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Authors:

Dr Nadya Ali, Lecturer in International Relations, University of Sussex

Dr Ben Whitham, Lecturer in International Relations, De Montfort University

Corresponding author:

Dr Ben Whitham (ben.whitham@dmu.ac.uk), Lecturer in International Relations, Department of Politics, People and Place, De Montfort University, Leicester.

The Unbearable Anxiety of Being: Ideological Fantasies of British Muslims beyond the Politics of Security

Abstract

Since the advent of the 'War on Terror' British Muslims have been designated as a source of anxiety by politicians, journalists and publics alike. Fears that began over terrorism have extended to the opening of Islamic faith schools, the meaning of clothing and halal slaughter. Critical scholarship that engages with these developments in the fields of politics and international relations tends to view them through paradigms of (in)security. Whilst these contributions have been helpful in understanding the construction of a Muslim 'problem', this article demonstrates how the array of issues incorporated by this problem exceeds the politics of security.

The article develops an original conceptual and analytic framework, drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian theory of ideology, to argue that political and media 'scandals' about what an imagined 'Muslim community' gets up to are best understood as ideological *fantasies*. Through analysis of three case studies, we show that these fantasies are mobilised to suture traumatic gaps and conceal contradictions in wider social practices around sexual abuse, education, and food production. We show how the unremitting focus on myriad aspects of British Muslims' imagined lives is symptomatic of what Žižek calls an 'unbearable anxiety'. Islamophobic ideological fantasies summon a 'conceptual Muslim' figure as a means of preventing confrontation with the Lacanian 'Real': antagonistic and anxiety-inducing structures and practices underpinning British society, of which we do not speak.

‘I wanted to consider what divides communities and gives rise to anxiety’

Dame Louise Casey (2016)¹

The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration

‘What will we do about The Muslim Problem then?’

Trevor Kavanagh (2017)²

The Sun

1. Introduction

On 7th May 2014, Britain’s highest circulation newspaper, the *Sun*, led with a story that restaurant chain Pizza Express was using halal meat without the knowledge of customers (Jones, 2014). The story came in the wake of similar revelations in April 2014, that fast-food chain Subway was selling halal meat in 185 of its shops ‘in an effort to please’ Muslims (Poulter, 2014). Similar tales have been in circulation in the press regarding the creeping infiltration of halal meat into schools, hospitals, prisons and even, as the *Daily Mail* notes with disdain, pubs (Penman, 2010).

This ‘media scandal’ (Lull and Hinerman, 1997) underscores wider fears about an Islamic ‘takeover’ of Britain. Colin Hart of the Christian Institute, describes the prevalence of halal meat as the ‘Islamification of food’ (Poulter et al, 2014), hinting at a more deep-seated anxiety about the spread of the Muslim ‘contagion’ or an ‘enemy within’ (Warsi, 2017). The takeover, spread, or infiltration of Britain by Muslims is also represented as occurring without the knowledge or consent of the population, as a conspiracy. Stephen Evans of the National Secular Society confirms this: ‘Unsuspecting members of the public are routinely being duped into buying meat from religious slaughter methods’ (Jones, 2014). This anxiety over secret Muslim activity reveals a compulsion on the part of much of the national news media to link this social group to a whole set of activities around which there is significant social tension. These do not just include the obvious topics of terrorism and ‘radicalisation’ but also paedophilia, benefits fraud, female genital mutilation, illegal immigration, electoral fraud, gender-based violence, faith schools and dress codes. The casting of the figure of the Muslim in these diverse narratives as deviant, depraved or barbaric calls for a fresh look at how and why this development has occurred. Existing critical

¹ The Casey Review was commissioned by government to investigate ‘opportunity and integration’ in the UK yet in the 199-page report, Muslims, Islam and ‘Islamism’ are mentioned 349 times, by contrast to just 35 mentions of Christians and Christianity, and 23 mentions of Jewish people and Judaism.

² Kavanagh is a former Political Editor, and now a columnist, at the Sun. Condemnation of this article for parallels with Hitler’s ‘Jewish Problem’ and ‘final solution’ led the newspaper to remove the capital letters from ‘The’ and ‘Problem’ in the online version. An IPSO investigation found that the article ‘was capable of causing serious offence, given [...] the rhetoric preceding the Holocaust’ but did not breach its Editors’ Code.

accounts of the construction of the figure of the Muslim in post-9/11 international relations (IR) scholarship has drawn upon securitisation theory, the ‘suspect communities’ thesis and governmentality approaches. These contributions have been crucial in highlighting the processes of marking out and designating Muslims as objects of (in)security, but have been unable to capture the more excessive, ‘fantasmatic’ elements of these efforts.

This article draws upon psychoanalytic and social theory to demonstrate how the ‘conceptual Muslim’ is not simply a *source* of societal anxiety in Britain today, but is also constructed to *manage* a range of societal anxieties. Inspired by Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian understanding of ideology, we show how British society fantasises about Muslims to avoid confrontation with contradictory and upsetting aspects of our social ‘Real’. Where pressing political problems rear their head, such as the large-scale sexual exploitation of women and girls, the implications of neoliberal educational reform, or the industrial production of meat, the conceptual Muslim is invoked as a means of bypassing critical societal self-reflection. Anxiety over these problems is channelled through the figure of the conceptual Muslim who bears the blame for society’s ills and this tendency concretely forestalls the possibility for radical political change focused on challenging patriarchy, class inequality and anthroparchy.

