Islamophobia and racism

By César Augusto Baldi

According to the view that became hegemonic in central European countries, modernity is related to the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, liberal ideas, and the development of human rights. Such Eurocentred view, however, obscures the coloniality side that has been associated to modernity from the beginning. In what has been traditionally called "the West", **modernity** is the geopolitical opening of Europe to the Atlantic , but it is also **the moment** when the "invention" or "invasion" of America takes place, simultaneously **to the expulsion of the "Moors**" and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and the beginning of the **Indian genocide**. In times of "endless war on terror" and the standardisation of structural adjustments, associated to new forms of colonialism in Asia, it would be an irony, to say the least, to recognise a re-emergence of those two foundational issues of modernity under today's cloak of reinvigorating Indian peoples' struggle and Islam as counter-hegemonic actors. While that implies recognising the possibility of "other" or "alternative modernities" (other narratives), thus widening that Eurocentric "monoculture of the mind", it is necessary to verify how much racism, colonialism, and patriarchalism are embedded into this "modern" version. Islamophobia, that is, aversion, discrimination, or prejudice towards Islam and Islamic people, in its several hues, is an opportunity to underscore obscure points in that trajectory.

First, because it poses the need to rethink "Western" and "Eastern" views. Orientalism is, in its origin, the acknowledgement of an epistemic privilege of the West, seen as developed, rational, and human, opposed to the East, aberrant, inferior, underdeveloped and despotic. A privilege resulting from major blindness: for over seven centuries, today's Europe was a mostly Islamic region of high intercultural socialisation. At the roots of the Renaissance, Greek and Roman sources were accessible only through Muslim/Arab languages. The original blindness, therefore, was an "imperial" difference.

Second, because it forgets the large process of colonisation carried out by European countries in the 19th century, where the division of Asia and Africa, "hygienisation" as a process to develop medicine, and exploitation of bodies and natural resources were the other side of the development of race notions – then biological – as an assertion of superiority by a colonising Europe. It was the "wind" of development and emancipation coming to "barbarian" areas. A "colonial" difference exposed, nowadays, with the arrival of Islamic communities coming from former colonies: no wonder colonial legislation from the time of the Algerian War has been used to counter unrest in France's banlieus in 2005.

Third, because subtle racism has been masked by the process of "secularisation". Other cultures should therefore assimilate the standard seen as "universal" in the public space, even though autochthonous spaces were preserved "in private". In such terms, colonisation is also stabilisation of religion in private as a way to stabilise, through it, oppressions and fears in the private space. That process of "colonialism" is visible when, under the pretext of preserving "laicity" (in the cases of Turkey and France), religious expressions are to remain "private" (that is, de-politicising female emancipation is the other side of colonising emancipatory struggles under the secular standard of human rights). Therefore, distinct trajectories in the struggle for human dignity are ignored, a specific and historical form of "feminism" is stressed, and religious emancipatory possibilities are demonised (forgetting that the tragedies of Nazism and Fascism were expressed in secular terms and came from that same Europe). And women's oppression is once again sent to the "private realm", after the feminist, gay, and queer movements themselves presented in Europe proposals to publicise demands.

Fourth, because the creation of the Nation-State was based on the formula One State = One Nation = One Culture, as a result of which cultural diversity was generating processes of homogenisation, ethnocide, and stabilisation seen as eternal. The emergence of the "European Union" is a regrouping of distinct national identities, but at the same time it obscures the fact that nations have always been plural. It was the State that thought itself "monocultural" (and often also mono-religious). Europe has always been Christian, but also

Islamic (historically, the latter even prevailed for a longer period), Buddhist, animistic. Therefore, there is not an Islam to put European identity at risk. What surfaces is precisely the existence of a European Islam – as European as Christianity – and a multiculturalism that in fact used to be too assimilationist and monocultural. When new racisms or "racisms with a new face" are discussed, the issue of islamophobia poses conceptual, epistemological, and political practice challenges in Brazil's context.

First, because the concept of racism has been changing its biological configuration and assuming a comprehensive view that also reconciles etymological, ethnological, sociological, and anthropological concepts. That "racism" aimed only at skin colour and referred to "blacks" took on distinct connotations. That was Brazil's Supreme Federal Court's interpretation when it understood that racism, in the country's legal order, includes any distinctions "regarding restrictions of race, colour, creed, national or ethnic ancestry or origin, inspired by the alleged superiority of one people over another", of which xenophobia, anti-Semitism and islamophobia are examples (HC 82.424/RS, Min. Mauricio Corrêa, on Sept. 17, 2003). The Durban Conference underscored such concerns and commitments at the international level when it acknowledged that "slavery and the slave trade" were "appalling tragedies in the history of humanity", at the same time as it sustained that "colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance" (Items 12 and 13 of the Declaration). And it extended protection to contemporary forms, including islamophobia (explicitly mentioning the issue of castes in India).

