

# The Souls of Muslim Folk: The “Obama Phenomenon” and the Paradoxes of Paranoid anti-Multiculturalism

*Abdelwahab El-Affendi*

## Abstract

The current debate on the vices of multiculturalism and the merits of integration, of problematizing cultural difference, appears to miss important lessons from recent history in the treatment of minorities. In this paper, I start by questioning the celebration of Barack Obama’s election as a “breakthrough” for multicultural inclusiveness. I argue that the “Obama phenomenon” highlights the limits of democratic inclusiveness and sheds light on the traumatic experience of African Americans, who have been victimized precisely for seeking to assimilate. European Jews, especially in Germany, could not be accused of any reluctance to integrate either, and their contributions to European culture are legendary. But they also suffered grievously for their pains. Thus when the same xenophobic political trends traditionally hostile to the integration of minorities begin to vociferously demand that Muslims should integrate, this must be seen as a warning that we may be heading toward a very dark phase of race relations in the West.

## Introduction

It took a dramatic intervention from former Secretary of State Colin Powell to point out one of American multiculturalism’s blind spots. Reacting to the deliberate disinformation from fellow Republicans about Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s religion, a “deeply troubled” Powell re-

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The author is a reader in politics, Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster; an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)/Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) fellow in the Research Councils UK’s (RCUK) Global Uncertainties Programme; and, currently, a visiting fellow at the Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. He would like to express his gratitude to the ESRC and AHRC for their support of his current research.

jected the insinuations behind the question: “Is Obama a Muslim?” the answer to which is categorically “No.” The real correct answer, however, should have been: What if he is a Muslim? “Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?” Powell wondered.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently there is, if we are to believe Rep. Peter King (R-NY), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, who held hearings in early 2011 on the supposed radicalization of American Muslims and insinuated that 80%-85% of practicing American Muslims are potentially “an enemy living amongst us.”<sup>2</sup> Obama’s camp responded to critics by consistently affirming how genuinely Christian he was and disavowing any hint of cultural non-conformity. In addition, Obama also studiously downplayed his racial identity. During the “stirring speech” that launched his candidacy in February 2007, “not once did the words ‘black’ or ‘African American’ pass Mr. Obama’s lips.”<sup>3</sup> More generally, he attempted to project total neutrality among various constituencies.

Seldom has a modern politician been less interested in representing any specific constituency ... Rather than building a coalition of specific interest groups, he addresses a general public, neither black nor white, neither Republican nor Democrat, but rather, the *United States of America*. It is what we could be, not what we are.<sup>4</sup>

For some critics, Obama’s election, far from advancing race equality, had a negative impact precisely due to the “Faustian bargain” he struck with the establishment to project a deceptive image of change. The United States remains a racialized society despite the widely accepted perception among whites that Obama was a “postracial Black man” in view of his white background and Ivy League pedigree, which made racism a thing of the past.<sup>5</sup> Obama is thus seen as a party to this grand deception.

Some of this criticism may be unfair, since downplaying racial identity was no doubt essential to becoming the first non-white president in an intensely polarized society. It can also be argued that he had already addressed the race question in his famous 1995 autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, and thus there was no need to overdo it. There is also a sense in which Obama seems to have genuinely believed that the country was entering a post-racial era, of which he was the personal embodiment, and that this era required the adoption of “colour-blind” policies.<sup>6</sup> This tendency parallels, in many ways, the comparable trend within the Left in the post-Reaganite era (in particular the British Labour party, but also the Clinton team during his 1992-2000 tenure) to accommodate neo-liberalism by adopting a post-socialist “Third Way” and abandoning many policies of the traditional left.

Obama went even further, possibly to counter the insinuation about his “Muslim” origins, by adopting belligerent foreign policy goals. These included a commitment to escalate the war in Afghanistan and continue the policy of extra-judicial killings of terror suspects, often with their families and whoever happened to be at home when the drones hit. He also committed himself to a solid and unconditional support for Israel, even though it was being ruled by the most uncompromising right-wing regime in its history. In a moment of supreme irony, during his famous June 2009 Cairo University speech Obama told the Palestinians to take a leaf out of the American civil rights movement’s book and stick to peaceful resistance. But having explicitly likened the Palestinians’ plight to that of the African Americans who had suffered for centuries “the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation,”<sup>7</sup> he stopped well short of condemning their oppressors. In fact, his warmth toward Israel and its supporters, and his offer of advice to the victims, and more weapons and cash to those wielding the “whip,” would be odd if we were take his comparison to its logical conclusions.

Nevertheless, Obama’s conservative critics continued to insist on playing the race card, bringing into the debate not only his race and religion, but also his birth place and alleged connections with radical black groups.<sup>8</sup> In later debates, the polemics escalated to such an extent that right-wing activists regularly compared him to Hitler even on mainstream conservative media outlets. This was seen by some as a rather paradoxical expression of deep racial anxieties, bordering on “outright panic” at a “non-white” president’s accession to office.<sup>9</sup>

## **Multiculturalism, Islamophobia, and “Community Cohesion”**

Ironically, race relations campaigners this side of the Atlantic were green with envy at this extraordinary “breakthrough” for multiculturalism, lamenting the impossibility of repeating it in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Trevor Phillips, head of the United Kingdom’s Equality and Human Rights Commission, told *The Times* that an ethnic minority figure would never secure his party’s nomination to run for prime minister due to the “institutional racism” afflicting major political parties. Phillips, who had earlier led New Labour’s assault on British multiculturalism by blaming both it and Muslim reluctance to integrate for causing the country to “sleepwalk into segregation,” admitted that discrimination in Britain was less about race and more about class and culture. This made the country’s Muslim minority the British equivalent of black Americans, with British voters more likely to reject a Muslim prime minister than a black one.<sup>10</sup>