The focus of our analysis is on media coverage of three cases in particular: ‘Muslim rape gangs’, the ‘Trojan Horse’ school controversy and the halal meat scandal. The aim of the analysis is to uncover the fundamentally fantasmatic quality of the Muslim ‘problem’ in Britain today. The article first constructs a conceptual and analytic framework through Žižek’s Lacanian theory of ideology as a tool or heuristic to demonstrate how scholars can conceptualise the figure of the Muslim ‘other’ as serving multiple political functions beyond the paradigm of security. The second part of the article explores the three exemplar media scandals set out above and demonstrates how they are united not by the actual practices of British Muslims, but by the fantasmatic function they serve in managing societal anxieties about generalised but unspeakable practices. While British Muslims are represented as deviants in relation to a range of issues, societal fantasies about secretive and deviant minority practices are, as our analysis demonstrates, really a means of uncritically addressing anxieties over the society we are collectively (re)producing.

2. A conceptual-analytic framework for ideology-critique

2.1 Why ideology? Moving beyond the security paradigm

There is an extant literature in the fields of politics and international relations that addresses social policy and media constructions of Muslims in the West through the conceptual

lenses of ‘securitisation’ (Cesari, 2009; Brown, 2010; Hussain and Bagguley, 2012; Bosco, 2014; Fox and Akababa, 2015), ‘suspect communities’ (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009; Choudhary and Fenwick, 2011; Hickman et al., 2011; Awan, 2012; HC Nikels et al, 2012; Kundnani, 2014), and ‘governmentality’ (Aradau and van Munster, 2007; Birt, 2011; de Goede, 2008; de Goede and Simons, 2012; Heath-Kelly, 2013; O’Toole, 2016). Each of these lenses offers something useful, but each also remains tied to the paradigm of *security* as its key reference point. Distinct concerns over schools, food, and sexual abuse, among other things, have been articulated through a series of media scandals, and while each is partly represented as overlapping with security concerns around terrorism and ‘radicalisation’, none is confined to this topic. We therefore need a conceptual and analytic framework that can speak to the more pervasive nature of anxieties about Muslims.

This article shows that the concept of ideology - specifically the Lacanian version developed by Slavoj Žižek - can provide such a framework. In the midst of the liberal triumphalism of the early post-Cold War era, Žižek added his voice to attempts to resuscitate the concept of ideology, noting that the ‘idea of the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea par excellence’ (2008: xxiv). In addition to his first major work published in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek penned a series of shorter interventions that were concerned with retrieving the concept of ideology and re-asserting its pertinence at a time when many were claiming that it had become a defunct or irrelevant category. Žižek’s Lacanian concept of ideology provides a way of seeing policy and media representations of an imagined ‘Muslim community’ as a confluence of fantasies and anxieties mobilised in the service of specific power relations and political strategies, which, we argue, makes for a deeper understanding of the wide range of ‘scandals’ relating to British Muslims, and the prominence accorded to these in our public sphere.

Muslims are singled out for exceptional, sustained, multi-faceted and intensive vilification (Alexander, 2017: 14). While critical security theory can contribute to explaining some aspects of this problem, there are important elements that are not accounted for. How has the figure of the Muslim become the pre-eminent ‘monster’ in our news media, across such a wide spectrum of issues? What sort of investment do we have as a society in the existence and threat of this monster that renders it so ubiquitous and anxiety-inducing? To answer these questions, it is useful to engage in a form of ideology-critique.

2.2 Which ideology? Beyond truth and falsehood

The Marxian concept of ideology has faced compelling challenges from within the critical tradition of social theory itself. Poststructuralist criticism has been articulated through a critique

of claims to ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ ostensibly implied in the concept of ideology, and a consequent imagined ability to ‘step outside of discourse’ on the part of practitioners of ideology-critique. Today, in the academic fields of politics and international relations, we find ideology counterposed to Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ in the form of a vertical analogy wherein the former functions ‘top-down’ while the latter acts from the ‘bottom-up’ (Springer, 2012: 133). Contemporary Foucauldian scholarship rejects ‘mere’ ideology as inadequate in explaining the complex modalities and generative capacities of power in the (post)modern world (for example: Rose, 1993; Vrsti, 2011).

How can we salvage the concept of ideology from this powerful critique? Žižek has striven to actively dissociate it from the ‘representationalist’ paradigm, according to which ideology is simply falsehood obscuring from view the ‘truth’ of the exploitation and inequality intrinsic to capitalism (Žižek, 1994: 7). Instead, Žižek proposes a concept of ideology as a ‘generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as changes in this relationship’ (1994: 1). Such a matrix is not imposed ‘top-down’, but consists in the basic interpretive frameworks, the ways of seeing (Berger, 1972), that we engage in our everyday lives. Ideology saturates everyday culture and communication, from film, literature, music and art to management practices and workplace training. We produce it ourselves, it belongs to us.

Žižek is not alone in conceptualising ideology in a more spontaneous, less representationalist, way. Stuart Hall, for example, rejects conceptualisations of ideology as the top-down imposition of an illusion or ‘some simple, all-or-nothing distinction between the True and the False’ (Hall, 1986: 39) - in favour of a sensitivity to the diffusion of ideology in social constellations, its operation in ‘logics’ and discourses, and in what Gramsci called ‘common sense’. We agree with Hall that ‘[i]deas only become effective if they do, in the end, connect with a particular constellation of social forces’ (ibid.: 42). But, as our analysis demonstrates, whereas Hall and others remain skeptical about psychoanalytic concepts, Žižek’s reading of the concept of ideology through Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is particularly insightful.