Second, considering that Brazil's Constitution "repudiates racism" internationally (Art. 4th, Section VIII) and provides that it is criminally non-bailable and imprescriptible (Art. 5th, Section XLII), that implies, one the one hand, the need – in negative terms – to prevent any conduct, practice, or attitude that encourages, spreads, or constitutes racism, and, one the other hand – in positive terms – taking relevant and possible measures to eradicate such practice. But it also implies recognising that social differences and hierarchies are constituted differently in distinct contexts and might acquire new meanings along history. Thus, for instance, Brazil was able to go from overt racial discrimination of

blacks in the slavery period to a nation project based on "whitening" as a form of European modernisation to, in the following years (and until the 1980s), boasting to have a "racial democracy" (which preserved discrimination structures without making them visible). Not making it an issue was seen as a proof of non-existence, and a non-racialist discourse was synonymous with absence of racism. The very uprising of Islamised blacks in the 19th century in the state of Bahia ("the so-called Uprising of the Malês") was ignored for a long time.

Third, because that implies realising that, for distinct racisms, there will be distinct anti-racism struggles and therefore actions are always context-oriented. Therefore, taking Brazil as an example, Oracy Nogueira pointed out the distinction of prejudices compared to the United States: in Brazil, according to him, there would not be "origin-based prejudice" (the "blood drop" and segregation pattern), but rather a "brand-based prejudice", i.e., associated to certain social configurations and representations. Islamophobia seems to be associated to that kid of discriminatory pattern. It is characterised by "social marks": the veil or kerchief in its distinct forms associated the image of Islamic (and therefore, submissive) women; a beard or a turban (although it might be Sikh); induces a connotation of Muslim, terrorist, fanatic, dangerous, just as the jihad becomes "wholly war" and Islam is a "backwards" or "pre-modern" religious. And here a distinction should be made regarding other racisms: the presence of the gender issue. In Brazil, which by and large lacks better studies on its Islam, the existence of a Muslim community in the so-called triple border (Brazil/Paraguay/Argentina) reinforces the stereotypes of criminal organisation and terrorism, a "concern" often pointed out by the USA to Brazilian authorities.

Fourth, because those specific marks make it harder to struggle against islamophobia. It is not about just occasional specific racial discrimination (which could be a hypothesis in the cases of Maghrebian or "German black" communities), but also ethnic discrimination (association with Arabs and "their" social signs), religious (a non-modern, archaic religion, as opposed to the secular and lay standard of modern societies), Orientalist

(according to the "us-and-the-rest-of-the-world" view and Afghan women's "salvationism"). Colonialism probably plays a distinct role to be carefully examined in future investigations: the connotation of Islamophobia in Europe is distinct (the idea of "invasion" by Islamic communities within metropolises) from the one that might occur in societies that have been colonised (that is, an "internal colonialism" would be a different ingredient for subordinations). In Brazil, where most Muslims are Palestinians (who came after the creation of the State of Israel) or Syrian or Lebanese who came after the First World War and were associated in the national imagery to "Turks" (because of the Ottoman Empire), and whose population is concentrated in areas of strong European immigration (the largest communities are in the states of Sao Paulo, Parana, Rio de Janeiro, and the south of Rio Grande do Sul) invisibility by social scientists also implies the lack of awareness of the most serious cases of Islamophobia, that is, a double process of subordination.

That range of discriminations of different hues, which can only be gauged in context, might be precisely what now characterises the forms taken by Islamophobia. Hence the answer to the question – Would Muslims be an ethnic, racial, or religious minority? – includes several issues to be solved. And with distinct answers, according to the country and even within one country, according the specific situation. Perhaps struggles against Islamophobia deserve that we exercise our "sociological imagination" in a different approach. These seem to be the relevant remarks from a distinct racial context, namely, Brazil, where racism is often so subtle that it might live side by side with anti-racism appearances and, according to distinct environments – universality, family, kinship – be made absolutely invisible.

While in the constitution of modernity, Islam and Indians were partially involved, according to the perspective of "coloniality" (at least when it comes to "America"), it would be pertinent to remind that, in the cosmology of the "Saterê Maué", in the Brazilian states of Pará and Amazonas, youth will put their hands inside a fibre glove with ants that then sting them ("waumat"). May that remind us that the struggle against racisms is also a painful ritual. But it has to start.

César Augusto Baldi holds a Master's Degree in Law (ULBRA/RS). He is a doctoral candidate at the Pablo Olavide University (Spain) an works as Chief of Office at Brazil's 4th Regional Federal Court. He is also the editor of "Direitos humanos na sociedade cosmopolita" (Ed. Renovar, 2004).