This presumed shifting of the goalposts for integration is revealing. In his notorious 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, Enoch Powell did not mention Islam or Muslims; however, he did identify black protests in the United States as a sign of the danger immigration represented.<sup>11</sup> Ever since Muslims began to be seen as the new nuisance after the Rushdie Affair of 1989 and then as a “threat” after 9/11 and 7/7, the debate shifted to the “Muslim problem.” The avowed Europe-wide distrust of Muslims, who are said to be both unwilling and unable to integrate, amounted to an “extensive moral panic” that, in turn, provoked intolerance and a “nationalist backlash in almost every European country.”<sup>12</sup>

Multiculturalism, now a “coded word” for Muslims,<sup>13</sup> was attacked for having permitted and even encouraged different (read “Muslim”) communities to live apart.<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is extremely significant that the current assault on it takes place against a surge in populist extreme right-wing trends on both sides of the Atlantic. For its critics, multiculturalism has been misleadingly valued as an acknowledgement of “the experience of living in a society that is less insular, less homogeneous, more vibrant and cosmopolitan than before.” In practice, however, the doctrine tended to ignore difference and dissent within communities and to impose rigid “cultural identities upon individuals.” At the same time, by dividing society into fixed cultures it tended to create tension and conflict among them. Thus multiculturalism limits the extent to which people can absorb different experiences and undermines the possibility of dialogue and debate among diverse communities. Ultimately, and in the name of tolerance and respect for others, “multiculturalism seeks to limit the kinds of clashes and conflicts necessary for a vibrant political culture.”<sup>15</sup>

For yet other critics, the liberal state should be indifferent to issues of identity and offer no recognition to cultural constituencies, lest its core task of maintaining order and peace be endangered by attempts to assume a cultural role.<sup>16</sup> In other words, what we have here is a contrast between two perspectives, one emphasizing the universalism of human rights, based on a recognition of the human race’s fundamental unity and equality, and the other emphasizing the recognition of difference based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other factors.<sup>17</sup> According to multiculturalism’s advocates, however, the problem is precisely the state’s inability to be wholly free of moral and cultural biases.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, minorities and marginalized groups need their distinct identities and the allocation of additional rights (e.g., self-government for indigenous minorities, as well as respect and protection for other minorities’ cultural identities) to be recognized in order to achieve equality.<sup>19</sup>

Critics have tended to describe this quest for recognition as a superfluous and counterproductive indulgence above and beyond the safeguarding of basic individual rights. But a more significant component of the multiculturalist thesis

is the protest against “misrecognition.” As Taylor puts it, “a person or a group of people can suffer a real damage, real distortion, if [the] people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”<sup>20</sup> This is because identity and difference are often imposed from the outside by the hegemonic powers through the representations and treatment of the minorities, rather than just constituted from the “inside.”<sup>21</sup>

Minority individuals have already been labeled in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, origin, and other factors, rather than simply perceived as individuals or new neighbors, fellow workers, or citizens.<sup>22</sup> The demands for cultural recognition thus emerge in the context of a “struggle over representation – over (self-) naming, and the language of articulation.”<sup>23</sup> Thus they were essentially protests against imposed and hostile labeling and gratuitous stereotyping. It is neither a luxury nor an indulgence, but rather a basic right, not to be stigmatized and oppressed. Recognition acquires even more significance in the case of previously oppressed minorities, whose suffering and the injustices committed against them need to be addressed through specific policies.

Critiques of multiculturalism thus miss the point in contrasting perceived particularistic demands with more genuine and legitimate demands for equal rights. A person does not wake up in the morning and, looking at her brown face in the mirror, decide to demand special treatment for people with brown faces. The label “negro,” not to mention a limitless arsenal of color-coded oppressive measures tending toward genocide, had been imposed on Africans long before “black consciousness” became a reality. This should focus attention on the modalities of constructing what Modood calls a “negative difference” that manifests itself in “alienness, inferiorization, stigmatization, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, racism, etc.”<sup>24</sup> It is these attitudes and practices that undermine the liberal state’s basic ethos, and not the legitimate demands for protection against them.

According to the standard narrative, multiculturalism as a doctrine (espousing recognition of difference as a component of “progressive politics”) and as a realization of the fact that many western countries have become multicultural societies due to immigration, dates back to the 1960s. During that period, various civic rights, feminist, and cultural and ethnic recognition movements flourished, while some countries (e.g., Canada) began to recognize themselves as multicultural societies.<sup>25</sup> Multiculturalism then “fell out of favour” after 9/11.<sup>26</sup> In reality, however, the onslaught against it started long before that particular event. As early as the Thatcher-Reagan era in the early 1980s, academic institutions were being accused of succumbing to the “intellectual tyranny” of political correctness of the “loony left,” of being allied with “anti-American” and/or “immoral” elements.<sup>27</sup>

This assault on American liberalism was raised another notch with the ascendancy of the neoconservative trend, which has its roots in the 1970s among disillusioned liberals and former Trotskyites who began to advocate a more aggressive anti-communism and wanted to “heat up” the cold war. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, they began calling for aggressive interventionism, particularly in the Middle East. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the culmination of this policy and the beginning of the end of the “neoconservative moment.”<sup>28</sup>

By that time, the attack on liberalism and multiculturalism had started to take on the overt form of Muslim bashing, and many “liberals” were happy to participate. The 1989 Rushdie Affair, when British Muslims staged mass protests against the publication of his *The Satanic Verses*, turned many erstwhile “liberals” against Muslims. After 9/11, this backlash went mainstream and became “respectable.” Some key socialist figures in Germany and Britain, who had earlier said it had been “a mistake to have admitted [Muslims] in large numbers” since they were difficult to integrate,<sup>29</sup> appeared to find in these trends confirmations of their earlier misgivings.