In the *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2013), Žižek uses the cult classic 1980s film *They Live!* to summarise his approach. The protagonist stumbles upon a box of sunglasses developed by a clandestine resistance movement who are struggling against ‘bodysnatcher’ aliens which, without the sunglasses, appear as ordinary people, and occupy all positions of political-economic power. When one dons the glasses, one sees through the illusion – the false consciousness – these aliens are broadcasting globally. Billboards, magazines, even dollar bills appear as they ‘really’ are; blank and grey, with simple and brutal injunctions inscribed onto them: ‘OBEY AND CONFORM’,

‘MARRY AND REPRODUCE’. *They Live!* thus provides a crucial insight into to the dynamics of ideology:

According to our common sense, we think that ideology is something blurring, confusing our ‘straight’ view. [In this view] ideology should be [understood as the] glasses, which distort our view, and the critique of ideology should be the opposite, like you take off the glasses so you can finally see the way things really are. This, precisely – and here the pessimism of the film, of *They Live!*, is well justified – this, precisely is the ultimate illusion. Ideology is not simply imposed on ourselves. Ideology is our spontaneous relationship to our social world, how we perceive each meaning, and so on and so on. We, in a way, *enjoy* our ideology! (Žižek, 2013).

Ideology is something that societies buy into (emotionally as much as materially) and reproduce as the experience of a cohesive social totality, or what Mandelbaum (2016) has called ‘the congruency fantasy’ with respect to ‘the discursive relations between state, nation and society in modernity’. ‘In the predominant Marxist perspective’, as Žižek puts it, ‘the ideological gaze is a *partial gaze* overlooking the *totality* of social relations, whereas in the Lacanian perspective ideology rather designates *a totality set on effacing the traces of its own possibility*’ (Žižek, 1989: 50). The concept of ideology need not, therefore, ‘always stand in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth’ (Foucault, 1984: 60), but is rather constitutive of ‘truths’ as we experience them:

Ideology is thus not necessarily ‘false’: as to its positive content, it can be ‘true’, quite accurate, since what really matters is not the asserted content as such but *the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation* (Žižek, 1994: 8).

Thinking our problem through ideology in this sense therefore involves asking the questions: how do all of these stories around Islam and Muslims in 21st century Britain function for us? Why, as a society, are we telling ourselves these stories about Muslims through our news media and national political conversation?

2.3 Fantasy and anxiety: Developing and applying Žižek’s Lacanian conceptualisation of ideology

Žižek’s conceptualisation of ideology rests upon a Lacanian theory of the subject. As such, two aspects of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory are especially important to understanding how the social construction of British Muslims can be conceived of as ‘ideological’: fantasy, and anxiety. These strands of Lacanian theory are intimately interrelated to the point of imbrication in his theorisation of the subject (Lacan, 2014), and we do not seek to describe each as a discrete

phenomenon; to do so would be to fundamentally misunderstand both Lacan and Žižek. Nor do we offer a ‘doctrinaire’ account of Žižek’s Lacanian conceptualisation of ideology. Instead, we draw upon both thinkers, and others, to develop our own conceptual-analytic framework for ideology-critique.

There have been important interventions that have mobilised Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts in IR (Eklundh, Zevnik and Guittet; 2017; Epstein 2011; Mandelbaum, 2016; Zevnik 2017a; 2017b). However, these interventions do not explicitly engage with the concept of ideology, which yields fresh critical insight by attending to the ways in which power relations and political strategies are mobilised. Through discussions of the fantasy of congruence, Mandelbaum argues ‘possibilities of national/social congruency require an other, an empty signifier of sorts (e.g. the foreigner, the migrant, Islam and so on)’ (2016: 191). This article engages in an analysis of an ‘other’, the conceptual Muslim, and its ideological functions in concrete political struggles beyond security.

The concepts of fantasy and anxiety are common to the Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalytic traditions that pre-date Lacan. But it is in Lacan’s *Seminar X* that the two concepts become thoroughly imbricated, with fantasies acting to manage anxieties generated by the ‘constitutive lack’ at the core of the subject (Lacan, 2014: 3; Ormrod, 2014: 116). Fantasmatic narratives about others allow us to conceal or escape deadlocks and antagonisms about ourselves, and in this sense fantasy is crucial to ideology. Specifically, while ‘reality’ is never directly experienced, but always-already symbolised, that symbolisation is always incomplete. The ‘Real’ (in the Lacanian sense, aspects of social reality that remain non-symbolised) thus reasserts itself in the form of ‘spectral apparitions’ (Žižek, 2005: 262). These fantasmatic spectres serve to ‘fill up the hole of the Real’ (Ibid.), or to manage our anxieties about societal antagonisms. In this sense, anxiety plays a dual role in ideology - it is both cause and effect. We are anxious about social contradictions of which we do not speak and then, when they erupt into the symbolic realm, we are encouraged to focus instead on spectral apparitions which are, in turn, cues to (actionable) anxiety.

In this engagement with the nomenclature of Lacanian psychoanalysis we risk losing track of the concept of *ideology* itself. It is therefore important to emphasise that Žižek’s Lacanian reconstruction of the concept is very much within that ‘critical’ tradition defined by John Thompson wherein ideology is understood as ‘*meaning in the service of power*’ (1990: 7). For Žižek too ideology is often realised and communicated textually or linguistically. A Lacanian concept of ideology does not contradict the claim of media discourse theorists and analysts like Roger Fowler that ‘[a]nything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological

position: language is not a clear window but a refracting, structuring, medium' (1991: 10) and that consequently ideology 'literally constructs the news, as it is written about' (ibid.: 24). This is what Žižek means when he says that 'facts never 'speak for themselves' but are always made to speak by a network of discursive devices'. Particular media representations are ideological to the extent that they serve the interests of maintaining existing social orders and forestall radical social change. Such representations are not necessarily 'consciously' produced by a manipulative ruling class however, but may result from what Jessop (2008) calls 'strategic selectivity', whereby policies, discourses and practices that favour and reproduce the social status quo are more likely to prevail.

