

Islamophobia and Normative Sociology

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Abstract

The Runnymede Trust (London) launched the public career of the concept of Islamophobia in 1997. It was too located in the field of religious tolerance and pluralism and an alternative understanding of Islamophobia that defines it as anti-Muslim racism in the context of multicultural citizenship was pioneered in Sociology. This concept is establishing itself in social science and public discourse alike. Yet I have some misgivings by the direction that some Islamophobia/Muslim studies are taking. My approach sees racialised ethno-religious group identity as having an 'inside' but in much of social science it is understood as something that is 'constructed from the outside', namely that it is an ascribed identity, constructed as a form of 'Othering'. I think that both these aspects of groupness have a real-world existence and political significance, and cannot be reduced to each other, but too much social studies is focused on 'othering' alone. I challenge this latter orientation by arguing that being a Muslim is an identity that is capable of being 'recognised' and so necessarily has a dimension of group inter-subjectivity. I make a multiculturalist plea for studying Islamophobia (and groups negatively perceived from the outside, generally) within a normative framework which priorities groups fighting outsider perceptions by boosting insider identifications ('the struggle for recognition'). The form of the discussion may be called 'normative sociology'. A sociology driven by socio-political problems and which thinks of problems and solutions as existing within a common intellectual framework. This framework must be normative, for to identify something as a problem, let alone to address it is to appeal to ideals. Going further, normative sociology uses sociological enquiry to engage with ideals and to justify itself normatively. It thus has an active interdisciplinary rather than a merely dependent relationship upon political theory. It is a form of sociology that lends itself – indeed prizes – public intellectual engagement.