More recently, there have been accusations that Muslims threaten the established secular consensus by insisting on introducing religion into political life and thus rejecting “not only the comprehensive secularization of society but also its more limited and political form.”<sup>30</sup> Views usually espoused by far-right groups about Europe gradually being subjected to “Islamification” began to acquire wider currency as an emerging trend of “new liberals” began to see Europe’s Muslim presence as “a potential fifth column for Islamism.”<sup>31</sup>

A simultaneous shift in the European extreme right’s ideology from its habitual anti-Semitism and undifferentiated anti-immigrant sentiments toward a more focused Islamophobic rhetoric converged with these trends. The latent anti-Semitism, never too deep under the surface, was subsumed under a more intense hatred for Arab and Muslim immigrants coupled with a pro-Israel stance. Some even merited the categorization of philo-Semites,<sup>32</sup> but only because of a more intense hatred for Arabs than Jews.

Nothing enrages these “new liberals” more than having their alarmist message ignored by “appeasers” among fellow liberals who “refuse to see Islamism as the uniquely evil political ideology that it really is.” This naiveté entails a failure to recognize the necessity, as a lesser evil, of an “illiberal ideological war in defence of liberalism.”<sup>33</sup> But unlike their fellow neoconservative ideologues who “see Muslims en masse as inherently anti-modern,” the “new liberals” focus on Islamism rather than Islam and “see individual Muslims as choosing the wrong kind of modern politics.” Thus while neoconservatives talk of a clash of civilizations, the “new liberals” talk of “a clash within civilizations between extremists and moderates.”<sup>34</sup>

But in actual fact, there is constant slippage between the two discourses, for the new liberal rhetoric implicitly, and often explicitly, labels *all* Muslims as potential “fifth columnists.”<sup>35</sup> This convergence was recently highlighted by the speed with which official discourses on terrorism, integration, multiculturalism, and Islamophobia seem to instantly merge into debates on immigration. In January 2011, British Conservative party chairwoman Sayeeda Warsi complained in a speech that Islamophobia in Britain has “now crossed the threshold of middle-class respectability.” Other commentators concurred, saying that it has become “the last socially acceptable form of bigotry, often dressed up in the clothes of liberalism.”<sup>36</sup>

As if to confirm this, the following month in his speech at a security meeting in Munich, her boss Prime Minister David Cameron blamed “state multiculturalism” for the rise in “extremist Islamism” that, he argued, was at the root of terrorism.<sup>37</sup> A *Guardian* editorial then criticized him for “blaming the victims,” thereby reinforcing extreme right-wing rhetoric and misunderstanding the links between multiculturalism and terrorism. Others warned that the wider impact of such remarks and policies “is likely to be chilling and poisonous.”<sup>38</sup>

Cameron’s speech could have equally been written by the author of Tony Blair’s March 2006 “about civilization” speech, which made precisely the same arguments: Terrorism has nothing to do with British foreign policy or the politics of authoritarian countries, but is motivated solely by a “global [Islamist] ideology” that links terrorists from Kashmir and Bali to Chechnya, Algeria, and New York.<sup>39</sup> The issue is thus not one of politics, but rather one of pathology – a specifically Islamic one.

Similar attacks were also made in October 2010 by Angela Merkel, who joined the chorus by proclaiming the failure of multiculturalism and singing the praises of full integration for immigrants. Nicolas Sarkozy followed in March with allegations that, under the influence of multiculturalism, western democracies “cared too much about the identity of the migrant and not sufficiently about the identity of the country that welcomed him.”<sup>40</sup> What is interesting about this is that neither country had ever espoused multiculturalism. Unlike Britain, the Netherlands, or Sweden from the 1970s, neither Germany nor France ever recognized the collective identities of immigrant communities; rather, they always insisted on their citizens’ full assimilation. So for these politicians, multiculturalism had failed before even being tried.

The allied rise in Islamophobia could not be understood in isolation from the general insecurity about national identity. This was soon highlighted by Cameron’s April 2011 speech on immigration, in which he declared immigration a (specifically political) threat that needs to be tackled decisively: “I want us to starve extremist parties of the oxygen of public anxiety they thrive on and

extinguish them once and for all.”<sup>41</sup> But this overbidding contest with the far right usually ends up “feeding the very fire” of the leaders whom Cameron believed could be contained. As center-right parties shift to the right for fear of losing their constituencies, anti-Muslim sentiments appear to have replaced anti-Semitism as “the common denominator of populist movements.”<sup>42</sup>