This model does not involve a spurious extrapolation from the 'individual' level of psychology to the societal level. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, unlike dominant strains of social psychology today, no such methodological individualism obtains. In the Lacanian view (which begins from a 'constitutive lack' at the core of the subject), the psychological is always-already social, there is no abstract 'individual'; one of many parallels with Marx (for example: Marx, 1973: 84). In *The Parallax View* Žižek rebuts the level of analysis objection in detail:

The focus of psychoanalysis resides elsewhere: the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which the individual himself has to relate ... to experience as an order which is minimally - reified, externalized. The problem, therefore, is not - how to jump from the individual to the social level (Žižek, 2006: 6).

This differs crucially from 'cognitive' psychological models of ideology too. Van Dijk, for instance, explicitly rejects the critical concept of ideology employed by scholars like Thompson for being 'exclusively inspired by the social sciences' (van Dijk, 2006: 21) and instead draws upon cognitive psychology in an effort to avoid focusing too strongly on 'discursive and social dimensions' (van Dijk, 1998: 21). This methodologically individualist psychological framing of ideology is almost diametrically opposed to Žižek's Lacanian model.

To conceptualise ideology as meaning in the service of power, and as realised in the interplay between anxiety and fantasy is a productive strategy as our analysis will demonstrate. It is also an approach that has not, as yet, been brought to bear on the research problem at stake in this investigation: the mediated social construction of British Muslims beyond the politics of security.

2.4 Ideology-critique and the unbearable anxiety of the 'conceptual Muslim'

The value added to our analysis by placing Žižek's Lacanian concept of ideology at the centre of our conceptual-analytic framework is prefigured by Žižek's own discussion of Nazi ideology, the fantasy of the 'conceptual Jew' and a 'Jewish plot'. He argues that in Nazi ideology 'the Jew is like the maternal phallus: there is no such thing in reality, yet for that very reason its phantom-like, spectral presence gives rise to an *unbearable anxiety*' (Žižek, 2005: 258) [emphasis added]. It is the very gap between the 'empirical' Jew, actual Jewish people and their everyday lives, and the 'conceptual' Jew-as-monster, the omnipotent and conniving figure of the Jew, which reinforces the fantasy of the latter. Nazi ideology consisted partly in fantasies about what the monstrous 'conceptual Jew' got up to behind closed doors.

Such fantasies need not be limited to either Nazi ideology or the 'conceptual Jew'. Žižek suggests that while general social 'intolerance' to 'foreigners' takes the form of complaints about 'their' loud voices, strange food, ugly clothing, or bad smell, such factors are found to be no more than 'indicators of a more radical strangeness', an 'unfathomable *je ne sais quoi*' (2005: 256). The role that these fantasies 'about the other's political and/or sexual omnipotence, about 'their' strange sexual practices, about their secret hypnotic powers' (Ibid.) play in ideological terms is their covering of the unarticulated or non-symbolised Real. These are the 'spectral apparitions' to which Žižek refers.

Žižek's Lacanian concept of ideology captures some of the ways that psychoanalytic categories, including fantasy and anxiety figure in political and social processes and events, and allows us to think of ideology as filling the gaps and voids in our social world to shore up our fragile identities. Consequently, Žižek argues that:

[one] mode of the critique of ideology that corresponds to this notion is that of the *symptomal reading*: the aim [...] is to discern the unavowed bias of the official text via its ruptures, blanks and slips (1994).

In response to Donald Rumsfeld's (in)famous 'known knowns' speech on Iraq, Žižek put it another way. He noted that what Rumsfeld neglects to mention are 'unknown knows' – things we don't know that we know (Žižek, 2006). This disavowed knowledge relates to the domain of the Real; the parts of reality that remain non-symbolised. The aim of a symptomal reading is therefore to attempt to describe the function of a given 'spectre' or fantasy in relation to this disavowed knowledge or non-symbolised reality. The purpose of our ideology-critique is thus to carry out a symptomal reading that reveals powerful antagonisms underpinning and maintaining our social orders. Ideological representations involve a fantasy of facticity and empirical clarity with regard to the spectre:

One of the fundamental stratagems of ideology is the reference to some self-evidence – ‘Look, you can see for yourself how things are!’. ‘Let the facts speak for themselves’ is perhaps the arch-statement of ideology – the point being, precisely, that facts *never* ‘speak for themselves’ but are always *made to speak* by a network of discursive devices (Žižek, 1994: 11).

The critique of ideology thus consists in an attempt to reconnect fantasmatic spectres to the ruptured Real. Rather than revealing some ‘deeper’ reality that is concealed by ideological illusion or falsehood, this method of ideology-critique is about highlighting the functions of particular powerful fantasies in a symbolic order where fantasising itself is inescapable. The point is to undermine fantasmatic narratives that claim that ‘the facts speak for themselves’:

When a racist Englishman says ‘There are too many Pakistanis on our streets!’, *how – from what place – does he ‘see’ this* – that is, how is his symbolic space structured so that he can perceive the fact of a Pakistani strolling along a London street as a disturbing surplus? That is to say, here one must bear in mind Lacan’s motto that *nothing is lacking in the real*: every perception of a lack or a surplus (‘not enough of this’, ‘too much of that’) always involves a *symbolic* universe (Ibid.).

