demise, has led to agonizing self-reflection by liberal-left
diaporic Jews seeking ways to counter this new ‘anti-Semitism’. Invariably, their comments begin by announcing that they are critical of Israeli government policy (see e.g. Chesler 2003; Schoenfeld 2005; Harrison 2006; Karpf et al. 2008). Their reflections attempt to identify the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which critics of Zionism (‘anti-Zionists’) reveal themselves to be anti-Semites (Freedland 2003). The conceptual ambiguities surrounding anti-Semitism today are nowhere more evident than in the equation of Zionism with racism. A nationalist movement that began with utopian socialist, universalist and democratic ideals (Shanin 1988) is now widely seen by anti-racists and young activists on the Left, as well as by Muslims, as colonialist and racist; not surprisingly, indeed, given that ‘Zionism’ has been hijacked by a succession of Israeli right-wing political parties for extreme nationalist projects.

Jewish diasporic and Israeli self-critique under these circumstances would seem to be particularly important, if the voices of anti-Semites are not to drown out reasoned criticism of the iniquities of the occupation. But for a Jew to speak out requires courage and a willingness to bear communal condemnation. This was exemplified in the case of Richard Goldstone, the judge who led the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict. Despite his self-acknowledgement as a Jew and a long-standing Zionist (Goldstone 2009), the Report’s indictment of the Gaza campaign and of the Israeli occupation more generally was vehemently condemned by the Israeli government and by many diaspora Zionist groups. Goldstone was initially even barred from attending his own grandson’s bar mitzvah.

Much more can be said about the painful dilemmas for Jews as victims turned victimizers, many of whom continue, despite Israel’s six million Jewish population, to fear another Holocaust, at a time when Israel seems bent on making this fearful imaginary a self-fulfilling nightmare. When, in a surprise op-ed in the Washington Post, Goldstone (2011) revised his opinion in the Report that Israel may have committed potential war crimes and crimes against humanity, it was the turn of the Israeli peace and civil rights movement to feel betrayed. Uri Avnery (2011), a veteran peace activist, commented ironically that Goldstone was initially regarded as:

...a self-hating Jew!... a “mosser” – a Jew who turns another Jew over to the evil Goyim, the most detested figure in Jewish folklore. And now the turnabout. Goldstone, the Jew who has recanted. ... MY HEART bleeds for Judge Goldstone. From the beginning he was placed in an impossible situation. The full fury of the Jewish ghetto against traitors from its midst was turned on him.
The sad reality, Avnery (2011) argues, was that Goldstone was wrong both times. Disproportionality made the Gaza carnage predictable, whatever the intentions. Tragically, however, with his about-turn ‘Goldstone has now paved the way for another Cast Lead operation which will be far worse.’

It is perhaps easier for Israelis within Israel to be outspoken critics of their own government, and, indeed, a raft of new films, plays and novels, as well as civil and human rights groups condemn the occupation, the land grab and the two invasions of Lebanon. As events of the Arab Spring have highlighted, for Muslims in some Muslim countries, such critiques against their own governments pose a greater risk. In places like Pakistan, Salman Taseer, Governor of the Punjab, a liberal-secular politician, was assassinated for publicly defending minority Christian rights and calling for changes to Pakistan’s blasphemy law, while his killer was showered with rose petals by local lawyers. Sherry Rehman, a Karachi-based MP for the Pakistan People’s Party, similarly received death threats and went into self-imposed house confinement for tabling a motion in parliament to revise the present blasphemy law (Walsh 2011, p. 2).

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that in studying differential racism, the need is to go beyond discourse and focus on the visceral, atavistic nature of racist imaginaries, the deep-seated psychological fears of difference and sameness that they trigger. The question I posed is whether current affairs – globally transmitted media images of violent encounters such as 9/11, wars in the Middle East or the Gaza Cast Lead operation – can transform the persistent yet mutating racist imaginaries about the essential and unchanging nature of protagonists, Jewish and Muslims, and in doing so, unconsciously reverse earlier stereotypes with Jews now stigmatized as openly violent and Muslims as secret plotters. I suggested further that whereas the two minority groups have both been victims of racist stereotyping, exclusion and violence, recent geopolitical events have also ironically generated mutually demonizing constructions by each community of its counterpart. Depicting three paradigmatic racist folk devils, the paper examined the particularly agonizing conundrums for diaspora Jews of taking a ‘self’-critical anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist stance, equated by most diaspora Jews with the ‘new’ anti-Semitism, perpetrated by Muslims and their supporters. The greater legitimacy accorded self-critique ‘from within’, evident also in the Arab Spring protest movements, has implications in the long term for the capacity of Muslims and Jews to seek peace based on mutual respect.
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Notes

1. Whereas Lacan and psychoanalysts more generally stress the subject’s primary fear of castration, the term can be expanded by analogy to the deep-seated threat to the integrity of the subject posed by the Other.

2. As we have argued elsewhere (Modood 1997; Werbner 1997) so-called ‘cultural racism’ or what some have called ‘cultural fundamentalisms’ (Stolcke 1995) in being essentialized are also biologized, thus resembling biological racisms based on phenotypical differences.

3. There is a vast literature on this topic, beyond the scope of the present paper. On French violent exclusion, stigmatization and murderous attack on Maghribian, primarily Algerian, Muslims, as continuing a long-term historical right-wing racism formally directed against Jews as well, see Silverstein (2010).

4. There are, of course, exceptions, with some European societies being multilingual (Switzerland) or religiously plural (the Netherlands, Belgium).

5. On the predominance of media stories in Britain on Muslim ‘terror’ and Islam as a danger, see Lewis, Mason and Moore (2011), and on Muslims as the new ‘folk devils’ in the same volume, see Richardson (2011).

6. Statistics of ‘hate crimes’ in 2009 in the UK compiled by the police show 703 ‘anti-Semitic’ incidents, 2083 ‘religion/faith’ incidents (presumably most against Muslims) as against 43,426 ‘race’ incidents. There were also almost 5,000 incidents related to ‘sexual orientation’ and almost 1,500 to ‘disability’. Most were incidents of verbal abuse. A small number were of actual violence. This indicates that from the perspective of the police, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia were far less significant than (biological?) racism, but it also points to the ambiguity of racial categorizations. See Home Office (2010).

7. Bauman (1989) draws on Mary Douglas’s (1966) notion of the stranger as witch in Purity and Danger to elucidate the fear of Jews by the Nazis. In Europe more generally the main target of such national purification of so-called middleman minorities has been the Jews. Asians, mainly Gujaratis, have been targeted in Uganda, Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, and overseas Chinese most recently in Vietnam and Indonesia.

8. See Morey and Yaqin (2011, p. 135) for the media portrayal of one such ‘folk devil’.

9. On contemporary racism against Palestinian Arabs in Israel, see White (2011). For an anthropological study, see Rabinowitz (1997). On legal discrimination in the Supreme Court, see Kretzmer (2002). Matters have got worse since, with a raft of discriminatory legislation.

10. On this see Werbner (2009b).

11. As mentioned, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is widely held to be an authentic document in the Arab world. See also Taguieff (2004, p. 53).


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