The policy implications have remained the same since the Labour government began, in 2000, to beat a hasty retreat from its self-proclaimed 1997 pluralist agenda. Its response to the 2001 riots in various northern English cities, as reflected in official reports and new policy statements, tended to put “much (but not all) of the responsibility for them on to Muslims” and to emphasize the need for community cohesion based on “core British values.”<sup>43</sup> Since then, “community cohesion” has become the flagship policy both in the realm of community relations and in the fight against terrorism. The ultimate objective was to build “a strong society with shared values and a strong sense of shared identity.”<sup>44</sup> Within the context of this policy, a multicultural British citizenship is to be “established through the forging of common values shared by all communities,” coupled with an effort at “de-polarizing communities” by “transforming the social capital in these areas from bonding to bridging.”<sup>45</sup>

But the close link with the fight against terrorism and the associated intrusiveness and surveillance made this policy problematic and very controversial. Its targeting of areas designated as particularly “deprived” or somehow problematic caused the policy to be viewed with suspicion, as a strategy to “regulate and punish” communities considered deviant or troublesome. Not only was it resented by the target communities as yet another form of victimization, but it was also resented by other communities for the perceived diversion of resources toward the Muslim community.<sup>46</sup>

When “integration” is deployed as an aggressive policy of containment and pacification, rather than as a welcoming strategy, it becomes a new form of oppression. It is also an assault on the liberal democratic character of western polities, since it advocates intrusive policies in the realms of culture and private space that are incompatible with liberalism. A whole era of post-war progress toward respecting equality and human dignity therefore becomes a parenthetical “multicultural moment,” a thing of the past. One can thus speak of a “long multicultural moment” that began with the closure of Nazi concentration camps and ended with the opening of new camps in Baghram and Guantanamo Bay. But the shorter, less diffuse one began with the 1960s civil rights movement and fell victim to the Reaganite-Thatcherite backlash. On both accounts, it appears to have been an ephemeral moment in western history.



## Lessons from the United States?

But there is a more fundamental problem: The very notion of “cultural deviance” at the heart of this intrusive social engineering is deeply problematic. Even if we could overlook the valid argument that culture is now a coded reference to race,<sup>47</sup> thereby contributing to the use of condescending references to race in liberal circles, insisting on cultural conformity as a condition for citizenship (complete with “citizenship tests”) is profoundly illiberal. In this regard, Sarkozy correctly saw this as a debate about the character of the countries involved, rather than immigrants. Cameron was also right in pointing out the deep insecurity and anxiety evoked by the specter of “mass immigration.” But both were wrong if they thought that attempting to outbid the racists was the correct approach. Insisting on an enforced “cohesion” (read “cultural conformity”) may look like the inverse of racism and exclusion, but it is really just another reminder of an earlier form of enforced conformity: the Inquisition.

In this regard, we only need to examine the sobering lessons from two formative and extremely traumatic episodes of modern western political history to uncover the dangerous impulses lurking behind this alleged search for homogeneity: the African-American struggle for recognition within an ostensibly liberal democratic polity that believed that all people are created equal, and the equally instructive traumatic trajectory of European Jewry within Enlightenment Europe. In both cases, the invented and problematic concept of “race” was deployed to trump culture as the defining identity in the same way that culture (and the label “Muslim”) are being used today to trump all other identities and even to “smear” perfectly integrated individuals like President Obama. In both cases, the minorities initially had no problem with cultural integration; later on, however, they rebelled against it.

The important debates that shaped the African-American struggle for liberation and dignity started from the conciliatory approach initiated by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), who sought to dissipate white Americans’ apprehensions and reassure them of black Americans’ “loyalty” and full respect for the values of American society.<sup>48</sup> In the 1960s, this approach provoked a backlash in the shape of the Black Power movement(s), a time when such radical leaders as Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and other figures rejected integration as both impossible (given that whites neither permitted nor wanted it) and demeaning (since it assumed the superiority of white culture and ways, and measured the worth of black people in terms of conforming to that culture). The alternative was to instill pride in authentic black culture and follow the example of radical anti-colonial theorists who argued that the “decoloni-

sation of the mind” was just as important a component of the liberation struggle as was the decolonization of territory.<sup>49</sup>

The significance of this shift stems from the fact that African Americans were correctly regarded as the most “American” of all Americans, and yet still remained the country’s most alienated group.

Paradoxically, blacks may well be at once the most estranged and the least foreign of all the citizens: most estranged because of their special history, which began in subjugation, continued in separation, and persists to this day under various forms of segregation; least foreign because, ironically, having been cut off from their native roots, they had few guides but those of the master and his agents.<sup>50</sup>

The motive of the struggle for integration was a faith, going back to de Tocqueville, in the American polity’s essentially liberal character. Reiterated in such works as Gunnar Myrdal’s *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), this line of thought viewed the evolution of American politics as a long drawn out conflict between a hegemonic liberal democratic “creed” and aberrant inclinations and “jealousies” that deviated from it. Yet according to this narrative, the “creed” always and ultimately triumphs.<sup>51</sup> For some of its advocates, Obama’s triumph, even in just securing the candidacy for president, signals the “end of Black politics” and the final realization of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “humanist” dream of a united, liberal, “post-racial” United States in which black leaders were no longer fixated on issues of race but were concerned with the welfare of all Americans.<sup>52</sup>

For the other side, however, this is a dangerous illusion resulting from the collusion of assimilated black leaders with the very establishment “that historically vilified [blacks] as the greatest threat to white racial purity and mastery.” In this bargain, candidates seek to present themselves as the “good” black people who are worthy of trust “partly or particularly because they are not accountable to an impoverished black mass,” and are, in turn, supported by “good white people” who vote for “good black people.”<sup>53</sup>

