

**“Riding the wave of fear, The rise of The Islamophobia Industry.”**

Review of Nathan Lean. *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*. Pluto Press, 2012. (248 pages)

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Even though *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims* by Nathan Lean was published eight years ago, it still remains an indispensable tool to understand how the time-honored tactic of fear manufacturing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become more impactful and therefore more dangerous to societal stability because of the extraordinary development of information technology. Nathan Lean’s book is thus an exhaustive and genuine demonstration of how fear mongers, namely the right wing, market Islam and Muslims as socially and religiously unfit to adapt with American culture and values. The book’s thrust is that the wave of Islamophobia that is sweeping across Europe and the United States is not a sudden reaction the shocking violence of some Jihadist groups. Rather, Islamophobia is the design of a right-wing corps of intellectual peddlers, bloggers, bigoted politicians, self-appointed experts, and religious extremists who manufacture and thrive on hate and xenophobia. These puppet-masters portray Islam as a violent religion by definition, a religion that infringes borders, and whose followers’ identity is primarily and inevitably shaped by their faith. The book’s seven chapters explain just how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century America and Europe “Muslims became receptacles for societal anxiety, and the right wing, knowing full well the power of fear, used the uncertain time to their advantage.” (p. 8)

Projecting monster movies, Lean argues, was how Americans chose to deal with fear. Monsters, repeatedly depicted in the form of easterners, were eventually defeated by American military intelligence and operations. The safety of the American mode of life is then dependent on conquering and vanishing the eastern villain. Such narrative mechanisms, according to the author, tend to exploit the American perception of threat. They can intentionally or unintentionally inculcate fallacies and twisted realities that would “...pull us back into the darkness where our rational fears are fed upon by individuals who seek to benefit from increased societal angst.” (p. 20) The scene is similar to the time when they started to allegedly claim, back in the late eighties, that the pillars of Christianity are bound to be dismantled by the rise of the Illuminati; which was apparently Europe’s fate.

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While exploring the precarious mechanics of sponsoring fear and intimidation among Americans, Lean unveils many official governmental strategies in the first chapter. German and Irish immigrants were believed to conspire against the existence of American Protestantism in the early nineties. Some governmental leaders declared the protestant community under attack. Catholicism was portrayed in their speeches as the new invader hidden behind socially and economically unfortunate immigrants seeking a better future. The same scenario surfaced when the Soviet Union launched the first earth-orbiting satellite; Sputnik. Many official documents and statements exposed the communist enemy endangering American freedom. Soon after, the alarm of radical Islam was unleashed immediately after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and was progressively nourished until it reached its peak after the 9/11 attacks. The right wing has successfully managed to lure the public opinion into linking Islam with violence as some statistics revealed back then.

Electronic media, Lean argues, effectively served the spread of anti-Islamic views for those who could not express them in respected journals and academic fields. “The role of the internet in fomenting hatred and prejudice cannot be overstated. Unlike fear campaigns of the past that relied on more traditional means of communication, the blogosphere has allowed ordinary folks with a bone to pick to disseminate their message far and wide.” (p.50) Pamela Geller’s online journal, *Atlas Shrugs*, was probably the most active by reaching a traffic of 200.000 visitors a month. She was able to attract anti-Muslim commentators and share her bigotry among emotionally wounded Americans of after 9/11. Various media platforms, riding the trending wave at that period, introduced her as a patriotic icon defending the state’s social safety and ideological stability. Such circumstances facilitated the spread of blog entries full of falsehood and misconceptions.

Using and abusing her fame and applauding fans, Pamela Geller vigorously disapproved establishing a Muslim community center in Manhattan, two blocks away from the twin towers’ debris despite the prior approval and appreciation of the project from the Lower Manhattan Community Board, local businessmen, and even some family members of those who died in the attacks. The building that was supposed to encourage peaceful dialogue and focalize paralleled grounds between major faiths, was condemned to be a secret headquarters for terrorist organizations. According to her blog, it would dishonor the lives of innocents who lost their lives nearby. The mosque that was part of the community center plan, along with its imam and its “fascist book”, were merely facades of Muslims monstrosities. It was even accused of conspiring with the Saudi government to establish what would become the “New Mecca”.

Getting assistance from other right-wing islamophobic internet activists, such as SIOA and SIOE, Stop Islamization of America/Europe, who were able to instigate anti-Muslim sentiments while supporting Israeli settlements and occupation in Jerusalem, June 6 was set to be the rally date against Park51 project. The date purposely symbolized the American intervention against Nazism and its evil practices in 1944; and by the same analogy, Americans should revolt once again against Islamic Jihad and its terrorist tactics. Lean tried to demonstrate how such frenzied media platforms have drastically shifted the public positive evaluation of Islam and Muslims towards a more biased radical perception, especially after consecutive dramatic incidents targeting innocent Muslims based on their faith or race.