Milan Kundera’s novel famously proposes an ‘unbearable lightness of being’ in contradistinction to the heaviness of Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’ (Kundera, 1984; Nietzsche, 2000). We can think of the ‘unbearable anxiety’ generated by the figure of the Muslim as precisely an instantiation of the eternal return of the ideological other; a fantasised ‘conceptual’ other who plots against and undermines our social whole. But the conceptual Muslim cannot really spoil our happy social whole, since it is never there in the first place. Our society is riven with difference and antagonism, with competing fantasies and aspirations. Instead, this figure, which ‘appears as the hindrance to society’s full identity with itself’ turns out to be its ‘positive condition’. In other words, we can here substitute a ‘conceptual Muslim’ for the ‘conceptual Jew’ in Žižek’s analysis, such that: ‘by transposing onto the [Muslim] the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society *qua* consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible’ (1992: 104). The more tension is ratcheted up in contemporary Britain, through ‘austerity’ and inequality, the rise of the far right, the split between ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’ in the wake of the 2016 referendum on EU membership, and a spike in hate crimes against minority groups, the figure of the Muslim becomes increasingly important in managing our political-economic neuroses. Islamophobic depictions of Muslims in British government and media can be considered ideological, in this sense.

Ideological fantasies are thus the narratives by means of which we avoid confrontation with the Lacanian ‘Real’ of political and economic power: the unarticulated and contradictory structures and practices that underpin our social order. These fantasies intensify when that Real is close to ‘erupting’ into visibility. This differs from an ‘ideology as illusion’ conceptual model in that the fantasies are not necessarily ‘false’ in the content of their narratives about particular social events, actors and processes, but are rather a means of avoiding confrontation with the ways in which the same problems represented as ‘deviant’ by a fantasy narrative may in fact be at the heart of ‘normal’ life - an anxiety-inducing prospect indeed. In the second half of this article, we turn to three media scandal case studies in relation to British Muslims. Our aim here is to show how Žižek’s Lacanian reconstruction of the concept of ideology, and this notion of the ‘conceptual Muslim’ can be brought to bear to develop original insights into the political power dynamics of racialised othering and the demonisation of Muslim minorities, beyond the politics of security.

3. The Unbearable Anxiety of Being: child sexual abuse, education and food

Below we explore concrete examples demonstrating the ‘spectral apparition’ of the conceptual Muslim in three British media scandals. The analysis of each fantasy is structured in two parts; the first examines the construction of the fantasy and second unpicks its ideological functions. An analysis of these fantasies shows the conceptual Muslim to be both purveyor and manager of anxieties, enmeshed in broader political struggles, strategies and relations of power.

3.1 ‘Muslimic ray guns’: Muslim sexuality and paedophilia

Constructing the fantasy

The concept of the ‘Muslim rape gang’ went viral in 2011 through an interview with an English Defence League member. Asked why he is marching, he says ‘cos I want Britain to be about British’, followed by a series of incoherent comments about ‘the Muslimic infidel’ who is ‘trying to put their law’, and ‘their Iraqi law’, ‘down on us’. He adds what sounds like ‘you’ve got Muslimic ray guns’. But this incoherent explanation is important, since, despite its surface level absurdity, there is something intelligible about it. The ‘Muslimic ray guns’ comment was significant because it was clear that he was really trying to say ‘Muslim rape gangs’. That such a disturbing comment appears in such a surreal form is telling. As inarticulate and intoxicated as the man appears, he is attempting to describe a ‘Muslim plot’, ranging from the imposition of Sharia law in parts of Britain to the infamous ‘rape gangs’. His comments can be read as a *symptom* (Zevnik,

2017) of a wider complex of anxiety and fantasy regarding the sexually monstrous conceptual Muslim.

In 2012, the cabinet minister and Labour MP Jack Straw, claimed that men from the Pakistani community were deliberately ‘grooming’ white girls in order to form sexual relations with them (Prince, 2012). He argued that these men saw white girls as ‘easy meat’ (ibid). Since 2012, there have been a number of cases involving Muslim men exploiting and raping young girls. In addition to Rochdale, there have been prosecutions in Oxford, Birmingham, Derby and High Wycombe (BBC, 2014). Explanations for these incidents of systematic sexual abuse has been directly linked to religion, race and misogyny (Tufail, 2015). Tory MP Kris Hopkins claimed that white girls are considered ‘available’ by Muslim men because they do not dress modestly and Baroness Warsi said they were seen as ‘fair game’ (Huffington Post, 2012). Labour’s shadow Equalities Minister Sarah Champion resigned in 2017 after arguing ‘Britain has a problem with British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls’ in the *Sun*.

The link between religion, race and misogyny is made clear in these narratives: Muslim men rape *because of* their ethnic and religious identity. Allison Pearson sums this up, ‘Leaders of the Pakistani Muslim community – essentially a Victorian society that has landed like Doctor Who’s Tardis on a liberal, permissive planet it despises – are at pains to deny that the grooming gangs behaviour has anything to do with ethnic origin or contemptible attitudes towards women’ (Pearson, 2013). The empirically observable fact of some groups of predominantly Muslim men sexually abusing mostly white, non-Muslim girls is thus ‘made to speak’, to borrow Žižek’s turn of phrase, to a broader fantasy about British Muslims as a culturally deviant minority with sinister designs on ‘our’ (white, non-Muslim men’s) women and children.

The ideological functions of ‘Muslim rape gangs’ fantasy

Stories of the serial historic sexual abuse have proliferated since the death of the television presenter Jimmy Savile in 2011. Savile abused up to 500 children he encountered through his television work and charitable visits to hospitals and schools (BBC, 2014). The investigation into Savile’s activities also triggered the Metropolitan Police’s ‘Operation Yewtree’, investigating other well-known figures including the DJ Dave Lee Travis, children’s television presenter Rolf Harris and publicist Max Clifford. Media reaction to these cases varied. In the case of Savile, shock was expressed by many members of the press despite the fact these allegations were known to many who worked with him (Davies, 2012). But explanations for the actions of these men centred on their celebrity status at the BBC, their wealth, and the sexual permissiveness of the time (Sillito, 2016; Boyle, 2016; Robertson, 2013).