By the same token, the competing discourses on assimilation could also be read as “antithetical master frames” in the contest to draw boundaries and “situate ethnic, racial, or minority groups along a dimension of deviance and normality.”<sup>54</sup> In the United States, the core identity into which people were required to assimilate gradually shifted from being English, to being northern European, and then to being White European, with the original boundaries being fiercely defended at every turn. Today, the emphasis is on being “Western European” as opposed to Asian, Muslim, or Latino. For some minorities, such as the Irish immigrants who were persecuted and often classified as “niggers,”

the struggle to differentiate themselves from the blacks with whom they shared the same urban space involved ruthless tactics. To be recognized as “white,” they exploited those political (the Democratic Party) and labor organizations (unions) that excluded blacks in order to gain an advantage and eventually be assimilated into the dominant “race” category of “whiteness.”<sup>55</sup>

By contrast, blacks were not even troubled with the label “deviant” in terms of their degree of assimilation. Long considered an “aberration” on the American cultural scene “even by well-meaning white[s],” they were deemed “even more deviant and subject to more social control when they *did* try to assimilate.”<sup>56</sup> Their attempts to assimilate were a source of terror for many whites, so much so that the idea has been expressed, since de Tocqueville, that the “Negro problem” could only be solved by the disappearance of black people. Doubting the feasibility of equitable white and black co-existence on American soil and skeptical about alternative solutions (e.g., repatriation), de Tocqueville grimly concluded that a massive race war was inevitable with “prejudice-driven genocides” as the predictable outcome.<sup>57</sup> And genocide was indeed contemplated, even advocated, for both Native Americans and blacks. As one congressman reflected in 1908 regarding blacks, “the utter extermination of a race of people is inexpressibly sad, yet if its existence endangers the welfare of mankind, it is fitting that it should be swept away.”<sup>58</sup>

Short of genocide, the evolving consensus was that blacks were to “be segregated, largely disfranchised, and confined to menial occupations via inferior education and discriminatory hiring practices – but not expelled, tortured, or killed.”<sup>59</sup> The result was, in the words of Kenneth Clark (writing in 1965), the creation of the “dark ghetto,” with its “invisible walls” erected “by those who have power, both to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness.”<sup>60</sup>

It is poignant to recall that even military service, regarded by black leaders since the nineteenth century as a tool to earn the right to citizenship, continued to be officially segregated until 1948.<sup>61</sup> But more to the point, segregation in places of worship persists even today, giving credence to Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous remark about 11:00 a.m. on Sunday being the most segregated hour of the week in the United States.<sup>62</sup> A 2008 CNN report reflected that as Americans were about to nominate a black man to run for president, it was “segregation as usual in U.S. churches,” with only about 5% of the nation’s churches being racially integrated.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, it was the anger at being rejected and humiliated that was at the root of the rise of the counter-culture and the Black Power movements in the mid-1960s. Like their counterparts in colonial Africa, the limited integration attained only accentuated the sense of grievance against racist injus-

tice and rejection.<sup>64</sup> Ironically, resistance to assimilation did facilitate partial integration, as it made assimilationists like Martin Luther King, Jr. seem acceptably moderate by comparison to the new radical forces.<sup>65</sup>

The rise of black separatism was a key influence in shifts in right-wing thinking from policies of overt repression and fantasies of genocide to prescriptions of assimilation. And it was, interestingly, a pioneer of today's neo-conservatism, for Norman Podhoretz<sup>66</sup> spearheaded such shifts in 1963 by advocating total assimilation as a solution to the "Negro problem." While admitting his own personal antipathy toward blacks, he reluctantly called on his peers to drop opposition to inter-marriage in order to counter the "dangerous" ideology of Black Muslims.<sup>67</sup>

This context led many civil rights activists to argue, as early as 1946 (the novelist Richard Wright) and again in 1964 (Ebony's publisher, John H. Johnson), that the "Negro problem" (or the "race problem") should more accurately be described as the "White problem," since it is primarily a problem of prejudice, racism, and a structural socioeconomic and political bias in favor of whites.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, it is instructive to note that the neoliberal anti-multiculturalist backlash of the 1980s manifested itself in antipathy toward remedial policies (e.g., affirmative action) that sought to address the consequences of racial inequality. In this context, the "white problem" now manifested itself in a new guise: defending privilege in the name of liberty and equality. Given this, even Podhoretz's intervention was only another manifestation of the intense insecurity associated with the "white problem."

## Lessons from the European Jewish Experience

Podhoretz, a Jewish intellectual, made the inevitable comparison between the African-American experience and the Jewish one, but only to downplay their similarities. Blacks, he argued, did not share the Jewish "memory of past glory and a dream of imminent redemption," for the blacks remained prisoners of what (the ever-right wing) Podhoretz called the "stigma" of color and history.

His past is a stigma, his color is a stigma, and his vision of the future is the hope of erasing the stigma by making color irrelevant, by making it disappear as a fact of consciousness. I share this hope, but I cannot see how it will ever be realized unless color does in fact disappear: and that means not integration, it means assimilation.<sup>69</sup>

But while this "disappearance" may suggest a more palatable fate than genocide, the Jewish experience in Europe indicates that such a quest for invisibility may not be a safeguard against the more grisly form of attempted

elimination. European Jews also shared with African Americans the fate of having been a long-established persecuted minority whose strenuous efforts to integrate and assimilate met with constant rejection. Jewish “emancipation” and the abolition of slavery occurred around the same time (late eighteenth and early nineteenth century). Anti-Semitism in Europe witnessed its most disastrous upsurge during the same post-World War I era that saw American racism climb to ominous levels with the second rise of Ku Klux Klan and similar trends. In both cases, this backlash and “reluctance to integrate” did not come from the minority.