Just as internet media platforms, the Islamophobic industry similarly exploited the right wing's evangelical militants to bestow the Christian community with anti-Islamic discourses and messages. Bill Keller, a notorious internet evangelist, ex-convict, and a devoted student of the fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell, managed to gather an email list of more than 2.5 million subscribers. Homosexuals, liberals, and abortionists were the enemy to address in his daily devotional emails every morning. The night of September 11 however, he broached into tarnishing Islamic teachings. He described the ordeal as a sign from god that called for Christian action; and since the enemy is explicitly in the open, emails insulting the prophet of Islam and its followers were quite common. Gradually gaining fame and expansion outside the restrictions of the virtual arena, he managed to launch a television show providing spiritual advice and prayers for 250.000 viewers. His radical comments even landed on some of the states' prominent newspapers. Topping it all off, he considered Barak Obama's presidential candidature fulfilling the famous Islamic prophecy based on his campaign symbol; referring to the sunrise from the west, one of the end of time Islamic prophecies. Eventually, Keller's artificial aura faded away, and all his plans for building a "911 Christian Center" as a counter reaction of the Muslim community center were unaccomplished due to lack of funding.

Lean investigated such evangelical fundamentalists, along with the official orientation of the Tea Party political conservatism to demonstrate that "the link between religious values and political agendas is also a goad to bigotry. The Christian Right is so labeled not only because they fall along the right-wing, or conservative, side of the religious spectrum, but perhaps more so because their religious beliefs overlap with their rightist political preferences." (p.83) In other words, much of the rightists' political choices and decisions are governed by the overall traits of their theological preferences. Hence, the growing visibility

of Muslims in social and professional domains is unavoidably disturbing for a supposedly biblically devoted society. Lean also draws our attention to the politically and prophetically overlapping concerns over the state of Israel. Many Christian and Jewish Rightists protect Israel's interests and security, support illegal settlement plans, and even foresee the cleansing of Muslims from Palestinian lands just to materialize the end of time prophecy regarding the coming of the Messiah. Though interpretations on the outcome of the prophecy vary in both Christian and Jewish scriptures, it will not be fulfilled unless Palestine is freed from Islamic existence.

Towards the last chapters, Lean unraveled many American policies that were unfortunately generated and forced by Islamophobic indoctrination. The anti-Muslim discourse has effectively shaped the political mind of many official leaders. Muslims have suddenly become a real threat to the national security of the USA. Despite their commitment and adoption of the American cultural and social life, they were accused of being treacherous to the country that guaranteed them food and shelter. Therefore, it was narratively impossible after 9/11 to disassociate Islam and terror from the prevailing discourse. Without any solid evidence, Muslims were ferociously tortured during long hours of unpredicted interrogations in suspicious cells just to uncover even a tiny link to terrorist implications. "Bookshops, foreign food stores, hair salons, and libraries all soon became beats for cops acting as human cameras zoomed in on the Muslim population." (p. 150) Anti-Muslim literature was used to train and inspire new FBI recruits. In their training facilities, they teach new agents how the level of violence in a Muslim depends on how devoted he is to his religion, and how the Quran legitimizes any war against the non-believers.

The emphatic impact of these momentous accusations and ideologically oriented narratives against Islam will expressively erupt after Oslo's barbaric attacks. Prior to revealing the true identity and faith of the attacker, many news channels, prominent newspapers, and officials declared it a Muslim act of terrorism once again. Yet, when Norway's butcher happened to be a blond Norwegian Christian whose 1500 pages manifesto explicitly explains his motives, researchers and terrorism specialists shifted their focus to what inspired the act itself rather than its perpetrator; "...if the authorities ultimately ruled out Islamic terrorism as the cause of Friday's assaults, other kinds of groups or individuals were mimicking Al-Qaeda's brutality and multiple attacks." (p. 165) There was not enough room in the Christian community to include this man. The general public will later blame the man's delusional mental condition for his horrific deed as the Forensic Commission concludes. In France, Belgium, Netherlands, and Britain, Islamophobic rushed reactions lead to the

implementation of many laws and regulations that restricted Muslims' freedom of religious practice.

For Lean, the Islamophobia industry is on the rise, and the diligent ventriloquists controlling its alarming manifestations in the USA and Europe should not be overlooked. Knowing the power of fear, they have mastered the art of manipulating and exploiting the public's sentiments and perception of the foreign Muslim for the sake of empowering their political rightist ideology. Multiculturalism and religious pluralism is vital to insure a democratic stability among any society. There is an urgent need to stand against those who systematically discriminate other religious, racial, or ethnic groups; those who thrive in slicing societies into numerous minorities while watching them ripping each other's' lives. "Only by protecting one another from the fracturing of societies, only by refusing to fall prey to this vicious and ceaseless movement to antagonize, isolate, and persecute Muslims in the United States, Europe, and everywhere around the globe, will this fear factory, the Islamophobia industry, be rightfully, forcefully and finally stamped out." (p. 184)