Deborah Orr offers a different take, ‘Look at the crimes that were committed by one man under cover of a dangerously misogynistic permissiveness, and wake up to the fact that this is exactly what all those tedious feminists mean when they talk of “rape culture”’ (Orr, 2012). But this ‘cultural’ narrative found little purchase in the media discussion, and was in any case not racialised (Orr is not suggesting that, for example, the ‘whiteness’ of perpetrators may be to blame). Most recently, fallout from allegations of abuse and rape levelled at American film producer Harvey Weinstein led to an outpouring of stories from women on social media about their experiences through the hashtag #metoo. These revelations extended to British politics too. Several MPs were ‘outed’ for sexual harassment and misconduct, with Defence Secretary Michael Fallon resigning his cabinet post over allegations against him (BBC, 2017).

Juxtaposing these two examples of systematic sexual abuse reveals that one is represented as stemming from an excess of power and the other from degenerate religious or racial characteristics. Comparing the representation of sex offenders racialised as ‘Asian’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Pakistani’ versus those who were ‘white’, Tufail (2015) found racial and religious signifiers to be absent in coverage of the latter. White sex offenders were simply paedophiles whereas those racialised as ‘Muslim’ were doubly monstrous. There is, meanwhile, a strong historical precedent to describing Muslim masculinities and sexualities as perverted and dangerous (Battacharyya, 2008; Puar and Rai, 2002). The example of the Prophet Mohammed as a paedophile is a recurrent trope in far-right discourses on the threat posed by Muslim men (BBC, 2003) and the YouTube film *Innocence of Muslims*, which sparked international riots in 2012, also depicted Mohammed in this way (The Innocence of Muslims, 2012). Polygamy and the availability of virgins in heaven upon martyrdom are oft-cited examples of the apparent strangeness of Muslim sexual practices.

From Savile to Weinstein to Westminster, systematic sexual abuse by the dominant, non-Muslim white male culture is almost never described a result of ‘cultural’ or racial failings. Cultural misogyny appears as the sole property of Muslim men who are ‘known’ to be sexually deviant, and this is the ideological function of the ‘Muslim rape gangs’ fantasy. This fantasy obfuscates the wider problem of endemic child sexual exploitation and patriarchal violence at large in British society perpetrated overwhelmingly by (white, non-Muslim) men. In making child sexual exploitation the work of Muslim men, and bringing racial and religious identity into the causal explanation, ‘Britishness’, and ‘British’ (white, non-Muslim) men are absolved. As bell hooks puts it: ‘misogynistic attitudes tend to be portrayed by the dominant culture as always an expression of male deviance. In reality, they are part of a sexist continuum, necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order’ (hooks, 1994: 135). The Muslim rape gangs fantasy allows us to say ‘look, it’s the Pakistani, the Muslim’ and ‘in comparison, we, white British people are more civilised’. This

fantasy ensures the participation of many feminists in racist discourse about Muslim men (what Sara Farris (2017) calls femonationalism) and makes the transformational work of anti-racist feminists more difficult (Rashid, 2017).

3.2 The ‘Trojan Horse’ of Birmingham: Muslim ‘plots’ in the state education system

Constructing the fantasy

In 2014, a letter containing details of a supposed Islamist plot to takeover 25 of Birmingham’s schools was sent to local educational authorities. Following the publication of the letter in news media, then Education Secretary Michael Gove ordered new Ofsted inspections of the schools concerned and appointed former head of counter-terrorism Peter Clarke to conduct a parallel inquiry (Travis, 2014). The result of the Ofsted inspections was to place three of the schools into special measures, despite the fact that two years previously two of them were rated ‘outstanding’ by the same team. The schools were accused of not preparing children for life in modern Britain (Hiles, 2014), of failing to teach pupils about the dangers of extremism, and of weak teaching around sex and relationships (BBC, 2014). However, the schools were not accused of ‘radicalising’ Muslim schoolchildren.

The letter that provoked the crisis is now considered a forgery but it was considered ‘real’ enough to warrant multiple inquiries (Cook, 2014). There were ongoing problems at the schools regarding external speakers, the sacking of head teachers and the alienation of teaching staff (Ibid). But it did not matter whether there *was* a conspiracy because, as the Ofsted reports suggests, these academy status schools are already problematic for being run by Muslims. This view is reinforced by Gove’s move (later overturned) to ban those involved in the alleged ‘plot’ from teaching or becoming school governors (Gilligan, 2014). Published years earlier, Gove’s book *Celsius 7/7* contained a chapter entitled ‘The Trojan Horse’, where he argued Islamists are trying to take over Britain through attempts such as the one outlined in the now-debunked letter (Gove, 2006). The spectre of the conceptual Muslim was already in place for Gove as he drew comparisons between UK Muslims, Nazis and Communists in the scale of the threat they pose to ‘Western Civilisation’.

Speculation over what was *really going on* in the schools abounded (Cook, 2014). Charles Moore at the Daily Telegraph provides an example *par excellence* of the kind of fantasising Trojan Horse enabled:

I wonder what we shall learn about the curriculum. Was evolutionary biology taught? Were any dancing or singing classes allowed? Were classes sexually segregated, with girls at the back, not allowed to ask questions? How were non-Muslim teachers, parents and pupils treated? Were there cultural exchange visits to Mecca and did these exclude non-Muslim

pupils? Were religious education classes on Christianity contrived specially for external visitors (Moore, 2014).