Jews, especially in Central Europe, generally identified with German culture. Even for separatist Zionists like Theodor Herzl, German identity was still regarded as “the source of any national regeneration of Judaism.” In fact, Herzl went so far as to propose making German the language of the future Jewish state of Palestine. German Jews displayed exemplary patriotism: 100,000 (out of a total of about 500,000) mobilized during World War I, and 12,000 of them died in battle. Like their African-American contemporaries, German Jews saw the war as a historical opportunity to prove their patriotism and “to redeem the privileges of an emancipation won not through struggle but granted by the state.” One result was that the “entire Jewish press, liberal as well as Zionist, competed in a display of loyalty, in harmony with the prevailing chauvinism.”<sup>70</sup>

Suspiciousness was nevertheless cast on Jewish sincerity even during the war. Compatriots did not see their full integration as a reassuring evidence of successful “community cohesion.” On the contrary, it signaled that the “Jews had simply gone underground or had merged into the innocent Aryan population.”<sup>71</sup> As the “inner enemy,” the Jew had “succeeded in concealing the outer signs of his true group belonging and is posing as a member of society.” The challenge now was to track down these “hidden enemies,” expose them, and enforce their visibility by making them wear special attire or a yellow star.<sup>72</sup>

Hannah Arendt’s famous depiction of the assimilated Jew as a “parvenu” and social climber, in contrast to those who defended and even celebrated their “pariah” status and used it as a base from which to fight for equality,<sup>73</sup> concedes too much to the racist climate of her times. She has a point in condemning assimilation when it meant acquiescing in the marginalization of the majority of Jews, with the “parvenu” seeking social acceptance as an “exception” while sharing the prevalent contempt for his/her unassimilated fellow Jews. This critique is echoed by the condemnation of assimilated blacks who “act white.” However, Arendt overlooks an important fact: the majority of Jews who sought to integrate into German culture and society (including Arendt herself, whose “spiritual home” remained Germany<sup>74</sup>), took the Enlightenment’s universalist claims at face value. This obstinate faith in the En-

lightenment's rhetoric, despite the many disappointments since the time of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), became a problem when the imaginary society that claimed to treat all humans as equal remained elusive.

Arendt theoretically grounded her critique in the distinction between the social and the political, charging that the "parvenu" was preoccupied with gaining social acceptance at the expense of equal political rights. This stance was behind her gross misjudgment when she criticized the struggle against racial segregation in the American South as an instance of blacks wanting to follow the model of the "parvenu" by trading social acceptance for political rights. She later modified her position.<sup>75</sup>

### **"The Souls of Muslim Folk"**

In his seminal work on the dilemmas facing African Americans trying to identify with a country that despises and stigmatizes them, pioneering civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois reflected on a person being torn between "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity ... The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he ... simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.<sup>76</sup>

This dilemma, however, should be the problem of the country that imposes it on the "Negro" who wants no more than to be treated as a fellow human being in a country that claims to be based on the ideals of liberal humanism. In this regard, Myrdal was quite correct in arguing that the "Negro problem" was the "white man's problem,"<sup>77</sup> just as the "Jewish Question" was not Jewish at all. Du Bois did not have to blame himself for finding it difficult to belong to a country that rejected him. The fact that most blacks continued to be patriotic and ready to sacrifice their lives for a country that insisted on segregating them even white at war testifies to the triumph of a hope that was ultimately, if only partially, vindicated as the United States began to change. German Jews were patriotic before Hitler; however, it would be too much to demand that they continue to be patriotic Germans after Auschwitz.

It could be argued that it is not the same for Muslims in the West, since their labeling as both a coherent and distinct group has gone hand in hand

with a growing consciousness among Muslims themselves of this broad and unifying identity. This has taken place against the background of struggles over domestic (e.g., the Rushdie Affair and the anti-terror laws) and foreign policy (e.g., the wars in Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine) issues. The actions and misguided rhetoric of some extremist Muslim individuals and groups has also contributed to this imposed labeling. Whenever Muslims burn books, wear mock suicide vests in demonstrations, voice support for acts of terror, or publicly disavow the responsibilities of citizenship, they tend to feed anti-Muslim prejudice and provoke hostile reactions.<sup>78</sup>

There is, in this regard, some truth in Arendt's points that victims of discrimination are not necessarily entirely innocent and that some of their actions and orientations may have contributed to the problem.<sup>79</sup> For Muslims, as Parekh puts it, much could be done to "to regain their individual and collective agency and regenerate themselves," and thus fight discrimination more effectively.

Muslim communities need to repair their disintegrating social fabric, build strong families and supporting networks, take greater interest in and responsibility for their youth, and reform those social and religious practices that stifle and alienate it. Their intellectual and religious leaders need to offer a way of reading Islam that connects with European modernity and counters the perverted interpretations that are popularized by the al-Qaeda and its associates.<sup>80</sup>

There are limits, however, to what can be done in such a hostile atmosphere. The argument that the rather enthusiastic Jewish assimilation into German culture may have contributed to their endangerment<sup>81</sup> cannot be justified even in hindsight. In fact, the "pariah" and "parvenu," "nationalist" or "integrationist" strategies can be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive tendencies.