The *Daily Mail* claimed that students were being taught 'holy war', for which their evidence was a Religious Education lesson that examined Jihad and Just War traditions (Clark et al., 2014). The *Daily Express* claims that governors from one school:

were demanding religious assemblies and regular time out of class for worship and generally turned the headteacher's life into a nightmare. Their intention was to remove Dave Peck but it is my view that it was their ultimate intention to take over the school and make it a Muslim faith school with a Muslim head (Wheeler, 2014).

The evidence for these claims was generated through fevered chains of linked speculation based on what is already 'known' about Muslims, which was sufficient to enable and structure the Trojan Horse fantasy.

The ideological functions of the 'Trojan Horse' fantasy

Writing about the Trojan Horse scandal, John Holmwood and Therese O'Toole argue 'From the outset, it seemed to us there was no basis at all to this narrative' (2017: 1). Five teachers who were accused of 'professional misconduct' by the Department for Education (DfE), had their cases brought to the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) but this was subsequently dropped. The NCTL accused government lawyers of 'abuse of the process which is of such seriousness that it offends the panel's sense of justice and propriety'. (Adams, 2017). Lifetime bans meted out to two further teachers by the DfE, were also overturned, with Judge Stephen Phillips accusing government lawyers of 'serious procedural impropriety' and highlighting 'considerable doubt as to the fairness' of the proceedings (Adams, 2016). However, what is at stake in the analysis of Trojan Horse is not only its veracity. The fantasy functioned ideologically to conceal wider tensions and contradictions in neoliberal educational reform and its reproduction of racialised, classed and gendered hierarchies, which these reforms were ostensibly designed to address.

As Education Secretary, Gove led wide-ranging changes, including significantly extending New Labour's academies and free schools schemes, taking more schools outside the control of local education authorities. These schools receive funding directly from DfE and have control over staff, budgets, admissions and curricula (UK Government, 2015). According to the

government this is about raising educational standards in disadvantaged areas (Ibid). Over half of English schools are now academies. As Holmwood and O'Toole point out, 'social inequalities had previously been argued to determine outcomes, the focus was shifted to *aspirations* (on the part of parents and communities) and *expectations* (of teachers) in order to drive up standards regardless of circumstances.' (2017: 111). Simply put, schools and the communities in which they are embedded are responsabilised for overcoming structural disadvantages and fostering their own success.

In 2012, Park View Academy had been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted in spite of catering to some of the most disadvantaged students in Britain. After the scandal broke in 2014, it was judged 'inadequate' and put into special measures. The change in status hinged on the idea the school had an 'Islamic ethos' which was not preparing children for 'life in modern Britain', rather than on educational attainment or teaching quality (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2017: 152-3). Taken together, these concerns point to fears that schools runs by Muslims are susceptible to being 'Islamised'. But without the expansion of academies, the Trojan Horse scandal would not have been possible. Park View Academy was an example of the wrong race and class of people enabling the wrong kind of success through neoliberal educational reform.

Christy Kulz (2017) has argued that a 'successful' academy is one which attracts white, middle-class children and parents whose aspirational values provide an example or 'oasis' to unruly (working class, racialised) 'urban' children. The colonisation of academies by white middle class families, to improve the chances of working class and BME children, reproduces the classed, raced and gendered structures they were ostensibly created to reform. The Trojan Horse scandal brought some of these tensions to light, but, as the example of Park View shows, the DfE and Gove were ultimately concerned with the 'misuse' of decentralised power by Muslims in the education system enabled by neoliberal reform. The fact this school was providing poor local students with the possibility of educational attainment was not relevant. What was at stake in the Trojan Horse Scandal was the reproduction of white middle class values and privilege, which was subverted by the successful running of Park View by Muslims.

3.3 The 'Halal Secret of Pizza Express': Muslims and the British food industry

Constructing the fantasy

In May 2014, The Sun ran a front page story relating to food, under the headline 'HALAL SECRET OF PIZZA EXPRESS', preceded by 'After Subway ban on bacon...' The use of halal meat by food outlets without labelling prompted newspapers to explain why this is problematic. The *Sun* wrote that 'Islam says chicken can only be eaten if the bird's throat has been slit while it is still alive' (Jones, 2014). The story provides details about reciting verses from the *Qur'an*, facing

Mecca when making the cut, and the draining of blood from the animal. The *Daily Mail* sent an undercover reporter to a 'halal' abattoir who writes, 'Grabbing one lamb at a time, he pulls back its head and slits the throat with a swift movement from his razor-sharp knife. Blood gushes everywhere as he recites the Islamic Bismillah prayer in Arabic: 'In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful'" (Penman, 2010). The 'halal' process is thus palpably shrouded in a veil of ritualistic strangeness replete with references to Allah, the spilling of innocent blood and the recital of prayers. The reporter's preoccupation with these aspects of slaughter points to a sense of unease and simultaneously a morbid fascination with the practice. The undercover investigation which sought to uncover the 'truth' about the halal process only reveals its profound unfathomability.

Coverage of this food production story was in sharp distinction to the horsemeat scandal the preceding year. In 2013, DNA testing revealed that many supposedly 'beef' products available in supermarkets in fact contained little or no cow, but instead up to 99% horse. The *Sun's* front page on the horsemeat scandal took a light-hearted approach, joking that Findus lasagne consisted of 'Shergar' (the racehorse disappeared by suspected IRA operatives in 1983) and pasta. Most tabloid coverage consisted of noting the level of horsemeat contained within the food, and the 'household name' stores stocking it, together with details of investigations underway. Major retailers including Tesco and Wal-Mart-owned Asda were selling 'own-brand' horsemeat lasagne wrongly labelled as 'beef'. As the scandal unfolded, the narrative adopted – with active encouragement from the companies responsible for packaging horse as beef – was that the practice of substituting horse for cow was due to the involvement of 'foreign' factories in the production process. Retailers apologised and promised to switch or discipline suppliers to resolve the problem.