In this regard it is, ironically, the emergence of "rejectionist" Muslim trends, culminating in the rise of terror groups such as al-Qaeda, that thrust the "Muslim Question" (or the "Muslim Problem") into the center of political debate in the West. The marginalized and disadvantaged Muslim communities, made up mainly of recently arrived, poor, and poorly educated immigrants, were not ready for this. They did not have the time to develop the intellectual, organizational, or financial resources needed to become part of such a core debate about the values and trajectory of advanced democracies. Consequently, this has become mainly a debate about Muslims, one from which they continue to be largely excluded.

Nevertheless, the core argument made by Cameron (and before that by Blair) on the character and legitimacy of Muslim representation is as patron-

izing as it is self-defeating. It is quite legitimate to criticize Muslim spokespersons as too Islamic for liberal sensibilities, and in fact many who claim to speak for Muslims often do more damage than good. But at least they speak *for* Muslims, whereas their critics have adopted a markedly anti-Muslim stance. As a result, the current struggle over Muslim representation is not one between liberal secular Muslims and bigoted fundamentalists, but one between those defending Muslim rights and freedoms and those actively victimizing them (or wanting to them to “disappear,” one way or the other). The attacks on Muslim organizations rarely come from the “silent Muslim majority,” for the main protagonists are the neoconservatives, far-right groups, or assorted Islamophobes. This is hardly a contest.

The political order into which Muslims are asked to integrate is thus becoming an increasingly Islamophobic and hostile one. If the fundamental defining characteristics of a modern liberal polity is respect for diversity, the sanctity of religious freedom, and the state’s non-interference in private conduct and matters of conscience, then the “muscular liberal” polities of Cameron and the French establishment are looking increasingly illiberal. “Muslim folks” cannot be expected to integrate willingly into such an Islamophobic, not to mention illiberal, polity any more than the black folks or Jews of yesteryear could have been expected to pledge loyalty to a racist state.

This problem is further exacerbated by the globalized dimension in which these contests are being waged, and not only because the assertion of ethnic and religious identities have become “modes of resistance” against globalized neoliberalism or because Islamic extremism mirrors its western counterpart.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, there are other and rather interesting interdependencies among the processes involved, since the same trends that trade on insecurities relating to immigration also advocate such imperialist and expansionist policies as the war on Iraq. Such adventures, in turn, tend to destabilize whole regions and displace masses of people, thereby creating large numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers. They also create resentment against the United States and its allies among those impacted, and often well beyond. Muslim communities the world over, including those in the West, felt anger at the devastation brought about by the violent western intrusions into Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention the simultaneous Israeli war on the Palestinians (2003-04).

When combined with the far right’s rising influence in many western countries, the resulting polarization makes the vociferously demanded “integration” of immigrants far more difficult. Again, what we have here is that suspect nexus: Muslim = Islamist = terrorist/enemy. The discourses that result in this construction of Muslims as enemies and “Islamic terrorism” as an existential threat have paradoxical consequences. The securitization of immi-



gration in general, and of a Muslim presence in the West in particular, can function as a device for enhancing national solidarity in a post-ideological era as well as for selling certain foreign and domestic policies (e.g., foreign wars or increased surveillance and police powers).<sup>83</sup> However, in this very act an “enemy within” is created and the demanded (or rather threatened) integration becomes both impossible and undesirable.

In an ominous replay of the processes of “enemy construction” in inter-war Germany and France, the “signs of visibility” of this undesirable alien presence (e.g., the headscarf) are discouraged, even proscribed, in the name of integration, which is equated with invisibility. However, no sooner has the emblem of difference been suppressed and made invisible than this very invisibility becomes suspect: “The visible and invisible both become problematic: the one suspect, the other threatening, viewed as potentially murderous.”<sup>84</sup>

In this charged atmosphere, those who “integrate” become even more suspect than those who do not. Leaving aside the regular sniping at the “Muslim Obama,” other perfectly integrated achievers among American Muslim citizens have become the latest victims of conservative sniping and scare mongering. When one of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s top female aides happened to be a Muslim, some conservative critics went so far as to accuse Clinton herself of being a secret member of a “Muslim Sisterhood” that is skewing American foreign policy in favor of Islamists!<sup>85</sup>

We observe the ultimate absurdity of this paradox in the so-called policy of “racial profiling,” where the Muslims’ presumed “concealed” identity is diligently tracked and unearthed. But this is also the arena in which Muslims who “self-profile” by visibly (and literally) “wearing” their identity on their sleeves and heads become the victims of arbitrary discrimination: treated as a threats and often prevented from boarding planes or being removed after boarding.

But the core problem is this paranoid securitization of cultural identity, not to mention the fantastical idea that coercing a dilution of attachment to religious beliefs and cultural identity is essential for social harmony, even a panacea for political violence. One need not go into the numerous empirical studies that indicate the tenuousness of the assumed link between religious beliefs and the resort to political violence.<sup>86</sup> It is also redundant to remind ourselves that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the West condemn and reject terrorism, if simply out of self-interest, since terrorism in the name of Islam endangers them and does not serve their interests. In this context, the core question about “integration” is what one is being asked to integrate into.