The ideological functions of the 'halal secret' fantasy

Both stories are unsettling in that they highlight increasing alienation from the processes of food production, the industrial slaughter of animals and the use of their flesh in 'processed' supermarket foods. However, whereas the horsemeat story is relatively light-hearted, with its Shergar joke (later *Sun* coverage noted that customers at a Mongolian restaurant were 'neigh bothered' about the sale of horsemeat), the coverage of the sale of Halal meat at Pizza Express is framed in a much more sinister way: a 'HALAL SECRET'. This story is also explicitly linked to one the paper had run the previous week under the headline '200 Subways cutting out Ham for Muslims', deepening the impression of a 'plot' or 'conspiracy' among UK food outlets to serve meat produced using halal slaughter methods 'secretively' to non-Muslims.

The Pizza Express story tells readers that the chain has been serving only halal-slaughtered chicken, ‘without telling us’. This ‘us’ (non-Muslims) is therefore unwittingly eating meat from animals killed in accordance with the Islamic faith. This is supposed to be intrinsically outrageous. Yet outrage is only possible if we link this information up to the ideological network of other stories about Muslims. They are taking our ham away from our branches of Subway, they are radicalising our children at school, they are forming rape gangs and molesting white, non-Muslim British girls; these are all elements of the ‘Muslim plot’. In fact, as subsequent news coverage demonstrated, Pizza Express had trailed online their switch to halal-only chicken on grounds of cost effectiveness; it is cheaper to buy the meat in bulk, and hence all from one source (Muir, 2014). Hugh Muir further notes that, unlike generic meat production, the standards of both care and hygiene are actually likely to be higher in many forms of religious slaughter, since at least some connection to the living animal and the *meaning* of its death is retained.

The Pizza Express story, like the horsemeat story, speaks to societal anxiety about our meat industry and secretive industrial food production processes, hidden from sight in vast and remote factories across the world (Singer, 1975; Lymbery, 2015; Foer, 2011). Where meat comes from in contemporary Britain, with its reliance on mass-produced and ‘convenience’ food, is a source of anxiety (Blythman, 2015; Lawrence, 2013). The animal itself, its life and death, has been conceptualised in critical scholarship as the ‘absent referent’ of the meat production process (for example: Cudworth, 2010). In this instance, the spectre of the conceptual Muslim rears its monstrous head to cover the Real of our industrial meat production processes. That a majority of people might daily be consuming food of which they have little or no knowledge – of the country or even species of origin – is an intensely anxiety-inducing idea. The fantasy of a Muslim halal ‘secret’ conspiracy provides a means of articulating and managing this anxiety. Lobbying for bans on halal meat on grounds of animal cruelty delays confrontation with the grotesqueries of contemporary industrial meat production.

Conclusions

This article provides a new frame through which to view media and political scandals surrounding Muslims in Britain. A series of highly publicised issues, including not only the ‘Muslim rape gangs’, ‘Trojan horse’ and ‘halal secret’ that form the focus of this paper, but also the building of mosques and the wearing of headscarves, have been articulated together in the popular imagination as a ‘Muslim plot’. We have shown that thinking this problem through the concepts of fantasy and anxiety enables us to better access the *ideological* functions of this ‘plot’ and its central imagined agent, the ‘conceptual Muslim’. The political labour which goes into ‘uncovering’ the

Muslim ‘plot’ functions to generate actionable anxieties, in order to complicate and block possibilities for wider social transformation. The spectral apparition of the conceptual Muslim occupies areas beyond obvious security concerns - food, child abuse and education - because these scandals point to multiple and intersecting systems of domination and oppression in British society. Through ideological fantasies about Muslims, confrontation with fundamental antagonisms of our social reality that are inadequately symbolised in our political-economic discourse – from poverty and inequality, to patriarchy, misogyny and anthroparchy – are indefinitely suspended. We need not confront ‘our’ antagonisms while we can still focus on ‘their’ disturbing excess and strange practices. This form of anxiety is necessary for politics to continue with ‘business as usual’; and in Britain this means as a racist, sexist, classed and anthroparchal order.

Implications for social movements agitating for radical change are stark. Demands made by feminists, anti-racists, or socialists for more egalitarian societies can be disregarded, their aims de-legitimised, *through* the propagation of fantasies centred on the Muslim as a sexist, devious character stealthily taking over Britain. Multiculturalism is depicted as ‘weakness’, rendering Britain susceptible to the machinations of Muslims; anti-racist campaigners as ‘politically correct’ naive accomplices. Anti-racist struggles for gender equality are equally susceptible to such claims. Zevnik’s words are instructive here: ‘anxiety can also mobilise and support political action’ (2017: 237); this includes support for measures targeting Muslims like so-called ‘burqa bans’ or banning halal meat. As Mandelbaum suggests, congruence between state, nation and society is the fantasy which underpins logics of security/insecurity, but we have shown here how fantasies of congruence can exceed security framings. Congruence fantasies provide ‘an explanation accounting for the lack of a promised future’ (Mandelbaum, 2016: 188), for why this future ‘cannot be attained’ (Zevnik, 2017: 240). British policy and media elites deploy the conceptual Muslim as means of avoiding uncomfortable truths about our society and - temporarily, at least - negating the possibility of its transformation. Anxieties about British Muslims are mobilised to manage the broader, unbearable anxiety of being in the UK today.

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