The advantage of liberal democracies over other systems is their inclusiveness and readiness to accept individuals and groups for who they are. This is not the case, however, with racist or similar systems. The recent rise of Is-

Islamophobia in many western countries, coupled with the erosion of democratic rights under the pretext of fighting terror, has stripped them of that advantage. Radical opposition to integration, as the precedents of Black Power activism remind us, is not motivated by a “hatred for democracy,” as some continue to argue, but rather by anger at the unfair conditions of inclusion. The connections between radicalism and violence, not to mention between culture and violence, are very complex and certainly do not conform to the simplistic formulae that sees less religion as equal to less radicalism, and thus a reduced tendency toward violence.

In sum, the core of this crisis with multiculturalism stems from a fundamental contradiction of living in an interconnected, intensely interactive and irreducibly multicultural world while simultaneously confronting a “profoundly post-multicultural era.”<sup>87</sup> It is precisely this tendency to violently suppress diversity that generates global violence.

## Conclusion

The Obama phenomenon thus presents a metaphor for our times by highlighting the limits of integration in a presumably liberal multicultural polity, where a fully assimilated half-white, upper middle class overachiever still has to strive for acceptance by downplaying non-existent difference. Obama is not busy proclaiming his supposedly Islamic faith from a specially constructed minaret in the West Wing of the White House. And if he really was a Muslim, then his perfectly concealed faith has had as much impact on his thinking and policies as has his color, which he cannot conceal as effectively. It is mainly his detractors who are busy trying, like fanatical UFO trackers but with more sinister motives, to locate his invisible faith. Like the Inquisition-style hunting of Jews during the Nazi era, the Islamophobes of today are doing the work of fanatical Nazis or the South African guardians of apartheid by striving to discover “otherness” where the subjects in question could not see any. (Is a Catholic who has one Jewish ancestor still a Jew? Is a person with one “colored” ancestor still colored?)

It is thus not a matter here of assessing and comparing the levels of inclusiveness in the United States and Europe or of grading their respective political systems on benchmarks of diversity, a task pursued energetically by Robert D. Putnam and his collaborators. As was the case with civil rights activists in the 1960s, it is not the lack of cultural integration that is behind the anger displayed by sections of Muslim youth in Europe. Rather, it is a sign of the wall that integration has hit, for it has finally reached a level sufficient to accentuate

awareness of the discrepancy between the theoretically trumpeted values of fairness and the reality of rejection and injustice. Preaching something and doing the opposite is what gets to them. In the end, they embrace cultural difference precisely to show their discontent with the dominant culture's hypocrisy and false promises, just as their counterparts in the United States had embraced Islam or radicalism to protest the humiliation of being locked out of their own local churches.

The characterization of the current problems facing the Muslims in Europe as one of "reluctance to integrate" overlooks the painful lessons from Nazi Germany and colonial Algeria, to apartheid South Africa and the segregated United States, where unprecedented and unjustified persecution fell precisely on those who worked hardest to assimilate into the dominant culture and adhere to its proclaimed values of freedom and democracy. Let us recall that when de Tocqueville sardonically predicted genocide as the only likely solution to the "Negro problem," he did not build his predictions on anything African Americans did or were likely to do, but on the white Americans' antipathy toward them. It was the same with European Jews. Just as in the case of the noticeably ascending anti-Muslim xenophobia gripping the United States and Europe these days, narratives of insecurity about black alienation mistook effect for cause. Hoover's FBI intensified surveillance of African-American groups long before the beginning of civil rights agitation, and allegations of "Bolshevik infiltration" of the civil rights movements were used as a pretext for surveillance and crackdowns.<sup>88</sup> Thus resistance to oppression and exclusion, the most natural of human responses, was characterized as foreign-induced sedition and used as a pretext for more oppression.

What we are facing today is thus not a crisis of multiculturalism, but a deep crisis of the modern nation-state comparable to the one on the eve of World War I, a time when emerging states were "haunted by inarticulate fears and anxieties" about impending chaos and "real and imagined enemies." Then as now, fledgling nation-states were dominated by an urge to eradicate what they saw as internal resistance to their claims of sovereignty and control.

From the state's point of view, those seen as belonging to it had to be integrated, either willingly or by coercion, whereas those seen as not belonging to it had to be excluded or eliminated, no matter whether they wished to belong to it or not. Hence the definition of both foe and friend, compatriot and non-patriot, entailed the making of victims, that is, compelling people to conform to a definition that they might not share, based on categories imposed on them by a larger community or a political regime.<sup>89</sup>

When the demands to “integrate” come from the same sources that accuse perfectly assimilated individuals and groups of “hiding something,” we are back into the Inquisition-mode, where assimilation is a program for (an impossible) annihilation. The insecurity is pathological, self-reinforcing, and ultimately immensely destructive, for the notion that “the enemy is among us yet cannot be unmasked has always been the stuff of fear and paranoia and the cause of destructive imaginings and violent eruptions.”<sup>90</sup>

The remedy may be to go back to Powell’s legitimate question: What if Obama is a Muslim? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in the United States or anywhere else on Earth for that matter? This is the correct question. The correct remedy is to treat the pathology behind it, not to succumb to or appease it. The illusion that by meeting the devil halfway, namely, condemning multiculturalism and adopting some of the rhetoric of extremism, we can contain xenophobia at manageable levels is a dangerous one. We live in an irreducibly multicultural world, and it is no more possible today to quarantine an isolated corner of it as an exclusive preserve of one unique culture to which all must conform than it was to safeguard the imagined purity of an exclusive “Aryan race.” We have been there before and do not need to go back to that very dark place. Treating the “white problem” may be the less costly option.

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